



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Guillermo
Gómez-Peña, 2020 September 11

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Guillermo Gomez-Peña on September 11, 2020. The interview took place at Gomez-Peña's home in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, this is Josh T. Franco interviewing Guillermo Gomez-Peña at his home in San Francisco, California. It's September 11, 2020 and this is for The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian's Pandemic Project. Okay Guillermo, we'll start with the first question as we try to document this year. Um how have you been doing since March?

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Well, um, my wife Balitronica and I had to, literally, escape Mexico City in the middle of March on the day government forbade non-essential traveling. Paradoxically, on spring equinox. So, we flew to Tijuana and walked into the U.S., it was very old school romantic, you know? We were welcomed by Balitronica's grandpa, Señor Ed with a Lysol blessing. And suddenly, there we were in a liminal zone at my wife's family home in San Diego, living with 10 relatives and clumsily learning how to live under the pandemia, you know? I was going crazy. I badly needed my own San Francisco studio where I am right now but, since we couldn't fly, I had to escape through my imagination and kind of began a survival blog.

Essentially, I created a sci-fi scenario. I began to imagine that our new condition, the lockdown, was a durational performance art project. The meta-fiction was a worldwide alien pandemic created by the Chinese, in cahoots with Trump Enterprises, the NSA, ICE, the British Secret Service, the most sad and weird mercenary scientists. And, I was a self-styled performance revivalist living by myself inside a one-bedroom apartment in a densely populated city or a cabin in the woods or in my own inner Gilligan's Island.

You know so in this, not-so-fictional contest, my only contact with the outside was my old, refurbished MacBook Air computer. But, the Wi-Fi signal was very low and my iPhone was a barrio cellular bought in Mexico's black market, both hard-wired to my Serbian ten dollar mini-speaker. You know, it was a daily science fiction film. So, I turned our southern crisis into an art project. And the philosophical premise was something I believe deeply. That art is a form of prognosis, a daily psycho-magic act, a new rolling linguistic exercise to re-write our re-invention script, so to speak, you know?

So, after a month of voluntary house arrest, I began to go mad. Loco. My extreme isolation forced me to re-think, remember a language that before and after in one liners and blog poems. I was reminded of my last transverse myelitis attack, you know? And, it was during those days, in late March, that I discovered Zoom. I hooked up with the Chicano's running the Democracy in America Project, which, you may be familiar with them. It's series of virtual town meetings inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville's journey into the American character. So, suddenly I began to broadcast my own philosophical rantings through a series of pirate Zoom casts.

[00:05:04]

And after a long—very long six weeks between homes, Balitronica and I got a couple of relatives to drive us back to San Francisco. It was the end of April, I believe. You know, the dates all bleed together these days. And soon after George Floyd was murdered, the Black Lives Matter revolt began and the pandemia was no longer my main concern. My writings and Zoom casts were dealing with a new subject matter. Systemic racism. How to explain to the quote on quote "White Left" the extent and dimension of our rage. How to begin to connect the dots between the history of colonialism and the collapse of their America. The dots between ancestral trauma and the current rage between my body—our bodies, the social body and those of the perpetrators of violence. And I believe this is the task of the artist citizen engaged in the issues of our times.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great, thank you. During this time, how are you caring for yourself and your

loved ones?

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Well, parallel to this intellectual and artistic project I was describing to you, I call my colleagues at the time, I became aware, you know that self-care and caretaking of my loved ones was also a priority. And perhaps, you know, I can best explain you this by reading an excerpt of one of my blogs; describing my desire to understand how to protect myself and my loved ones.

Haber. At the time I was exploring the overlapping space between panic-politics, panic-media, and everyday life.

I quote. "So, what to do? Wash your hand obsessively. Don't touch your face. Open doors with your shoulders, knees and elbows. Do not leave your house unless it's absolutely necessary. But remember, your human needs might put others in danger. Wear a mask and gloves. Do not loiter, exist without a purpose anywhere in a public space. Especially when Black, Brown, Native or openly visibly queer. Think of a curfew without soldiers, yet. House arrest in China or Chile. Practice anti-social, social and physical distancing. Stay six feet away from everyone, especially white people. They are all guilty until proven innocent. If possible, avoid all direct human contact. Try not to panic that the person at the store isn't wearing gloves when they handle your food. Get rid of the thought that they may be your assassins. Spray your money and debit card with sanitizer before returning home. Spray yourself with Lysol or Clorox. Watch the news all day long. Google statistics. Try to make sense out of them, even if they contradict each other. Avoid all traveling, especially across national borders. Don't drink alcohol, yeah right. Don't visit your close friend's homes. Don't share a joint with a friend much less a line of coke. Sanitize your hands before lighting your cigarette. Refrain from hugging your mother and grandmother.

[00:10:01]

"Take your temperature and your pulse three times a day. Take the temperature and the pulse of those living with you. Do not attend museums, music concerts, art openings, book clubs, bars or political demonstrations, a no brainer. They weren't allowed. Do not attempt to connect the dots with other pandemics such as femicides, racially-motivated massacres or pervasive ecocide. Do not engage in conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the pandemic."

So, then I began to think of the impact of the lockdown in my own mental health. And the fear of COVID-19 on the mental health of my loved ones. So, I just want to quote one more paragraph of my blog.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: "Re-write your will obsessively. Try not to cry again. Don't panic, especially when you are experiencing panic. Pretend we're all performing in a sci-fi movie. Pretend we are all survivalists, astronauts or Zoom radio pirates. Pretend you are a televangelist broadcasting your lonely truth from your own inner island. Wait for the symptoms to emerge. Write them down and please do not joke about it, you might spontaneously combust while sleeping."

So, now that you know I read out loud this text, I realize how paranoid it sounds. How much my own fears were intertwining with those of my relatives and friends. And humor saved me. We must continue to remember humor as a strategy, as a survivalist strategy, as a political strategy. I think that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Paranoia might—this new feature of paranoia leads to the next question too. What has changed for you and your work during this time?

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Well, in the absence of touring, during this time my troupe and I have gone one-hundred percent virtual. Everything we do, from solo to group performances, from classroom visits to our kind of legendary summer school. We have all done it online. We have truly embraced the virtual as a way to continue to engage with our multiple communities of difference with our audiences and also reach new ones. It's been an interesting journey across multiple borders. Just to give you an example, a participant—a participant from our first ever virtual international performance workshop, one that we hosted last month, she told us she had always wanted to attend a *Pocha Nostra* workshop but was not able to due to a mental health condition, agoraphobia. And she was very thankful to be a part of this virtual workshop. So, we are noticing way that new people can engage with our performance pedagogy at this time. And then, other people who live in remote parts of the world, like in Argentina, Peru, Norway, Latvia.

They have also mentioned that the virtual workshops made it possible for them to participate in this experience and especially, to be able to afford it. So, I, again, I want to refer to my blogs as a kind of parallel memory.

[00:15:12]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: So, let me read you an excerpt from a pedagogical text we used in our summer school that describes this new ethos of *la Pocha Nostra*.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: "Dear Cibernautas, orphans of two or more cultures, identities and bodies. Welcome to another impromptu pedagogical experiment. An attempt to re-invent ourselves in times of pandemia. To bring performance poetry and critical thinking to our everyday lives in forced lock down. To turn our homes into techno-performance laboratories and to close geographical borders with our cyber bodies."

So, another important discovery during these times was the need to re-boot our living archives. We have devoted this time to advancing an over—I don't know—twelve-year project, that we termed *The Living Archives*. It's an extensive and wide-ranging body of materials spanning 30-plus—like—35 years of interdisciplinary work. And, our living archives now comprise a wide selection of you name it. Photo-performance blogs, experimental films, audio art, performance documents, props, costumes. There is this interactive digital chronology on my website guillermogomezpena.com. And you may think of this website as a virtual portal into a wider body of work, one that is ever-evolving. And we simple couldn't have done this work without forced isolation--

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mmm [affirmative.]

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: --without this isolation generated by the pandemia. And, for us, it's a very important project. We hope that our living archives will inspire other experimental artists to engage in similar projects to think of the artist as both theorists and archivists.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing. Speaking—referring to your isolation, the next question is about the space where you are isolated. How do you feel about it and has your sense of home changed during this? Also, we are at the five-minute mark now.

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Yeah well, home is now our studio, this place where we are right now and our studio is home. We're advocating that artists who are not currently able to be in their studio create one from wherever they are. We are also trying to explain to our alumni how to set up a home studio, you know, including having other basic technical needs, props, costumes, art materials close by. So, since Bali, my wife, and I returned to San Francisco, me and my troupe immediately began gathering gear and advice for setting up our very own, how should I call it? Kind of like, barrio broadcasting station--

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PENA: --as one way to keep connected with our audiences and peers. So, we now have, in our own studio home, in San Francisco, a true Pocha-low-high-tech-pirate-Zoom video on audio station for a new era—

[00:20:16]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing.

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: —it's located, literally, in our dining room, here, where this interview is taking place.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: And besides, you know, the basic electronics, we all have re-purposed our costumes and props from the last 10 years. In fact, if you come back another time, we'll give you a virtual tour [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: I look forward to it.

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PENA: But, so to re-cap, over the past six months we have hosted weekly events ranging from spoken word solos, poetry slams, salons, classroom visits and a couple of international performance festivals. And, as a collective, we have truly embraced the pedagogical and theoretical challenges related to how we can translate live art, experimental poetry, vernacular philosophy and radical pedagogy to virtual space. And, I believe these new art proxies will remain pertinent in the future, even when travel and touring gets normalized again.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] That's interesting. Now, the lessons learned is the final question and we have about a minute left. So, what do you think is the most urgent lesson that we're learning or the most urgent memory that you'll leave this time with?

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Aye yai, yai, in one minute?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Well, all I can say is that I am currently re-reading Chicano, Latino-American and Black authors who have dealt with a history of racism in the Americas. This intellectual exercise is informing my new writings. You know, I would say let's leave it here Maestro Josh, I'm feeling self-conscious or confessional for my taste. I wonder if the interview is going to be a defining document of my art and character. I think we should stop here.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

GUILLERMO GOMEZ-PEÑA: Take a walk. Thank you for your time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you, hitting stop now. Thank you, Guillermo.

[END OF gomez20_1of1_digvid.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]