

## An Open Letter to the Arts Community

Written by Guillermo Gómez Peña

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(This letter carries the outrage of my saliva and the fears and aspirations of my many artistic communities. Written 6 months ago, it is one of my humble attempts to contribute to our clarity and valor, in the era of the Blue Dragon).

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**Dear colleagues:**

Since the mid 90's, as part of the much-touted "backlash", the US political right managed to successfully demonize and defund contemporary art, labeling critical artists as "decadent," "elitist," and "un-American." As a result, the budgets of federal and state arts agencies were progressively sliced down, and soon the efforts of private foundations to pick up the slack became insufficient.

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Then came "9/11"...

The dramatic attacks on the US provided the Bush administration with the much-needed moral authority to implement overnight, a regime of intolerance, censorship, and paranoid nationalism. Their particular brand of religious machismo was not that different from the extremist beliefs of those they allegedly opposed. Their master discourse stated: You are either with "us"(the "good guys") or with "them"(the "evil" ones); "and God Bless America!" a hundred-thousand times, (and no one else). And artists and intellectuals suddenly found ourselves caught between two forms of fundamentalisms - not really knowing if we were perceived as part of the "us" or the "them." Remember?

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In this cartography of fear, new and resurrected borders were drawn overnight dividing families, communities and nations. Brand new enemies and abysmal ethical contradictions were imposed on us, and the arts communities were no exception.

First came state-sponsored censorship: movies and art shows containing references to political violence were indefinitely postponed and a long list of innocuous songs alluding to violence and airplanes were banned from the radio. Remember our complete disbelief? Then, a high-tech form of McCarthyism came into effect with Carnivore and other digital surveillance systems, and thousands of "suspicious" Websites and virtual networks were dismantled. Finally came the public burnings of books and audio-CDs sanctioned by the theological rhetoric of our Holy Attorney General. He was embarked in a personal crusade against Satan himself. Remember?

Under this rarified climate, the corporate owned electronic and printed media engaged in a "no questions asked" policy. Wrapped in the American flag (made in China), most US journalists began to willingly perform the role of stenographers for the Pentagon. The US became the only western "democracy" in which generals and intelligence agents perform the role of news commentators. And those "liberal" anchormen, correspondents and commentators who deviated from the script were instantly fired. Remember?

In academia, conservative students began to report on their outspoken professors and their "anti-American" behavior. In some universities, conservative alumni threatened to withdraw their financial support if those outspoken professors weren't silenced. Those students and teachers

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who dared to organize against the supernintendo policies of the Bush administration were inundated with hate mail and death threats. Remember?

As more flags appeared, Chicano/Latino and grassroots organizations throughout the country were cowardly tagged with jingoistic statements by anonymous "patriots". In San Diego, the legendary murals of Chicano Park were defaced by white supremacists while in San Francisco, the windows and digital murals of the Galería de la Raza were tagged with anti-immigrant and anti-gay phrases. One night, a passing car shot a bullet into the Galeria window. It felt like the 1970's in Central America.

The word "terrorist" surreptitiously expanded to signify, at first all radical Muslims, then all Arabs and Southeast Asians and finally all Arab-looking people including Latino immigrants - documented or not - and brown people with foreign accents. (Since 9/11, those US-based Latino artists, who travel abroad regularly, including myself, have been systematically detained at airport checkpoints, body searched and interrogated; and many of our art materials, props and costumes have been confiscated without an explanation or an apology. We have slowly learned to endure the post 9-11 humiliation rituals at airport security checkpoints. We are all slowly learning to live with ethnic profiling as official culture).

The drastic measurements of the Homeland Security Office, and the scary Patriot Act which turned the country into the largest neighborhood watch program ever, paired with the tightening of borders and the new immigration and travel restrictions began to affect international cultural exchange. Visas were denied or indefinitely postponed. And foreign artists from countries in Bush's ever-expanding black list were no longer allowed in the land of freedom and democracy. Remember? (Unfortunately many myopic cultural institutions from Europe, Asia and Latin America have responded by "boycotting" US artists, as if this would hurt the Bush administration at all).

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Then came the expected defunding of the arts. The budget priorities of the new Republican Junta were clearly National Security, law enforcement and the military. As the attention of the country focused on a myriad of threats (some real, most mythical), a fictional "Axis of Evil" and the much-touted "weapons of mass distraction", Bush and cronies managed to surreptitiously dismantle the funding sources of all progressive communities, including the alternative and experimental art worlds.

In this ambiance of manufactured hysteria, art was sent from the back seat of the funding bus straight out the back door. The unspoken yet pervasive narrative stated: "Who needs art when we are fighting international terrorists." In California alone, the Arts Council lost 19 million dollars out of its 20 million-dollar budget. Today, California, the 5th economy of the world, holds a pitiful continental record worthy of Ripley's Believe it or Not: the second smallest per capita budget allocated to the arts...after Bolivia: 3 cents per person per year.

The fear of losing one's funding or one's job created a more insidious problem: self-censorship. Throughout academia and the art world, with a few exceptions, we were all in silence, scared of not knowing the exact placement of the new borders of tolerance: of not knowing the shape and direction of the probable repercussions of our outrage. Our European and Latin American colleagues kept asking us the same unpleasant question: How come the artists and intellectuals in the US are not speaking up and putting up a good fight? When are you guys going to break the silence? All we could do was raise our shoulders in total disbelief. "What irony," I wrote to one of my publishers late last year, "Mexico, my original homeland, is clumsily learning to live with the new dangers of freedom and democracy; while we here in the US, my new homeland, are learning to live without freedom."

## II

Eventually, the Bush administration contributed to the re-politicization of art. Why? All the values and principles they chose to target were at the core of art practice including, freedom of speech, civil liberties, cultural diversity and tolerance, the right to dissent and criticize power.

Since most institutional spaces were closed to critical art, virtual space became the de facto territory of contestation. A new anonymous political arts movement began to emerge as unsigned posters, hilarious political cartoons and outrageous PhotoShop images and QuickTime movies critical of Bush and his few international collaborators circulated in virtual space. After a group of poets rejected a Faustian invitation by the First Lady to read their poetry in the White House, a huge anti-war poetry website came into fruition. For a while, it was the most visited literary website ever. By early 2003, as we approached the irrational invasion of Iraq, sectors in the intellectual community and even the pop music and the Hollywood establishment began to finally break the silence. It warmed our hearts to hear celebrities like Susan Sarandon, Harry Belafonte, Martin Sheen, Danny Glover, and even the Dixie Chicks speak their minds.

In mid February over 20 million people across the globe, demonstrated energetically against the war. Many artists, students and intellectuals who normally don't walk the political streets were there, along with myriad unlikely colleagues including housewives, senior citizens, war veterans and even apolitical citizens who had recently lost their jobs due to Bush's narrow-minded

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politics. Most demonstrations were peaceful and quite imaginative, in terms of their performance strategies, visual languages and poetic slogans. A window of hope seemed to temporarily open up in the smoky horizon.

### III

Artists, arts administrators, curators, and producers are now facing many predicaments. Due to the drastic funding cuts, cultural institutions have had to trim down considerably their programs and staff, and most grassroots institutions and alternative art spaces face probable extinction within the next two years. Every week, we hear of yet another arts organization, museum department or community center that just lost its funding; of yet another arts administrator, or artist colleague who was just fired. Commissions and tours are being cancelled left and right. Our organization, La Pocha Nostra, alone has lost 10 large commissions since 9/11 and as of November of 2003, 70% of our budget is coming from our International touring.

The toll that the Bush era is taking on people's mental and physical health is immense. Understandably, everyone is exhausted, poor, overworked and scared shitless of the immediate future; our communities are all in disarray and we don't even have a political project at hand to envision an alternative. It is no coincidence that in the last two years personal illness, divorce, and suicide against a backdrop of social, racial and military violence have all increased exponentially. Understandably, our bodies and psyches are internalizing the pain of the larger socio-political body and the confusion of the collective psyche.

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These dramatic conditions are forcing our frail arts communities to engage in serious soul searching and tough questioning: All across the US, in every art space, gallery, theater; bohemian café, recording and rehearsal studio, we are all expressing our perplexity and asking similar questions:

What are our new roles as artists and intellectuals in this cartography of terror? How do we restore the mirror of critical culture for society to see, once again, its own ethical reflection? Are critical artists an endangered species in the US? Do we wish to live in a country without museums, galleries, theaters, cultural centers, literary journals, film festivals and an alternative press? If America continues to follow this path and chooses to become a closed society and a cultural wasteland, will we be able to tolerate living here as complete outcasts or will we be forced to become expatriates in Europe, Canada or Mexico? What concrete actions can we realistically undertake as a sector (and not as disenfranchised individuals), to reclaim our stolen civic self and our legitimate right to create, and articulate our artistic visions? How to keep these questions alive, discuss survival strategies with our local and national communities and present our case empathetically to the press and to sympathetic members of the political class?

## IV

Since 9/11, I have had this reoccurring dream. I dream of a faraway country in which artists are respected in the same way pop celebrities, military men and sportsmen are respected in our country. Artists perceive a decent salary, own their homes and cars, enjoy vacations, and have



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medical insurance. The media and the political class value their opinions. They perform multiple social roles as social critics and chroniclers, advisers, intercultural diplomats, community brokers, and spiritual leaders. In this sui generis society, we can actually purchase poetry books and art magazines in convenience stores. Writers, philosophers, and performance artists appear daily on national television and radio. Museums are free and every neighborhood has a cultural center. In this most unusual society, even corporations, city councils, school districts and hospitals hire artists as advisers, and animators. In this imaginary society, artists don't have to write texts like this one.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña.**

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