

Gustavo Vazquez a case study on collaboration “Documented/Indocumentado: A Curiosity Cabinet”

In early 2007, performance artist/writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña and I began working in a long term project. Our motivation was to dissect the gaze of the video artist by using performance art strategies in order to challenge the issue of authorship and explore the inner workings of our 20-year long collaborative process. The pieces question, problematize, clarify & explore the actual collaboration process between the human body and the camera, between the gaze of the filmmaker and the gaze of the performance artist. We strongly feel that the terrain of “authorship” that lies between performance art and video is particularly ambiguous...and dangerous. To be more specific, whenever a video artists teams with a performance artist, it becomes extremely hard to draw the border between the creative gaze and aesthetic filter of the camera and the primary aesthetics and concept of the performance. The inevitable question is: Who is the real author? Filmmaker’s either think of performance artists as subject matter or actors (not creators), whereas they tend to perceive us as mere technicians in their universe and cameramen in their conceptual art production.

This new reflective phase in our working relation was triggered by the fact that we find our psychic and mysterious process of collaboration often overlaps and intersects in multiple points of the creative process. From conceptions to the writing, living and enhancing directed improvisations or video performative jamming sessions, to the editing image and sound as telepathic mental Siamese twins. This creative phenomena is something that I had experience in my youth, during my initiation with art practice.

Both Gomez-Peña and I crossed the border around the same time and participated in the creation of the border arts movement of the early to late 80’s. Since then we have been sporadically collaborating on common subjects of interest, reverse anthropology, juxtaposing kitsch aesthetics with political and conceptual art. We have been influenced by Mexican and Chicano art and pop culture, constantly engage in art history debates between north and south. Our constant discussion on social, political and artistic tensions between the dominant cultures and the cultures of resistance become a framework to create critical and humorous avant-garde video art.

Our goal is to present the finished work in multiple formats and contexts. Some examples: As an experimental DVD it can be shown in the context of media arts and performance art. The Curiosity Cabinet a conceptual kit as a video installation it could be presented in galleries & museums. Its theoretical and pedagogic nature (critical writings will accompany the hand made book and DVD) will make it a good teaching tool in multiple university departments (art, film, new media, cultural studies, Chicano studies, Spanish language, etc). Another aspect is to reach young audiences and new communities of emerging artists to engage in collaboration and question issues of authorship. Thus stimulate debate and redefine a paradigm shift on these areas of contention.

We consider venues for this project to be National and international film and video festivals, museums and galleries, communities cultural centers, universities. Our previous collaborative works on video for performance or videos titles like “The Great Mojado Invasion” has tour both nationally as well as internationally with more than 100 screenings.

We both position ourselves as insiders/outsideers and ‘border artists’, operating simultaneously in multiple contexts (academia, the art world, the Chicano community, the Latino media, etc). Like most of our past projects, we hope to have an impact both in the art world and in the civic realm. If packaged and distributed, the art world will respond to certain issues (the articulation of the post-9/11 body politic, and of the troubling epistemological terrain that exists between video art and live performance). Whereas the Chicano community will respond to its political content more directly. (racism, immigration, the politics of language).

This will be a conceptual kit that will include a hand made book with Felicia Rice, and an essay by Jennifer Gonzalez. In addition, this project will provide a pointed yet humorous selection of artifacts in the curiosity cabinet of antidotes and fetishes to fight paranoia, racism, cultural loneliness, formalist aesthetics & political despair.

Our first collaboration dates back to 1982, San Diego California. Ironically the title of the piece was “The Last Performance”. I made a video with relics of mammoths and other extinct animals as ghost of the past with Gomez-Peña’s performance of archetypal personas such as a Latin American General in exile. Later on I designed other videos as meta-language for performance troupe La Pocha Nostra(i.e. “The Mexterminator”), followed by a performance opera, “The Indian Queen”, which Gomez-Peña directed in LA, In 1999 together we created the now classic “Chicano sci-fi mocumentary” “The Great Mojado Invasion” (which received several national awards), Our last piece “Declaration of Poetic Disobedience” has been widely shown in International film and performance festivals. In all of these past collaborative work we have share discussed and partially overlap roles, yet what distinguishes this proposed project is the degree of time we have invested and are willing to commit to the realization of “Documented/Indocumentado”. The process of working in-depth on a territory not explored enough in video, on authorship and it’s relation to performance art.