

## Performance Review: Guillermo Gomez-Peña brings borderland aesthetics to the avant-garde

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Numerous performance artists address social and political issues in their works. Some do so in an intentional and self-conscious way — and are often criticized for being too didactic, and some do so in a more abstract, symbolic manner — thus criticized for being inaccessible. Yet no matter how topical these issues may be or how successfully they are conveyed, they emerge almost exclusively from a white, Eurocentric perspective. One has only to read one of the few existing performance-art historical texts or take one of the few existing performance-art history courses to see this.

Comparatively few “ethnic” (as if white were neutral or raceless) artists inhabit the terrain of art — with a capital “A” — the Western canon of high art. This exclusivity is perhaps even more evident within the medium of performance, an art form too new and experimental to have reached many people beyond those from backgrounds of privilege and some sort of connection with the art elite.

One of the few exceptions to this rule is Mexican-born artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña. Both a Mexican and an American citizen,

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*In its relatively short history, performance art has always emphasized notions of border/boundary crossing, breaking down traditional conventions and challenging establishments; this is the avant-garde aesthetic upon which it was founded. Though often political, performance pieces rarely address issues of race and ethnicity, likely because of the avant garde’s largely white composition and its rootedness in European traditions. By infusing his work with a borderland sensibility, Mexican-born Guillermo-Gomez Peña uses the medium to unsettle the additional boundaries of white/black, Self/Other, West/non-West, and high culture/low culture, appropriating an avant-garde medium to question some of the fundamental assumptions of Western “high art.”*

Gomez-Peña uses his dual location in the world to be a mediator — an “intercultural interpreter” — with performance art as his primary mode of discourse. Though the specific theme of his works is U.S.-Mexico border relations, Gomez-Peña addresses in a broader sense the tension between dominant Western culture and what is defined as the “Other,” evidenced not only in the art world but the American public sphere in general. The tone of Gomez-Peña’s works — though often angry and biting sarcasm — cannot be described simply as one of “white bashing,” nor can his motivations be described simply as compensatory (i.e., the sense that a culture must be represented in its “authentic,” “essential” form in order to make up for all the years it has been rendered invisible). Instead of issuing ethnocentric artistic statements, Gomez-Peña approaches his work from the perspective of a “border citizen.” He describes himself, in his own words, as a member of a “lost tribe” of “citizens of nowhere, or better said, of everywhere...condemned to roam around the foggy and unspecific territory known as border culture” (Gomez-Peña 1991:30).

As a way of reconciling this feeling of rootlessness and disconnection, Gomez-Peña employs in all his works a spoken and visual language of syncretism, hybridity, and intercultural fusion. In his piece, “Border Brujo,” performed from 1988 to 1989, this is evident on many levels, including setting. For a backdrop, he provides a “portable altar,” reminiscent of Latin-American Catholic *nichos* and *ofrendas*, yet filled with objects and images of both Mexican and American culture: plastic toy robots, tourist memorabilia, *calaveras* (skeleton figurines) — elements of both kitsch/pop culture and the sacred. In the foreground is a table holding a “ghetto blaster,” megaphone, tequila bottle (he is prone to swigging tequila while on stage), ashtray, and many votive candles that he ritualistically lights as the piece begins.

The performance consists simply of Gomez-Peña sitting behind his table, in a cross between a news broadcast and a preacher’s sermon, directly addressing the audience (at times through the megaphone) with a carefully planned text. Yet the text is delivered in the many languages of the bicultural characters he plays. These range, as writer and sometime-collaborator Cocoa Fusco describes, “...from lowrider to Tijuana barker, from velvet-voiced Latin lover to crackpot

traveling salesman” (Gomez-Peña 1991:46). Beyond simply code-switching between English and Spanish, Gomez-Peña constructs a continuous linguistic collage of border-influenced words and sounds — their sources being pachuco and chilango slang, “redneck” and yuppie intonations, political jargon, media and tourism marketing-speak, ancient indigenous Indian tongues, postmodern academic lingo, Christian terminology, and probably more. All the while, the stereo plays a *mélange* of otherworldly and mundane pop-musical sounds.

Gomez-Peña’s performance is unlike many of his contemporary performers’ in that very little is left to chance. His words and ritualized movements are clearly pre-rehearsed and straightforwardly convey the artist’s political intentions. Although he intends to address a multicultural audience, his dialogue at times seems directly aimed at his white viewers, attempting to provoke and confront their assumptions about “alien-ness” and “Otherness.” To do this, he cites history:

It’s January 1st, 1847  
and the U.S. hasn’t invaded Mexico yet.  
This is Mexico carnales!  
There is no border.  
We are merely divided  
by the imprecision of your memory [Gomez-Peña 1991]

He cites pop culture:

You thought Mexican art was a bunch of candy skulls and  
velvet paintings [Gomez-Peña 1991:57]

And he cites other institutions of power in society:

Dear editor, dear curator, dear collector, dear candidate, dear  
anthropologist  
Where can we draw the line between curiosity and exploitation?  
Between dialogue and entertainment  
Between democratic participation and tokenism? [Gomez-Peña: 1991]

This emphasis upon the white audience by no means results in the alien-

ation of all other viewers (which would, sadly, be the case with most performance-art pieces). It instead reflects the necessity and sense of urgency in which the culturally dominant, mostly white upper class of society, must accept the presence of other cultures. He explains in a 1991 interview:

If we don't begin exercising a systematic dialogue across borders, races, genders and generations, we are going to arrive at the 21st century in disastrous shape. Artists and writers who are not informed purely by Western European art and culture can give us clues as to what real national identity is (Wei 1993:159).

For Gomez-Peña, it is a political necessity that he performs in spaces on the "inside" of the art establishment, to reach this sort of audience. Yet he performs in alternative spaces as well, successfully reaching as broad a range of people as he depicts in the works themselves. In terms of this piece, Gomez-Peña explains:

"Border Brujo" performs distinctly inside and outside the art world. He has appeared in galleries and theater festivals, and also at youth centers, migrant worker centers, high schools, community events, political rallies and performance pilgrimages (Gomez-Peña 1991:50).

Guillermo Gomez-Peña's hyperawareness of his audience and his acknowledgment of his art as belonging to a larger context is refreshing, in the context of contemporary art — where notions such as "art for art's sake," formalism, expressionism, and artists as having no responsibility to their audiences run rampant. Yet, in reading the performance text to "Border Brujo," one gets the impression that he was early-on criticized by the art establishment for being too didactic and lacking the formal aesthetics they deem constitute art:

"There's no recognizable form in your art"— they said.  
 "There's no recognizable form for your fear"— I told them...Form, form  
 form without content  
 love without saliva

art without ideas  
tacos without salsa  
life without redemption  
Form, form, form [Gomez-Peña]

Currently, Gomez-Peña's works are widely respected by most of the art establishment, lending themselves to the wave of multiculturalism and postmodernism at the forefront of critical theory today, in art and beyond. His strong presence in American "high culture" is reiterated by Scott T. Cummings in his article for *American Theater*: "In the 1990s, thanks in part to a MacArthur Fellowship in 1991, Gomez-Peña has become a major contributor to the ongoing debate about what he sometimes calls 'culturalism'" (Gomez-Peña 1991:51). This last word implies Gomez-Peña's critique of, and uneasiness with, his position in the discourse of multiculturalism. He feels it has typically called for the representation of non-Anglo cultures only in a token way, in a relationship "either of sponsorship, messianism or voyeurism, but very seldom of total immersion or dialogue" (Gomez-Peña 1991:26).

Despite the faults of multiculturalism, it has brought the presence of non-Anglo groups to the forefront of traditional Western discourses enough as to cause a stir among academics and critics. Some still view the shift away from Western or European aesthetics as a threat to their understanding of art. One critic, James Moy of *Theater Journal*, goes so far as to label this tendency a "new hegemony of color," in which:

People of color now command a new art discourse as the "Wasp Bags" or "Waspanos" become increasingly vocal in their demands for a fair share of the art marketplace. It is, unfortunately, determined that whites are just not good enough to be given a showing. Their Anglo aesthetics seem out of place in the kitsch sensibility which refuses even postmodern appropriation (Moy 1993:378).

Audacious comments such as this emphasize how volatile the debate is over who represents and what is represented, in both art and politics. Whatever the result of this debate, it seems to point to the fact

that art can no longer be seen as separate from its sociopolitical context. All art, consciously or unconsciously, reflects the artist's own culture, social location, and ideology — in what he or she chooses to represent and chooses not to. Guillermo Gomez-Peña does so consciously and honestly, using art as a site of cross-cultural dialogue and perhaps even social change.

While non-Anglo cultures are still underrepresented in the “high-art” canon — the realm of “master” European painters, poets, and sculptors — Gomez-Peña chooses a medium — that of performance, which is even more exclusively white. The irony of this, of which he is keenly aware, is that performance is an ideal medium for marginalized and “border” artists. In its relatively short history, performance-art has always emphasized notions of border/boundary crossing, breaking down traditional conventions and challenging establishments; this is the avant-garde aesthetic upon which it was founded. Hopefully in the future more artists of color, with the inspiration of performance-art pioneers such as Guillermo Gomez-Peña, will begin to appropriate this medium as their mode of expression as well as that of artists of European backgrounds.

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