Yo soy Guadalupe

Josh T. Franco

Figure 1. Hector Sanchez altar for La Virgen de Guadalupe. Marfa, Texas, 1997. Photo: Nerin Kadribegovic.

Preparation:

This piece is meant to be spoken.

It was prompted by an invitation to the Ends of American Art Conference hosted by the Art History Department at Stanford University in November 2014. While senior scholars presented full-length papers, we graduate students were given the following parameters: one image, 5 minutes. The results were electric. My peers rose to the occasion with style and verve. Cheers to them and to the inventive organizers.
One senior art historian—not a conference participant—has since identified my performance as prosopopoeia. I hear him, but I disagree. Prosopopoeia names the ancient Greek concept of speaking as an object, a thing. Here, the thing is not the central action, not the locus from which the voice emanates. For communicability between materialists and art historians (all people who need and love our things), I offer the image of this plaster construction crafted in an attitude of utter devotion by a man and continuously sweated over by a family and pilgrims. But this is not the thing speaking. It is the transcribed voice of a goddess of the Americas. Not prosopopoeia, but inhabitation, presence, blessing. It is appropriate to light a candle (preferably red) before reading aloud and to blow out the candle following the last word.

**Y ahorita, La Guadalupe:**

Yo soy Guadalupe.
I am Guadalupe.

In one legend of my birth—my transformation 500 years ago into a goddess of the Americas—I spoke to a bishop through Juan Diego, a dark-skinned poor man.

Here I also speak in partnership with a brown-skinned boy, un hijo mio.

But we do not address a bishop today. Today, we speak to guardians of faith in something else, something called art. Their faith is in crisis.

From where I live in this plaster form, sheltered by this altered bathtub...this altered bathtub...mounted on rocks, I have come to know something of the art you guard. (This speaking boy loves it, too.)

How did I come to know?

Por que yo soy La Guadalupe de Marfa, Tejas.
I am the Guadalupe of Marfa, Texas.

I first heard this place in the prayers of la familia Sanchez, appearing first to the father, Hector. (Why am I always revealing myself to men?) The Sanchez family lives in this house. They take care of me.

This boy who speaks has a grandfather. The grandfather was himself a boy in this yard.

I called this speaking boy back to this dirt-grass patch of ancestral land. I called him because I wanted to know more about this vecino, my neighbor.

First: What is his name? The boy gives two syllables:

“Don.” Y “Judd.”
I cannot believe that is all.
My own name goes on forever in comparison: Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Morena-Guadalupe…

“But he’s not exactly your neighbor,” says the boy. “He died. About three years before you showed up here. But those are his things you look at all day. And all the people coming in and out of those gates are here because of him.”

“Oh,” I sound. I know what it’s like to have pilgrims. Mine come less now. I was more popular when I was new in town and living as a flicker in the trunk of this tree here. I was in the newspaper and everything.

El Vecino Judd’s pilgrims come every day. I watch them walk around his things. Those blocks are so tall. It must hurt their necks to look up. Some pilgrims fit inside them standing. The blocks are made of concrete, so similar to what makes me in this form.

I watch the blocks change from almost white to dark gray every day. Sometimes red, when the sun is red, but then everything is red, even the yellow grass.

The blocks sit so still. They make shadows that split the light around them sharply. Every edge a sundial.

At night they are lit by the moon. The sky is clear most nights in this desert. The boy tells me El Vecino Judd loved natural light. He would never flip a switch if he didn’t have to. Did he know that the natural light at night comes from my daughter Coyolxuaqui? I don’t look upwards so much (the prayers at my feet keep me busy), but I know she’s there by her light.

People leave my neighbor’s place with all kinds of faces. Some are so happy! Like they’ve never seen such things with their eyes, but they already had in their hearts. Plenty leave angry, muttering under their breath, “That is not art…” They all leave different than when they entered.

I wonder if people think I am art? People are led to me by their spirit, not necessarily their eyes (though much effort was given to make me beautiful, and I thank the Sanchez family for that). The boy read me a passage once, some words of El Vecino Judd’s, all about things like the blocks and the spirit world. I remember a little bit:

“…All forms are spiritual…Art must…be general, but at the same time out of the ordinary….”

I don’t think I am very ordinary, so I must be art? But perhaps I am not general enough. Maybe you can tell me, guardians. I am curious, if not terribly concerned. Let’s let some nights pass. I am here for a while, cemented and sun-baked in place.

I notice something: The other pilgrims leave no ofrendas! No talismans for mi Vecino. No food. No little tin drawings. Not even a little pile of rocks. They do take: They take pictures.
Are they pilgrims if they leave nothing? Ofrendas remind me what people pray for: the little girl a flower for her lost cat; the old man a cigarette’s worth of tobacco for a job. What kind of blessings do El Vecino Judd’s pilgrims ask?

But I guess he’s not there to receive prayers. The boy says he didn’t really believe like that, he thinks, anyway. But who really knows? Mi Vecino’s body resides in a simple pine box further out in the desert. Like the furniture in his casitas, the pine box was made by those who knew him well. Putting things together like this—with materials from nearby and all by hand and learning as you go…El Vecino Judd’s daughter calls it “DIY.” I call it “rasquache.” Rasquachismo built my own little bathtub-house.

So my neighbor is gone, and we will never meet. In town are just his things. Not “just....” They are interesting things. They give me a lot to think about every day.

REFERENCES


*Allen’s research brought out the otherwise unpublished Dutch interview in which Judd discusses spirituality and states, “All forms are spiritual....”