

# HIGH PERFORMANCE

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THE  
MULTICULTURAL  
PARADIGM

by Guillermo Gómez-Peña

Government Censorship of the Arts

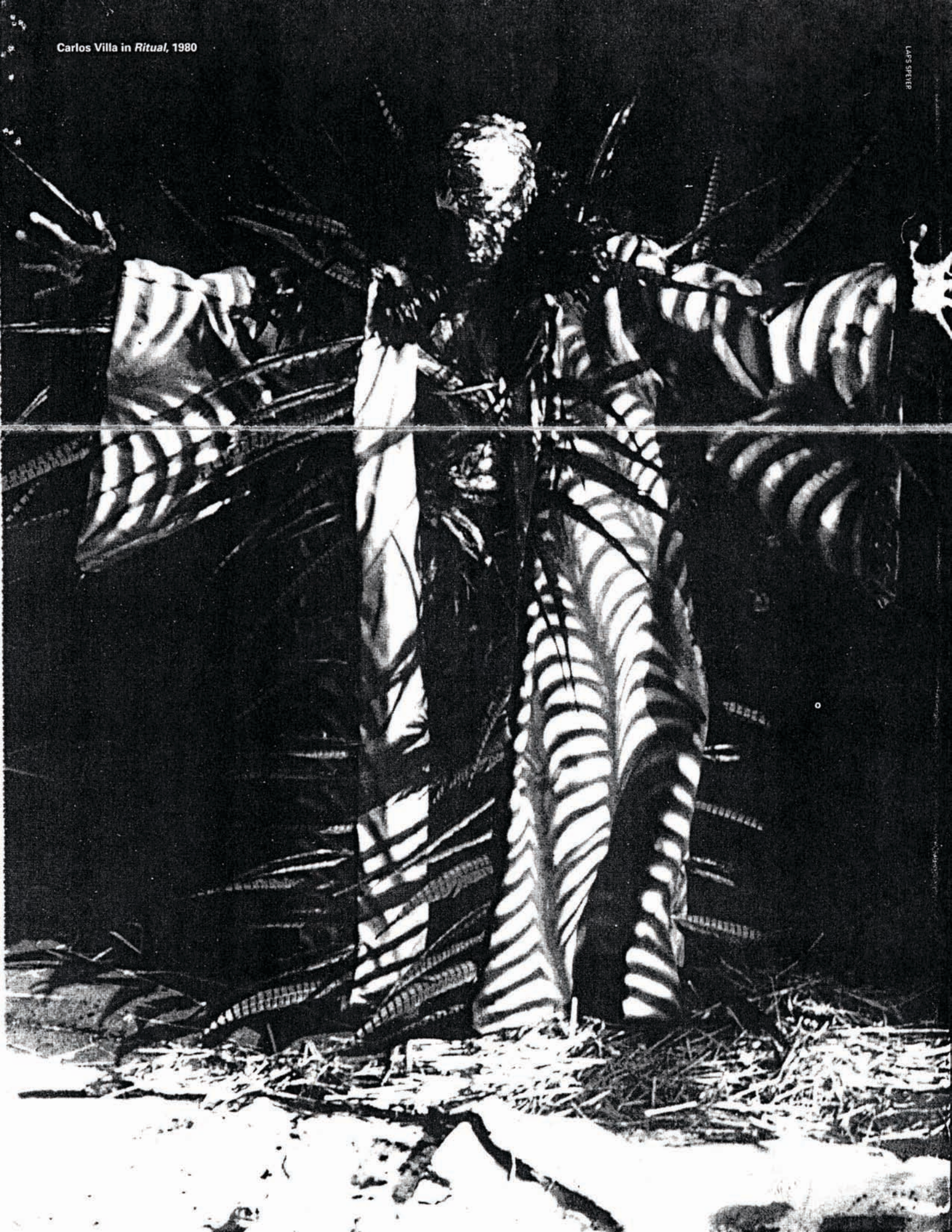
an Interview with Ishmael Reed

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# THE ART OF MULTICULTURAL WEAVING

## CARLOS VILLA'S *RITUAL*

by Moira Roth

*Like it or not, we are attending the funeral of modernity, and the birth of a new culture.*

—Guillermo Gómez-Peña<sup>1</sup>

Carlos Villa's art is a complex expression of what Guillermo Gómez-Peña describes as "border culture," that inevitable situation occurring "whenever and wherever two or more cultures meet." In "The Multicultural Paradigm" (included in this issue of *High Performance*) Gómez-Peña argues persuasively that once we get away from "the images on television or in commercial cinema depicting a monocultural middle-class world" the dominant culture in the multicultural and multilingual America of 1989 is that of "border culture." Clearly American art history needs to be radically reassessed to describe accurately the wide range of arts that reflect this paradigm shift. In such a new multicultural history Villa's art must be placed more centrally than it is now. The performance *Ritual*, a pivotal work in his oeuvre, is a fascinating place in which to begin such a reassessment.

In 1980, in his mid-40s, Villa, a Bay Area painter and sculptor and a first generation Asian-American, melded African cosmogony with T'ai Chi movements and the Western action painting tradition to shape *Ritual*. It was a composite of many of the subjects, themes and materials—ceremony and mythology, body imprints and casts, feathers, blood, paper pulp, spray paint and canvas—in Villa's sculpture and painting of the '70s. *Ritual* was also a cogent statement at the end of Villa's decade-long shaping of his multicultural artistic identity. Out of these different threads Villa drew a mesmerizing performance.

*Ritual*, the first of Villa's two performances to date, has not been published until now.<sup>2</sup> It deserves full attention as a highly powerful, original performance that should be introduced—albeit nine years later—into the history of performance art.

During the '70s Villa learned the art of multicultural weaving. Prior to this time, and following his education at the San Francisco Art Institute and Mills College, Villa had had a successful career in New York where his Filipino heritage did not express itself overtly in his minimalist sculpture and painting.<sup>3</sup> In 1969-1970, while a faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute, Villa started teaching in the Projects, "a black and Asian ghetto which was located down the hill from the Institute."<sup>4</sup>

"At this time the black kids had these beautiful Afro hairstyles, and the Asian kids, too, had their own kind of hairstyles," Villa recalled. "I was struck by the pride the kids had in themselves, their jauntiness. There was something about that which I really liked, and I started thinking about identity, my Filipino identity."

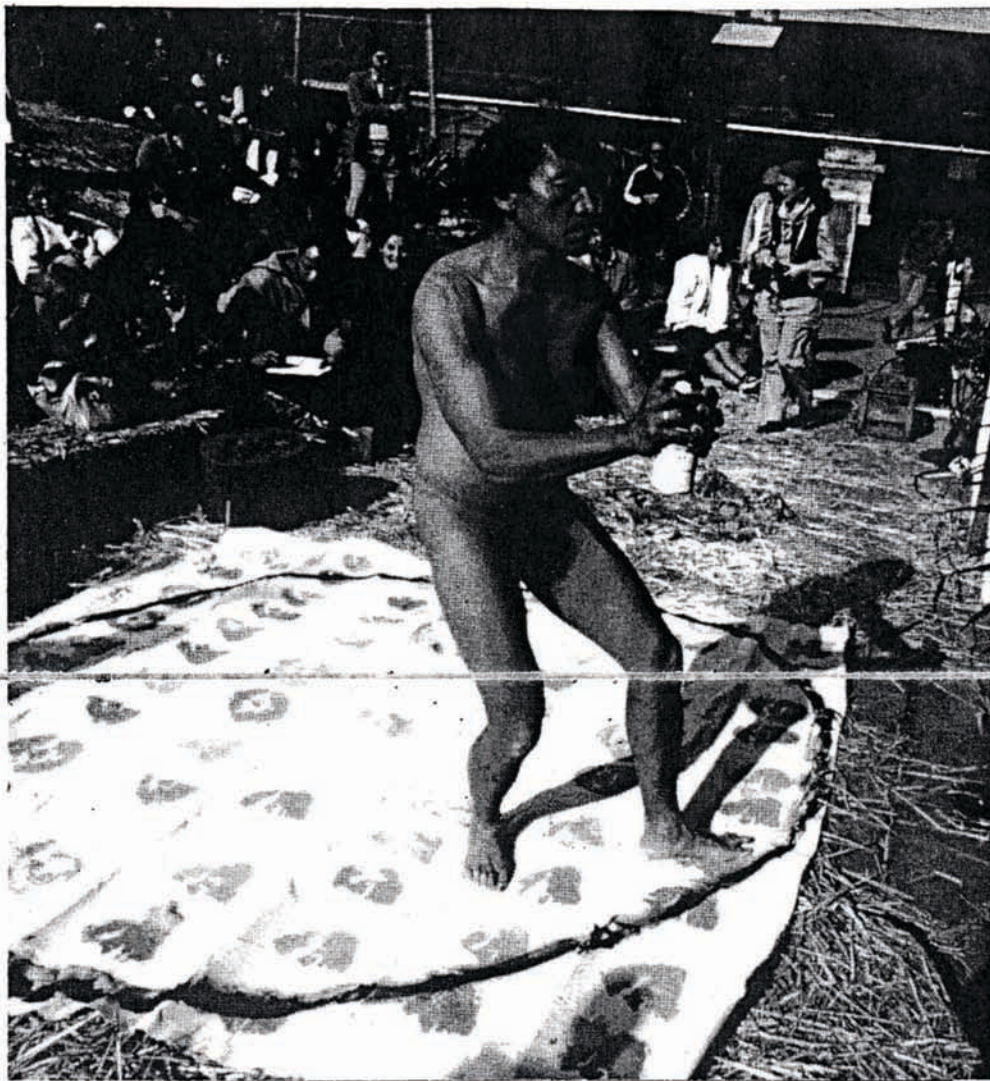
It is highly characteristic of Villa's thinking that an experience in this culturally mixed community setting would spark such a psychological and artistic concern. Given the history and culture of the Philippines—the dense overlaying of successive migrations from Asia, India and Africa, and its geographic proximity to both the Asian mainland and Oceania—an exploration of Filipino ethnicity led Villa in diverse directions. In order to create a "visual anthropology" (Villa's term) for himself, he made repeated visits to the African and Asian collection in San Francisco's De Young

Museum, and poured over books on African, Asian and Oceanic art, history and religion. At the same time, he was also inspired by near-at-hand and daily encounters in the culturally diverse Bay Area, through, for example, his on-going contacts with the Filipino community and exhibitions at the Galeria de la Raza, the Latino art community center. During this period Villa continued to love European and American mainstream modernism, although this became one among several cultures from which he drew his artistic inspiration.

By the time Villa used a Western Sudanese framework for many of the visual symbols and the overt narrative of *Ritual*, the mixing of different cultural threads to produce a weaving peculiarly and originally his own had become a natural mode for him. Villa read Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemeli*, the product of intense exchanges over a month in 1946 between Ogotemeli, a Dogon elder, and Griaule, a French anthropologist.<sup>5</sup>

Ogotemeli described the Dogon world and its history to Griaule including the roles of twin gods, a multicolored jointed skeleton and drumming and dancing in the creation of the world, the invention of language ("The Word"), contemporary rites of passage, and personal skull and body altars using ritual stones. Among the many Dogon references in the performance that Villa wove together with the American action painting tradition were the twin theme, the images of the corpse and body imprints in various Dogon symbolic colors on a canvas to represent "The Word," and dancing and drumming components.

The Pollock action painting tradition formed the other central reference system of



Ritual

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*Ritual*. Indeed, Villa describes *Ritual* as “a painting performance.” Villa, whose early painting style was in an Abstract Expressionist mode, always admired Jackson Pollock’s work, art that was inextricably associated with trance, ritual and the artist’s body. This aspect of Pollock became highly publicized through Hans Namuth’s famous still photographs and film (Villa included the film in *Ritual*). In an interesting two-part article on the subject, Barbara Rose describes Namuth’s use of the “stalking” methods of wild animal photographers to document Pollock “totally immersed in his own trance-like activity” and credits Namuth’s recording of “the artist’s repeated rhythmic steps as he worked his way around the four sides of his canvas” as leading to the interpretation of Pollock’s movement as a “ritual dance.” With trance-like movements in *Ritual*, Villa too creates a painting.

In many ways *Ritual* was also a logical outcome of Villa’s own decade-long exploration of the artist’s body, his own. Beginning in 1971 he had been drawn to ritual garments. Made for his own body size but hung on the wall as paintings, these cloaks and coats were composed of feathers, canvas, acrylic paint and taffeta linings. In the later ‘70s, Villa learned how to make molds of his body from which he formed paper-pulp-and-feather objects, his *Artist’s Arm*, *Artist’s Feet* and *Artist’s Head* series. At the same time, he produced a series of large canvases of imprints of his body and face. In *Ritual* Villa incorporated these experiments with body molds and body imprints together with one of his feather coats.

*Ritual* took place on April 26, 1980 in San Francisco at The Farm. This alternative art space offered an ideal setting for the performance as it included real farm elements such

as crops and animals (reminiscent of the setting of the Ogotemeli-Griaule conversations) as well as indoor and outdoor spaces in which art and community events were regularly held. An audience of some 200 people from both the San Francisco art and Filipino communities watched the performance. Many people arrived around one o’clock and stayed until six while others wandered in and out during the long sunny afternoon. The central performance space was an outside area covered with hay. Behind that was a building whose open doors led into a room where two films were projected, one being Namuth’s *Pollock*, and the other, *Les Maitres Fous*, a documentary of African trance rituals.

*Les Maitres Fous* (The Crazy Masters), made in the ‘50s by Jean Rouch, begins with urban scenes, surrounded by trains and boats, of the Haouka people working as



Ritual

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stevedores, agricultural workers and miners. We see them leave the city in trucks, and then journey by foot through the bush to a village. There, in a state of deep trance and accompanied by the killing of animals and testing by fire, they take on the roles of either penitents or oppressors. Wearing red sashes and white pit helmets and carrying wooden rifles and whips, they parody military and diplomatic ceremonies associated with British colonialism—a parade inspection, a round table conference at the governor's palace, etc. Enhanced, relieved and exhausted by their ritual catharsis, they return to the city. The film ends with scenes of the Haoukas once more at work on their menial jobs juxtaposed with flashbacks of their ritual "other" selves.<sup>7</sup>

Complex and insistent music was integral to *Ritual*. A group of six drummers from different ethnic backgrounds played throughout

the piece accompanied by the delicate sounds of Filipino Kulintang instruments (a set of eight traditional bronze gongs) and a saxophone. At one point, beneath the music, a tape was played of Villa's mother telling her son in a matter-of-fact way how to prepare a pig for killing in Filipino style by giving the animal sweet vinegar to soften its pain.

The performance began with the riveting appearance of Villa in a sumptuous feather-canvas-taffeta coat and wearing a mask of feathers. Underneath this purple, green, and yellow coat he had attached feathered limbs and a feathered torso form to his body. These were removed by Tom Seligman<sup>8</sup> who laid them on the hay-strewn ground to form a corpse and placed eight stones on its joints. From this point on, Seligman, now wearing Villa's coat, acted in the role of "a permission-giver" (Villa's own description), and provider of the performance's ritual sub-

stances—stones, feathers, paint and millet. Their exchanges suggested mythic harvesting and divination rituals as well as an esoteric initiation, perhaps inspired partly by Villa's childhood memories of Catholic mass.

At the heart of the performance was the compelling presence of Villa, mostly nude and with closed eyes. His movements ranged from full, highly controlled body motions as he advanced, withdrew, bowed, knelt and prostrated himself, to near motionless as he slowly turned his head from side to side eleven times—an exquisite, precise gesture which he repeated as a refrain between the different segments of the piece. "At the time I had just learned Ta'i Chi. I went through the movements as if I were doing a set of Ta'i Chi. I was breathing through my nose. By the time I got to putting paint on my body, I was actually in a trance. A set of Ta'i Chi is done in 10-15 minutes but I did them



Ritual

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for an hour and a half. I was completely unaware of everything around me except I remembered the sequences which Tom and I had rehearsed once or twice."

A seven-by-seven-foot canvas was placed on the ground. This canvas, together with the corpse of the paper pulp-feathered body parts and Villa's interactions with Seligman, was the primary focus of *Ritual*. By the end of the performance, the canvas had become a richly layered, multicolored painting of overlapping images, feathers, blood, paint and marks.

Prior to the performance Villa had glued together 144 small canvas pieces of white-titanium-painted imprints of 72 "twin" pairs of his face in carefully orchestrated directional poses. At the beginning of the performance, he outlined a large black egg-like ellipse form (a shape central to Dogon symbolism) on the canvas. During the rest of the performance he would return to the canvas over and over again, pressing down on it with his face, hands, feet and sometimes whole prostrated body to make further impressions using spray paint and sponges containing black and brown paint handed to him by Seligman. (Periodically, Seligman also stuck feathers from the corpse on the freshly painted areas of the canvas.) Villa's final imprints were made first with animal blood, and then with white paint. The event ended with Seligman covering Villa's body with the corpse's feathered limbs and torso and returning the coat and mask for him to wear once more. After the performance, there was an impromptu feast provided by one of Villa's cousins who had brought some

25-30 barbecued fish. The overall casual atmosphere of the festivity contrasted with the intensity of this hour-long performance which Seligman remembers vividly. "It was an amazing burst of energy. The most telling part was at the end. Carlos was wiped out, absolutely emotionally drained. He was going through some sort of catharsis."

For me, the power and complexity of *Ritual* comes from the emotional and physical intensity of Villa's performance commingled with *Ritual's* highly original synthesis of fascinatingly diverse references and materials, and the richness of its metaphors and layers of meaning.

**B**y 1980 Villa had produced a large body of fine work, but one that—since the end of the '60s when he abandoned minimalist aesthetics—lacked critical contextualization. At the time of *Ritual*, minority, Third World and ethnic art—with their marginal connotations—were unfortunately still the order of the day. Not only did these act as simplistic labels for grouping together a vast array of all different sorts of artists, art and group exhibitions, but they also severely inhibited critical explorations of extended *oeuvres* and complex careers of individual artists of color.

During the '70s, Villa exhibited frequently, receiving many short reviews primarily of a journalistic nature, but very little in the way of in-depth analysis. Reviewers wrote, for the most part praisingly, about the exotic "ethnic" nature of his art though worrying, on occasion, if it was sufficiently "authentic." Concurrently, they viewed Villa's main-

stream training and concerns as being marginal if not downright destructive to his "innate" sensibilities. (There are parallels here with the value systems of old-fashioned ethnography.) This has continued to be true in the '80s. One reviewer wrote enthusiastically in 1982 that Villa's works were alive "with a wild primitive tribal rhythm that makes the exhibit seem more of a step into a tropical jungle than a visit to a college art gallery."<sup>9</sup> In 1985 a writer criticized the inconsistencies in Villa's work that he felt were due to the "difficulties of maintaining one's ethnic identity while adapting to the manners and mores of a *foreign cultural climate*."<sup>10</sup> [italics mine]

This situation cannot be redressed merely by more serious and knowledgeable studies of Villa's work. His art will inevitably continue to appear somewhat marginal unless situated in a radically re-worked understanding of American culture as well as art. In his "Multicultural Paradigm" Gómez-Peña argues that "In 1989, we must realize that all cultures are open systems in the constant process of transformation, redefinition and recontextualization. What we need is dialog, not protection. In fact, the only way to regenerate identity and culture is through ongoing dialog with the other." This is what Villa has been doing for two decades in his studio and community organizing.

The range of materials, performance modes and cultural references, and the kaleidoscope of the shifting perspectives in *Ritual* make it a classic study in American art of what I have called a multicultural weaving process. For Villa, "appropriation is one of

1980 SCRIPT NOTES BY CARLOS VILLA<sup>11</sup>**Ritual: A Painting Performance / Interaction  
with Tom Seligman / Based on the Cosmogony of the Dogons**

1. Drums steady / My arms are outstretched / I wear a coat and mask of feathers. Underneath my coat are my feather limbs and feather torso
  2. I face Tom—he is my "twin" / Tom takes my limbs, torso and mask. He lays them on the ground. From his bag, he takes 8 stones (they are round). He places the stones on the joints of this "corpse"
  3. The feather coat is taken off me and placed on my "twin," Tom. / Drums peak
  4. Tom moves to his right / I stand "tranced"—my head moves from left to right slowly 11 times. Each time forming an ellipse / (I repeat this before and after each movement.)
  5. The canvas surface is unrolled / (This fabric becomes the "Word"—the faces on the canvas are the testimony to the ceremony.) / Drums peak again
  6. Tom hands me a sponge and black paint / With my hand plus paint, I draw an elongated circle or ellipse over the surface / Tom takes feathers from my "corpse" and sticks them on the painted areas
  7. I repeat #4.
  8. Tom hands me a jar of millet. I place the millet on 8 regions of the surface
  9. I repeat #4
  10. Tom hands me spray paint. I seek and find a spot where I may sacrifice...make a mist where my body will touch the surface
  11. I repeat #4.
  12. Drums peak / Tom hands me brown paint. / I put it on my body, make the impression of the "ancestral figure" on the surface. / Tom hands me tan paint. / I repeat the last gesture and impression except now to the side of the other figure. / (Each time I get paint, I put some on my feet.) / Tom put feathers on the painted areas
  13. I repeat #4
  14. Tom gives me blood / I sprinkle blood on the canvas / Drums peak again and stay peaking
  15. I repeat #4
  16. I put blood on my body (torso, right side of my face and my hands) / I then go to the spot where I sprayed. I prostrate myself...make marks...flail around.
  17. Drums get mellow, steady
  18. I repeat #4
  19. Tom hands me the white paint plus sponge / Trancelike, I make 2 undulating lines on the surface
  20. Tom goes to the "corpse" and gets feathers to place on the painted areas
  21. I repeat #4
  22. Tom places the feather limbs and torso on me, and gives me my mask and coat
- Drums are steady and heavy. Leo<sup>12</sup> is playing something happy

## FOOTNOTES

1. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Documented/Undocumented," Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, eds., *Multicultural Literacy*, Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1988, p.131
2. There exist many unpublished photographs of *Ritual*. There is also a short evocative videotape by Lars Speyer—made with a dissolve unit and slides together with an audiotape—that, however, focuses almost exclusively on the movements of Villa and does not give a sense of Seligman's role, the presence of the two films, or the general ambiance.
3. For a general discussion of Villa's art and career, see my essay, "The Dual Citizenship Art of Carlos Villa," to be published in September 1989 in *Visions*, the Los Angeles quarterly art journal.
4. Quotes of Villa are drawn from my series of taped interviews with him over the past year.
5. Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmel: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965. For a recent re-evaluation of Griaule in the light of current anthropological thinking, see chapter 2, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation," in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988.
6. Barbara Rose, "Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Myth of Jackson Pollock: parts 1 and 2," *Arts Magazine*, March 1979.
7. The colonized Africa portrayed in this film seems the antithesis of Ogotemmel's mythic Africa. In fact, both are '50s portrayals of African belief systems in the context of British and French colonial rule, and recorded through European lens, respectively those of Rouch and Griaule. In the context of this, it should be pointed out that Tom Seligman, who plays somewhat of a priest role in *Ritual*, is white.
8. Seligman, then-curator of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas of the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco, had a long history of scholarly and personal experiences with Africa. Initially Villa had contacted Seligman, a friend of his of some years standing, to hear about his recent trip to Africa. Seligman recommended the Griaule-Ogotemmel book and showed him African performance film footage. A few days before the event, Villa asked Seligman to perform in it. I interviewed Seligman about *Ritual* (June 13, 1989). Although deeply touched by the piece, Seligman remembers feeling that "I participated in a very marginal way, almost like a spectator." Furthermore, he comments that "In Africa, there is an almost an abhorrence of public nudity so that Carlos' nudity was very Western. Right away that sent a shock through me." Also Seligman points out that, in contrast to Villa's performance in which music and movement went their separate ways, central to African movement is its response to sound: the dances of the performers are either in synch or counterpart to the music.
9. Roxanne Lawler, "Sheehan Gallery Comes Alive with Villa Exhibit," *The Walla Walla Union Bulletin*, October 7, 1982.
10. Mark Van Proyen, "Magical Inconsistencies," *Artweek*, February 9, 1985.
11. These were written by Villa just prior to the 1980 performance and constituted a "script" which he and Seligman followed. With Villa's permission, they have been slightly edited in order to clarify certain movements.
12. "Leo" refers to Villa's cousin, Leo Vallidor, the painter, who played a formative role in Villa becoming an artist.

the ways we get insight into other traditions and we develop our own. But to make appropriation really work, you need contextualization. You need to know both the culture and why you are putting in the reference. I'm like a cook. I put ingredients together and something comes out. The African thing is what I wanted at a certain time. It wasn't about copying. I can never copy things even

when I try. I have to reproduce things in my own way. *Ritual* came out of the Africa of my mind. Ogotemmel and his conversations became a vehicle." ■

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