Traumatic social memories & visual practices of representation: A case study of performances by Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña
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Introduction
As a case study of performances by Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, this paper gives examples of visual practices of representation departing from some questions posed for the conference section Art as Political Witness. Questions are: How does Gómez-Peña use the performance medium as a possibility to express the existence of conflicting social memories and affects originating in traumatic experiences? How can such practices about the past be understood as political actions and witnesses of present political processes? I start with a brief historical background to what is called ‘the Chicano experience’, aimed at opening up for interpretations of visual practices of representation by Gómez-Peña. Then follows a short presentation of his performances. In the final section of the paper, the questions posed above are given some answers as conclusions.

Traumatic social memories
The historical background to the Chicano experience begins in the mid 19th century, when the Mexican nation-state reached far into the territory of present day USA. In 1845, Mexico gave up claims to Texas that was annexed by the USA. In 1848, the Mexican-American war (1846–1848) was brought to an end with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by which the Mexican nation-state lost more than half of its geographical territory, an area that comprises the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and parts of Wyoming and Colorado (Griswold del Castillo 1990). In 1854, parts of Arizona and New Mexico were added to U.S. territory with the Gadsden Purchase. This meant that the U.S.-Mexico border was moved further south, drawn as a line south of San Diego and westward along Rio Grande to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Treaty of Guadalupe has beyond the loss of territory been fundamental in shaping conflicting social memories among generations of Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os in the USA (Griswold del Castillo 1990). Experiences of the new border have been described with expressions such as “We never crossed the border, the border crossed us” (Blackwell 2011: 64), of the border as a cultural zone where its two parts are related to each other as a “siamese twin”, separated but connected (Valenzuela Arce 2004: 168), the border as “una herida abierta”, an open wound (Anzaldúa 1987: 25), and the border as “a scar” from a wound that never heals (Debroise 1991: 61; Latorre 2008: 147).

Of Mexicans in the ceded territories, over ninety percent remained in the new U.S. territories (Montero-Sieburth & Perez 2014), whom became separated from relatives and family south of the new border. Although the Treaty Guadalupe Hidalgo promised U.S. citizenship to former Mexicans, they were not given full U.S. citizenship until the 1930s (Griswold del Castillo 1990). Due to difference in skin pigmentation, language, and the Catholic heritage surrounding the Mexican culture, Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os have been treated as second-class U.S. citizens and are subjects of various kinds of ethnic and racial
discriminations (Krofcheck & Jackson 1974). Differences that exist between a Mexican heritage and the Anglo American culture have been highlighted in various incidents with conflicts between the two cultures, such as the massive repatriation of Mexican Americans during the 1920s and 1950s, the Los Angeles zoot suit riots during the 1940s, and the Los Angeles Chicano Moratorium riots in the 1960s (Krofcheck & Jackson 1974). Though indigenous and claiming a heritage going back in time to pre-colonial cultures as the Aztecs, Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os are looked upon as “non-American”, “anti-American”, “foreign”, “alien”, and, by the U.S. Immigration Service, “illegal alien” (Krofcheck & Jackson 1974: 536).

The Spanish term Chicano was up to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s used in the U.S. as a pejorative term for Mexican Americans. In the Chicano Movement, with a struggle for empowerment and affirmation, the term was redefined and came to signify political activism, awareness of discriminating structures based on race and ethnicity, and resistance to assimilation into the hegemonic identity norm as WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) (Mendoza 2001; Sánchez-Tranquilino 1996). Self-acclaimed identities as Chicana (female), Chicano (male) and Chicanas/os (as a group) thereby refer to identities by choice, not by birth. The Chicano experience has been defined as referring to identities that reflect a bicultural experience that include the contradictory themes of “being proudly American” but “unwilling to assimilate” (Delgado 2009: ix).

Practices of representation
Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña was born in 1955 in Mexico City, where he studied Linguistics and Latin American Literature (1974-1978) at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónomo de México). In 1978, he moved to Los Angeles where he received his BA (1981) and his MA (1983) from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) (Cullen 2011). Since 1999, he has dual nationality. He defines himself as an artist working with border issues, and in his performances are border concepts used as departure for performative renegotiations (Gómez-Peña 1996). The U.S-Mexico border can be conceived in several ways. As a word, the border has several synonyms: state line, boundary, frontier, edge, limit, margin, borderline, and periphery. As a concept it can be applied as an analytical figure with various meanings: a physical line, a spatial porous zone, a symbolic sphere, an imaginary dimension, a mental experience, an aspect of identity, and recognition of in-group verses out-group distinctions (Anzaldúa 1987; Michaelsen & Johnson 1997; Border Poetics/Border Culture 2014).

The photographs collected for this presentation of performances by Gómez-Peña from Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco are of three kinds: snap-shots from live performances, film stills from video recordings of live performances, and performances enacted “strictly for the camera” as art images or “photo-performance portfolios” (Gómez-Peña 2014a).

In Los Angeles Gómez-Peña co-founded his first performance group Poyesis Genética with Sara-Jo Berman in 1979 (Cullen 2011). As an art student at CalArts he performed The
Mexican homeless (1978) and The Loneliness of the Immigrant (1979) as interventions in public space. In The Mexican Homeless he spent twelve hours laying on a downtown Los Angeles street. He later stated that with this project, he realized that “as both a homeless and as Mexican”, he “was invisible to the Anglo population” (Gómez-Peña 2014c). In The Loneliness of the Immigrant was his body wrapped in batik fabric and tied with rope dumped as a package in the enclosed space of an elevator in downtown Los Angeles. Going up and down in the elevator for 24 hours, elevator users variably threatened, kicked, and cursed him. No one helped him or tried to release him. At one point, a dog peed on him. Finally, security guards threw him into a dumpster (MOCA 2011).


In the early 1980s Gómez-Peña moved to San Diego, where he was a founding member in 1984 of the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), originally based at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park (Cullen 2011). Including artists Emily Hicks, Berta Jottar, Richard A. Lou, Victor Orozco Ochoa, Robert Sánchez, Michael Schnorr, Liz Sisco, and Rocio Weiss, the workshop utilized the bi-national character of the Tijuana-San Diego border region as “a laboratory of social and aesthetic experimentation” (Gómez-Peña 2000: 9), through a series of playful site specific performances where the Border State Park in the U.S. meets Playas de Tijuana in Mexico. In the project Border actions (1985), they embodied symbols such as cactuses, the inquisition, the border patrol, binoculars, and cars packed with fictive border crossers. The project Border Realities (1986–1988) included the performance End of Line (1986) and the video Erasing the Line: Backyard to Backyard (1988). Both occurred simultaneously in Mexico and the U.S. where the dividing border fence meet the Pacific Ocean, challenging the media concept of the border as a “war zone”. The intention was to create a sense of “no border” and “the transformation of the viewer on an internal and intellectual level” (BAW/TAF 2014a). One ‘border reality’ was the performance Border Wedding (1988), the marriage of Gómez-Peña and Emily Hicks that took place across the U.S.-Mexico border through the fence with their guests on both sides of the borderline.

The performance Tijuana-Niagara (1987–1988) by Gómez-Peña and Emily Hicks was a site-specific project developed for the northern borderline of U.S. territory. As the “mobile temple of kitsch” for tourists at the U.S.-Canada border it included a Mexican folk altar and a map of North America spread out on the floor (Gómez-Peña 2014c). In one photograph of the project, Hicks wears a wrestler’s mask like the Mexican community activist Superbarrio, with whom the BAW/TAF later collaborated (BAW/TAF 2014b). She sits legs apart on the US region on the map. With her symbolical bodily placement on the map in combination with the project’s title, the U.S. nation-state is rendered invisible as a geographical territory. Instead it is conceived as a ‘no-place’ and oversized border zone between the border cities Tijuana and Niagara in Mexico and Canada.

Working with parallel projects over several years, performance projects can merge into another or being brought back to life several years after a first version. One project developed in San Diego was The Border Brujo (1988–1989), in which the role he takes on “unfolds into fifteen different persona” (Gomez-Pena 1993: 75), and undergoes a series of “nine
transformations of character/speech/culture/sex, etc” (BAW/TAFa). This project was adapted into a film by Isaac Artenstein in 1988 and later developed into various kinds of border personifications including characters such as “the border super-hero” El Aztec Vampire (1990), “protector of migrant worker and border sex workers”, and “the border rocker” El Moctezuma Jr. (1992) (Gómez-Peña 2014d).

San Francisco (1991–) – La Pocha Nostra
In the early 1990s Gómez-Peña relocated to San Francisco where he still lives and works. In 1992 he performed El Guerrero de la Gringostroika / The Warrior of Gringostroika (1992) in response to the global celebration of the 500-year-anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas by Christofer Columbus. In this performance he wears a mariachi costume, a Mexican wrestler mask, and has the words “Please don’t discover me!” written on his chest. A similar later staging was as Palestinian Vato Loco (2003) in The Chica/Iranian Project, where he has the deliberate misspelled words ”Pleez Do Not Liberate Me!” written on his chest.

A second project in response to the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial was Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West (1992–1994), written, directed and performed in collaboration with the Cuban-American performance artist Coco Fusco. With this project they toured two years in three continents (Europe, Americas and Australia) where groups of indigenous people had been extinct (Sheren 2011), visiting museums and public spaces in seven cities (Minneapolis, Madrid, London, Washington D.C., Irvine, California, Buenos Aires and Sydney). The cage refers to the phenomenon of presenting representations of ‘the Other’ as spectacles in circuses and freak shows. The couple in the cage claimed to be Guatinauis from an island called Guatinau in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked for five centuries (Ginsberg 2012). For a small fee in a donation box in front of the cage, the female Guatinaui would perform a traditional dance (to rap music), the male Guatinaui would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a made-up language), and they would both pose with visitors (Ginsberg 2012). They never spoke directly to anyone in the audience or met the gaze of the audience, wearing sunglasses where the spectator’s faces were reflected. Despite the obvious recreation of Western concepts of the exotic, primitive ‘Other’, a substantial portion of the audience believed in the authenticity of the caged couple as Guatinauis (Ginsberg). Fusco and Gómez-Peña later wrote articles about the tour and people’s reaction that had differed depending on country and cultural group (Fusco 1994; Gómez-Peña 2002). On questions posed in an article (by Elisabeth Ginsberg) of what kind of reactions they might have expected from the audience, Gómez-Peña gave the answer in one of his articles that ultimate reaction would have been that somebody had opened the cage and let them free (Ginsberg 2012: 313; Gómez-Peña 2002: 83).

In 1993, Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes and Nola Marino founded the performance group and art organization La Pocha Nostra in Los Angeles, which was relocated to San Francisco’s Mission District in 1995 (Gómez-Peña 2005: 77). Nostra is the Spanish word for “our”, while Pocha is a feminine form of Pocho with multiple meanings; a derogatory term for an Anglicized Latino “not speaking Spanish well” (Cole 2011: 84), or a slang term for “artificial
whiteness” meaning ‘bleached’, indicting an intentional whiteness expressed by an attitude, “either clueless about Latino culture and social norms or purports to exist above them” (Sheren 2010: 69). La Pocha Nostra webpage “Gómez-Peña’s Pocho Nostra Live Art Lab” (http://www.pochanostra.com/) has a digitally accessible performance archive, including “A User Friendly Guide” (La Pocha Nostra 2014), and the posted manifest “The Pocho Nostra Manifesto for 2012”, stating that both the archive and performance projects are works-in-progress in dialogue with history (La Pocha Nostra 2012).


In 1994 when the Californian law number 187 was taken, limiting the rights of undocumented immigrants and their children, Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes enacted the _The Crucifixion Project_ (1994) on Rodeo Beach in the Marin Headlands Park across from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge (Gómez-Peña 2000). In protest to U.S. immigration policy they symbolically crucified themselves on wooden crosses an evening one week after Easter Sunday. Gómez-Peña later explained in an article that they had imagined to be released from their crucified positions by the audience, but the expected reaction by the audience took so long that they almost passed out (Gómez-Peña 1996; Gómez-Peña 1997; Gómez-Peña 2000). The following day a doctor informed them that that in another half an hour, they would have died (Gómez-Peña 2000: 64; Grambo 2011).

With the project _El Templo de las Confesiones / The Temple of Confessions_ (1995–1996) Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes toured for over two years, visiting museum, art galleries, city festivals, university campuses and a former convent in Mexico City (Gómez-Peña 2000: 36). This project included activities as “living dioramas” where they posed as postmodern “saints” in Plexiglas boxes. Visitors could confess their sins via a computer terminal and request that they performed “various acts to exorcise the visitor’s cross-racial fears and desires” (Pitman 2005: 130). In the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes staged _The Shame-man meets El Mexican’t_ (1995), wearing signs hanging from their neck that reads: “There used to be a Mexican inside this body”. In the former convent in Mexico City, Sifuentes enacted _El performero desempleado_ (the performance of the unemployed) (1995) standing behind a sign that reads: “PERFORMANCE / They threw me out of the Museum of Anthropology / I didn’t find a job in Hollywood / NO one believes that I’m a Zapatista”.

Several La Pocha Nostra projects deals with “Reverse Anthropology: Challenging the museum representations of the Other” (Gómez-Peña 2014a). The project _The Living Museum_
of Fetishized Identities (2000–2003) include the performances British curator presents his newly discovered specimen to his colleagues back home (2000), El Mexorcist (2002), El Indio Amazonico (2003), and Pocha Nostra Royalty (2003). The project The Mapa / Corpo: Interactive Rituals for the New Millennium (2004–2013) explores the relationship between international conflict, borders and the human body, with the human body as a map for “political acupuncture”. Touring in Latin America, Europe and Canada, the audience was invited to extract the flags (needles) of nation-states from the body/territory in rituals with “acupuncturist” priests (Sheren 2011: 70). Later body/identity projects are Divino Corpo and Corpo Insurrecto. Divino Corpo includes the performances La Sagrada Familia (2008), La Otra Sagrada Familia (2008), and El Biker Shaman (2008). Corpo Insurrecto, launched in Austria, includes stagings of Robo-Proletarian warriors (2012) with Gómez-Peña, Dani d’Emilia and Saul Garcia Lopez. This project was developed in workshops at Francisco Toledo’s art space CASA in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Conclusions
Gómez-Peña has worked with politically invested performance projects during a period of thirty years. The conclusion of this case study, departing from the initial questions, is the following: In performance projects by Gómez-Peña are the visual practices of representation engaging with the existence of conflicting social memories by addressing political implications for Chicanas/os of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and nationalized territories divided by drawn lines on two-dimensional maps. These testimonies of the past are informed by affects originating in various kinds of traumatic experiences by departing from the bicultural Chicano experience and Gómez-Peña’s own “subjective perspective” (Gómez-Peña 2010) as the methodological framework. Working in various locations and with shifting constellations of participants, the performances address the U.S.-Mexico border, Mexicans as the other, the invisibility of migrants, and in-group/out-group distinctions. The visual practices about the past are at the same time witnesses of present political processes by dealing with immigration politics, international conflicts, identities as cultural constructions, media myths, the politics of language, neo-colonialism, and cross-racial fears. Elaborated as political actions and applying an “ultra-baroque aesthetics” (Gómez-Peña 2014a), the performance projects are playing with various border concepts for politically invested, performative border renegotiations. As he once stated, with his performances Gómez-Peña is “experimenting with the fringes between art and society, legalidad and illegality, English and español, male and female, North and South, self and other, and subverting these relationships” (Gómez-Peña 1993: 44).

References


Gómez-Peña, Guillermo (2014d) ”A Photo-Performance Gallery & ‘Living Archive’ in Progress” (El Aztec Vampire and El Moctezuma Jr.). Intercultural poltergeist: The living art


Valenzuela Arce, José Manuel (2004) ”Forms of Resistance, Corridors of Power: Public

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1 On the elevator wall was a handwritten text on cardboard reading: “In one way or another we all are or will be immigrants. Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open, this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity.” (MOCA 2011).


