

An Account of *Señorita Maquiladora*

Rosina Conde

Autonomous University of Mexico City

In the sixteen years that I have been doing performance (1992-2008), *Señorita Maquiladora* is the piece that has gone through the most transformations, not in its script, but in its text, despite its few presentations.¹ As we all know, “Performance” is a recent trans disciplinary genre,² in a constant process of definition and transformation, one that takes on various forms and adapts to the space and audience to which it is directed. For the performer or the artist, it is not the same to present in a conference room as in a cabaret, in an auditorium, in a theater, or in a public amphitheater, even if the script is the same. Nor is it the same to present to an academic audience, an artistic gathering, an adolescent group, or a general public, and, unlike theater, I argue that performance is not “representational” but rather “presentational,” in the sense that the performer is not acting in character, but rather is showing him or herself to the audience. Some playwrights and theater theorists, when questioning me about the validity, transcendence, or pertinence of performance, have argued with me that there is no difference between a performer and an actor, affirming, like Mayakowski, that actors should not act, but rather “live” the character, and that, to play that character, the actor must feel it come alive in the moment of its execution. In this sense, rehearsals serve only as a path to get to know and develop the character so as to be able to activate it and “live it.” Nevertheless, this type of actor, though very proposition-driven and distinct from the

traditional actor, still continues to play a character created as fixed, as something that has been shaped by an external director, and the text is manifested on stage within a dialogical schema that never changes, regardless of the audience, in the space and time in which the play is presented. The performer, on the other hand, is not playing a character but rather invents oneself on stage, and for that reason, the act varies depending on intention, the historical, political, and/or social moment, the mood in which s/he finds her/himself, and the response of the audience. Unlike an ordinary individual, the performer announces that this will be a public presentation; consequently, in the moment of its execution, what the performer does is to foster his/her social representability and circumscribe his/her actions within a determined time and space in order to register them fully. The case of the actor is different, since his/her ideology, personality, and personal life are separate from the characters s/he represents, and so the actor disassociates the moment of acting from personal life.

Another difference between the performer and the actor is that in the moment of the theatrical show, the actor will continue with the performance regardless of the size of the audience, the response to or rejection of the character by the audience, his/her own state of mind, and the space and the historical moment circumscribing the action. No matter what, s/he will no longer be himself in order to become possessed by Hamlet and to declaim "to be or not to be," whether s/he wants to or not. If s/he were to skip this monologue even once, he would be attacked by the audience, the press, and history itself, seen as a poor actor, a forgetful, irreverent, a mutilator of or traitor to Shakespeare, and would be lost in oblivion. This would not happen to the performer, since the discourse can change depending on intention and what s/he wants to say in the moment and based on the response of the audience. This response can become part of the text, can be eliminated if one wants, without any interference in the execution of the performance, without anyone noticing the difference, and could, in fact, even manifest itself in a counter-reaction. In any of these cases, the performer is the one who decides if s/he wants to interact or not with the audience.

Señorita Maquiladora was born in 1996, when I was invited to participate in the First International Meeting of Writers, which took

place in Monterrey, Nuevo León, on the 400th anniversary of the city. Although I had gone to live in Mexico City in 1993, I was invited as a writer from Tijuana,³ and it was expected that, therefore, I was going to talk about Tijuana, since the theme of the meeting was precisely “the city.” My dilemma was what to talk about in such a sophisticated location as Monterrey, a city with a vast cultural tradition, and how to go there as the representative of a city that had barely celebrated its 100th birthday. It was then that I realized that my city was very young and, in this sense, could be compared with a “Miss.” But the theme was not fully resolved by this insight, and on thinking about what had been happening recently in both cities, I realized that in Monterrey there had just occurred the incident of “El Naranjo.” This is a zone with a very high percentage of health problems among its residents, principally cancer and, upon conducting investigations into the cause, it was discovered that the housing development had been constructed over a clandestine dumping ground for industrial wastes. By association of ideas, I was reminded of the master’s thesis of Carlos Montalvo in the area of environmental economy,⁴ which explores the environmental cost produced by the industrial growth of the electronics assembly plants in Tijuana, and the repercussions on public health. It was then that I realized I would go as the representative of an assembly plant city to an industrial city.

But the question remained of how to represent an assembly plant city. Since there was a long tradition of beauty queen contestants in my family—my mother had been Carnival Queen of the port city of Topolobampo in 1943 when she was seventeen years old, and all three of my sisters had been queens of the Kiwanis Club of Tijuana (Mabel in 1969, who ceded the crown to Patricia because she left to study in Mexico City, and Lucila in 1979)—it occurred to me that I could very well represent the city of Tijuana through the figure of Miss Maquiladora. So I asked my mother to send me my sisters’ cape and crown, which, since Lucila had been the last Kiwanis club queen, she still had in her possession. She told me she would do so on the condition that, if the Kiwanis Club ever asked for its return, I would give it back.⁵ I then spoke to the organizers of the event, and asked them if it would be viable to present a performance. They told me that there was no venue within the structure

of the meeting's activities, but that I could present it extra-officially during the dinner offered by a group of industrialists. Everything came together perfectly: the most expensive part of the costume was resolved, and there was no better space for presenting *Señorita Maquiladora*. All I had to do was cover the costs of the hairstyle and the fingernails.



I began, then, to write the script. It was easy, since it was not a theme alien to my experience. From my family members and other beauty queens I knew (several employees of my parents' jewelry shop had been chosen queens of the national celebrations in Tijuana) I knew that all of them, after being crowned, travel in the back of a convertible car during the parade, smile prettily to the crowd, wave their hands in the "short-short-long" style,⁶ then for a year attend all the events as representative of that social sector. But they never speak—they only smile!⁷ So the question remained: What could Miss *Maquiladora* speak about, beyond thanking her sponsors? What would her discourse be, for an audience that was composed largely of writers and journalists for whom "misses" are obsolete? And what would I say in front of the sponsors of the event, who still believe in them? I was not interested in doing a parody of beauty queens or ridiculing them, despite what some people have concluded. I did want my presentation to have an element of irony, so as not to sound moralistic, but more than anything else, I wanted the performance to reflect on Mexican industrial and environmental policies.⁸ For this reason I decided to write the "*Maquiladora rap*,"⁹ based on Carlos Montalvo's thesis.

I began, thus, to write the poem. Nevertheless, I couldn't find the way to phrase it, since all the rap songs I knew were in English, and Spanish does not have the same phrasing, accentuation, or rhythm. Besides, I was more familiar with blues and jazz. When my son Oscar heard me complaining, he loaned me a tape with Italian rap songs that I listened to day and night for a week, and that was how, finally, I was able to write my poem. Then I asked my friend Armando Vega-Gil to help me compose a percussion-based sound track on his computer so as to rap more freely, and, in addition, I taped the march from "*Aída*" for my entrance.¹⁰ To end the performance, I chose several poems I had written years before, from a sequence called "*De preferencia*" 'by preference,'¹¹ with the idea of rolling them up, like diplomas, and handing them out to the audience.

The day of my presentation, the performance began when I went to the beauty parlor to get my hair done and apply the false nails. Both the hairstylist and the women and young girls in the salon were very excited to be in the presence of a beauty queen, to the

extent that, when I took the crown out of its case, the stylist's hands trembled with fear that she might drop and break it while she was putting it on. Later, when I left the salon and walked to the hotel to pick up my costume and cross into the banquet room, the passersby also stared at me with admiration and greeted me and, despite the fact that I had not paraded through the city on the back of a convertible, I waved back at them, short-short-long. On arriving at the hotel, the receptionists and bellboys attended me as they had not done since my arrival two days earlier, and one of them even apologized for not having given me the service I deserved, although not before scolding me that if only I had told them I was a beauty queen, then they would have known...

Once in the dressing room of the Cultural Center that was sponsoring the dinner, I put on heavy makeup, and when I presented myself to greet the assistants in my bathing suit, ribbon, crown, and cape, despite having been announced as "*Señorita Maquiladora*," many of them did not know how to react. The writers were surprised, because they did not expect my outfit—furthermore, they couldn't even imagine what a "performance piece" was—and the industrialists because no one had told them that a "miss" would be arriving, and they had not prepared any ceremony deserving of my reception. Nevertheless, once they saw me up close, and I told them that the residents of "El Naranjo" had invited me, they got up and left without eating. The writers thought this all so entertaining that even before I could get up front to give my talk, they all gathered around in groups to have their pictures taken with me. Despite the fact that my talk and rap lasted only about twenty minutes, the next day no one talked about anything else during the meeting.

The second time I presented *Señorita Maquiladora* (Chapingo University 1998), all the students—mostly men—study in agriculture-related fields and, for that reason, study little or nothing related to (or show any interest in) literature and art. There the reaction of the audience was very different because, in the first place, they had never invited a woman writer before, only men in suits and ties who spoke to them about High Poetry and High Literature, and, in the second place, because no one had told them that there was going to be a performance (they had never even heard the word before). And even though they had been given one of my books to

read before my presentation, and so I could presume they would be familiar with my language, characters, and themes, they expected the entrance into the auditorium of a lady who would give them an intellectual lecture. The reaction of these young men when they saw a Miss come into the auditorium—they literally went crazy with happiness. On that occasion, I addressed agricultural contaminants, especially pesticides and fertilizers, and their repercussions on health as my topic and, before singing the “*Maquiladora* rap,” I made an analogy between the chemicals in the electronics industry and the health problems of workers exposed to them, like breast and uterine cancer, miscarriages and the birth of anencephalic children. Afterwards, there was a long question and answer period about my writing and my scenic proposals, and more than two hundred students waited in line for me to sign their copies of my book.

Between 1999 and 2004 I received numerous invitations to present *Señorita Maquiladora*; nevertheless, the groups making the invitation tended to want me to do it for free, and to pay my own costs. Unfortunately, many cultural promoters in Mexico continue to see performance art as a hobby, an extravagance, and a fraud. They see it as a hobby because they don’t imagine it can earn money; as an extravagance because they cannot justify investing in its production, and as a fraud, because it is expensive and only lasts a few minutes, and because, finally, generally “nothing happens”—that is, they do not know that, despite the ephemeral nature of the presentation, performance can take hours or even days to have an effect on its public. In fact, in Mexico, to date, there have been only two works published on performance, and the majority of the references are either in English or found on the internet.

In 2005, Inés Martínez de Castro proposed that I present *Señorita Maquiladora* in the seminar, “Four decades of the assembly plant model in northern Mexico,” at Sonora College in the city of Hermosillo. Because it was an academic event under the principal rubrics of economics, industrial restructuring, social anthropology, and feminism, I took advantage of the opportunity to promote the movement of a group of women living in the Cuauhtémoc zone of that city, where the local government had closed a clinic for the detection of uterine and breast cancer. Faced with the indifference of the authorities, and due to the high incidence of cancer in the

women in this area, the residents decided to capture the attention of their fellow citizens through the installation of hundreds of bras on the fence of an ecological park in Hermosillo, near the highway. People in general, and especially the men, took down the bras, and yelled come-on lines, double entendres, and sexual insults, believing that it was the advertisement for a table-dancing center. Nevertheless, when the context was explained, that perhaps their wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters could be suffering from breast cancer, their attitude changed radically, realizing that breasts were not just a sexual symbol, but also have an incalculable value because they give life and love, an infant's first food. Later, the activists from the Cuauhtémoc area associated themselves with another women's group, RETO, to give talks and demand resolution to the problem of the toxic waste dump that had been closed on November 19, 1998, but which had not been cleaned up. Unfortunately, the government still has done nothing in this respect: they have neither reopened the cancer detection clinic, nor cleaned up the toxic waste dump, and the cancer index in Sonora continues to rise.¹²

For this presentation, I made some changes in my costume, as several months previously I had acquired a pair of 20 centimeter acrylic heels, which are the type of shoes used by dancers for table dancing, and with them I was able to meet the minimal height standards for competing in a beauty contest.¹³ In earlier presentations, I had touched on the theme of racial discrimination by making an analogy between European beauty standards and the beauty contests that exclude all the Latin American ethnic groups based on an imposition of a minimum height; thus the shoes were a prop to speak about racism. I continued to use the crown, but instead of a swimming suit I used a long silk gown so as to hide the shoes, with the goal of surprising the audience by my discussion of height.

The fourth time I presented *Señorita Maquiladora* was in March 2008 at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Since it is very close to the border with Chihuahua, I was interested in talking about the feminicides in Juárez and the problem of violence against women. To be frank, I was not sure how to approach the problem, since I had never presented in the United States before and I was not very sure of my English. Thus, the day before the presentation, I went to the university library to consult a dictionary to look up

words that began with “mis-” and “miss-”, with the idea of playing with them phonetically. From a menu of 25 words I chose the ones that gave me the most elements to put together my presentation: misunderstood, miscegenation, misogyny, miserability, mistreat, miscarriage, missing person, and misbehave. I bought a roll of ribbon and elaborated new banners which I put on one over the other, under the “Miss *Maquiladora*” banner. The first gave me the opportunity to apologize for my bad English and my errors in speech, and I excused myself by saying that I hoped not to be Miss Understood. The second (Miss Cegenation) allowed me, along with the shoes, to talk about the mixture of races and the discrimination against ethnic groups in Latin America. I explained that, due to height restrictions, Mexican women cannot aspire to become Miss Universe, unless they come from a European background, but that in Mexico we have many misses, and among the most popular are Miss Ongeny and Miss Erability; who then give way to Miss Treat and from her to Miss Carriage. I commented that I did not want to be any of these misses, since in my country, just in the state of Mexico alone, last year there were 500 reported deaths from domestic violence, and many women suffered miscarriages due to violence. There is a parallel with the cases of the electronics industry in that it is very common for women to suffer miscarriages due to the chemical substances they work with, and due to the long work days. Nevertheless, I told them that the worst of all the misses, the one I would never want to be, is Miss Ing Person. Here I commented that, just in Juárez, in the last ten years, there have been a reported 5,000 disappeared women, among whom were mainly adolescent *maquiladora* workers between 16 to 18 years old. They have only found 400 of them, all dead and dismembered in the desert, with their genitals exposed. I made the observation that these deaths have not been solved, to date, but that after putting the cadavers in a plastic bag and closing the zipper, the authorities give them the title of Miss Behave, since the press and police justify their deaths by arguing that they are migrant women who have left their families to go north because they are libertines, single mothers, or prostitutes, and they suggest that their deaths are a divine punishment for their bad behavior. Afterwards there was a question and answer period about my scenic proposal. One of the questions that they asked me was if

Señorita Maquiladora had had any social impact. I responded that I did not believe it had much impact beyond the impression it provoked in the few students and academics who had seen it, and that, to date, I only knew of two academic works that had touched on the theme of *Señorita Maquiladora*.

Besides adding the new banners to my costume, for this occasion I did not use makeup, but only covered my face with an orange mask, making me look like a fifteen-year-old. This mask forms a very thin transparent sheet over the face, and I took it off gradually as I spoke about the theme of the health problems suffered by maquiladora workers caused by the substances they work with: including miscarriages, the birth of anencephalic children, uterine, skin, and breast cancer.



Conclusion

Despite the fact that in Mexico performance is a genre that has been promoted since the 1990s, it is little understood and has little audience appeal, and as I mentioned earlier, many people still see it as nonsense. For *Señorita Maquiladora* to have a real social impact, it would have to be presented frequently, in public venues, principally those with a political aspect, such as demonstrations or protests against femicide or health problems caused by contaminants and industrial waste. Unfortunately, *Señorita Maquiladora* is very expensive, due to the production and transportation costs, and it is very hard for me to self-finance the performance. I believe that

Señorita Maquiladora has great potential because it speaks to global themes that affect workers in the assembly plant industry, not only with respect to the questions of the environment and health, but also in terms of the patriarchal patterns that force these women to compete in an atmosphere of a vertical structure dominated by men, with all the attendant disadvantages, without taking into account that women are responsible for procreation. Femicide, health problems like breast and uterine cancer and the birth of anencephalic children, are only a few of the conditions suffered by this group of women who remain today the most vulnerable sector of the Mexican workforce.

Translated by Debra A. Castillo

Notes

1 For example, between 2000 and 2008 I have presented *Those were the Days* (ensayo autobiográfico) more than twenty times, and between 1996 and 2008, I have only presented *Señorita Maquiladora* four times.

2 Performance per se arises in the 1960s, although its origins stretch back to slapstick theater from the Middle Ages as well as the happenings of Dadaist and surrealist artists at the beginning of the twentieth century.

3 I make this observation because we Mexicans are very regionalist, and when one goes to live in another city, state, or country, we are typically considered traitors, identity-less, or unpatriotic.

4 I reviewed Montalvo's book, published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation from his 1992 Master's thesis, in Tijuana while he was writing it at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte: "Costo ambiental del crecimiento industrial: El caso de la maquiladora electrónica en Tijuana, B.C." 'The environmental cost of industrial growth: the case of the electronics assembly plant in Tijuana, Baja California' (2005).

5 The crown was made totally by hand, from blown and cut glass dating from the 1960s.

6 While parading in the car, the beauty queen waves briefly twice toward the front, then once, for a longer time, to the back as she turns to see the crowd behind her.

7 A tradition in Mexico is that women are prettier when they are silent (*caladitas son más bonitas*).

8 After this presentation at the first meeting of writers, I was never invited back.

9 The text of *Señorita Maquiladora* and the “Rap de la maquiladora” can be consulted on my website: <http://www.rosinaconde.com.mx/performance.htm>.

10 For the past several decades in Tijuana, when beauty queens enter the room, or when students process for middle or high school graduations, “Gloria all’Egitto” from *Aida* is played.

11 The poems, “De preferencia,” can be found at: <http://www.rosinaconde.com.mx/mm.htm>.

12 The state of Sonora has the highest rate of uterine, breast, and colon cancer in the country.

13 I am 1.53 meters tall and the minimal required height is 1.70 meters. Indigenous Mexican and Guatemalan women are even shorter than I am.