

"(Mexicans) are simple people. They are happy with the little they got...They are not ambitious and complex like us. They don't need all this technology to communicate. Sometimes I just feel like going down there & living among them."

Anonymous confession in the web



I: Tecnofobia:

My "low rider" laptop is decorated with a 3-D decal of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the spiritual queen of Spanish-speaking America. It's like a traveling altar, an office and a literary bank, all in one. Since I spend 70% of the year on the road, it is (besides my "World Link" phone card of course), my main means to keep in touch with my agent, editors and collaborators spread throughout many cities in the U.S and Mexico. The month before a major performance project, most of the technical preparations, and last minute negotiations and calendar changes, take place in the mysterious territory of cyber-space. Unwillingly, I have become a techno-artist and an information superhighway bandido.

I use the term "unwillingly because, like most Mexican artists, my relationship with digital technology and personal computers is defined by paradoxes and contradictions: I don't quite understand them, yet I am seduced by them; I don't want to know how they work; but I love how they look and what they do; I criticize my colleagues who are acritically immersed in las nuevas tecnologías, yet I silently envy them. I resent the fact that I am constantly told that as a "Latino" I am supposedly "culturally handicapped" or somehow unfit to handle high-technology; yet once I have IT right in front of me, I am tempted and uncontrollably propelled to work against it; to question it, expose it, subvert it, and imbued it with humor, radical politics and linguas polutas such as Spanglish and Franglé.

Contradiction prevails. Two years ago, my main collaborator Roberto Sifuentes and I bullied ourselves into the net, and once we were generously adopted by various communities (Arts Wire, and Latino net, among others) we suddenly started to lose interest in maintaining ongoing conversations with phantasmagoric beings we had never met in person (and that I must say is a Mexican cultural prejudice: if I don't know you in person, I don't really care to converse with you). Then we started sending a series of poetic/activist "techno-placas" in Spanglish. In these short communiqués we raised some tough questions regarding access, identity politics and language. Since at the time we didn't quite know where to post them in order to get the maximum response; and the responses were sporadic and unfocused, our interest began to dim. For months we felt a bit lonely and isolated (It's not hard to feel marginal and inconsequential in cyberspace). And it was only through the gracious persistence of our techno-colleagues that we decided to remain seated at the virtual table, so to speak.

Today, despite the fact that Roberto and I spend a lot of time in front of our laptops (when we are not touring, he is in New York, and I'm in San Francisco or Mexico City) conceptualizing performance projects which incorporate new technologies and redesigning our web sites, every time we are invited to participate in a public discussion around art and technology, we tend to emphasize its shortcomings and overstate our cultural skepticism. Why?

I can only speak for myself. Perhaps I have some computer traumas, or suffer from endemic digital fibrosis. I've been utilizing computers since 88; however, during the first 5 years, I used my old Mac as a glorified typewriter. During those years I probably deleted accidentally here and there over 300 pages of original texts which I hadn't backed up in discs, and thus was forced to rewrite them by memory (Some of these "reconstructed texts" appeared on my first book "Warrior for Gringostroika", Greywolf Press, 1994). The thick and confusing "user friendly" manuals fell many times from my impatient hands. I spent many desperate nights cursing the mischievous gods of cyber-space, and dialing promising "hotlines" which rarely answered, or if they answered, they provided me with complicated instructions I was unable to follow..

My bittersweet relationship to technology dates back to my formative years in the highly politicized ambiance of Mexico City in the 70's. As a young "radical artist", I was full of ideological dogmas and partial truths. One such partial truth spouted that high-technology was intrinsically dehumanizing(enajenante in Spanish); that it was mostly used as a means to control "us" -little techno-illiterate people, politically. My critique of technology overlapped with my critique of capitalism. To me, "capitalists" were rootless(and faceless) corporate men who utilized mass media to advertise their useless electronic gadgets, and sold us unnecessary apparatuses which kept us both, eternally in debt(as a country and as individuals) and conveniently distracted from "the truly important matters of life". Of course, these "important matters" included sex, music, spirituality and "revolution" California style (meaning, en abstracto). As a child of contradiction, besides being a rabid "anti-technology artist," I owned a little Datsun; and listened to my favorite U.S. and British rock groups in my Panasonic

importado, often while meditating or making love as a means to "liberate myself" from capitalist socialization. My favorite clothes, books, posters and albums, had all been made with technology by "capitalists"; but for some obscure reason, that seemed perfectly logical to me.

Luckily, my family never lost their magical thinking and sense of humor around technology. My parents were easily seduced by refurbished and slightly dated American and Japanese electronic goods. We bought them as *fayuca* (contraband) in Tepito neighborhood, and they occupied an important place in the decoration of our "modern" middle-class home. Our huge color TV set for example, was decorated as to perform the double function of entertainment unit and involuntary post modern altar -with nostalgic photos of relatives, paper flowers, and assorted figurines all around it; and so was the humongous sound system, next to it, with an amph, an 8-track recorder, 2 record players and 17 speakers which played all day long, a syncretic array of music including Mexican composer Agustin Lara, Los Panchos (of course with Eddie Gorme), Sinatra, Esquivel, Eartha Kit, tropical cumbias, Italian opera and rock & roll(In this sense, my father was my first involuntary instructor of post modern thought). Though I was sure that with the scary arrival of the first microwave oven to our traditional kitchen, our delicious daily meals were going to turn overnight into sleazy fast food, soon my mother realized that *el microondas* was only good to reheat cold coffee and soups. The point was to own it, and to display it prominently as yet another sign of modernidad. (In Mexico, modernity is conceived as synonymous with U.S. technology and pop culture).When I moved to California(and therefore into the future), I would often buy cheesy electronic trinkets for my family(I didn't qualify them as "cheesy" then). During vacations, to go back to visit my family with such presents *ipso facto* turned me into an emissary of both prosperity and modernity. Once I bought an electric *ionizador* for grandma. She put it in the middle of her bedroom altar, and kept it there -unplugged of course, for months. When I next saw her, she told me: "Mijito, since you gave me that thing(still unplugged), I truly can breath much better." And she probably did. Things like televisions, short wave radios and microwave ovens; and later on ionizers, walkmans, crappy calculators, digital watches and video cameras, were seen by my family and friends as *alta tecnologia* (high technology), and their function was as much pragmatic as it was social, ritual, sentimental and aesthetic.

It is no coincidence then that in my early performance work, cheap technology performed ritual and aesthetic functions as well. *Verbigratia*: For years, I used video monitors as centerpieces for my "video-altars" on stage. Fog machines, strobe lights and gobos, megaphones and voice

filters have remained since then, trademark elements in my "low-tech/high-tech" performances. By the early 90's, I sarcastically baptized my aesthetic practice, "Aztec high-tech art", and when I teamed with Cyber Vato Roberto Sifuentes, we decided that what we were doing was "techno-razcuache art". In a glossary which dates back to 94, we defined it as "a new aesthetic that fuses performance art, epic rap poetry, interactive television, experimental radio and computer art; but with a Chicanocentric perspective and an sleazoide bent."

II: Mythical Differences

The mythology goes like this. Mexicans(and by extension other Latinos) can't handle high-technology. Caught between a preindustrial past and an imposed modernity, we continue to be manual beings; homo fabers per excellence; imaginative artisans (not technicians); and our understanding of the world is strictly political, poetical or metaphysical at best, but certainly not scientific. Furthermore, we are perceived as sentimentalist and passionate creatures (meaning irrational); and when we decide to step out of our realm, and utilize high technology in our art (most of the time we are not even interested), we are meant to naively repeat what others-mainly Anglos and Europeans- have already done.

We, Latinos, often feed this mythology, by overstating our "romantic nature" and humanistic stances; and/or by assuming the role of colonial victims of technology. We are always ready to point out the fact that social and personal relations in the US, the land of the future, are totally mediated by faxes, phones, computers, and other technologies we are not even aware of; and that the overabundance of information technology in everyday life is responsible for America's social handicaps and cultural crisis. Paradoxically, whether we like it or not, it is our lack of access to these goods what makes us overstate our differences: We, "in the contrary", socialize profusely, negotiate information ritually and sensually; and remain in touch with our (still intact?)primeval selves. This simplistic and extremely problematic binary world view portrays Mexico and Mexicans, as technologically underdeveloped, yet culturally and spiritually superior;

and the US as exactly the opposite.

Reality is much more complicated: The average Anglo American does not understand new technologies either; people of color and women in the U.S. clearly don't have "equal access" to cyberspace. Furthermore, American culture has always led the most radical (and often childish) movements against its own technological development and back to nature. Meanwhile, the average urban Mexican is already afflicted in varying degrees with the same "First World" existential illnesses produced by high technology and advanced capitalism. In fact the new generations of Mexicans, including my hip generación-Mex nephews and my 8 year-old fully bicultural son, are completely immersed in and defined by personal computers, Nintendo, video games and virtual reality (even if they don't own the software). Far from being the rrrroomantic preindustrial paradise of the American imaginary, the Mexico of the 90's, is already a virtual (and therefore mythical) nation whose cohesiveness and fluctuating boundaries are largely provided by television, transnational pop culture, tourism, free market, and yes, the internet.

But life in the ranchero global village is ridden with contradictions: Despite all this, still very few people south of the border are on line, and those who are wired, tend to belong to the upper and upper middle classes, and are related to corporate or managerial metiers. Every time my colleagues and I have attempted to create a binational dialogue via digital technologies (ie. link Los Angeles to Mexico City through satellite video-telephone), we are faced with a myriad complications. In Mexico, the few artists with ongoing "access" to high technologies who are interested in this kind of transnational techno-dialogue, with a few exceptions, tend to be socially privileged, politically conservative and aesthetically uninteresting. And the funding sources down there willing to fund this type of project are clearly interested in controlling who is part of the experiment.

The zapatista phenomenon is a famous exception to the rule. Techno-performance artist extraordinaire El subcomandante Marcos communicates with the "outside world" through a very

popular web page sponsored and designed by Canadian liberals (It is still a mystery to me how his communiques get from the jungle village of "La Realidad", which still has no electricity, into his website overnight). However, this web page is better known outside of Mexico, for a simple reason: The Mexican Telephone company makes it practically impossible for anyone living outside the main Mexican cities to use the net, arguing that there are simply not enough lines to handle both telephone and internet users.

"The world is waiting for you-so come on!" ad for America On-line

III: The Cyber-migra

Roberto and I arrived late to the debate, along with a dozen other Chicano experimental artists.

When we began to dialogue with US artists working with new technologies, we were perplexed by the fact that when referring to cyber-space or the net, they spoke of a politically neutral/raceless/genderless and classless "territory" which provided us all with "equal access", and unlimited possibilities of participation, interaction and belonging, specially "belonging" (in a time in which no one feels that they "belong" anywhere). Yet there was never any mention of the physical and social loneliness, or the fear of the "real world" which propels so many people to get on line and pretend they are having "meaningful" experiences of communication or discovery. To them, the thought of exchanging identities in the net and impersonating other genders, races or ages, without real (social or physical) consequences seemed extremely

appealing and liberating(and by no means, superficial or escapist).

The utopian rhetoric around digital technologies, specially in California, reminded Roberto and I of a sanitized version of the pioneer and frontier mentalities of the Old West, and also of the early century futurist cult to the speed, size and beauty of epic technology(airplanes, trains, factories, etc.) Given the existing "compassion fatigue" regarding political art and art dealing with matters of race and gender, it was hard to not see this feel-good philosophy(or better said teosophy) as an attractive exit from the acute social and racial crisis afflicting the U.S.

Like the pre-multicultural art world of the early 80's, the new high-tech art world assumed an unquestionable "center", and drew a dramatic digital border. And on the other side of the tracks, there lived all the techno-illiterate (and underfunded) artists, along with most women, Chicanos, Afro-Americans and Native Americans. Those of us living South of the digital border were forced to assume once again the unpleasant but necessary roles of undocumented immigrants, cultural invaders, techno-pirates, and virtual coyotes (smugglers).

We were also shocked by the benign or quiet(not naive) ethnocentrism permeating the debates around art and digital technology, specially in California. The master narrative was either the utopian language of Western democratic values (excuse me!!) or a perverse form of anti-corporate/corporate jargon. The unquestioned lingua franca was of course English, "the official language of international communications"; the theoretical vocabulary utilized by critics was hyper-specialized (a combination of "software" talk; revamped post-structuralism and psychoanalysis), and de-politicized (post colonial theory and the border paradigm were conveniently overlooked); and if Chicanos and Mexicans didn't participate enough in the net, it was solely because of lack of information or interest, (not money or "access") or again, because we were "culturally unfit". The unspoken assumption was that our true interests were "grassroots" (and by grassroots I mean, the streets in the barrio, our logical place in the world), representational or oral (as if these concerns couldn't exist in virtual space). In other words, we

were to remain painting murals, tagging, plotting revolutions in rowdy cafes, reciting oral poetry and dancing salsa or quebradita.

IV: 1st draft of a manifesto: Remapping cyberspace

In the past two years, many theoreticians of color, feminists and activist artist have finally crossed the digital border without documents and, as a result, the debates have become more complex and interesting. Since "we" (as of now, the "we" is still blurry, unspecific and ever changing) don't wish to reproduce the unpleasant mistakes of the multicultural days, nor do we wish to harass the brokers and curators of cyberspace as to elicit a new backlash, our strategies and priorities are now quite different: We are no longer trying to persuade anyone that we are worthy of inclusion (we are de facto insiders/outsideers at the same time, or temporary insiders perhaps, and we know it). Nor are we fighting for the same funding (since serious funding no longer exists specially for politicized experimental art). What we wish is to remap the hegemonic cartography of cyberspace; to "politicize" the debate; to develop a multi centric theoretical understanding of the cultural, political and aesthetic possibilities of new technologies; to exchange a different sort of information (mytho poetical, activist, per formative, imagistic); and to hopefully do all this with humor and intelligence. Chicano artists in particular wish to "brownify" virtual space; to "spanglishize the net", and "infect" the lingua franca;

With the increasing availability of new technologies in our communities, the notion of "community art" and "political" or politicized art is shifting dramatically. Now the goals, as defined by activist artists, are to find innovative grassroots applications to new technologies; to help the Latino youth literally exchange their guns for computers and video cameras, and to link all community centers through the net. Artist made CD-roms can perform an extremely important educational function for the youth: they can function as community "memory banks" ("encyclopedias chicanicas"). But to attain all this, the larger virtual community must get used to a new cultural presence-the cyber immigrant/mojado; sensibility; and many new languages

spoken in the net. All this is yet to be attained.

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/gomezpena/gomezpena.html>