

Giuseppe Campuzano and the Museo Travesti del Perú

Interview with Lawrence La fountain-Stokes (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Traveling genius, crazy drag queen, transvestite scholar, philosopher of the *boudoir* and the beauty salon, of the hollow walls of the invisible museum, of the abandoned *tacas* on the side of the road where women that were born as men work and live off of sex, of the feather of the cabaret, the injected silicone and hormones, the lost sequin, the blood of the wound of transphobia, the gutter press, the corpse. The philosopher and performer Giuseppe Campuzano, founder of the ephemeral and wonderful Museo Travesti del Perú – a conceptual project, mobile or portable, that can be assembled and disassembled in different spaces, and that has been documented in an important book - discusses in the following cybernetic conversation his aesthetic and activist practice: the process that led him to reconceptualize his performance and his interventions in the public spaces of museums and that led, by extension, to the catalogue, a book as object that gives life (a different life) to photographs, drawings, and texts compiled by the transvestite artist-author. Accompany us on this delirious trip from the national to the body of the continental nation (Latin America) and to the trans flesh/clothes/life.

LLS: How did it all start?

GC: I could start with an “Antique”, but since the Museo Travesti is not about established orders, I will mention some of the circumstances that, around 2003, redefined my transvestism:

My own cross-dressing, as the series of acts and effects which have condensed into an aesthetic; the dilemma between the subversive transvestite that does not have access to certain spaces (night clubs, art galleries) and the domesticated drag queen who is invited to host in these spaces; resisting an official history of colonizers and colonized, of race, gender and territories as fixed borders and insurmountable chasms; and traveling to my fathers village, in the Peruvian Andes, from the city and its borders to the rural fiesta as the dissolution of the transvestite amidst the entire village dancing in unison.



Giuseppe Campuzano. *DNI (De Natura Incertus)*. 2009. Infografía. Museo Travesti.

EMISFÉRICA

With the Museo Travesti, I propose to transgress such dichotomies and binaries (savage-civilized, center-margin, man-woman) in the act of entering the museum, cross-dressed as a museum, in order cross-dress the museum. Like the horse of Troy, the indigenous mask, or a retrovirus, these transvestite actions have always existed as performativity and discourse.

LLS: Tell us a bit about your own trajectory as a transvestite. I know that you became frustrated with nightclubs that would invite you to host parties but on other occasions wouldn't even let you in. I also know that there is extraordinary documentation of your performances as a transvestite, such as the numerous times you dressed as the Virgin Mary.

GC: In my work, there is an obsession with observing and documenting my own body, a process that was born of narcissism and of the transvestite body as fetish, but that in its reiteration has produced displacements that remap a transfigured body. I need this constant transfiguration, and through it I investigate not only regulations but the strategies that undermine them. It is in this sense that I work with my own body to dislocate the subject.

There exists a confessional relationship between the Virgin Mary and Peruvian transvestites and, subsequently, a conceptual relationship between the Virgin and the transvestite that transcends the catholic clichés of unity, apparitions, and idolatries as cultural *mestizajes* (and poverty). The Virgin is the transvestite par excellence with her magnificent trousseau and her performative apparitions. I am not the first transvestite to dress as the Virgin--this was done in theatre during the Middle Ages. But it was in 2007, in the context of the publication of the transvestite book, that I decided to exchange the image of the whore for that of the virgin, as a metaphor of transvestism as ritual and *mestizaje*- moving from the triangulated, sacred, stable composition of the Renaissance to the transposition of bodies and cultures that destabilized it.



Giuseppe Campuzano. *Aparición*. 2007. Performance. Fotografía de Alejandro Gómez de Tuddo. Museo Travesti.

LLS: How do you define transvestite? What does it mean for you, on a conceptual, intellectual, or personal level?

GC: Just as transvestite and transsexual subjects are evidence of the cultural construction of gender and sexuality, I aim to locate transvestism not in terms of a subject but in terms of a discourse that begins with self-reference, in which identity is a relational and therefore unstable phenomenon that emerges from a colonized, *mestizo*, and agent body-territory. I once heard Mauro Cabral, the intersex philosopher and activist, ask "why not drop the acronym LGBT and accept that we are all trans?" His question helps me explain my approach to transvestism not in terms of research or in terms of the production of another identity to add to the long list that already exists, but rather as a transformative postidentity that replaces clean racial and racist lines with superimposed ethnicities, from the perspective of feminist and postcolonial studies, where the subaltern subject does not imply a flagrant contradiction.

LLS: In the Museo Travesti del Perú, there is a tension between privileging men that become or dress as women, and recognizing that women are or have also been transvestites that dress as men. (For example, you mention that the colonial laws penalized women as well as men for transgressing the norms for proper clothing.) Could you speak of this difference, if this is how you perceive it, and if it is related to personal preference or to more concrete reasons of an intellectual or historiographic nature?

GC: It is evident from a historiographic perspective that "masculine" to "feminine" transvestism has been privileged, contextualized in a *machista* historical narrative that has disregarded or been simply incapable of looking at women's actions as constitutive of their history. The book *Museo Travesti del Perú* (2008) in some way reflects the slant of having to return to this absolute vision of the world, as a strategy of the Museo Travesti that nevertheless does not exhaust it. There is a hermeneutic debt that needs to be resolved with regards to "feminine" to "masculine" travestism, like feminism does with women, but not from the abyss of the historic binary oppositions that challenge gender and sex as cultural constructions, since it would not be relevant to establish which sex the transvestite "belongs" to, but rather from the degree of subversion and the strategies of simulation that are at play. Going back to the book, it is significant that one of the oldest objects in the collection is not a binary Castillean text but an image of a pre-Inca character wearing masculine and feminine garments that hide any trace of an "original" sexuality.

EMISFÉRICA



Cultura Moche. Botella ritual. 100 AC-800 DC. Cerámica. Museo Larco, Lima

LLS: We live in a society where there is immense violence against transvestites, particularly towards the ones that work in prostitution, and impunity for their victimizers. In this sense, do you see the Museo Travesti del Perú as a political project making social claims?

GC: The Museo Travesti is a political project that starts by challenging knowledge in order to achieve a dislocation of power, transferring the androgynes and transvestites from the margins to the center of Peruvian history as a transformative strategy for moving from memory to social recognition. An expansion of the semantic field of the word “transvestite,” the historical contextualization of coitus and the orgasm as a transformative ritual, and the rethinking of sex work in a consumer society in crisis, are all important for situating transvestites not as subjects that belong to society, but as subjects that transform our societies.

LLS: In interviews and in your own book you have proposed a transvestite reading of the nation, or, to be more specific, you have said that Peru is a transvestite nation, or that “All ‘peruvian-ness’ is a transvestism.” Can you speak more about this?

GC: Like I was saying, to pass from subjecthood to the nation is an exercise that is necessary in order to expose the struggle of subjects defined by the power of a fragmented and individualistic sexuality. If there were such a thing as a Peruvian essence, it would be constant metamorphosis. A Peru, an America, immersed in the transvestite processes of imposition and agency that are constitutive of its subjects.

LLS: The Museo Travesti del Perú has been presented in a great number of places since you created it in 2003, including spaces in Lima and other Peruvian cities, in the United Kingdom, in

Montreal, in Toronto and in Colombia. How has it changed depended on where it is presented? Has its reception been very different?



Giuseppe Campuzano. Presentación del libro *Museo Travesti del Perú*. 2008. Performance. Fotografía de Centro Cultural de España en Lima. Museo Travesti.

GC: Perhaps it is time to talk in greater depth about the ways in which the Museo Travesti is a museum. Museums are spaces that preserve memory. This memory, however, has often consisted of unpunished pillage and conquest, not only materially but also conceptually, since diverse world views are made to accept the Western view and the limitations of a collection as absolutes. On the other hand, many contemporary projects have rethought the concept of the museum through the deconstruction of its images (George Didi-Huberman), of its collections (Fred Wilson), or of its own material constructions (Michael Asher). In this context, the Museo Travesti arises not as a physical collection but as a critical discourse on diverse documents that range from works of art to newspaper cutouts. This also enables a conversation with the space that will be intervened, sometimes complementing the memory of that space and other times distancing oneself from its conventions. Such interventions do not always consist of an exhibition of objects; they can also refer to a discourse or a performance. In Bogotá, for example, the assigned space was the main building of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. In the context of simultaneous actions, I attempted to make this space visible through strategies that ranged from the *in situ* design to events convened in the vicinity of the university. The content, in an Encuentro on the performance and politics of cultural rights, was articulated through a genealogy of Peruvian dance, and the Museo Travesti served as a political artifact that preserved a mestizo memory translated into social inclusion for the transvestite: from carnivalesque mimesis to daily *poésis*. The participation of a [Nariño dancer from southeastern Colombia](#) was part of a project articulated from queer and feminist theories and from the living body itself: restoring the energy to the exhibited objects, rethinking the Colombian-Peruvian border from a mutant body, displacing activism from the city to the countryside and from gender to everything, and raising a discussion about citizenship by contesting history and fixed identities.

EMISFÉRICA



[View the media gallery](#)

LLS: How do you understand the relationship between the book and the museum?

GC: The production of the transvestite book has been long and eventful, since the project started with the body yet demanded that it be rethought in only two dimensions and with a beginning and an end: not, however, with the rigor of an essay. I felt on many occasions that the project was dying, which is the main reason why its presentation has been one of the most complex performances that I have ever put on, with the help and the skill of Miguel Rubio of Yuyachkani and other performance and visual artists.⁴ Some time after said ritual restitution of discourses to the transvestite body, I feel that the relationship between the project as a whole and the book is one of retroactive feedback, since the systematization of the discourse has been an important part of the process.



Valeria Tello. *La Lola y La Carlita*. 2009. Museo Travesti.

LLS: In Bogotá, you left in a classroom a pair of high heeled shoes that are part of the collection of the museum. Marcela Fuentes and I had to walk around the entire campus of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia looking for you with the white heels so that we could return them to you. Could you speak more about those heels, and also about the ephemeral or replaceable nature of the museum's collection?

EMISFÉRICA

GC: I love this image, in fact, I have it!

I have already mentioned the non-material nature of the Museo Travesti, that lack which draws its potentiality from the symbolic and systematic looting of other collections, where the pieces go beyond fulfilling the function of treasure-fetish by articulating a discourse in which limits are only established by the intellectual gaps themselves. What takes place is a displacement of the transvestite as fetish and fetishism to transvestism as critique. Once, after a conference, I was asked who were the artists with whom I liked working. I am not a curator who works with a fixed type of art or artists, but rather a healer who, along with others, uses tools that some consider art.

The story of these high-heeled shoes is peculiar. In 2003, my friend Carla migrated from Peru to Italy, so she was getting rid of some things. Among them was a pair of old shoes and I asked her to give them to me.



Giuseppe Campuzano. *La Carlita*. 2004. *Objet trouvé*. Museo Travesti.

In 2004, I started to display these heels as part of the Museo Travesti, which had already evolved into an artistic *objet trouvé*. I was telling Carla - who was at that time named Fiorella - about these montages and she always offered to send me new ones. I would repeat to her that I was keeping these as an allegory of her travels (transgender, transnational). A client murdered Carlita in 2008. In 2009, I looked for the shoes once more, this time to bring them to Bogotá, but I didn't find them: my mother had thrown them out. After a moment of hysteric fetishism, I managed to recapture their transvestite meaning, and then I simply bought new ones. It was that false Carlita that you managed to return to me and that I removed from the Museo, like the symbol of a truncated journey, to show them at the Chile Triennial at the Contemporary Art Museum in Santiago. The original Carlita never existed.

LLS: Is there a transvestite philosophy? Could we attempt to assemble a genealogy of transvestite thought?

EMISFÉRICA

GC: We can trace a transvestite genealogy between the androgynous ritual Moche and the Inca “men disguised as women” that are “uncovered” in this binary chronicle:

The truth is that the devil has introduced this vice among the people of the highlands and the Yungas under guise of a form of sanctity. Each temple or site of adoration has one or two or more men, depending on the idol. These men dress as women from infancy and speak as such, and in their manner, dress and all else imitate women. During feast days and other important occasions, men of importance in the community have carnal relations with these men of the temples. I know this because I have punished two of his majesty’s Indians to whom I spoke about the evil of this practice. When impressing the gravity of their sin upon them, they claimed that they were not to blame because they had been placed there by their Caciques since the time of their childhood to be used for this damning and nefarious vice and to be priests and guardians of the temples of his Indians.

Pedro de Cieza de León, *Crónica del Perú*, 1553

The connection between the ritual androgynous and transvestite dancers as cultural mediators; in the hair, from sacred indigenous and colonial offerings to the mode of subsistence for the modern transvestite hairdresser; in the feathers shared by the Inka Manco Capac of the man-woman caste, the colonial androgynous archangel and the contemporary transvestite showgirl. Fragmentary thought and supposition as a challenge to a supposedly lineal, continuous and progressive knowledge. The transvestite as a revolution of the pretenses of originality and unity determined by dominant history and ethics.

LLS: The Museo Travesti del Perú consists of archival documents, images, objects, documental and analytical information, but also comes to life through folkloric dance performances, the runway show, happenings, the presence of drag queens, and a public that participates and interacts with all of the above. What is the importance of this performance for the museum, both artistically and in terms of the performance of the public?

GC: Performativity – as a relational act that transcends the field of the performance, not in the movement from the fabulous to the real but in the act of migrating that which is fabulous to everyday life– is the aesthetic and social goal of the Museo Travesti, in which folklore, performance, happenings, passing and its interlocutors, constitute constant strategies of subject transformation and the subsequent transformation of its environment. It is in this way that the performance constantly reiterates this project.

LLS: What is the future of the Museo Travesti del Perú? What is the future of Giuseppe Campuzano?

GC: There is a transversal entrypoint proposed by the space of carnival (temporal, spatial) that I incorporate in my work and life in which the body as the territory of the performance emerges as

EMISFÉRICA

continuous present where the present and the future are in dialogue. I can say, however, that 2008 and 2009 have been a great opportunity to remap America (Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Chile) and it is from this experience, which is still in process, that I can propose my own transvestisms.

LLS: Thank you Giuseppe!