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Chicano Interneta

The search for intelligent life in cyberspace

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[A Glossary of Borderismos]

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[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 message on the World Wide Web

Fighting My Own Endemic Technofobia

I venture into the terra ignota of cyberlandia, without documents, a map, or an invitation at hand. In so doing, I become a sort of virus, the cyberversion of the Mexican fly: irritating, inescapable, and, hopefully, highly contagious.

My "lowrider" laptop is decorated with a 3-D decal of the Virgin of Guadaloupe, 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 percent of the year on the road, it is (besides my phone card, of course) my main means of keeping in touch with my agent, editors, and performance collaborators throughout many cities in the United States and Mexico. The month before a major performance project, most of the technical preparations, last-minute negotiations, and calendar changes take place in the mysterious territory of cyberspace. Unwillingly, I have become a techno-artist and an information superhighway bandido.

I use the term unwillingly because, like most Mexican artists, I have a paradoxical, contradictory relationship with digital technology and personal computers: I don't quite understand them, yet I'm seduced by them; I don't want to know how they work, yet 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 being constantly told that as a "Latino," I am "culturally handicapped" or somehow unfit to handle high technology, yet once I have the apparatus right in front of me, I'm tempted and uncontrollably driven to work against it, to question it, expose it, subvert it, and/or imbue it with humor, radical politics, and linguas polutas such as Spanglish and Franglais.

Contradiction prevails. Two years ago my collaborator, Roberto "Cybervato" Sifuentes, and I bullied ourselves into the hegemonic "space" of the Net, and once we had been generously adopted by various communities (Arts Wire, Chicle, and Latino Net, [End Page 80] [Begin Page 82] among others), we suddenly started to lose interest in ongoing conversations with phantasmagoric beings we had never met in person--which, I must say, is a Mexican prejudice: if I don't know you in person, I don't really care to converse with you. Then we started sending 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 to get the maximum response, and since the responses were sporadic and unfocused, our interest began to dim. It was only through the gracious persistence of our technocolleagues that we remained seated at the virtual table, so to speak.

Today, although Roberto and I spend a lot of time in front of our laptops--when not on tour, he's in New York, and I'm in San Francisco or Mexico City--conceptualizing performance projects that incorporate new technologies or redesigning our Web site, every time we are invited to participate in a public discussion about art and technology, we emphasize its shortcomings and overstate our skepticism. Why? I can speak only for myself. Perhaps I have had some computer traumas or suffer from endemic digital fibrosis.

Confieso: I've been using computers since 1988; for the first five years, however, I used my old Mac as a glorified typewriter. During those years I probably deleted accidentally, here and there, over three hundred pages of texts that I hadn't backed up on diskettes and had to rewrite from memory. (Some of these "reconstructed texts" appear in my first book, Warrior for Gringostroika.) The thick and confusing "user-friendly" manuals fell many times from my impatient hands. As a result, I spent many desperate nights cursing the mischievous gods of cyberspace and dialing promising "hot lines" that were rarely answered or, if they were, provided me with complicated instructions in computer Esperanto I couldn't follow.

My bittersweet relationship to technology dates back to my formative years in the highly politicized ambience of Mexico City in the 1970s. As a young, self-proclaimed "radical artist," I was full of ideological dogmas: for me, high technology was intrinsically dehumanizing (enajenante in Spanish) and was mostly used 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. They sold us unnecessary apparatuses that 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 y bien fashionable). [End Page 82] As a child of contradiction, not to mention a rabid "antitechnology artist," I owned a little Datsun and listened to my favorite U.S. and British rock groups on my Panasonic importado, often while meditating or making love as a way to "liberate myself" from capitalist socialization. My favorite clothes, books, posters, and albums had all been made by capitalists with the help of technology, but for some obscure reason, that seemed perfectly logical and acceptable to me.

Luckily, my family never lost its magical thinking and sense of humor about technology. My parents were easily seduced by refurbished, slightly dated American and Japanese electronic goods. We bought them as fayuca [contraband] in our neighborhood, Tepito, and they occupied an important place in the decor of our "modern" middle-class home. Our huge color TV, for example, was decorated to perform the double function of entertainment unit and postmodern altar--with nostalgic photos of relatives, paper flowers, and assorted figurines all around it--and so was the humongous equipo de sonido next to it, with an amp, an eight-track recorder, two record players, and at least fifteen speakers, which played all day long a syncretic array of music, including Mexican composer Austín Lara, Los Panchos (of course, with Eddie Gorme), Sinatra, Esquivel, and Eartha Kitt. Cumbias followed Italian operas, and rock and roll alternated with rancheras. (In this sense, my father was my first instructor in postmodern thought.) Although I was sure that with the scary arrival of our first microwave oven our delicious daily meals would turn into sleazy fast food overnight, my mother soon realized that el

microondas was good only for reheating coffee and soup. The point was to own it and to display it prominently as yet another sign of modernidad. (At the time, modernity was perceived in Mexico as synonymous with U.S. technology and pop culture.) When I moved north, to California (and therefore into the future), I often bought cheesy electronic trinkets for my family (I didn't qualify them as "cheesy" back then). Bringing them such presents on visits made me 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 breathe much better." And she probably could. Things like TVs, short-wave radios, and microwave ovens--and, later on, ionizers, Walkmans, crappy calcula-doras, digital watches, and video cameras--were seen by my family and friends as alta tecnologia [End Page 83] [high technology], and their function was less pragmatic than it was social, ritual, sentimental, symbolic, and aesthetic.

It is no coincidence, then, that in my early performance work (1979-90), chafa [cheap] technology performed ritual and aesthetic functions as well. Verbigratia: For years I used TV monitors as centerpieces for my "video-altars" onstage. 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 1990s I had sarcastically baptized my aesthetic practice "Aztec high-tech art," and when I teamed up with Roberto, we decided that what we were doing was "techno-razcuache art." In a glossary of borderismos, which dates back to 1994 (below), 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 a sleazoide bent."

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 faber par excellence, imaginative artisans (not technicians), and our understanding of the world is strictly political, poetic, or metaphysical, at best, certainly not scientific or technological. Furthermore, we are perceived as sentimental and passionate creatures (meaning irrational), and when we decide to step out of our anthropological realm and utilize high technology in our art (most of the time we aren't even interested in doing that), we are meant to naively repeat what others--mainly Anglos and Europeans--have already done much better.

We, Latinos, often feed this mythology by overstating our "romantic nature" and humanistic stances and/or by assuming the romantic role of colonial victims of technology. We are always ready to point out that social and personal relations in the United States, the strange land of the future, are totally mediated and distorted by faxes, phones, computers, and technological devices we are not even aware of, and that the overabundance of information technology in everyday life is responsible for the United States's social handicaps, sexual neuroses, and cultural crises.

It is our lack of access to these goods that makes us overstate our differences? On the contrary, we socialize profusely, negotiate information ritually and sensually, and remain in touch with our primeval selves. The mythology continues to unfold: since our families and communities are not exposed to the "daily dehumanizing effects of high technology," we are somehow untouched by postmodern "illnesses" such as despair, fragmentation, and nihilism. Our problems are mainly political, not personal or psychological.

This simplistic, extremely problematic binary worldview portrays Mexico and Mexicans as technologically underdeveloped, yet culturally and spiritually superior, and the United States as exactly the opposite. But reality is much more complicated and ridden with contradictions: the average Anglo-American does not understand new technologies, either; people of color and women in the United States don't have "equal access" to, say, cyberspace. Furthermore, American culture has always led the most radical (and often childish) movements against

its own technological development and back to nature. (In the 1990s American Luddites tended to be much more purist and intolerant than their Mexican counterparts.) Meanwhile, the average urban Mexican--more than 70 percent of Mexicans live in large cities--who is exposed to world transculture on a daily basis, is afflicted to varying degrees with the same First World existential [End Page 84] [Begin Page 86] malaises allegedly produced by high technology and advanced capitalism. In fact, the latest generations of Mexicans, including my hip generación-Mex nephews and my fully bicultural eight-year-old son, are immersed in and defined by MTV, personal computers, Nintendo, video games, and virtual reality, even if they don't own a computer. I would go so far as to say that generational borders in Mexico can be determined by the degree of familiarity with high technology and of cyberliteracy. Far from being the rrrromantic preindustrial paradise of the American imagination, contemporary Mexico is already a virtual nation whose cohesiveness and fluctuating boundaries are largely provided by transnational pop culture, television, tourism, a free market (a dysfunctional version, of course), and yes, the Internet.

But life in the ranchero global village is ridden with epic contradictions: even today 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 mostly employed in corporate or managerial métiers. The Zapatista phenomenon is a famous exception to the rule. Technoperformance artist extraordinaire Subcomandante Marcos has been communicating with the "outside world" through extremely popular Web pages sponsored and designed by U.S. and Canadian radical scholars. (It is still a mystery to me how his communiqués get from the jungle village of "La Realidad" in northern Chiapas, which still has no electricity, to his Web pages overnight.) However, these Web pages are better known outside Mexico for a simple reason: Telmex, the Mexican telephone company, makes it practically impossible for anyone outside the main Mexican cities to use the Net, because, it argues, there are simply not enough lines to handle both telephone and Internet users.

Every time my colleagues and I attempt to create some kind of binational dialogue via digital technology (i.e., to link Los Angeles to Mexico City by satellite video-telephone), we are faced with myriad complications. In Mexico most of the few artists with ready "access" to high technology who are interested in this kind of dialogue are socially privileged, politically uninformed, and aesthetically unappealing. And the funding sources down there that are willing to back this type of project are clearly interested in controlling who is part of the experiment.

Cybermigras and "Webbacks"

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

At the time, we were shocked by the benign [End Page 86] or quiet--surely not naive--ethnocentrism permeating the debate concerning art and digital technology, especially in California. The master narrative was either the utopian, dated language of Western democratic values or a bizarre New Age anticorporate/corporate jargon; the unquestioned lingua franca was, of course, English, "the official language of science, information, and international communications"; and the theoretical vocabulary of both the critics of and the apologists for cyberspace was hyperspecialized (a combination of Esperantic software talk, revamped poststructuralist theory--hadn't we already overcome poststructuralism in the early 1990s?--and nouvelle psychoanalysis) and largely depoliticized(i.e., postcolonial theory and the border paradigm were conveniently overlooked). If Chicanos, Mexicans, and other people of color didn't participate enough in the Net, it was solely because of a lack of information or interest, not because of a lack of money or access. The unspoken assumption was that our true interests were grassroots (and by grassroots I mean from the streets in the barrio and our ethnic-based community institutions), representational, and oral (as if these concerns couldn't exist in virtual space). In other words, we were to keep painting murals, plotting revolutions in rowdy cafés, reciting oral poetry, and dancing salsa or quebradita. (Some colleagues believe that the mere fact that Roberto, I, and a handful of other Chicanos are now temporarily sitting at the cybertable is a huge political victory. Others, more cynical, believe that we get invited to the great rave of consciousness to bring Tex-Mex and tequila to an otherwise fairly puritan fiesta.

Hopefully not.) When we began to dialogue with U.S. artists working with new technologies, we were perplexed by the fact that these artists, when referring to "cyberspace" or "the Net," meant a politically neutral/raceless/genderless and classless territory that gave us all "equal access" and unlimited possibilities for participation, interaction, and belonging, especially belonging (at a time when no one feels that they "belong" anywhere). Yet they never mentioned the physical and social loneliness or the fear of the "real world" that propels so many people to get on line, stay there, and pretend that they are having meaningful experiences of "communication" or "discovery," two very American obsessions. To many of these artists, the thought of exchanging identities on the Net and impersonating members of other genders, races, or ages without real (social or physical) consequences was
extremely appealing and liberating and by no means superficial or escapist.

The utopian rhetoric surrounding digital technologies, especially the rhetoric coming out of California, reminded Roberto and me of a sanitized version of the pioneer and frontier mentality of the Old West and also of the early-century futurist cult drawn to the speed, size, and beauty of epic technology (airplanes, trains, factories, etc.). Given the compassion fatigue regarding political art and art dealing with race and gender, it was hard not to see this feel-good philosophy (or rather, theosophy) as an attractive exit from the acute social and racial crisis afflicting the United States.

Like the pre-multi-culti art world of the early 1980s, the new high-tech art world assumed an unquestionable "center" and drew a dramatic digital border. "On the other side" lived all the techno-illiterate artists, along with most women, Chicanos, African Americans, and Native Americans in the United States and Canada, not to mention the artists in the so-called Third World countries. Given this hegemonic cartography, those of us "illegal aliens" from south of the digital border were forced to assume once again the unpleasant but necessary roles of Webbacks, [End Page 87] cyberaliens, digital viruses, technopirates, and virtual coyotes [smugglers].

Chicano Virtual Reality

Perhaps our first truly high-tech project that contributed to the politicization of the debates about new technologies was a performance designed for cable TV with the obscure title "Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for a.d. 2000."

On Thanksgiving Day 1994 the evening news in over 3.5 million American households was interrupted by two "post-Nafta cyber-Aztec TV pirates" who transmitted their bizarre views on American culture "directly from their underground vato-bunker, somewhere between New York, Miami, and Los Angeles." In fact, what the viewers were witnessing was an experiment in interactive multilingual television via satellite. Roberto and I had teamed with filmmakers Adrienne Jenik, Philip Dwja, and Branda Miller (from I-Ear Studio, at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) to broadcast a simulacrum of a pirate TV intervention to hundreds of cable TV stations across the country. The stations' program directors had agreed to play along (which is unthinkable, say, on PBS) and had advertised the time slot under a fictional title.

For an hour and a half the "information superhighway bandidos" encouraged the perplexed viewers to call in and respond to the broadcast, a strange blend of radical politics, autobiographical material, and parodies of traditional TV formatting gone bananas. The style was very much like that of MTV, with five handheld cameras in constant motion. During the broadcast we demonstrated a "Chicano virtual reality machine," which "could turn personal and collective memories into video footage ipso facto," and "a virtual reality bandanna," which could "allow Anglos to experience firsthand the psychological sensation of racism." We also received "live reports" via Picture Tel (video-telephone) from the Electronic Cafe in Los Angeles. We spoke in English, Spanglish, Franglais, French, and a robolanguage we had invented and encouraged [End Page 88] our viewers "to be intelligent, poetical, and performative" in their responses. During the live broadcast it sometimes appeared that the TV station was struggling to regain the airwaves, but we managed to maintain control.

The performance was transmitted over computer networks as well, via "M-Bone," and those watching in cyberspace could interact with us, and with one another, by posting written and visual comments. We received dozens of phone calls and computer messages.

Most of the viewers--and the M-Bone users--who responded were amazed at how technically and visually sophisticated and "unfolksy" the program was, given (though they didn't always state this assumption) that it had been created by "Mexicans." Many others, clearly pissed off by our arrogance ("two Mexicans live on national television broadcasting uncensored material"), declared that we should immediately leave the high-tech simulated space we had created "illegally" and return to our "pyramid-infested past." The project (including satellite time) cost, I believe, under seven thousand dollars and, to our surprise, was judged "best experimental video" at the San Antonio Cine Festival.

Ethnocyborgs and "Artificial Savages"
The debates about the body and its relation to the new technologies have tremendously polarized the experimental arts community, particularly the performance art milieu. There are those in the "machine art" movement who advocate the total disappearance of the human body and its replacement with computer or mechanical robotics; others believe that the body, though obsolete, can remain at the center of the art event but that new technologies can equip it with prosthetic (perceptual and physical) extensions. A visceral reaction to these proposals can be found in the artists of "apocalypse culture," who have adopted a radical Luddite stance: to reclaim the body primitive as a site for pleasure and pain and to "return" (so they claim) to neotribal paganism, very much in the Western tradition of anarchist [End Page 89] "dropout" culture. But Roberto and I are trying to explore other options: to politicize technology, imbuing it with humor and linguas polutas; to use it to enhance interaction between performers and audience members, who unknowingly become voyeurs/tourists; and to gather cultural and political information of a unique confessional nature, which will then be reinterpreted by and expressed through our "primitive," political, and erotic bodies. What the live audience ends up experiencing is a visualization of its own postcolonial demons and racist mirages.

Our most recent "technodiorama" project, called El Mexterminator I, premiered in Mexico City in March 1995 under the working title The Museum of Frozen Identity. Since then different versions have been performed in the United States, Spain, Italy, Austria, Canada, England, and Wales. In this project Roberto and I utilize the responses and "confessions" of the visitors (both physical and virtual visitors, that is) to design visual and performative representations of "the new mythical Mexican and Chicano of the '90s." In other words, the Internet responses become the basis for the creation of a series of "ethnocyborgs," cocreated (or rather, "coimagined") collaboratively with thousands of anonymous Net users. The idea of this diorama project, unlike our previous ones, is to cede our will to the Internet users--and to the gallery visitors, once we have the necessary technology available at the performance site--in determining the nature and content of the "living dioramas," including how we dress, what music we listen to, and, most important, what ritualized actions we engage in and what type of interaction we have with the audience. What we then do as performance artists is to "embody," reinterpret, and stylize this information. In this sense, the ethnocyborgs and "artificial savages" incarnate profound fears and desires of contemporary Americans regarding the Latino other, immigrants, and people of color and mirror to the real and virtual visitors their own psychological and cultural monsters.

These performances always involve some form of physical contact with the audience. Visitors to the gallery are encouraged "to interact with the live specimens" in various modes: they can feed us, touch us, attempt to engage us in conversation, handle our props ("at their own risk"), and point replicas of weapons at us ("to experience the feeling of shooting at a live Mexican"); occasionally, they are invited to "alter our identity" by changing our makeup and costumes and even to "replace us for a short period of time." Lately, we have been setting up "identity make-over booths," in which audience members undergo "instant" identity changes through special-effects

makeup and costumes. Whenever we can, we set up a bar inside the space to "carnivalize" the experience even more. When we do, the behavior of the audience members changes dramatically as they drink tropical cocktails.

The complete version of El Mexterminator I premiered in early 1998, during the "commemoration" of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It parodied an end-of-the-century "museum of experimental ethnography," incorporating several ethnocyborgs reflective of America's problematic relationship with cultural otherness in the 1990s (i.e., the Chicano as an "endangered species," the "Mad Mex" super criminal, the exotic "cultural transvestite," "La Zapatista stripper," etc.).

Draft of a Manifesto: Remapping Cyberspace

In recent years many theoreticians of color, feminists, and activist artists have finally crossed the digital border without documents. This diasporic movement has forced the debates to become more complex and interesting. But since "we"--as of now, the "we" is still blurry and ever-changing--don't wish to reproduce the unpleasant [End Page 90] mistakes of the "culture wars" (1988-93) or to cause a new backlash by harassing the brokers, impresarios, and curators of cyberspace, our strategies and priorities are now quite different.

We no longer try to persuade anyone that we are worthy of inclusion. Nor do we fight for the same funding--since serious funding no longer exists (especially not for politicized experimental art)--and the computer tycoons we all thought would eventually become progressive philanthropists are just oversize teenagers, with no political understanding of culture whatsoever.

For the moment, what we (cyberimmigrants) desire is (1) to politicize the debate; (2) to remap the hegemonic cartography of cyberspace; (3) to develop a multicentric theoretical understanding of the (cultural, political, and aesthetic) possibilities of new technologies; (4) to exchange a different sort of information (mythopoetic, activist, performative, imagistic); and (5) hopefully to do all this with humor, inventiveness, and intelligence.

Chicano artists in particular wish to "brownify" virtual space, to "Spanglishize the Net," and to "infect" the lingua francas.

These concerns have echoes throughout Latin America, Asia, Africa, and many so-called Third World communities within the so-called First World.

With the increasing availability of new technologies in our communities, the notion of "community art" and political or politicized art is changing dramatically. Now the goals, as defined by activist artists and theoreticians, are to find innovative grassroots applications to new technologies (i.e., to help the Latino youth exchange their weapons for computers and video cameras) and to link all community centers and artist collectives through the Internet. Artist-made CD-ROMs and Web pages can perform a vital educational function: they can serve as community memory banks (encyclopedias chicánicas, so to speak), sites for encounter, dialogue, complicity, and exchange, and as virtual bases of operation and action for trans/border grassroots projects.

But first the many virtual communities must get used to a new cultural presence: the Webback (e.g., el nuevo virus virtual), a new sensibility, and the many new languages spoken on the Net. As for me, hopefully one day I won't have to write in English to have a voice in the new centers of international power.

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