
A Festival Shines through the Fog: The Hemispheric Institute's 6th Encuentro, "Corpolíticas / Body Politics in the Americas"

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Buenos Aires was recently the site of one of this year's most anticipated performance-related gatherings, the 6th Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, titled "Corpolíticas / Body Politics in the Americas" (2007). Taking place from 8-17 June, it was co-hosted by the Centro Cultural Recoleta in collaboration with the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella and the Teatro Empire, along with students and faculty from the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Mixing artists, activists and scholars from across the hemisphere in an environment of intense interdisciplinary discussion and production, the Encuentro was almost universally considered by participants to be a great success. Rubbing shoulders with the cemetery that is the final resting place of so many figures who occupied center stage in Argentine history, the Centro Cultural Recoleta was truly the heart of this event. It seemed as though every inch of the uniquely designed Centro – from its airy, white exhibition rooms and tall-windowed hallways, to its courtyards, black box and auditorium – was taken up by the Encuentro's performances and group discussions. The historic Teatro Empire's proscenium-style theater, just a short taxi ride down Avenida Callao, also proved to be a cozy setting for a number of evening performances. Taking the Encuentro off-site, events such as Thursday rounds with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, performances in the Plaza del Congreso and a visit to la Boca to see the Grupo de Teatro Catalinas Sur were opportunities to interact with other parts of Buenos Aires. Consistent with the conference's spirit of creativity, even the Hotel Bauen (a cooperative "empresa recuperada" taken over by former employees after the economic crisis), which lodged most participants, was a model of out-of-the-box thinking. It was also notable that members of the Argentine public were eager participants in most events,

making the Encuentro's goal of facilitating exchange across the hemisphere a reality.

The Institute's best laid plans were almost frustrated, however, by what has proven to be a remarkable winter for Buenos Aires weather-wise. Overlapping with the Encuentro's beginning, Ezeiza Airport came to a virtual standstill for the better part of three days due to heavy fog. This unforeseen obstacle – indeed, faulty radar technology was rumored to be the underlying cause of the problem – threatened to seriously interrupt the conference as many waylaid participants anxiously hoped for the chance to soon join the significant porteño contingent of this four hundred-person gathering. Though many, myself included, missed the first couple of days, through the flexibility of the event's coordinators (Diana Taylor, Claudia Briones, Diana Raznovich, Isabel Puente, Marlène Ramírez-Cancio and César González Mathus), a commendable feat of organization typical of the Hemispheric Institute took place, and the needs of tardy artists, academics and activists were effectively accommodated.

If anything, the travel difficulties proved to be a galvanizing force for the many who, after getting little sleep in various airports, were then confronted by a schedule of events staggering in both size and scope. Performances, installations, exhibits, films, roundtables, workshops, keynote lectures and work groups ran from 9:30am until 2:00am and frequently later into the night. The enormous variety and overabundance of possible activities was precisely what made the 6th Encuentro so thrilling, however, and throughout the ten days each event seemed to inevitably draw an eager crowd of participants. As its title suggested, the conference's focus was on the body, specifically its political articulations in terms of race, gender and class. These issues were confronted effectively in round table discussions such as "Performance e intervenciones colectivas," "Mecanismos de terror" and "Cuerpos utópicos" led by authorities like Reverend Billy, Coco Fusco, Danny Hoch and Antonio Prieto, among others. Keynote speakers Diamela Eltit and Rossana Reguillo both dealt with violence against women's bodies in their respective keynote talks, "Pliegues del cuerpo. Los síntomas del poder" and "Condensaciones y desplazamientos. Las políticas del miedo en los cuerpos contemporáneos." In other keynote lectures, Jorge Dubatti also discussed the "Cuerpo social y cuerpo poético en la escena argentina," and George E. Lewis examined the role of technology in improvisation in "Living with Creative Machines." Most mornings, one could also choose to attend one of the twenty-three workshops offered. Sample topics from the impressive selection available included

“Intervenciones: Del hacktivismo a la nanotecnología,” “ALÁBASE, Orixá Dances,” or “Re-Colección de Arte-Basura.”

Besides the fast pace and expansive range of exciting opportunities offered by the Encuentro, its intensity was compounded by strong encouragements to more actively engage the issues confronted in each scheduled event. After nearly every performance came a question and answer session with the artists. Additionally, all work group participants were asked to arrive in Buenos Aires having read their colleagues’ work in advance in order to assure that meeting times would be reserved exclusively for discussion and debate. This abstract theorizing was then put to practical use at the end of the conference in the form of a poster/performance session. Such a project presented an excellent opportunity to see what the minds of artists, scholars and activists could collectively come up with when asked to produce something tangible that effectively synthesized their findings over the course of the week and a half. The work groups were on topics such as “Knowing and Caring for the Body: The Political Economy of the Self in Consumer Society” or “Fraud as Political Performance,” and varied in size from as few as four people to as many as fifty-five. Perhaps one of the most memorable final presentations was that of Francine A’Ness and Mary K. Coffey’s work group “Bodies Politics: Nationalism and Spaces of Performance.” According to



“Bodies Politics” work group poster (featuring Rachel Bowditch).
Photograph by Mary K. Coffey and Francine A’Ness.



Rosa Cuchillo Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani (Perú). Photograph by Carolina Soler.



La voz de FOMMA Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (México). Photograph by Carolina Soler.

Coffey, their broader discussions on institutionalized nationalism and its relation to performance became focused over the course of the event upon the private institution and corporate culture. This led the group to make a poster with a head-sized cutout surrounded by the words “Hemispheric Corporation.” Observers were encouraged to place their faces in the hole and have their pictures taken as part of a contest to become the iconic image associated with the institution. As these observers performed their identification with Hemi, Inc., they were also asked what sorts of products they would like to see marketed under its name in the future. Though results of the campaign are still pending, in the end the work group poster displays turned out to be a highlight of the conference.

Speaking of the question of officially or unofficially sanctioned performance, the Encuentro managed to schedule a number of established performers – along with quite a few who were new to many – that did not disappoint. The Peruvian Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani gave excellent performances of the previously staged *Rosa Cuchillo* and a relatively new piece, *Kay Punku*. The latter work of documentary theater involves two village women who recount sexual violence suffered at the hands of soldiers and who subsequently find they can rely on ancestral traditions in order to heal themselves. Ana and Débora Correa explained to the audience that this piece has been a great success as an interactive play in Andean villages where local women accompany the two characters in the custom of washing the doors of their homes. La Pocha Nostra also performed their *Mapa/Corpo 2: Interactive Rituals for the New Millennium*, and from México, La FOMMA presented a sampling of their theatre work promoting social



Enterrada en el cuerpo del recuerdo Secos y Mojados (Argentina-El Salvador-México).
Photograph by Carolina Soler.



“Experimentos Gramíneos” Maicyra Leão
(Brasil). Photograph by Carolina Soler.

awareness. San Francisco-based Secos y Mojados in turn addressed the challenges accompanying immigration in *Enterrada en el cuerpo del recuerdo*. Among the groups who performed in the Plaza Congreso were: Fernando Pertuz, with “La muerte ronda por todas partes” (Colombia), Gonzalo Rabanal with “Contrapieles” (Chile), and Mujeres Creando “Ninguna mujer nace para puta” (Bolivia). Maicyra Leão from Brasilia performed “Experimentos Gramíneos,” where she slowly walked the streets covered from head to toe in a suit made of artificial grass, making everyone gasp (she wore nothing under the suit) as she doused herself with water from a watering can on a very chilly porteña evening.

Representing the host country, Diana Raznovich’s installation “El cuerpo efímero: una muerte de lujo” treated anorexia’s complex connection with a variety of commercial interests, and Grupo de Teatro Catalinas Sur’s rousing *El Fulgor Argentino, Club Social y Deportivo* documented the ups and downs of one hundred years of Argentine history. Susana Cook’s humorous and satirical solo performance *The unPatriot Act: inseguridades de la seguridad nacional*, regarding nationalism and homophobia in Argentina and the United States, was also well-received. Perhaps the most popular performance of the conference was that of Liliana Felipe, whose acerbic and saucy tango lyrics dissected both love and politics with her alternately jarring and tender piano keystrokes. Already an enormous hit with the audience, things only got wilder when she was joined onstage by Jesusa Rodríguez for a duet and multiple curtain calls in which they sang about ailing relationships.

Rodríguez’s own performance, *Striptease de Sor Juana* (reworked since the 2002 Encuentro in Lima), likewise generated a great deal of interest.



Striptease de Sor Juana Jesusa Rodríguez (México). Photograph by Julio Pantoja.

In this play, Sor Juana unhurriedly recites *Primero sueño* in its entirety – sometimes with a touch of melancholy – while she periodically removes articles of clothing until left completely naked. Though the (deliberately) difficult baroque poetry was as challenging as ever to follow, the poetic image Sor Juana produced during what could only be interpreted as solemn striptease intended for knowledge was quite arresting. Particularly memorable was the moment in which she climbed atop her desk to stand below a small, hanging globe. Centered between an open book and an embroidery hoop (through which black and white hieroglyphics and desert images were projected onto the auditorium wall), her figure hereby topped-off a roughly pyramid-like shape evocative of the poem’s initial verses: “Piramidal, funesta, de la tierra / nacida sombra, al Cielo encaminaba / de vanos obeliscos punta altiva, / escalar pretendiendo las Estrellas” (169). This image was brought to its culminating point when she then opened the hanging globe above to slowly release a stream of tiny white balls that cascaded off her head, shoulders and the table, resembling grains of sand. Though the work contrasted markedly with some of Rodríguez’s more overtly ironic performances, where contemporary politics is parodied in a more explicit manner, this play’s subtlety and simplicity were praised by many who attended.

From the United States, Michelle Matlock and Danny Hoch brought the issue of race to the forefront in *The Mammy Project* and *Teatro Hip-Hop: Una noche con Danny Hoch*, respectively, while Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Spending also shared a “Sermon” on a personal reaction to Elvis’s “If I can Dream.” One of the Encuentro’s most well-received performances came from Split Britches, the American duo of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. *Retro Perspective/It’s a small house and we’ve lived in it. Always.* was an at times raucously funny and at others profoundly tender parody of butch-femme identities, providing a look back at the two women’s last thirty years of work in the form of a medley. From Canada, 2boys.tv’s *Within the Folds of the Zona Pellucida* was another impressive performance that involved the impeccably-timed lip-synchronization of various movie monologues mixed with famous opera music, in order to to communicate a woman’s confusion upon being accused of a crime.

Among the many excellent photography exhibits which adorned the walls of the Centro Cultural Recoleta was Julio Pantoja’s striking collection entitled “Las madres del monte” dealing with the struggle of mothers from the northern forest and jungle zones of Argentina against deforestation due to genetically altered soybean cultivation. Pantoja, who was also curator of



Retro Perspective/It’s a small house and we’ve lived in it. Always. Split Britches (United States).
Photograph by Carolina Soler.



“Demetria Moreira, Iguazú, Misiones, 2007.” *Las madres del monte* Julio Pantoja (Argentina).

the conference’s photography exhibits, took panoramic portraits of the women surrounded by their children and pets in the foreground of their homes or plots of land. What made the images particularly remarkable, however, was his use of the classic bright white sheet historically associated with portraits as a partial backdrop, hereby insistently pushing the mothers to the forefront a second time. Frequently, the only suggestion of adult men in the picture was – touchingly, it seemed – an anonymous set of rather large, wrinkled knuckles holding up the “telón de fondo.” Pantoja explains that with this sheet “intenté simbolizar a la ‘nada’ en que quedan transformadas sus tierras.”

A number of dance performances also occurred toward the end of the Encuentro. A few of those that might be of interest to followers of Latin American dance were Mexican Nohemí Contreras’s *Calavera de la Oruga* and Viveca Vázquez’s *Mascando Inglés*, from Puerto Rico. The Argentine Mariana Belloto’s *Slogans* was one of the most visually dizzying pieces, displaying an array of repetitive movements involving advertising while multimedia effects simultaneously projected particular dancers’ actions onto a screen onstage. Among the many works of film which were presented at the Encuentro (works that merit more attention than this report can provide), Coco Fusco’s *Operation Atropos*, a documentary on interrogation and POW training from the perspective of civilian women participants – Fusco and her students – generated significant interest and provoked polarized reactions. Diego Ceballos’ and Jorge Antonio Fortes’ *Afroargentinos*, examining the frequently-held assumption that Argentina has no blacks, also created an interesting dialogue with Michelle Matlock’s aforementioned *The Mammy Project*.

Toward the end of the conference, one topic of discussion that was brought to the forefront by Nora Cortiñas (Asociación Madres de Plaza de

Mayo) was the passage during the week of new anti-terrorism legislation by the Argentine congress. Many felt the bill – heavily backed by the United States – will serve to curb civil liberties. With this in mind, and feeding off of the spirit of commitment to social change exhibited throughout the Encuentro, the proceedings closed with a proposal from Jesusa Rodríguez (Senior Fellow of the Hemispheric Institute) that the participants draft a statement regarding the upcoming general election in Argentina. The proposed text attempted to assert a consensus among those present supporting the left and censuring the right. There was some disagreement, though, upon how representative such a statement could be given diversity of opinion among the participants, particularly those from Argentina. The sentiment persisted, however, that one of the very few aspects of this Encuentro which could be improved upon was a lack of opportunities to more directly explore or intervene in the context outside the event, namely the city of Buenos Aires. It was therefore concluded that such an interaction, whether in the form of a collective statement, performance or demonstration, would be integrated into the 2009 Encuentro in Bogotá (along with possible future dates in Santiago, Chile and Winnipeg, Canada), making those present anticipate our next reunion all the more.

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Works Cited

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