Philosophical Tantrum #7
2008–present, in permanent progress

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

In the past few years, I have been writing, rewriting, sampling, recording, and performing live in multiple contexts what I term “philosophical tantrums.” As part of my border strategy of recycling and “multi-contextuality,” I have presented them in performance festivals (as part of larger performances), as keynote speeches, as weird “sermons” (in dialogue with Reverend Billy, Reverend Derek from Pittsburgh, and farmworker and labor organizer Valdemar Velázquez), as performative devices to trigger discussion in the classroom, and on various podcasts and radio programs.

If I were to find a common thread in these philosophical tantrums, it’s my attempt to articulate my obsessive search for political hope, artistic meaning, and a radical spirituality against a backdrop of war, a broken economy, and an acute crisis of global identity. Here’s one of my favorites, which I’ve performed at, among other places, the Gala Theatre (Washington, DC), the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), the University of Amsterdam, and the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts (Cape Town, South Africa).

I

No carnales, I won’t celebrate the Democratic Party this year. The fact is...I don’t believe in government. I don’t think it is possible to correct “the problem” from within the system. We’ve all tried. It doesn’t work. The system is the problem, and politics is the art of manipulating the system to perpetrate problems. Being a “radical” within the system is a mere prestidigitation act — part of the spectacle of radicalism that media consumers require to feel alive and to authenticate their extreme designer identities.

In my world, the Vatos I would propose as presidential candidates are not even politicians. They are artists and literati, visionaries not functionaries. The country I would like to live in only exists on planet poetry and planet performance, where imagination is the only law, art is part of everyday life, and everyone practices what they believe. Imagination is my nation; that’s where I wish to live and die.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a performance artist, writer, activist, radical pedagogue, and director of the performance troupe La Pocha Nostra. His performance work and 10 books have contributed to the debates on cultural diversity, border culture and US-Mexico relations. His artwork has been presented at over 800 venues across the US, Canada, Latin America, Europe, Russia, South Africa, and Australia. A MacArthur Fellow, Bessie, and American Book Award winner, he is a regular contributor for newspapers and magazines in the US, Mexico, and Europe and a Contributing Editor of TDR. Gómez-Peña is a Senior Fellow of the Hemispheric Institute Institute of Performance and Politics and a Patron for the London-based Live Art Development Agency. nafiaztc@aol.com

Figure 1. Guillermo Gomez-Peña as a biker shaman, 2010. (Photo by Zach Gross)
II
The crucial question here is: Where does one find the spiritual energy to continue when you
don’t believe in mainstream politics and institutionalized religion gives you the creeps? What
to do when you are too old to belong to a subculture and participate in the global rave and too
strange to get a chic job in academia?

Where do we locate our dissent when dissent is a corporate product, an HBO special, a per-
fume, the scent of dissent (bad French accent)—“Anarchic,” “Extreme,” “Suicide”...or when kids
can simply wear a T-shirt that says, “art is resistance” and think the job is done?

What to do when all the master discourses and epic narratives of hope are bankrupt? Which
is the best energy drink? Do male enhancers really work?

After 9/11, as my meta-horizons began to fade, I became obsessed with hope, with finding its
spiritual source and location. Is hope a deep feeling of expansion located in the chest, the abdo-
men, or the sphincter? Is it a distant marker in the horizon that directs our actions, or a myster-
ious spiritual energy that propels you into the unknown against the laws of gravity? Is hope a
matter of quantum physics? A form of poetic will? Is hope by definition illogical and unreason-
able? Can hope be nurtured through education? Does hope put you at odds with the state? If
so, what to make of the fact that Obama and his “audacity of hope” are now failed state policy?

Will I vote in the next elections? Unlike the presidential candidates, my hope is not con-
ected to God, Country, or Economy. My hope is located...somewhere else; in obscure books,
films, and performances; in small communities that exist under the radar of the media; in the
political streets of our cities; in the eyes of my students; in late-night conversations at a bar full
of outsiders, in animal species I’ve never seen. My hope is always located on the other side of
the border...or the mirror. In this very moment, my hope is located...in your arms.

I want to hug you, but there is a formidable border that separates me from your body. It’s
a 3,000-year-old theatrical convention. And despite a century of attempts by the avantgarde to
destroy it, it remains intact, even in performance art.

III
Is love still an option? Love in times of war, disease, and global warming? Love amidst earth-
quakes and floods? Under red alerts and a suspicious purple moon colored by smog and chemi-
cal waste? Is it possible to love as if 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq never happened, as if America
was a true democracy and an active member of the world community? Can we love as if the
Patriot Act didn’t exist? As if the Earth wasn’t mortally wounded? As if we had open borders
and open hearts?

I think we can. Love can certainly help us continue but only so far — a few more miles, a
couple of months, and then, we encounter yet another abyss. Like right now, I’m facing yet
another abyss, my beautiful audience...you! Can I stage dive at 55? Should I? I would love to
stage dive into your arms but if I miscalculate the risk, one of you will sue me.

But what if I call my stage dive “performance art”? Can I get away with murder? (If conditions
are appropriate, I stage dive.)

IV
And what about art? Is art our salvation?

In the past art has saved me from deportation, jail, and the mental hospital. True. Naming
my antisocial behavior “art” has saved me from the jaws of the police, the border patrol, and the
IRS. But I talk about art as critical thought and embodied theory, not as object or market. I talk
about art as in uncompromising art practice, not as in “the art world.”

The art world is full of compromises, humiliation rituals, and complicated power negotia-
tions. It takes a special skill to survive it. If you comply too much you lose your voice, your
sharp edges, your culo. You become someone else you dislike. And one day, when you least
expect it, they send you back to the margins where you wait and wait for a second chance
that rarely comes. Or, should you succeed in preserving your ethics, uncompromised, you will eventually be rendered so marginal that no one will know that it was your choice to be inconsequential.

And what if my art leads to my own death? What if I die in the service of art, like the Italian live artist Pippa Bacca who was tragically murdered in Turkey as she traveled across Eastern Europe as “a bride for peace”?

So, between being an art world darling culipronto (ass-licker) and being poor and bitter, I choose to be...an uncompromising dandy, an insider/outsider; a mariachi with a big mouth, a performing contradiction if you will.

 CONTRA-dicción is the name of my favorite lotion. And my job as a performance artist is to avoid simplistic definitions, trends and adjectives, to remain slippery and evanescent, while I continue to ask irritating questions in original ways. What a bizarre job, qué no? And I get paid for it...kind of.

Merde, I’m so moody tonight, I feel like an existential wolf that went to sleep in the Arctic Circle and woke up on the rooftop of a Manhattan skyscraper (I howl).

V
I wonder if community is still a source of hope?

Community is one of our obsessions. We all long to belong to a larger “we” because we are obsessed precisely with what we lack.

But you know locos, communities of sameness drive me up the wall, conjure my asthma, give me acute vertigo and claustrophobia. My community is not confined by ideological, national, or ethnic boundaries. Mine is a community of difference, and therefore it is fragmented, ever-changing, and...temporary. And that’s how I like it.

Besides, no one belongs to only one community, not even the Christian right, not even my Chihuahua Sigfrid ne Babalu. He hangs out with rodents, marsupials, and ghosts.

Like Babalu’s, my peers are scattered all over the pinche planet, howling outsiders jumping all over the planet. Some of you are my peers; others are total strangers in my community of strangers. I long for my peers every night and hopefully, you long for me as well, and every now and then, when we get together, we lick each other’s wounds and dance until the morning like rabid kangaroos, and then we fall asleep in a circle of accidental bodies, and we dream of a better place and a better present.

VI
In this imaginary place we dream about, artists and writers are actually needed and taken care of. We have universal medical insurance, a decent low-rider car, and a great studio space in the bohemian hood of our choice. We don’t have to write grants. And we get paid decently for what we do; and what we do matters. We make important decisions and fix concrete problems for society.

In this imaginary place we dream about, schools, hospitals, prisons, and even airports are reconceptualized and designed by artists; the daily papers are written by philosophers, novelists, and poets. We have ongoing access to electronic media where we make people think, remember, imagine, and laugh. Politicians and religious leaders consult our opinions before making important decisions. We collaborate with progressive doctors, activists, educators, lawyers, priests, and socially conscious scientists in the great project of co-imagining a better future for the borderless community of humankind.

Sounds so corny but so appealing qué no?

In this imaginary place we dream about there is a place for everyone,

Well...almost everyone...

Since no one knows why we are here on this pinche planet, we all have the same right to exist.