

Stages of a Panic-Curator: My Catharsis with the Holy Infant of Prague (aka Nicolas Dumit Estevez)

By Alanna Lockward

"Talk it out, spit it out, and scream it out. Confess, confess, confess then lie on sweet mother's earth and smile." *Linda Montano*

Although I have always been interested in analyzing my relationship as curator with artists, it has taken me a long time. This delay could be explained by the contradictions inherent in conveying my own perspective as Non-male through the mechanism of legitimization of a male thought-system; a circumstance endemic to the Female condition (Montano 1995). Being a Non-white immigrant to Europe, as is my case, and pursuing a path of experiencing art from my own difference is also a continuous challenge for my curatorial praxis. Current art discourses and practices are based on a notion of western supremacy. Even when this notion is openly questioned, a self-critical treatment of supremacist-contaminated ideology and terminology in cultural studies is constantly challenged by how deeply this view of the world is ingrained in thinking processes and paradigms (Arndt, Hornscheidt 2004). Additionally, this attempt to decipher my own codes of ethics and aesthetics must remain devoid of some important references I would like to quote, since they are virtually unknown in a western context. Beyond these theoretical and perceptual constraints, my intention is to leave a testimony "universal" enough to be discussed in different frameworks.

In 2001, three Dominican up-and-coming artists invited me to write a short piece for the catalogue of their self-curated project (*Curador curado* 2001). Their thesis was that there were no "real" curators in the Dominican Republic and serious artists were hence forced to become their own promoters and curators. The title of the exhibition was self-explanatory: "Curated Curator". My response to their invitation was defiant. I had to prove at all cost the extent and influence of my labour on the local scene. After re-reading the text I wrote for that exhibition in order to prepare this examination of my own work, the need for some self-criticism of my egotistical performance as curator became crystal clear to me. But I will not delve into that, since this presentation will expose the changes in my own perception on curatorial praxis.

The stages of this transformation will be mostly focused on my interaction with the artist Nicolas Dumit Estevez, a resident of the Bronx. I will begin with a brief account of *La Papa Movil*, our first project together. I will then present the theoretical components of our collaboration around what I call dialogical aesthetics. And finally, I will explain how the transition from curator to performance artist in our last communion, *In His Shoes*, has changed my perception of my work as curator, given me the freedom to talk about it, and offered me the gift of self-awareness through catharsis, in a strict Aristotelian sense.

La Papa Movil was an action that took place one afternoon in poor, densely populated areas of Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. Nicolas Dumit Estevez deconstructed a Papal parade by transmuting the Pope into an oversized potato, which he carried ceremoniously in a small shrine affixed to the back of his bicycle. In Spanish the same word signifies potato and Pope ("papa"), and the term "Pope-mobile" is, of course, widely recognized as the name of the official carriage used by the Pope. The double spectrum of irony implied in the title and its potential to be easily understood by a local and international audience appealed strongly to me. When the artist first sent me this proposal, I had recently re-located to Germany after a couple of years of intense work as an

investigative journalist and cultural editor in the Dominican Republic. Estevez and I had never met before; we started an ardent exchange of emails that culminated with the successful production of *La Papa Movil* as part of the Primera Muestra Internacional de Performance, a guest event within the III Festival Internacional de Teatro de Santo Domingo.

There are two images emblematic to the beginning and the current stage of my expedition in curatorial awareness. In the first, Estevez is putting on his shoes inside the Museo de Arte Moderno in Santo Domingo, getting ready to start the procession.



In the second, I am taking his shoes off as part of the undressing of the Holy Infant of Prague in artransponder, a Berlin gallery. In the first image I am playing the role of the observer-catalyst documenting the project, my baby, my production. In the second one, I am the Mother-curator, undressing the artist-Holy Child after a strenuous three-day long procession in Prague. At that moment, I gave birth to myself as performance artist.



My involvement with *La Papa Movil* was very much influenced by a perspective on critical praxis [and, I add, curatorial as well] described by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1995).

"The art critic's [curator] role is then to give [art] meaning, to act as an interpreter. It follows from what I have been saying that I include the work of criticism in contemporary aesthetic experience. Now more than ever, we are faced with a necessary and inevitable osmosis between the execution of a work and its interpretation, involving a redefinition of the distinction between critic [curator] and artist." (P. 31)

The distance between my role as catalyst-curator of *La Papa Movil's* aesthetic experience and my empiric perception of the piece as part of its audience was filled by words, by intellectual pre-conditioning. In this action, the re-appropriation of the freebies distributed during political campaigns targeted the daily fight for survival of the majority of Dominicans, who are willing to grab whatever is promised them without any second thoughts. The vouchers for five kilos of potatoes, to be exchanged that same evening in front of the Museo de Arte Moderno, were literally snatched from the artist's hands. The fake and real policemen that accompanied him had a hard time preserving his physical integrity -- a penetrating comment on populist tactics overlapped with a criticism of the collusion between religious hierarchy and the State that is endemic to many Latin American countries. The never-ending search for the boundaries between Life and Art, a main source of inspiration for the artist, was successfully conveyed. My work as catalyst was heroic. Kristeva would have been proud.

In the six-year period between *La Papa Movil* and *In His Shoes*, which is documented in the exhibition *Milky-Images*, (arttransponder, Berlin, August 25 - October 3, 2007, Lisa Glauer, curator) Estevez's work has increasingly explored the different layers of meaning in the social mosaic of religious beliefs and rituals. Since 2003 he has undertaken a series of pilgrimages entitled *For Art's Sake*. This series was developed in collaboration with the Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Residency Program. Evoking the pilgrimage of El Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain where Catholic devotees travel to the reliquary of St. James the Apostle, Estevez' s secular twist has taken him on pilgrimages to museums in the New York metropolitan area,

each time with a new penance (on his knees, walking backwards) while spreading "the word" -- of Art. This project raises issues such as art as ritual, the artist as an emblem of secular religion, the place of the museum in the modern art world, and the legitimizing figure of the curator. At the beginning of each of his pilgrimages a curator gave him a special blessing. In his last pilgrimage I blessed him from my apartment in Berlin and this action was transmitted in real time by phone.

Contemporary thinkers and creators examine consonant preoccupations on the ways in which art now plays the role previously occupied by religion. Some, such as Kristeva, advocate a new way of perceiving art:

"...it is as though artists were inventing quasi-sacred spaces for us. Instead of asking us to contemplate images, it is as though they were asking us to commune with other beings, or with Being itself." (P. 27)

Others, such as Linda Montano, are more direct; she states that her contribution to art is a "Catholic gift". Estevez's recent exchanges with Linda Montano, which he has generously shared with me, were essential to his conception of *In His Shoes*, his impersonation of The Holy Infant of Prague. This influence is evident in the length of his embodiment of Christ (one week). Montano began her long-standing devotion to Time and durational performance after being tied for one year to Tehching Hsieh (*Art/Life. One Year Performance* 1983-1984). The fact that *In His Shoes* the irony is so subliminal that it becomes a profession of the divine potential of art rather than an iteration of the humanness of religious beliefs, adds to Montano's impact in Estevez's current work.

Other thinkers and creators have gone so far as to systematize a multidisciplinary art practice with psychology and non-conventional knowledge, as it occurs with the *Psicomagia* of poet, novelist, avant-garde theatre and film director, cabbalist, actor, and Tarologist Alejandro Jodorowsky. Jodorowsky's panic events in Mexico City during the sixties were concept-parties where his role as host [I add: curator] was to facilitate the enactment of a chosen guest's particular fantasy. In the inaugural event of this prolific series, a famous artist executed a chicken in order to create an abstract painting with the guts and blood of the animal, while beside him, his wife, dressed in a Nazi uniform, devoured a dozen chicken tacos. (Jodorowsky 2005).

Panic theatre was based on ephemeral acts oblivious to time and space. As in "classic" performance art, panic space has its own actual boundaries, it cannot symbolize another space: it is what it is in any specific moment. He considered the panic man an ex-actor [I add performance artist], who is not executing a representation because he has completely eliminated the character. In the ephemeral [I add: performance] the panic-man [I add: Woman] strives to become the person he or she is Being. Jodorowsky motivated the spectators-actors to achieve a theatrical act consisting of the interpretation of their own drama, exploring their innermost enigma.

When Nicolas Dumit Estevez first approached me regarding his need for a Mother figure who would accompany him in his transition from artist to divinity and vice versa, I of course agreed immediately. In his original proposal the dressing was going to be a private event documented on video, while the undressing would take place in a white cube. Both guidelines were observed. After our return from an intense and exhausting three-day sojourn at the Prague Quadrennial, an event consecrated entirely to theatrical scenography, Estevez reconsidered the initial format of the undressing. Instead of talking about performance art while he was chanting some kind of liberating mantra and putting on his human clothes again, I would talk about my own experience with pregnancy. My first reaction was panic. Trying to put on a brave and intellectual face, I agreed that this change of discourse would be

more consonant with the lexicon of the *Milky-Images* exhibition, which addresses the conspicuous absence of breast milk as media in contemporary art.

After undressing the Holy Infant of Prague, packing away his blue contact lenses and shaving off his bleached hair, I changed positions with the artist. I sat on his chair and gave my speech, he was chanting and putting his clothes on, while at the same time a ready-made video on breast-feeding was running. Estevez's voice and that of the middle-aged man on the video praising the benefits of breast-feeding were the perfect cushion for mine. I felt completely free to voice publicly the story of the final eighteen months of my three-year long third marriage, with its two consecutive miscarriages and one induced abortion in a German hospital due to foetal abnormalities. I closed with the recollection of my first night as a Mother, when I breastfed my now sixteen year old son for six consecutive hours in an Australian hospital. In the strictest Montano and Jodorowsky sense, I became my own curer through the reconstruction of my own drama. The distance between the catalyst-curator and the audience-performer had disappeared. Life and Art became one in a single moment of innocence; I was Being a panic-curator.

From this newborn stage I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart Nicolas Dumit Estevez and Lisa Glauer, who both share a vision of the creative act that goes beyond the myth of the artist, and who have offered me the extraordinary gift of self-awareness. My panic-curator Me is teaching my other selves (r)evolutionary things about Art and Life. I am an open system now. Cheers to you all.

Final Note:

"The survival of the most free and enlightened elements of our civilisation depends on developing this culture of revolt out of our aesthetic heritage and finding new forms for it. Heidegger thought that only a religion could still save us. Faced with the religious and political failures of our times, we can ask ourselves whether an experience alone can save us, an experience of revolt against the robotisation of the human race. This revolt is now taking place. It has not found the harmony that would confer on it the dignity of Beauty and perhaps will not find it. But we are here and I can see no other role for art criticism than to show the value of these experiences or revolt, both formal and philosophical, which perhaps have a chance of keeping alive our inner lives, the mental space we call our souls and which is no doubt the hidden face of Beauty".

Julia Kristeva

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