

The New Global Culture

Somewhere between Corporate Multiculturalism and the Mainstream Bizarre (a border perspective)

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

"Gómez-Peña, you are trapped in between the currents of the global and the concrete. Make up your mind!"

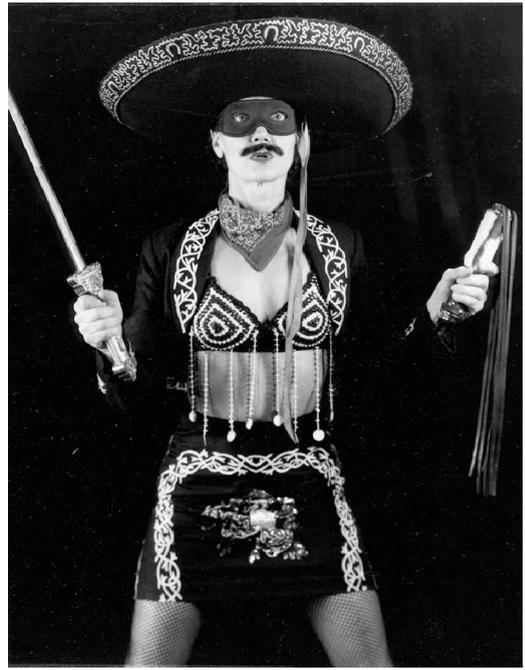
—Mexican journalist

Intro

(Soundbed by Tha Mexakinz, scratched & mixed with 1950s boleros)

In the last three years of the 20th century I stopped writing essays altogether. I concentrated mainly on performance and film scripts, spoken word poetry, and chronicles of my performance adventures. Why? The formidable changes generated by the cult of globalization and virtual capitalism created an unprecedented philosophical vertigo in me and my Chicano *flota*. This condition worsened due to the sudden socialization of digital technologies and the backlash against humanistic concerns and identity politics. We were entering a new, terrifying era. All our ideological parameters and political certainties were crisscrossing under our feet. Suddenly, binary models of understanding the world were no longer functional—us/them, right/wrong, progressive/reactionary, local/global, Third World/First World, alternative/mainstream, center/periphery, etc.—were constantly shifting fault lines in an ever-fluctuating landscape. It felt as if we were drunk in the middle of an extremely long 8.5 earthquake. For a few years, all we could do was mumble in our existential drunken stupor, and clumsily express our inability to assume simplistic positionalities or to unconditionally embrace a cause. All we could do was raise questions, myriad impertinent questions.

I must say that at least our skepticism was proactive, almost militant. As Chicanos, we had no delusions about one day becoming part of the new virtual capitalist project. As politicized artists, neither suicide nor taking up arms were viable options for us. What we did instead was to immerse ourselves in the epicenter of the millennial earthquake, in hopes of understanding its causes and nature through direct artistic praxis. This bipolar condition of *ran-*



1. *In the Mexterminator Project (1999), CyberVato (Roberto Sifuentes) performs the desires of Internet users. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)*
2. *Dancer Sara Shelton-Mann as El Transgender Mariachi in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)*

chero nihilism and proactive humanism became the very substance of our performance work. We performed constantly and everywhere we could: from the streets to chic museums, from community centers to international festivals. The stage became both the ultimate battlefield and the ground zero of the search for clarity.

To complicate things even more, the alternative art world, our main base of operations and transgressions, was crumbling all around us due to funding cuts and rampant gentrification engendered by the virtual “gold rush.” Our desperate colleagues, especially those not protected by academia or an established position in the commercial art world, were trying to figure out ways to reinvent themselves and cross over with dignity into other realms: film, TV, publicity, computer design, digital arts, the new global art world, you name it. Some did. Others were lucky to still find a place in the overpopulated and highly competitive realm of academia. Many others gave up.

During those trepidatious years (1996–1999), my close collaborators and I undertook various “crossover” adventures with different degrees of success. We created a “lowrider/Spanglish” opera; participated in some experiments for cable TV, staged populist performance extravaganzas camouflaged as “ethno-techno raves,” and “political peep shows” and designed a couple of performative Websites. I also decided to return to radio journalism, this time as commentator for *All Things Considered* (NPR). Why did we go through all this trouble? We had no other option. We were definitely not willing to accept the omnipresent lethargy, much less sing along with the hip new dot.com mantra. We wanted to force ourselves to be “present” at the crossroads of change (what a corny term, *que no?*) as cultural witnesses and social actors, to literally walk on the debris of the world as it crumbled in front of and around us. Luckily, this “presence” kept us both politicized and outraged.

Now the waters seem to be settling down a bit, just a bit, and I am coming out of my perplexity. As the year 2000 unfolds, I have decided to begin writing a hybrid text (part essay, part chronicle, and part performance text) on the new

“global” culture, and what I perceive to be its main risks and contradictions, artistic and pop cultural products, major philosophical trends and political dilemmas. Hopefully, my bifocal perspective as a border artist (with one foot on the benign side of globalization and another on the dark side) will make this text interesting enough to my colleagues in the U.S. Since they have been exposed much longer to the effects of savage capitalism and new technologies, they are culturally better equipped than my Mexican *camales* to deal with the profound paradigm shift. However, they seem a bit more spiritually and politically lost.

Inevitably, I am prone to miss the target here and there. As a performance exercise, I am attempting to observe a new world with new eyes, as if my motorboat were reaching the shore of the mainland for the first time—not because I feel like a macho explorer on assignment for the Discovery Channel, but instead because I feel like the survivor of a shipwreck. Besides, I have finally accepted my condition as an orphan of globalization, and it is from this new position that I must speak, write, and perform.

As I embark on this conceptual journey, I haven’t the least idea where it will take me or when exactly it will end. All I know is that I am willing to walk alone in the spooky forest of millennial nihilism in the hope of finding some clarity at the end, even if this clarity ends up blinding me. I am sure that in this journey I will come across many distorted images of myself, projections perhaps of what I wish I could understand. And that’s also fine, for I am unapologetically assuming the contradictory voice of an artist/theoretician, and while writing this text I will exercise the same intellectual freedoms that my radical performance work has granted me. To finish this introduction I must say that I will try very hard to not pass judgment on what I see, as much as this is possible for a politicized performance artist who for 20 years has been an active member of a culture of resistance (Chicanismo), and whose identity, heart, and liver are as bruised as mine for dancing in the trenches of the cultural wars.

Track #1:

The Dark Side of Globalization

(Soundbed by DJ Dara, sampling mariachi musik, ’80s Banghra, and Rai)

Originally drafted in the late ’80s, Phase One of the much-touted project of globalization has now been thoroughly completed: macro-economic communities such as the European Union and NAFTA have replaced the “dated”



3. A postcard produced by the Mexican Department of Tourism. (Courtesy of Guillermo Gómez-Peña)

functions of the nation state. Politicians are now “trading partners,” and their religious *dictum* is called transnational “free trade” (“free” meaning that it benefits only those who have the power to determine its terms). The “information superhighway,” the Internet, e-commerce, cable TV, and “smart” tourism have ideologically narrowed the world and the word. Effectively, “the world” is now “at our fingertips,” or at least that’s how we’re invited to (mis)perceive it so long as we are members of that elite micro-minority which stands on the benign side of globalization. The dark side of this project, however, is implacable. Entire Third World countries have become sweatshops, quaint bordellos, and entertainment parks for the First World; and for the inhabitants of the Southern Hemisphere the only options for participation in the “global” economy are as passive consumers of “global” trash, or providers of cheap labor or *materia prima*. Those excluded from these “options” are forced to become part of a transnational economy of crime (sex, drug and organs trafficking, child labor, kidnappings, *fayuca* [smuggled goods], etc.). Many will cross the border North in search of the source of the rainbow, only to find racial hatred and inhumane working conditions.

Now that humanistic concerns are perceived as passé, U.S., European, and Asian corporations and governments are no longer accountable to anyone. The “global” goal is to add several zeros to their accounts by simply pressing a button. It is savage capitalism at its most efficient and diabolical: virtual operators discreetly trading capital, products, weapons, and hollow dreams; and starving or killing their inconsequential victims in the ether of virtual space, a parallel “world” devoid of ethical or ideological implications, of tears and blood. It’s economic-darwinism.com. Only the digitally fit will survive. In this virtual panorama, the plight of the victims—whether the newly arrived immigrants and the homeless of the U.S., the *embasucados* of Colombia, or the starving children of Africa—is a mere nuisance. Delete. As the new American law states, “one strike and you’re out.” Delete. Compassion and philanthropy aren’t part of the “global” agenda. In fact, governments and corporations (increasingly more intertwined with and indistinguishable from one another) have effectively designed a high-tech prison industrial complex to keep the excluded from bothering us and at the same time to make money off of them. In the U.S., not coincidentally, the prison population is disproportionately black and Latino. This mega-industry has an intricately symbiotic relationship with other equally macabre “industries” such as law enforcement, the border patrol, gun manufacturers, the courts, and of course, the media, where “bad guys,” cops, lawyers, and judges all get to have their own TV shows and entertain America.

New subtle forms of “ethnic cleansing” are yet to be baptized. The “cyber gold rush” has displaced entire communities in the main U.S. cities. These communities happen to be the most disenfranchised, fragile, and ethnically “different,” meaning those existing south of the much-touted “digital divide.” Entire blocks are seized by real estate corporations, rents skyrocket overnight, and immigrant families, working-class people of color, street eccentrics, and artists are forced out of their neighborhoods. The total disregard for the fate of these communities is beyond description. In San Francisco, Silicon Valley tycoons in complicity with the local political establishment are turning the city into a sanitized bohemian entertainment park and hotel, catering exclusively to the demanding dot.com mavericks. The legendary Mission district will soon (perhaps by the time this essay gets published) become “Chilicon Valley,” a Latino entertainment park—without Latinos. Economic Darwinism rules. To quote a local politico: “Those who cannot afford it, should not be here.” Delete.

In this unprecedented “post-democratic era” (if I may call it that), civic, human, and labor rights, education, and art are perceived as expendable bud-

get items, minor privileges, and nostalgic concerns. Humanism has become either a mere corporate “interest” or “goal,” or a trendy marketing strategy for computer firms. Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, and Rigoberta Menchú now “think different.” “Content” is a topic discussed by the sponsors of cyberspace, and “counterculture” is a weekly show on the Bravo channel. In this bizarre context, artists don’t seem to perform any meaningful role other than that of decorators of the omnipresent *horror vacui* and entertainers of a new and much more cynical consumer class that is more open to radical behaviors: www.radarts.com. The paradigm shift is drastic, total, and irreversible. It truly feels like the day the TV antennas arrived in Brazil and many forms of popular theatre and community *fiestas* died overnight.

Track #2:

Corporate Multiculturalism

(Soundbed by “Pavarotti and friends”—including Sting, Lucio Dalla, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan—scratched & mixed with all the other tracks)

Americans arrived in the 21st century experiencing acute vertigo, with our sense of worth and prosperity as a nation blown out of proportion by the “success” of the new virtual economy, paired with the absence of formidable enemies abroad. The old Soviet menace has been strategically replaced by mythical enemies, including immigrants from the South¹ and “terrorists” from the Middle East. In the international arena, the U.S. is no longer accountable to any legal, moral, or diplomatic institution (other than the World Trade Organization, of



4. In this ad from a Brazilian magazine, Orbcomm uses an Amazonian Indian to advertise the Internet. (Courtesy of Guillermo Gómez-Peña)

course). On the domestic front, the backlash against “political correctness” and humanitarian concerns has thoroughly completed its mission; sensitive questions of race and gender and matters of diversity are perceived as issues of the past, trembling shadows of the old socialist rhetoric. Given this backdrop, the social programs and grassroots agencies attending the needs of the dispossessed, an important legacy of the civil rights movement, are being dismantled as I write.

Magister dixit: We are now allegedly installed in a fully globalized, post-racial, post-racist, post-sexist, post-ideological, post-civil rights era, and anyone who thinks otherwise is clearly out of touch with the times. Old-fashioned libertarianism meets fascism in technolandia. It is finally up to an individual’s will and intelligence to overcome the restrictions imposed by race, gender, and class in order to “make a difference,” meaning to become rich. The *homo digitalis* is a living proof. To complement this ideology, a “benevolent” form of multiculturalism has been adopted by corporations and media conglomerates across borders, continents, and virtual space. And our major cultural and educational institutions have followed suit. This global transculture artificially softens the otherwise sharp edges of cultural difference, fetishizing them in such a way as to render them desirable. Under this corporate logic, blacks are fine announcing Nikes, and Latinos are okay shaking our butts to “La Vida Loca.” Whether the Other is a “gang member” targeted by the LAPD, or an Amazonian Indian fighting ecological devastation, Benetton or the Gap can make them look really cool. It is no coincidence that the recent Latino “boom” is a dim parade of forgettable pop singers, low-calorie entertainers who can barely speak at all (much less speak Spanish), commercial movie actors, a couple of athletes, and one annoying little dog whose Mexican accent is actually articulated by an Argentine actor from LA. The most obvious feature of this new Latinocracy is that, unlike prior Latino booms, it does not include one intellectual, not even one social critic, articulate spokesperson, or civil rights activist. If that weren’t enough, the professional boxer De la Hoya has the only brown face with somewhat indigenous features; the rest look startlingly white, or may we call them “post-ethnic.”

Corporate multiculturalism has proven to be both sexy and profitable—for its sponsors, that is. The sponsors of the Internet, in indirect collaboration with the entertainment industry (Hollywood, “total TV,” tourism, the World music industry, etc.) and the high-art world, have created a “global mall” which we can access any time we wish. The implied subtext goes as follows: “You may now experience anything you want, become whomever you wish, or purchase whichever cultural, sexual, spiritual, artistic, or political experience you desire. You can impersonate other genders or ethnic identities without having to suffer any physical, social, or political repercussions, or be subjected to the rage of the excluded. You don’t even need to belong to any ‘real’ community. And you can do all this from the solitude of your home.”

They have clearly outsmarted us. This new transnational multiculturalism is actually devoid of “real” people of color, true artists, outcasts, and revolutionaries. The very diversity it claims to celebrate merely performs the passive roles of glossy images and exotic background, played out by nameless backup actors and dancers. Curiously, the immense social contradictions and hidden violence of this new transculture of denial, entitlement, and, above all, rabid consumerism are embodied in the very artifacts it produces. All we need to do is browse the Web, surf the hundreds of channels available in digital cable, or check the classified ads in the local weekly paper. Suddenly, at the snap of a finger, the multi-spectacle of *Amigo* racism, stylish sexism, and/or eroticized oppression becomes available to us, everything flattened and equalized by high production values. And through the global media networks and the invisible fluids of the Net, these decontextualized images get immediately broadcast to the Southern

Hemisphere, where people have much weaker cultural antibodies to resist these colonizing viruses and certainly lack the software to talk back.

TECHNICAL NOTE: FROM NOW ON, ALL WORDS THAT APPEAR IN QUOTATION MARKS ARE TEMPORARILY “MEANINGLESS.”

Track #3:

The Monstrous Culture of the Mainstream Bizarre

(Soundbed: Retro-pulp rock, scratched & mixed with tracks #4, 5, 6, 8, & 9)

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” behaviors as we knew them have actually become the mainstream. Spectacle has replaced content; form gets heightened, more stylized than ever, as “meaning” (remember meaning?) evaporates, or rather, fades out, and everybody searches for the next “extreme” image or “interactive experience.” We are now fully installed in what I term the culture of the mainstream bizarre, a perplexing oxymoron that 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 race, violence, and sexual hybridity have become daily entertainment, mere marketing strategies. Change channel. From the humiliating spectacle of antisocial behavior “performed” on infamous U.S. network talk shows to TV specials on mass murderers, child killers, religious cults, kinky sex, 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* (shift to track #11). Its goal is clear: to entice more 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. Artists exploring the tensions between these borders must now be watchful, for we can easily get lost in this fun house of virtual mirrors and distorted perceptions. If this happens, we might end up becoming just another “extreme” variety act in the great global cultural menu (shift to track #5). 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 Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, and Walter Mercado. Change channel. Independent filmmakers and video artists now must contend with TV ads and rock videos whose aesthetic strategies are directly appropriated from experimental film and 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 or the performative polemicists of *Crossfire* 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. In



5. Roberto Sifuentes as a Chicano paleontologist discovers the skull of an early Caucasian in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)

this new convoluted logic, Subcomandante Marcos and Tim McVeigh will be granted equal status and media coverage, as will Mother Teresa and Princess Diana. The media invests the banal opinions of Gloria Estefan or Antonio Banderas about Elian, Prop. 227, or Latino electoral politics with greater weight than those of Carlos Fuentes, Richard Rodriguez, or Ana Castillo.

As radical artists (and here I dare to use the old conception of the term), we 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 remain in touch with the *zeitgeist* of the 21st century, what certainty do we have that our high definition reflection won't devour us from the inside out and turn us into the very stylized freaks we are attempting to deconstruct? And if we are interested in performing for nonspecialized audiences, what certainty do we have that they won't misinterpret our "radical" actions and hyperethnicized 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.

“If your Website is not state-of-the-art, you may soon bite the dust.”

—*Computer designer at a party*

“Artists are in danger of becoming programmers.”

—*Ellen Ullman, speaking during a public discussion
on the crisis of creativity in America
September 2000*

Track #4:

The Illusion of Talking Back

(Soundbed designed by the reader)

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 email 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 a 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. 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 cameras are now pointing in all directions. “Normal people” can suddenly become actors, singers, performance artists, filmmakers, even porn stars. If we are lucky, we might be cast in a “reality TV” show.

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 passively watching a performance, especially younger audiences. They’ve been trained by the Internet, Supernintendo, and other video games, 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 onstage at any invitation from the artist and do something, whatever. It’s karaoke time. It’s a live computer game with the added excitement that people are watching. Given this dramatic epistemological shift, artists and art institutions are pressured to redefine their epistemological relationship with their public. The educational departments of museums are trying to figure out how to design more technologically interactive and “audience-friendly” exhibits. And artists such as myself are wracking our brains developing new ways to further catch peoples’ attention and implicate new audiences in our performance games and rituals. The challenge is obvious: if our production or event is not “interactive,” “exciting,” or “dynamic” enough, our impatient U.S. audiences have a hundred other options for how to spend their evening. My colleagues and I are accepting this challenge wholeheartedly. Please email us your valuable opinion to pochnostra@aol.com.

“Originality is no longer a possibility. Maybe it will come again, or maybe it never was.”

—Richard Schechner, in an email
September 2000

Track #5:

Collectible Primitives in the Great International Expo

(Soundbed: A collage of Eminem mixed with generic “World Music”)

The *modus operandi* of the self-proclaimed “international” art world is no longer very different from that of corporate multiculturalism or the culture of the mainstream bizarre. In the great art mall of *ex-centric* internationalism, artists become ephemeral commodities and trendy neoprimitives. 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 tamed (and stylized) “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. This internationalism 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, 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 postcolonial predecessors, the new global impresarios needn’t be concerned with ethical boundaries. Ethics, ideology, border issues, and postcolonial dilemmas—they all belong to the immediate past, a past too painful 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 a-critically in mild difference. The new praxis is to witness, document, “sample,” and consume all thorny edges, “alternative” expressions, antisocial 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 rediscovered for the 100th time, this time under a new light, one without political implications, continuity, or context.

No matter where you are, whether at a chic art space in New York or Buenos Aires or at the Biennale in Venice or Istanbul, the art you will find is strangely similar, its differences only superficial and idiosyncratic. It is homogeneous in that it has managed to reinstall the value, weight, and canon of the modernist object: artifacts, paintings, sporadic installations, and even video art—as objects—are “in” again, because a global cultural economy necessarily feeds itself from artifacts. 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 (the 1950s and the ’70s are back) 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. 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. The Third World may provide the international art world with alien objects

spiced with mild salsa, mango chutney, or picapepa. Depending on the whims of the powerful curators, self-conscious orientalism or tropicalism may be back in style. It's a bit like the high-art version of the yuppie fascination with nostalgic negrobilia, mexicanabilia, or tango. The new Third World or "minority" artist is expected to perform trans- and intercultural sophistication, unpredictable eclecticism, and cool hybridity. Those artists, writers, and curators who decide to problematize this neo-retro-colonial praxis, are usually deported back to oblivion. No one is truly indispensable in the free market of 21st-century art. Besides, the waiting line of willing Others is immense.

"International" curators and art critics have depoliticized the border paradigm and the discourse on hybridity, therefore mixing things up is now quite trendy. "Daring" juxtapositions of high/low art, Third/First World, shamanic/high-tech, insider/outsider art have become common practice. Borders and identities are interchangeable. It's gentrified ethnicity, nomadism for sale, hybridity for rent, 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 in the late '80s, 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 the crises of outsiders and/or borrow their artifacts (sometimes permanently) to exhibit them in museums. The framing of course, will be done by someone who will never understand the drama of the "outsider." For the global impressario, 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 Biennale, or the film festival.

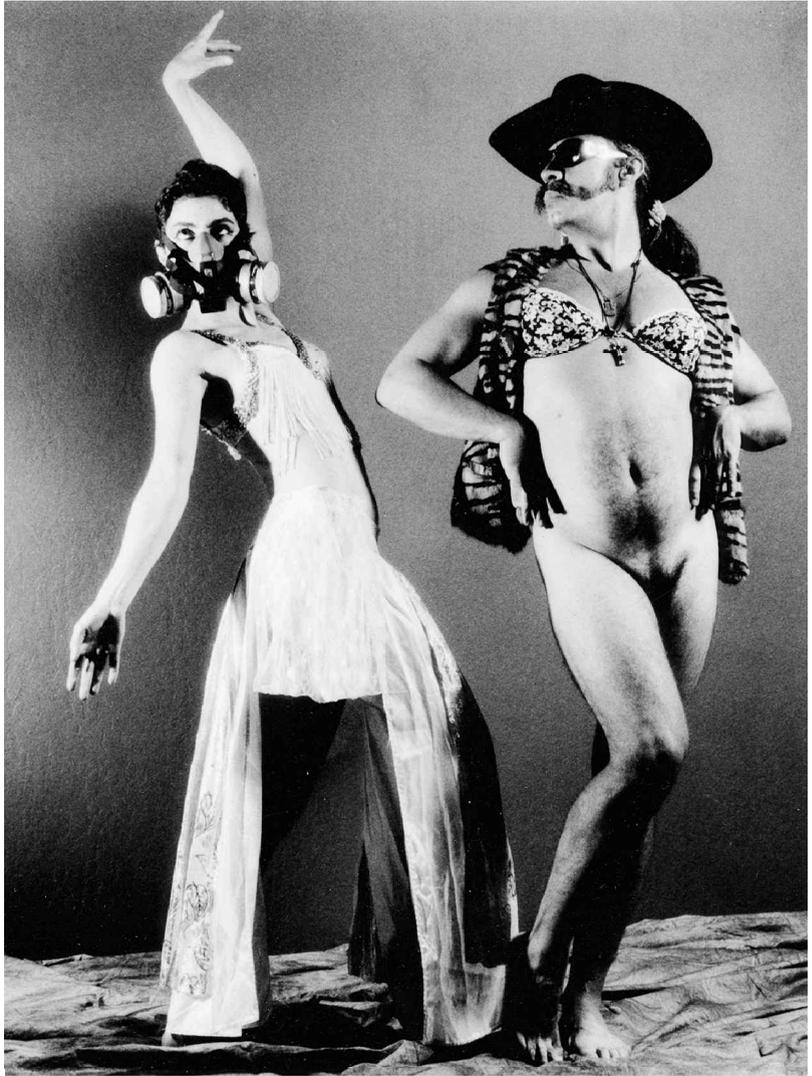
"Audience enters space. A nude opera singer with her face covered by a veil and a strap-on dildo gets 'activated,' by audience members through fellatio."
 —Stage directions from *Califas 2000*,
 a Spanglish performance opera by
 Guillermo Galinda and Gómez-Pe a
 October 2000

Track #6:

"Extreme Sexuality" and Other Hollow Concepts

(Soundbed: Nino Rota mixed with 1980s House music)

Ten years ago performance artists managed to shock the American political class and the 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. The kink of Jerry Springer's involuntary performance artist guests makes Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, or Annie Sprinkle 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 Americana. Specialty "hookers," sexual fetishes, hard core S&M, and theatrical sex are regular topics on Cable TV. It's no big deal. 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



6. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Iranian performance artist Carmel Kooros perform the desires of Internet users in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)

“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 margins continue to stretch. “Alternative” weekly papers like the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* publish features on necrophilia and satanic sex rites while Hollywood makes movies about the snuff film subculture.

In the porn industry, the kinkiest videos, hotlines, and websites are being marketed to average, middle-class people with boring lives and numbed bodies. Yuppies in search of intense experiences to shatter their lethargy attend vampire clubs in London, San Francisco, and New York, while financiers and politicians discover the wonders of fetishized S&M. 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 (*shift to track #7*). The great paradox is that behind the spectacle of “extreme sexuality” lies a profound puritanism. So much sexuality amounts to not much actual sensuality. For the willing consumer of

this new sex industry, the unspoken text seems to be: “I am completely disconnected from my own sexuality and sensuality. I badly need an extreme experience to shake up my dormant body and shock my senses.”

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 fun house. There they can find unimaginable photos to download and videos to watch: sex with animals, child porn, online strippers and escorts, “The Dead Babes” website, and the recent “Couple TV” sites which feature amateur couples revealing (or rather “performing”) “everything” they do at home from making love and taking a shower to shitting.² And if they get bored with “extreme sexuality,” within seconds kids and teens can access other daring sites where they can find neo-nazi and KKK paraphernalia, militia manifestos, and right-wing terrorist manuals detailing the formula to construct bombs in the garage. There are truly no limits to our “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 spare time to exercise our unlimited “freedoms.”

Since performance artists simply can't or don't wish to compete with these readily accessible forms of “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”? Should we bother to attempt “transgressing” the outer boundaries of accepted transgression? My colleagues and I remember with nostalgia the days when getting naked during a performance piece at a Chicano cultural center would trigger a monthlong community controversy. I also remember with a melancholic smile when the Walker Art Center outraged the political establishment by presenting Ron Athey, and when Karen Finley was banned in England. Today, things are quite different: Ron gets invited to direct MTV videos; Karen appears frequently on the TV show *Politically Incorrect*; and an HBO film crew follows my *Mexterminator Project* on tour. The image of my dear 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. Is this phenomenon a breakthrough in terms of tolerance for extreme behavior, or yet another confirmation that content, in the age of infinite options and multidirectional promises, no longer matters? For the moment, my performance colleagues and I are a bit confused.

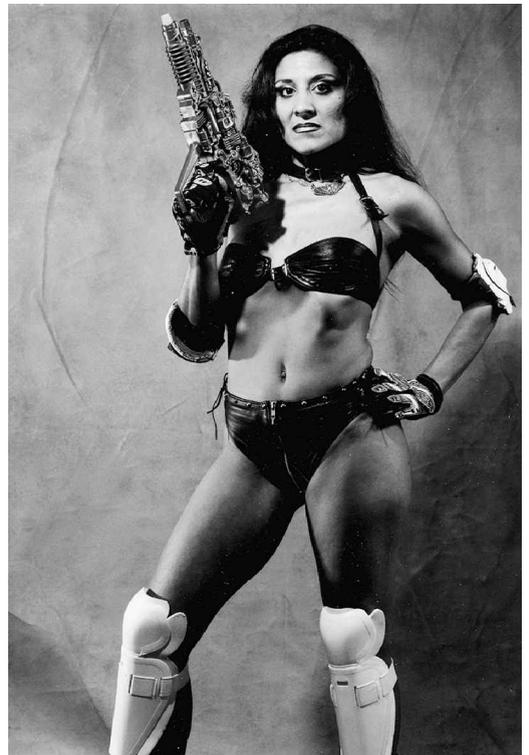
Track #7:

The Dot.com Project of Recuperation of the Human Body & the Social Realm

(Soundbed: *The pseudo-music of cell phones and computer sound alerts parodying a black exploitation movie soundtrack*)

One of the scariest features of virtual capitalism is that it is run mostly by guys in their 20s and early 30s. These young millionaires are determining the new terms (or lack thereof) of our social contract, and the fundamental characteristics of our new culture (*shift to tracks #2 & 3*). They are also responsible

7. Performance artist Iris Rodriguez as Superchicana II in the *Mexterminator Project*. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)



for gentrifying cyberspace, and turning it into a Wild West theme park and mall, the largest ever. The ethnographic taxonomy of the homo digitalis is quite spooky: First and foremost, they are rabid social Darwinists. They have no ethos (not even towards their peers), no political understanding of the world, and no cultural sophistication whatsoever. Since the geography they inhabit is largely virtual, they have no sense of belonging to any community in reality #1 other than their own corporation. Neighborhoods are mere “hosts” and cities are “portals.” Given these formidable lacks, notions of social responsibility or justice are not even included in their computer thesaurus. Since their business transactions, social life, and family matters take place strictly in virtual space, they tend to be socially awkward, rude, and, sexually, extremely lonely. Up until recently, their physical and social needs (in the “old” sense of the terms) were a mere nuisance. The great paradox is that virtual capitalists don’t see themselves as conservative. On the contrary, they define themselves as carriers of the torch of “a new revolution,” and holders of true “alternative lifestyles.” They actually use these terms.

In the past two years, the extremely worrisome absence of the “real” human body and of “real” human interactions in cyberculture has become an obsession for the masterminds, gurus, and operators of cyberspace. Unlike the



8. *La KKK nurse* (performance artist Alice Joanou) at the laboratory of desire in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)



9. This ad for “Extreme Fighting Techniques” appeared in the SF Weekly, an alternative weekly newspaper. (Courtesy of Ralph Gracie Jiu-Jitsu)

early utopian discourse of replacement or even abolishment of the body, now it is desirable and fashionable for the digital optimists to recapture their physicality on the weekend, at any cost. It is a serious “project.” The logic goes like this: If you lose your physical (and therefore social) body sitting in front of your computer from Monday to Friday, you must then recapture it on the weekend. Since the loss is so extreme, the therapy must be equally hardcore. To this effect, some engage in compulsive hiking or biking. Martial arts and “extreme fighting” are also quite popular. Others join expensive outdoor seminars where participants, all white males in the same social class, take off their clothes to howl, drum, and learn to survive in the wilderness. The objective is to “reconnect” with their “inner primitive,” “inner child,” or long-lost erotic self. To this effect, many prefer to attend “extreme sex” clubs, or hire a personal dominatrix that truly understands their needs (*shift to track #6*). The escort services in Silicon Valley are a booming industry. Whatever their weekend therapy for recapturing the body, once it is over, the dot.comers return to their 9-to-9 jobs and engage in their other great obsessions: e-commerce and the cyber stock market. They have many crucial decisions to make...on our behalf.

*“dear audiencē
ease my pain
lick my chest, my sweat, my blood
500 years of bleeding...
from head to toes
& all the way down to the root
I bleed
from Alaska to Patagonia”*
—from “Brownout!” a solo performance text by Gómez-Pe a

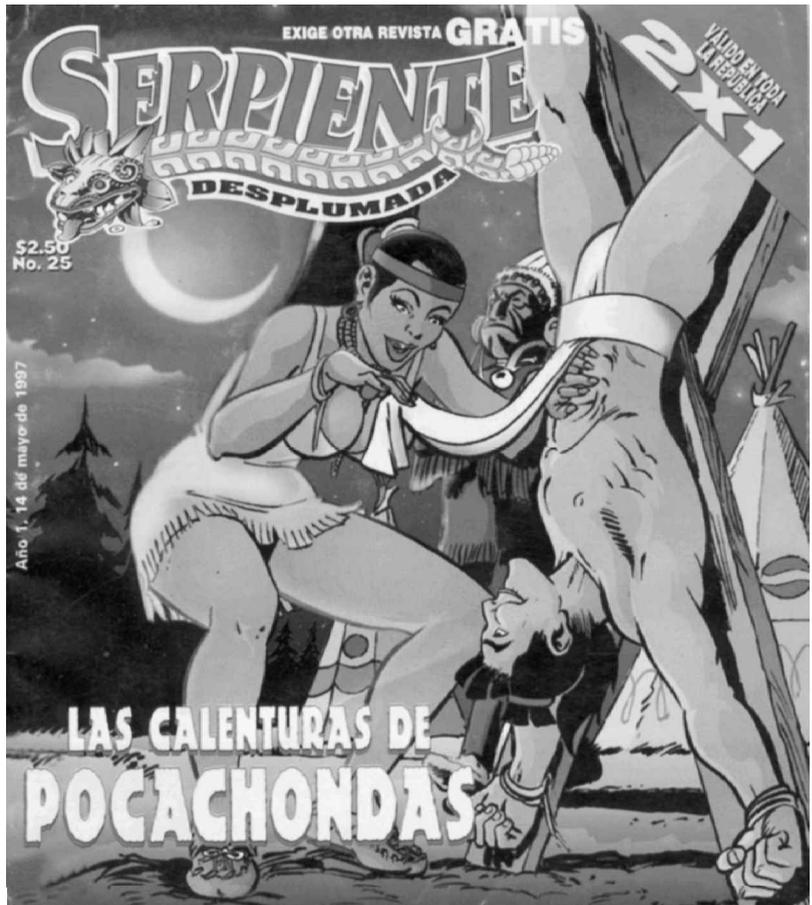
Track #8:
Altered Bodies & Wounded Bodies

(Soundbed: Experimental drum & bass by DJ Krush mixed with tracks #3, 5, & 6)

In a culture that a-critically glorifies 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 reshaped, 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 noses. Cyborg bodies and body parts enhanced by high technology, in all states of artificial alteration, appear in movies, primetime TV shows, ads, Websites, and art shows. Fully tattooed or pierced bodies are no longer a bold statement. We see them on tourist beaches, Ivy League university campuses, and in suburban discos. The popularization and mainstreaming of these practices have finally permitted anyone, not just eccentrics, bohemians, celebrities, or the upper class, to carry out their fantasies, to sculpt and dramatically alter their bodies. In fact most of us know people who have undergone drastic physical transformations. And many times we ourselves have fantasized about reshaping some body part. I have. I am just too shy to do it.

At the same time, the spectacle of bodies wounded or even destroyed by social or political drama went from being a tabloid subculture to becoming a cliché. Mutilated or inert, covered with blood, open sores, or prosthetics, “extreme” bodies without identity populate both the 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, decontextualized, emptied of drama and emotion, stripped of their humanity and



10. This popular Mexican mini-novela features the weekly adventures of “Pocachondas,” a horny Indian maiden who loves to torture muscled cowboys. (Courtesy of Guillermo Gómez-Peña)

identity. And as spectators, we have clearly lost our capability to feel outraged by that which caused the violence acted upon those bodies (*shift to track #11*).

The combined spectacle of the altered and the wounded body has generated an interest in the strange intersection of performance (and performative photography), a fringe of cybertheory, porn, (para)ethnography, and pop culture. But the new areas of interest are quite different. It is clearly no longer the “beautiful” or “natural” body (with its cultural specificities and ideological implications) or theatricalized nudity. It is definitely not *el cuerpo político*, or *el cuerpo cartográfico* either. It’s the combination of pathology and high style, of sex and suffering, 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. *Que loquera!*

Track #9:

The Millennial Freak Crosses the Southern Border

(Soundbed by Mexican hip-hop groups Molotov and Plastilina Mosh)

For years Latin Americans witnessed from the South what they perceived as a First World culture of unacknowledged excesses and extremes. But thanks to global media, the Internet, and the black market, today, they themselves are an integral part of this culture, as daily voyeurs and willing participants. The border of the mainstream bizarre has moved South. At the Mexico City street market of Tepito, as in similar places in S o Paolo, Bogotá, Calcutta, or Taipei, with enough *conexiones* one 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 you wish. This “outlaw” global market appears to defy but in actuality strangely complements the “lawful” one. Other more “legitimate” pop cultural examples come to mind. The popular Mexican comic books known as *mini-novelas* 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 a crime or accident, or people with “rare genetic disorders” share the screen with, say, a mob of angry *campesinos* setting a rapist on fire as captured by the camcorder of a bewildered tourist, a recent apparition of the virgin of Guadalupe, or interviews with witch doctors and “outrageous” artists. It’s family entertainment *para todas las edades*. The old freak show is back in a new high definition format, and you simply can’t take your eyes off the screen.

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,” and “families engaged in bizarre forms of incest.” 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 others’ heads off, like in the early Jerry Springer shows. It’s “radical” according to my own family and friends. *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 indig-

enous troupe of fake transsexuals, overweight women in *tangas*, and hypersexualized 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 body had undergone at least five plastic surgeries. Wearing a microscopic bikini, she looked like a character from a Japanese *anime* 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 regards to her “eight-year-old son who is watching the show at home. Jorgito, my love, I see you in an hour. Ciao.” 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.

The emerging Latin American “alternative” art world is by no means less voyeuristic. As voyeurs of crime and biological pathologies in search of intense perceptual experiences, artists photograph, paint, video, or reenact in a performance the silent drama of a corpse. In Ciudad Juarez, a collective of photographers became famous for photographing victims of executions by *narcos* and the mutilated corpses of *las muertas de Juarez*.³ Once, a group of “morgue artists” in Mexico City named “Semefo” presented the ultimate metaphor of our times in a gallery: the corpse of a stillborn child concealed inside a cube of cement. On another occasion, they hung on the walls of a museum several sheets covered with dry blood which had been used in a morgue to cover corpses after autopsy.

My Chicano and Mexico City colleagues and I have explored the spectacle of the brown body-as-freak by “enhancing” our own bodies with special effects makeup, handmade “lowrider” prosthetics, and hyper-ethnic motifs. The objective is to heighten identity features of fear or desire in the Anglo imagination, to “spectacularize” our identities so to speak. We then pose on dioramas as “artificial savages,” or “ethno-techno” freaks, 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. Once, during one of our diorama-performances, a Latina collaborator played strip poker with audience members for three hours. Regardless of the country or the city where we perform, the results of these dangerous 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, our current audiences feel entitled to invade our intimacy, overtly sexualize us, and even engage in (symbolic or real) violent acts, from whipping us, to handling us roughly with dog leashes. People are also allowed to “tag” (spray paint) our bodies, and to point handguns and Uzis at us. Some audience members actually invite us to reverse the gaze and inflict violence on them. 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; to understand our new role as performance artists in this culture of extreme spectacle

11. Guillermo Gómez-Pe a and Carmel Kooros as “The Natural Born Matones” in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)



and to open up a *sui generis* ceremonial space for the audience to reflect on their new relationship with the Other. 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

*Track #10:
"Alternative" Spirituality*

(Soundbed: New age music mixed with Tibetan monk chants and Yaqui drums)

During a discussion I had with a vegan anarchist after one of my performances, he told me: "Radical politics was to the '80s and early '90s what 'radical spirituality' is to the 21st century." He had a point. Understandably we all feel "empty." The unprecedented *horror vacui* produced by living in a world without ethics or community has revitalized an interest in religion. But not just in institutionalized religion. Eclectic forms of spirituality-by-the-numbers permeate our daily lives, our beliefs, our relationship to our bodies, the pop cultural products we consume, and even the art produced by emerging artists. The global menu includes Eastern and Western beliefs and practices, alleged Native American rituals, and a sampling of "World" tribalism (as in World music). These practices are not exactly "countercultural" (in the old sense of the term, that is). To say that nowadays "alternative spirituality" is corporate culture is neither an oxymoron nor a hyperbole. Cyber-gurus teach the young virtual capitalists how to find harmony between cyberspace and the "inner self" (perhaps the true objective of these teachings is to help them rationalize their absolute lack of compassion for others). Conservative yuppies with corporate jobs seek shamans, acupuncturists, aromatherapists, and healers-by-phone. They shop on the Net for herbal secrets and eco-friendly products. And during vacation, they embark on long "spiritual quests" somewhere in "Indian country," or south of the old border. Their "alternative" spirituality is sometimes complemented by a Spartan health program that requires strict diets, gym routines, and "zero tolerance" for drugs, fat, tobacco, and alcohol. For them it is hard to distinguish between "enlightenment" and "lifestyle" (*shifi to track #7*).

Contemporary spirituality has other cultural manifestations. Freed from the moral constraints of critical multiculturalism and "political correctness," many young hipsters have selectively borrowed elements from numerous Third World "pet cultures," to create their own designer tribalism. From San Diego to Manhattan, and from West Berlin to Formentera, the (mostly) white Apocalypse youth gather for postindustrial pow-wows in an attempt to recapture a lost sense of belonging to a larger "spiritual community." Their neotribalism is loosely based on performance rituals allegedly inspired by "ancient rites," spiced with collective drumming, and framed by all-purpose "anarchist" politics. The conscious goal is collective ecstasy. The neotribal self-made man, an alleged drop out of Western civilization, meets with the universe and unleashes his creative "demons and fairies" at huge outdoor ritual raves such as the Burning Man Festival, where everyone gets to be a performance artist for a week. They build teepees and kivas out of industrial trash. They wear Rasta dreadlocks, Indian braids, or shave their heads. They cover their pale, ex-Protestant bodies with Celtic, pre-Columbian, Native American, and Maori tattoos, not knowing exactly why, except that it makes them look more stylistically marginal, and feel spiritually "deeper," and yes, much more sexualized.

In Mexico and other Latin American countries, since the dramatic collapse of *neoliberalismo* (when we finally realized that we were not exactly VIP guests

in the global project) and the emergence of a generalized culture of violence, the practice of *brujería* (witchcraft) has extended across class, profession, and age. Everyone consults a witch doctor, even the middle class. In Galerías, a popular Mexico City mall, an entire wing called El Pabellon Esotérico is devoted to the occult. There, after shopping or before the movies, you can get a *limpia* (exorcism), purchase talismans to protect your business or your aching heart, or have someone read your cards, pulse, or aura. The performance personae of the witches fall into various categories: *Mexica*/goth, ultra-*indigenista*, gypsy/*hipiteca*, or Californian new age. These vernacular performance artists are representatives of a neo-medieval/post-NAFTA “alternative spirituality.” Our unprecedented emptiness and acute social crises cannot be “healed” by institutionalized religion. Catholicism has failed us and the witch doctors know it. They know that our selves are fractured and incomplete, that our lives are frail and predictable, and they are ready to provide us with the instant cure: a participatory ritual performance through which we get to experience an intensified sense of ourselves and of the many worlds we have lost for good.

“...serial killer enters *La Placita*
dressed as a pregnant nun
randomly killing 35 paisanos
a police report describes it as an isolated incident
an eight-year-old suburban wunderkind
murders his parents, neighbors, and toys
claims he ate too much ice cream
and receives 2000 letters of support
a vivid example of global solidarity”

—from “Another Day in the Life of Califas,” a performance poem
in *The New World Border* by Gómez-Pe a (*City Lights*, 1996)

Track #11:

SADD (Social Attention Deficit Disorder)

(Soundbed: Trash punk at maximum volume)

If there is a central feature to globalization, it is violence, generalized violence, all-encompassing violence, in every corner of the “global” village. ...And now, the world news: Since the end of the cold war, the “center” of the ideological spectrum has moved 10 miles to the right. The U.S. and its cronies in the U.N. have established an international police force in charge of punishing rebel nations in the name of “democracy.” Corporations displace indigenous communities, ravage their land and dump toxic waste wherever they please. Organized crime crosses all borders. In fact, the largest and best-organized multinational network may very well be the drug trade. In Latin America, executions of peasants by paramilitary groups and kidnappings of small businessmen and children have become common practice, as have mob lynchings by dispossessed communities. Since the government won’t protect them, neighbors take justice into their own hands, punishing rapists, kidnappers, and abusive policemen. In the U.S., the panorama is equally Dantean. Whether through mass media, or through the sad spectacle of the streets we walk, homelessness, crime, and police brutality are all part of our quotidian narrative. Here, psychotic sex crimes and attacks on people of color and immigrants by racist vigilantes and neo-nazi skinheads are daily news. Here, Anglo child killers from privileged backgrounds have taught the frightened citizenry that ineffable violence has nothing to do with poverty, hunger, or the lack of freedom.

How do we respond to this global culture of violence?

Whether we like it or not, the new Darwinism as dominant discourse has infiltrated our psyche, our relationship to the social sphere, and our interpersonal relations. Daily (over)exposure to (staged or real) violence in the global media also contributes to the numbing of our hearts and civic selves. The results are devastating. The social injustice and alienation that produces violence no longer outrage us. We have become jaded, complacent, and if we happen to be part of a politicized minority, there are simply too many forms of injustice competing for our attention and we have no axiological mechanisms to prioritize these concerns. The great paradox is that more than ever we are informed, overinformed, about the dramas of mankind. But we feel nothing, or we don't feel enough, or if we are genuinely moved to care we have no political format to express our concern. It's... "sad," and that's as far as it goes. Our sadness only lasts a few minutes. Desensitization to human pain appears to be necessary in order to survive the daily spectacle of violence.

Even intellectuals and artists suffer from compassion fatigue and humanitarian impotence. But in order to rationalize and justify our malaise, we have developed extremely convoluted theoretical arguments. Critical reflections on the dehumanizing effects of mass media or the Internet are seen as dated, as is denouncing neocolonialism, social injustice, the privileges of white men, or racism in our educational or cultural institutions. In fact to adopt too much of a critical stance, much less to express outrage, is perceived as unfashionable and, in art circles, as an anathema. Re-creating the frustrated steps of our incapability to perceive the world beyond mass media or virtual reality, and referencing the frustration of our inability to embrace a cause in a tongue-and-cheek manner are all that is seen as acceptable. The crucial question here is, if cynicism and indifference are considered normal behavior in the era of globalization, how do we begin a discussion about ethics in the 21st century without being self-righteous or sounding like old farts or boring ideologues?

*"Tired of suffering from political outrage
and not having a language to express it?
Call Dr. Nancy Dharma
She'll help you find your inner activist"*

*—from "Pirate Messages on the Short Wave Radio,"
performance text in The Last Migration,
The New World Border*

15 MINUTE REFLEXIVE PAUSE

Track #12:

Zones of Resistance: In Search of a New Activist Ethos

(Soundbed by Manu Chao, Tijuana No, and Negu Gorriak)

Perhaps the very first statement against globalization with an international impact was made by the Zapatista rebels on 1 January 1994, the day that NAFTA went into effect. Unlike prior guerrilla movements, their main means of operation and communication with the outside world were performative actions, poetical communiqués, and the Internet. For several years (1994–1998), Zapatismo managed to reenergize all kinds of progressive movements and organizations worldwide, including arts collectives. During their legendary *Convenciones Intergalácticas*, which were like political Woodstocks, one could



12. *El Ethnographic Loco*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña's robotic hand, betrays him and distorts his identity in the Mexterminator Project. (Photo by Eugenio Castro, copyright © Eugenio Castro 1999)

find in the *Chiapaneca* jungle people from every nationality, age, and creed: The common denominator was that they were all fighting the side-effects of globalization in their own countries and communities, from Chiapas to Japan, and from California to Western Europe. They were the first global resistance movement.

In the last couple of years, a new antiglobalization movement has begun to shape up, gathering an eclectic array of labor organizers, environmentalists, young anarchists of sorts, and cyber-activists. We saw them on TV, first in Seattle and Prague and then in Washington, DC; a new generation of activists came of age protesting the WTO and the World Bank. Although artists were not formally involved in the organization of these protests, some of the groups involved in the demonstration utilized performance art strategies to appeal to the media.

Under the leadership of activist, musician, and theologian Valdemar Velazquez, the Farm Worker Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) out of Toledo, Ohio, has managed to carry out one of the dreams of Cesar Chavez: they have successfully created a binational network of progressive unions that bypasses the departments of labor of both countries. In collaboration with other labor organizations, they have also created a cross-border network of ombudsmen

agencies that monitor the working conditions of migrant workers and protect them from the abuse of farmers, immigration agents, and citizen vigilantes.

The omnipotent *logos digitalis* is actually filled with myriad cracks. Cyberhackers have managed to paralyze entire corporations and banks and to enter into classified computer files from the U.S. and other governments. A young Canadian hacker utilized U.S. computers to launch a mega cyberattack on CNN and other corporations effectively shutting them down for several hours. Through fake press releases and bogus chat-room hype, young “fraudsters” have manipulated the price of stocks to their benefit, driving down the stock market.

More examples of resistance pop up in other parts of the world: In Buenos Aires, a group of teenagers calling themselves *Grupo de Arte Callejero*, create very sleek conceptual street signs that lead people to the mansions of top military men implicated in the 1970s dirty war. In cahoots with another group formed by children of *los desaparecidos*, they also coordinate mass taggings of the generals’ homes. The defacing guerrilla ritual is carried out and documented as quickly as possible. And as of July 2000, when I got to meet the members of the group in Brazil, they hadn’t been busted yet. My heart is with them. I truly wish my colleagues and I had the same valor. Another truly heroic action warmed our hearts recently. When a U.S. corporation, with the blessing of the Colombian government, announced they were opening facilities in the Colombian Amazon, an entire Indian village threatened to commit mass suicide. They were not kidding. Needless to say that the corporation’s plans are falling apart. Other gestures are less utopian in nature, but by no means less effective. An entire town in the Mexican state of Guerrero rebelled against a posse of judicial policemen terrorizing the village. One night, when the sinister cops were resting at a cantina after one of their bloody raids, the locals stormed in and hung them from the tallest trees in the *zocalo*. The impunity with which the forces of globalization tend to proceed, is certainly being questioned, and many times quite successfully. Whether it is Chicano students walking out *en masse* from their high schools to protest a racist proposition in Los Angeles, artists marching in San Francisco to contest gentrification, leftists worldwide protesting Nike’s unapologetic use of child labor in Southeast Asia, or young postcolonial feminists organizing against the transnational sex slave trade, we are witnessing the workings of a new multi-centric activist movement.

But these hopeful examples by no means exonerate us from attempting to articulate a new activist ethos that emerges organically from within the very communities and institutions we are part of. In this regard, perhaps the first step is to go back to the basics—social justice; human, civic, and labor rights; empathy and compassion for others. From these basics, we can begin to raise the fundamental questions, the obvious ones, from the global to the personal: Why is it that in the age of multidirectional free trade, the First World countries are closing their borders to the south? Why in the era of digital communication, more than ever, are we unable to communicate effectively across nationality, race, gender, and class? Why in “times of peace” are our governments manufacturing more weaponry than ever before? The questions ought to become increasingly more obvious and specific: Why in the U.S., an alleged “First World leader,” don’t we yet have decent medical and educational systems? Why in the face of so much (virtual) money, are our artistic institutions and grassroots organizations being defunded? Why are so many people still living on the streets of our cities? Why are our neighbors fully armed? Why are cops never punished for their acts of brutality against our communities? Why are there still political prisoners in what is allegedly “the most perfect democracy on earth”? Why is the government indirectly providing weapons and drugs to the youth of color and then putting them in jail for us-

ing them? Why have we abandoned our children and elders to their fate? Why are our local educational and cultural institutions doing nothing about these matters? Why is the media more interested in spectacle than in raising these questions? Why aren't we as individuals outraged enough? Why don't we speak up whenever it is needed? As politicized artists, we have a formidable task ahead of us: How do we make sure that these and other equally important questions get articulated in our work in such a unique way that we challenge effectively the compassion fatigue of our audiences? More questions, crucial questions, continue to emerge as I shut down my computer.

—*San Francisco, September 2000*

NEXT WEEK:
 A SPECIAL ON HOW AN UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN PERFORMANCE ARTIST MANAGED TO ESCAPE THE BACKLASH DEATH SQUADS & THE ACADEMIC BORDER PATROL;
 ON HOW HE FOUND LOVE AT 43;
 ON HIS INADEQUACIES AS A FATHER;
 AND ON HIS POOR ACTIVIST ORGANIZING SKILLS.
 TUNE IN!

Notes

1. For U.S. Latinos, the South refers to all the countries existing south of the U.S.-Mexico border.
2. The cyber-sex industry constitutes 60 percent of the current Internet economy.
3. In the past five years, over 200 young women, most of whom worked in the *maquiladora* industry, have been kidnapped and killed by a binational gang of serial killers.
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."

Guillermo Gómez-Pe a is a performance artist, writer, and a Contributing Editor to TDR. His most recent book, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back (2000)* was published by Routledge.