

## **A critical regionalism: Mexico's Performative Range-of-Motion in *Madre por un día* & the Rodríguez/Felipe Wedding.**

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### **"Mexico" as a Critical Regionalism<sup>1</sup>**

In the context of Mexico, any Jamesonian projection of national allegory (1986) must be read in light of post-revolutionary cultural nationalism and its conceptions of public and political art, externally and internally epitomized in and by muralism and the representational sedimentation of *mestizaje*. Because the allegorical was deployed in the service of a nation-state which is now synonymous with the institutionalized political party PRI (its veritable monopoly on nationalism somewhat disrupted by the 2000 historic elections of Vicente Fox), many contemporary cultural producers, including those involved in performance, express a decidedly Mexican unease with a certain nationalized vision of political/public art (e.g. Orozco 2000, de la Torre 1999). The story is more complicated than this, however, because before performance surfaced as a viable genre on the Mexican aesthetic horizon of possibility (and here I speak of performance *art*), proto-performance work, like that of Los Grupos, positioned itself in conflict with national allegorical traditions.

Los Grupos, distinctive artistic collectives that experimented with happenings, actions, and ephemeral art during the 1970s and early 80s, endeavored to reclaim and reconstruct the

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I recycle a phrase that Fredric Jameson takes from architecture to consider global regions "in tension with the standardizing world system as a whole [...] Such areas are not so much characterized by the emergence of strong collective identities as they are by their relative distance from the full force of global modernization, a distance that provided a shelter or an eco-niche in which regional traditions could still develop" (1994: 192). Because I am not so sure about Mexico's "distance" post-NAFTA, I use the phrase in terms of it being a contemporary "foundational fiction," a "strategic essentialism" mobilized in the performances I examine as "a kind of postmodernism of the global system as a whole" (ibid.: 194).

relationship between the aesthetic and the political in post-1968 Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, their efforts made and make it possible for current cultural producers to avoid the gesture of complete disavowal, meaning, the contemporary work I allude to hover-crafts in a space in-between, dodging binaries, including those that would oppose the allegorical to the anti-allegorical. The majority of contemporary Mexican performance (based in either cabaret or the visual arts) exhibits a healthy suspicion of national allegorical templates—taking from them a sense of the location of aesthetic production in relation to the national (and/or the transnational in terms of neoliberal [cultural] capital), but critiquing this location and the details omitted or downplayed in consolidated narratives which naturalize Culture as a handmaiden of the state and/or capitalism.

The kinds of philosophical and political negotiations which ground a contemporary Mexican performative aesthetic might then be characterized as relying upon "disidentification," in the sense that José Muñoz develops the term (1999). Often enough the work displays a careful attention to the tug of popular culture (television, music, the web) while utilizing humor as an aesthetic tool with which to sugarcoat the import of the (neo)political. In addition, a proportionately high number of performance artists demonstrate in their work an extrasensory perception of the pendulous figure of Woman, where Woman, with a capital W, as I have noted, traditionally operates allegorically to tag "gender" as the marker of radical difference (the make-or-break of weak and strong, South and North, bottom and top oppositions).<sup>3</sup>

This paper will focus on two Woman-centric, yet open-ended televised performances of alternate sex/gender systems that humorously (re)interpret traditionally scripted intersections of

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<sup>2</sup> There are notable exceptions to this; for a clear tracing of "refutation," see the recent article "Gender, Sexuality, and Nation in the Art of Mexican Social Movements" (2002) by Edward J. McCaughan.

<sup>3</sup> Standing in as some original Manichean subject, Woman likewise oscillated/oscillates between the spectacles of the Virgin of Guadalupe and *la Malinche* in the context of Mexico and beyond.

gender, sexuality, and nation/region: Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante's *Madre por un día* (1987). and Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe's Valentine's Day wedding (2001). I juxtapose these pieces in part to throw into question the parameters of the genre of Mexican performance, but likewise to contend that each re-cites the allegorical in gendered constructions of the nation. In other words, like the Latin American women writers Jean Franco considers in "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private" (1999), Mayer and Bustamante and Felipe and Rodríguez "understand their position to be not so much one of confronting a dominant patriarchy with a new feminine position but rather one of unsettling the stance that supports gender power/knowledge as masculine [...] displacing the male-centered national allegory [to expose] the dubious stereotyping that was always inherent in the epics of nationhood that constitute the Latin American canon" (57). *Madre por un día* and Rodríguez and Felipe's wedding bridge an imaginary divide between Mexican visual (performance) and verbal (cabaret) performative traditions by broaching certain topics which straddle other divides like that between representation and the social real and/or that between high and low cultures. The halo-effect of this bridging as a performative, in and of itself, criss-crosses possibility within the belly of the beast, which is to say each piece, evoking the figure and placement of Woman in the public sphere, acts as a public, political intervention mediated by the mass media. Put differently, on the one hand, these works interrogate nationalized/naturalized constructions of gender and sexuality in Mexico through an appeal to the popular; on the other hand, they do so at an acute angle, arguably *allegorically*, thereby, homeopathetically, re-imprinting Mexican foundational fictions (Sommer 1991) to highlight "Mexico" as a (postmodern) critical regionalism in possession of a *performative range-of-motion*.

## The Maternal Prosthesis

In *Madre por un día*, Mayer and Bustamante, the founders and sole members of the first Mexican feminist performance group, Polvo de Gallina Negra (PGN), in operation from 1983 to 1993 appeared on the well known talk show "Nuestro Mundo" and granted its host Guillermo Ochoa the "honor" of being "mother for a day."<sup>4</sup> In the performance, Ochoa was invited by Mayer and Bustamante to wear an apron fashioned to make him look pregnant. Before donning the apron, however, Ochoa quizzed Bustamante and Mayer in true talk-show fashion about their work as *performanceras* (although he didn't use that word). Bustamante, who did most of the talking, underscored the pair's feminist agenda, highlighting what it means to create work as women in the machista space of Latin America. Her discourse tacked between a general introduction of the group and a more specific contextualization of the piece at hand. Concerning the piece, the pair clearly stated that their objective was to offer alternative representations of maternity because those "currently in circulation had been painted by men." In addition, they insisted they wanted to move beyond "the good mother, bad mother dichotomy" by demonstrating the constructedness of each of these polar distinctions. Finally, Bustamante emphasized that their choice to "perform" the piece on television with the "participant-observation" of Ochoa had everything to do with their conception of television as *the* museum of modern art. The importance of the inclusion of performance as a genre on the talk show cannot

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this performance and others by PGN, see Mayer's recent "memoir" *Rosa chillante: mujeres y performance en México* (2004). Mayer clarifies that Polvo de Gallina Negra's appellation references a black powder sold in Mexican markets meant to thwart the actions of the evil eye, writing, "we knew that in this world it is difficult to be an artist and riskier yet to be a female artist so we decided to protect ourselves with a name that would act as a talisman" (my translation, 2004: 38). Mayer recalls PGN's objectives: "(1) to analyze the image of Woman in art and the media of communication, (2) to study and promote the participation of women in art, and (3) to create images from the departure point of the experience of women in the patriarchal system, based in a feminist perspective and with the goal of transforming the visual world and thereby altering reality" (ibid.).

be overestimated, but the scope of Mayer and Bustamante's aesthetic and political intervention extends beyond the piece being exemplary of the disseminatory potential of performance.

Indeed, "Nuestro Mundo" had over 200 million viewers that day in Mexico, greater Latin America, and the United States. And many of these extended audience members chose to participate in the performance's reverberating echo, calling in to complain about Mayer, Bustamante, and Ochoa's "lack of respect" for motherhood's sanctity (Bustamante 2001)—another act of participant-observation, which highlighted an opposition between the aura of motherhood and motherhood as an institution, the latter being what Mayer and Bustamante attempted to present in relation to what they had learned in and from early feminist transnational scholarship, cultural production, and practice (including the indistinguishability of those three turns of phrase).<sup>5</sup> *Madre por un día* represented and represents a double act of insemination. Ochoa, temporarily made pregnant by Bustamante and Mayer, sported a maternal, feminine prosthesis, a reversal of a prior performance by Bustamante, where, in reference to Freud, she wore and distributed to her audience prosthetic "nose-penises."

In the context of *Madre por un día*, the prosthetic stomach revisits envy narratives, denaturalizing via humor the privileged equal sign between Woman and maternity. It likewise rewrites the stomach as a metaphor, shifting the terms from that of cultural engulfment and assimilation to that of potential and anticipation, where avant-garde cultural production's relationship to aesthetic-industrial complexes is no longer scripted in terms of an anxiety concerning "the new"'s susceptibility to being swallowed/ingested, but becomes one of potential insemination, i.e., cultural production itself can plant the uncertain seeds of a radical politics.

In effect, *Madre por un día* functioned allegorically, (re)presenting "how newness might enter the world" (Bhabha 1994: 212). Expanding the scope of the piece's impregnation of the

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<sup>5</sup> Keep in mind that Mayer studied and collaborated with Suzanne Lacey on/in the Women's House.

masculine, the presence of Bustamante and Mayer on "Nuestro Mundo" amounted to a recognition of feminist cultural production in Mexico, where, as Bustamante and Mayer point out, they were the only two women among their peers willing to form and participate in a feminist art collective. Through this action and others in the *Madres* series, Polvo de Gallina Negra became recognizable as a champion of an intertwining of the feminist (a particularized political) and the aesthetic in the Mexican 1980s. This intertwining represented a new politicization of the aesthetic, marking a paradigm shift in Mexican thinking about the relationship between the aesthetic and the political in general. Moreover, Mayer and Bustamante's inclusion on "Nuestro Mundo" could be read as tantamount to a (trans)national insemination, where the pair conceptually offered themselves up as a matrilineal originary point, a queer maternal couple presenting insemination and pregnancy as transferable privileges (versus, among jockeying oppositions, one which would pit the real against the artificial in some meta-critical Lucha Libre). The performative action established the pair as "mothers of both Mexican performance AND feminist art," where that double-stranded genealogy acknowledges Polvo de Gallina Negra's progeny: the particularly high number of women in the Mexican performance art world.

### **Mexico as Queer Nation**

Obliquely one could take an interpretative leap of faith, imagining Mayer and Bustamante's performance as setting the televisual stage for a subsequent national intervention on the part of Liliana Felipe and Jesusa Rodríguez almost fifteen years later. But, this, of course, would overlook Felipe and Rodríguez's already unprecedented presence in the Mexican public sphere as performers, social activists, and proprietresses of El Hábito. Felipe and Rodríguez's wedding, which also blurs the boundary between representation and the social real, underscores

this blurring as an identifiable trait of the couple's life/work, where, if as Roselyn Constantino has observed, "[i]t is difficult to separate Rodríguez's theatrical performances from the political ones. They inform each other and at times overflow boundaries—theater in the streets, political acts in the theater bar" (2000: 187), the wedding goes further than this—rendering irrelevant the boundaries of the public and private, the personal and the political-aesthetic.

In the wedding, Felipe and Rodríguez were mock-married (enacting J. L. Austin's classic example of a "performative utterance" [1962]), re-outing themselves as lesbians and partners in order to draw attention to the fact that same-sex unions are not legal in Mexico. Their piece, which was nationally televised on Valentine's Day 2001, attracted the attention of millions of viewers to both performance as a genre and the relationship between sexuality and the nation-state (most notably to previous allegorical depictions of "repro-narrativity" in the sense that Michael Warner floats the phrase [1993], including revised presentations like Mayer and Bustamante's). Various versions of the wedding are now in circulation (as more than one television station and its constituents stood in as the wedding's witnesses), but most of the documentation is marked by fragmentation and a heightened attention to campiness. The emphasis on humor reflects Rodríguez and Felipe's own overarching commitment to humor as a political tactic. Humor, for the pair, represents a tool/weapon in a discursive war of maneuvers, where the very battle over questions of censorship too often occludes "other concerns including who has access to staples as basic as food and medicine" (Rodríguez 2001).

This dangling qualifier modifies and checks the import of performance as a methodology for the couple, but also points to the ethical staple of their performative philosophy, bringing to the forefront how Rodríguez and Felipe themselves resist taking their work as intervention too seriously. Humor allows the pair to up the ante of the *a priori* in their overall efforts. By this I

mean that humor facilitates Rodríguez and Felipe's generous assumptions regarding the "viewing-level" of their audiences; humor becomes the vital ingredient in the "molcajete context of cabaret" in which their work carves out a space for itself, and by extension, feminist and queer representation (ibid.).

In addition, just as in the case of *Madre por un día*, humor in the oeuvre of Rodríguez and Felipe works to mediate contradictions, to illuminate bipolar locations, so that the tacking of an either/or, a neither/nor is rendered once again irrelevant. As such, their work does not dismantle a national allegorical, but points toward its inherent paradoxes, ironies, role-reversals, cross-dressing. Finally, in the specific space of the wedding as a performance, the work parodies the performative qualities of marriage ceremonies in general: the blushing, peacock-strutting bride (now a double-vision), the power invested in the master/mistress of ceremony (the priest, justice of the peace, federal judge, ad infinitum), while simultaneously denaturalizing a sex/gender system which depends upon the wealth of the bride as the image and embodiment of exchange. Re-presenting "realness," the piece parodies allegories of national romance, where a revisited happily-ever-after narrative becomes the means through which to implicate questions of gender and sexuality in discussions of aesthetic creation, patrimony, and patriarchy.

### **Allegorically Speaking**

In this essay I intentionally have placed side by side the work of *performanceras* coming from distinct traditions of Mexican performance: Mayer and Bustamante, who studied and consider their work to fall under the purview of the visual arts; and Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, who claim their efforts to be based in the theatrical tradition of cabaret. Initially, I did not plan to perform this crossover operation. In fact, I went through a phase of actively resisting reading cabaret as performance, in part because in the Mexican context I felt the conflation of

cabaret and performance to be the consequence of a U.S.-based classificatory system.<sup>6</sup> Here, however, I have pushed myself in the opposite direction, enacting an unlikely juxtaposition to sharpen the point of a methodological argument. *Madre por un día* and the Rodríguez/Felipe wedding speak to one another insofar as each circulated/circulates in the public sphere as a performative allegorical intervention, enacting Rosario Castellanos's intuition, "[t]here must be another way of being human and free. Another way of being" (my translation, 1972: 316). These works operate from a space of the performative, which sutures performance to questions of performativity, rendering superfluous and/or obsolete the binary between these key terms. Their not so hidden (trans)scripts gently resist the anxious theoretical sandcastles which one, as a critic, is liable to build. Bypassing both Judith Butler's "stage-fright" of the theatrical in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and Diana Taylor's recent lament that "it may be too late to reclaim *performative* for the nondiscursive realm of performance" (2002), works like *Madre por un día* and Felipe and Rodríguez's wedding demonstrate that performance's ability to throw into confusion and/or comic relief naturalized performatives (like motherhood and/or marriage) cannot be underestimated. Renegotiating classic configurations of Woman as allegory and the template of national allegory in the particular context of Mexico, each work offers an alternative performative which *allegorically* underscores Paul de Man's insight that, rather than being constituted in terms of opposition, there is an inevitable and easy slippage between allegory and symbol that makes performativity possible (1979).

### Works Cited

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<sup>6</sup> Don't worry, I won't let myself get away with superfluous kvetching, finger-pointing. It's too facile to dismiss U.S.-based "classificatory systems" which would forefront a cabaret tradition as "Mexican performance," as instances of "academic colonialism/imperialism." Instead, it seems more interesting to begin a dialogue between prevailing Mexican and U.S. definitions of what constitutes "performance" (an idea which was seconded by Guillermo Gómez-Peña in an interview I conducted with him [2001], and by Jesusa Rodríguez, when I asked her if she thought her work counted as performance" and she laughed and said, "for NYU." She did, however, at least pretend to agree with me that her wedding more closely approximated performance art, that is, after we spent some time discussing J. L. Austin, i.e., after she quizzed me at length regarding *How To Do Things With Words* [2001]).

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