

by Michael Hoechsmann

# INTERVIEW

with Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña



## Speaking From/To Border/Lines

Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña combine their work in cultural theory with performance, video, and radio. They were interviewed by *Border/Lines* in November, 1994, when they performed "Mexarcane International," a performance piece set in a mall, which played on questions of racial and cultural identity in the corporate future staged by the new globalizing economy. Both have published anthologies of critical writings recently: Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995) and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1993). Fusco returned to Toronto in November, 1995, to participate in the Corrientes del Sur Film and Video Festival with *Pochonovela: A Chicano Soap Opera*, a video by Fusco that features the Chicano Secret Service.

**Q:** Guillermo, the Mexico-U.S. border has been the site for much of your work. You were a founding member of the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (1985) and among your many "border" works, is the film version of your performance "Border Brujo" (1990). While the concept of "border" has recently slipped into Anglo-European scholarship with relative ease, it does not appear to draw extensively, if at all, from your work. On the other hand, important theoretical work from Latin America, such as Néstor García Canclini's *Culturas Híbridas* (1989), does establish important links to your work. Could you comment on the development of the notion of "border"?

**Guillermo:** The border paradigm was originally introduced in the mid-'80s by artists who were working in the highly charged political context of the U.S.-Mexico border at a time of tremendous nationalism in both countries. For the PRI in Mexico, the border was seen as a site of contention against which to define "Mexinacity." For the Reagan administration, it was seen as a threat to the national security of the U.S. Neither country was interested in border dialogue, border exchange, border culture, or in talking about a border consciousness, while artists were.

# Gringostroka

## "The End of the Line"

A site-specific performance at the U.S./Mexico border, by the Border Arts Workshop. Documentary scenes of this performance can be seen in the film *Mi Otro Yo/My Other Self*, directed by Philip and Amy Brookman. (From the BAW-TAF archives).

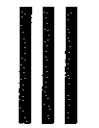


One of the contributions that border culture provided to the debates on identity in the '80s is to talk about binary identities, transitional identities, multiple repertoires of identities, hyphenated identities. That kind of language didn't exist in the Mexican discourse on identity prior to that. You were either Mexican or Chicano—you couldn't be both at the same time. Suddenly, theorists and artists started to assert that we should embrace that contradiction, that you could be a Mexicano and a Chicano at the same time, or you could be a Mexicano in the process of chicanization, and so on.

There had been a number of initiatives to engage in a politicized dialogue at a grassroots level among the Chicano, Mexicano, and Anglo communities living along both sides of the border, but in the mid-'80s, artists and activists began to talk about the need to develop a border consciousness and a border aesthetic. The border art of that time was a very contestatory, radical discourse that took place at the margins. Slowly it began to creep into academe, and by 1987 or 1988 one can witness a gradual acceptance of the border paradigm. It was a much more chic paradigm than that of multiculturalism, which was extremely problematic and had too many holes.

I think that at first many academics were completely uninterested in a dialogue with the radical artists and activists who had been actively engaged in the creation of this model. It wasn't until 1989 that both sides began to engage tentatively in a dialogue. Artists started to read radical social anthro-

# BORDER/LINES

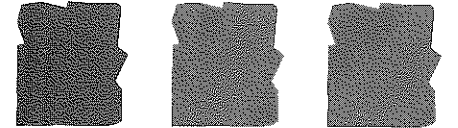
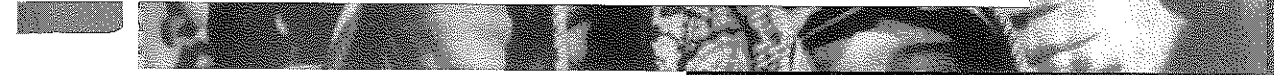


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## Ronald Reagan and the Mexican peril

pologists and cultural critics, and those people began to talk about art. By the end of the '80s, you had activist artists debating at the same table with literary critics, cultural critics, social anthropologists, philosophers, etc., who had all suddenly realized that they were working in similar territories.

Unfortunately, I feel that eventually the border paradigm became saturated, overused, emptied of meaning, and slowly it became depoliticized. Currently, something similar is happening with the hybrid model, which is a very useful model for understanding many of the processes that are taking place in contemporary America. Soon it will be appropriated by conservative sectors in academe to mean practically anything and there will be a need for another paradigm. This is the ongoing process where radical paradigms become emptied of meaning.

**Q:** Is there an element to this discussion of borders that we might be able to attribute to a type of South-North dialogue, an intellectual contribution that speaks against the dominance of Anglo-Europeans in academe?

**COCO:** For me the problem is one of philosophical orientation and politics. Speaking from a position of privilege enables one to erase the political dimension of what it means to have a border, so that anything can be a border and all borders are the same because they are equally permeable. The reality of the matter is that that is a privilege of those who can cross any border without any obstacle or penalty. For those

who really experience difficulty in crossing, the politics of which border is which and which one is permeable or not and why, is much more apparent.

**Guillermo:** The border as a metaphor was and continues to be very useful. It is a very malleable metaphor which allows for multiple readings, some more politicized than the others, depending on one's position. For a theorist, the border can be a very useful laboratory of thought, while for a Mexican migrant worker the border means fences, police dogs, border patrol, helicopters, raids and fear. That is why we have to be very careful in terms of glamourizing the reality.

In the border model of collaboration that many artist collectives have developed since the mid-80s, I think that often the Chicanos and Mexicanos offer the ideas and the Americanos control the terms. In a sense, we are witnessing an intellectual version of a *maquiladora* and a cultural version of free trade. Under the label of border art, the Mexicanos provide the raw talent and the intellectual and artistic labour, and the North Americans are the curators, the impresarios, and the publishers, the people who control the terms of the debate, who frame the artistic product, and who organize the conferences.

We have to work against that model; what we want is a truly symmetrical exchange between the North and the South, between the Norteamericanos and the Mexicanos. For that symmetrical model to emerge, there has to be a time when the U.S. stops talking and begins to listen.

**Q:** Coco, you co-produced a video documentary about Cuban artists called *Havana Postmodern* (1989) that aired on public television. Recently, the concept of postmodernism has been receiving a lot of attention in Latin American intellectual circles, but one strong current within those discussions is to suggest, as do writers such as Celeste Olalquiaga and Nelly Richard, that given the "mestizaje" of Latin American culture, postmodernism is anything but new. Could you tell us about the video and its reception in Cuba and the U.S., as well as commenting on the viability of the concept of the postmodern in Latin America?

**COCO:** I went to the Havana Biennial (with the two co-producers) in 1986 with the intention of making a documentary about that event. At that time there was quite a heated debate going on in Cuba as to whether the term postmodernism would apply to that context. While it is true that socialist realism was never imposed on Cuban art, in the '70s there was an official disdain for internationalist trends, for a kind of aesthetic eclecticism which had been part of the history of Cuban visual art. There was pressure to pay more attention to artists who dealt with figurative paintings, especially representations of working class people.

At the time, the same people who are now recognized as internationally acclaimed artists—José Bedia, Flavio Garcíandía Consuelo Castañeda, Arturo Cuenca—were in a much more precarious position. By associating themselves with a movement that was critical of cultural nationalism, they were assuming a position that was somewhat controversial. Their take on Cuban culture involved a more realistic, more open-minded view of "underdevelopment." We were condemned by some bureaucrats who claimed that our representation of the island was too ugly. Thus, the tape was censored in Cuba and it became a kind of underground cult video for a while. We showed it in the States, but the right-wing Cubans didn't want to know that there is any art in Cuba. For the American left there was a problem because they were still into this idea that Cuban art was all posters and schematically pro-revolution. So we made the video at a moment when there wasn't much acceptance of the concept of an independent, autonomous artistic activity coming from an underdeveloped socialist revolution.

What took place in the debate over postmodernism in Cuba was the opening up of the visual arts to the aesthetic experimentation that we associate with art in other parts of the world, particularly the U.S. and Europe from the '60s and '70s.

At the time we made the tape most European and American curators thought the Cubans were just slaves to fashion, that they had read too many issues of *Artforum*. I showed the tape in London to the visual arts curators at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] and they told me that Cubans couldn't have postmodernism because they had never had a modernism. That was the state of things at the time; now it's perfectly fine and it's cool and everyone recognizes that the coexistence of different historical and social formations in the same society at the same time is similar to what Jameson labelled postmodernism.

In regards to the broader issue of postmodernism in Latin America, I think that it is ultimately positive that intellectuals outside of the U.S. and Europe decided to have a debate about postmodernism and that news of that debate actually got back to the "centre" and some people take it seriously. There really was a time when it was not considered acceptable for people in Third World countries to talk about postmodernity. It's not only that there was a total lack of familiarity with urban cultures and the uneven introduction of mod-



ernism and modernist practices to these countries, but it was also because there was this really strong sense among a certain generation of critics, including many Latin American leftists, that postmodernism was something for the hyperdeveloped world and had nothing to do with Latin America. So the attempt to interpret the relevance of that concept to a Latin American reality specifically, but also to a lot of developing countries, was a really smart move.

**Guillermo:** I think that a postmodern reading of Mexico is better than a magical realist reading, which is what existed prior to the introduction of this debate. Magical realism only helped to perpetuate the myth of Mexico as a partially industrialized country, not quite modernized and more connected to shamanism and a kind of rural magical thinking, than to the political, social, and economic problems of a postmodern society. In terms of art, it was the same. Americans had a lot of trouble accepting the idea that Mexicans could do conceptual art, video art, or performance art, because that meant accepting the notion that Mexicans were citizens of the same time and place and not creatures somehow encrusted in an historical era existing outside of the present. To understand Mexico as a postmodern nation is to politicize the perception of Mexico, and I am all for it.

In regards to performance politics, I just want to mention the example of the Zapatistas and the figure of Marcos. This is probably the last chapter of a very novel history of performance activists in Latin America. You have the quintessential postmodern guerrilla leader, someone who is fully aware of the symbolic power of utilizing a mask and of using props, and of the importance of press conferences and of staging theatrical actions for the eye of the camera.

**Q:** Guillermo, you suggest that Joseph Beuys was correct to prophesize that art will become politics and politics will become art. You state that in the 1980s "politicians and activists borrowed performance techniques, while performance artists began to mix experimental art with direct political action." Could you comment on this statement in light of current developments in the U.S.? What are the current prospects of Gringostroika?

**Guillermo:** You are speaking to us in a very dim moment; we have just experienced a shift of power to the Republicans, as well as the approval of Proposition 187 and the reelection of Pete Wilson in California. Gringostroika as a national project, the American version of "glasnost," is being completely dismantled. What we are witnessing is an incredible retaliation from the dominant Anglo-American sectors of society. They are very well organized and they are doing everything possible to dismantle social services, education, medical access, and cultural programmes that serve people of colour, newly arrived immigrants, women, the homeless, the elderly. They are doing it so thoroughly and effectively that I think we are going to be in very bad shape by the end of the century.

Three or four years ago, many people were talking about California as this very interesting laboratory, a sort of possible future where we could develop models of coexistence. Now I think that California is becoming increasingly an apartheid state, with a kind of a cowboy version of the French politician, LePen, called Pete Wilson. Two weeks before we went on the road, a supremacist group in California started issuing stickers and leaflets telling Anglo-Californians that it was time to start killing Mexicans. Over the past two years, opportunistic conservative politicians and sectors of the mainstream media have been creating the psychological and cultural conditions for the justification of aggressive behavior towards the "illegal" immigrant community. They have been labelled as the source for all of the social ills of contemporary America. It is very dangerous. We need border dialogue right now more than ever.

**Q:** Where do you/we go from here?

**COCO:** Attempts to counter the hegemonic gringorder are going to become more strident because the U.S. government has given the green light to all attempts to stop any kind of institutionalized multiculturalism. If all of the institutional attempts to account for difference and historical inequities are going to disappear, then it's all going to have to be countercultural. This is terrible, but I don't think it's the end. I believe that American culture is the product of the clashing of cultures. Even though there is a myth of a homogeneous America, it has never really existed. Aspects of other cultures will enter into the society and into the culture and we'll feel the effects of it in the long term.

**Guillermo:** In terms of our performance work, I think that it is time to become very activist, to speak out, to do work that is very tough and confrontational with a lot of valour. It is time for artists to assume a role of leadership, and to do very risky work, because we have to fight back.

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