

CONJURING THE SPIRIT

with Merián Soto
and Pedro Alejandro



photo © Bill Hebert

Merián Soto in the reconstruction of her work *Todos Mis Muertos (All My Dead Ones)* (1996) for the Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA, November 1, 2015.

Todos Mis Muertos (All My Dead Ones) (1996)

by Merián Soto

Conjuring the spirit

Some dances are gifts. The directives for the dance simply reveal themselves to me. I follow unquestioningly. This was the process of *Todos Mis Muertos*. In searching for a practice of Day of the Dead traditions, my approach was to focus on personal encounters with death.

I decided to create a piece in homage to Mamita, my beloved grandmother, long gone. In the studio as I invoked her memory I felt surrounded and filled by a yellow light. Yellow. I would be yellow, yellow costume, yellow body, yellow flowers. What better *ofrenda* than myself? I became the offering.

I later learned that yellow is the Soul light. I knew Mamita in her late years. She had lost her eyesight to cataracts. Loss of one sense heightens the others, they say. In order to feel closer to her I blindfolded myself. Touching my own fingertips I immediately connected to my childhood memory of Mamita's wrinkled fingers gently exploring my hands and face. Her electric, seeing touch. Touching my own fingertips closed an electric circuit. I moved swiftly

into an internal universe and I felt an inner awareness open up and expand.

The performance would focus on the body and its actions as *ofrendas*, offerings. I would enter the altar/performance space through the audience. I would bring with me all the objects and elements needed for the ritual. Blindfolded, balancing a large basket of flowers on my head, I would let the audience guide me to the performance space with their hands. I would feel their hands as Mamita had felt mine, conjuring her spirit.

I have been interested in the exchange of energy between performer and audience for a long time. The vulnerability of my position (blindfolded, balancing a large basket on my head, loaded down with offerings), coupled by the touch of seeing hands, created an immediate and individual connection with audience members who assume the responsibility of participants/guardians of the performance ritual as they lead me to the performance area. Being touched and touching. We have shared a moment of intimacy and presence.

Todos Mis Muertos reminds me that we are all travelers through the cycle of life and death. The piece has the nomadic quality (present in many burial rituals) of carrying

everything one needs: all sorts of *ofrendas*—*escapularios*, bells, photos, the yellow chair hanging from one shoulder, the yellow cloth pack containing dirt, earth, hanging from the other, the large skeleton child attached to my back, the basket of yellow flowers on my head; pockets filled with more offerings—rum, food (cornmeal, bread), more flowers, candles, matches. Actions include saluting and invoking the four directions, honoring the earth, caressing/eating the soil, dancing with the dead (the skeleton figure), mourning, conjuring, eating, drinking, dancing, communing, and finally resting in the dirt.

It has been a challenge to find ways to re-create the altar experience in a context foreign to communal Day of the Dead experiences. Irene Sosa created a video altar for me. On one screen, the image of hands digging, digging up soil, an archaeology of the dead. On another screen, the same hands dig up human bones, then photographs of the deceased, and flowers. The third screen documents the Day of the Dead altar, detailing the multiple objects and offerings. The three images form a triangle and complete a simple physical altar containing photos, candles, flowers, water, and food offerings for the dead. The triangle configuration evokes multiple levels of experience: the realm of tradition in the physical/objective, the contemporary electronic realm of video, bridging time and space; the ephemeral/energetic/spiritual reflected in the performance.

This article was originally published in Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas (Routledge, 2000), edited by Coco Fusco.



OUT-FIT:

Merián Soto's Decadent Defiance in *Todos Mis Muertos*

by Pedro Alejandro

The American poet Robert Frost said, "Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't, and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it." For me, the most compelling reason to take on writing assignments of any kind is when I have nothing to say and I am saying it now. Merián Soto's reconstruction of her 1996 work, Todos Mis Muertos (All My Dead Ones) for the Fleisher Art Memorial, November 1, 2015, in Philadelphia, PA, re-presents one of those choreographic endeavors that leaves me wondering whether, as an immersive spectator, I have anything to say. Equal measure of strange beauty—baroque Caribbean decadence and Puerto Rican defiance (Boriiiiiccuuuuuuuuu!)—TMM is

so So-So-Matically arresting. Simply, there's so much to say about the body—here and in the beyond—that I wish I were saying it all now.

I met Merián when she hired me to be a tech for her work No Regrets (1988) at PS 122 in New York City. I am struck by Merián's description of being surrounded and filled by a yellow light as she invoked Mamita's memory in the making of TMM. I am a native of the Dominican Republic, where this color refers to the Virgin of Mercy, as it does in other global spiritual traditions. In Cuba and Puerto Rico she is known as Yemaya.

Community performance is the progeny of the audience-for-pay spectacles imported to France by the Italian principessa, Catherine Di Medici. She brought the great Balo (ballroom) Italian banquet tradition of the early Renaissance to France in order to instill a deep sense of unity and community among the nobility. The Italian ballroom dances and their courtly staging conventions were themselves appropriated from the pagan pageants and processions prevalent in medieval Europe among the working classes. Their restaging for the courts represents a gradual progression towards the



Merián Soto in the reconstruction of her work *Todos Mis Muertos (All My Dead Ones)*, Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA, November 1, 2015.

photo © Bill Hebert

privatization of nomadic pagan dancing habits. I feel that the yearning for community evoked in TMM represents a historical continuity with Catherine Di Medici's community gatherings. However, in TMM, these yearnings are tied to communicating with the populace at large rather than enriching the private affairs of the elite. I also see TMM as a rupture—a rupture from colonial history of the Caribbean and an early-Renaissance European conceptualization of the body, which, among many things, privatizes dancing in exchange for pay among the privileged.

TMM keeps on saying it. [P.A.]

Can you imagine telling anyBODYone, in this *Be Here Now, Now* global cultural moment, that you just attended a sacred event for Halloween at a quasi-church, quasi-community center, quasi-museum, -gallery, -healing, -urban center? And that its main features consisted of a gigantiform video-screen altar placed high above an Egyptian-like church nave, which shows the ghostly image of a pair of white-powdered hands solemnly scavenging about in a cemetery? All the while, the live presence of a lonely figure outfitted in the shape of a yellow flower drum-vessel floats into the performance space, ever so slowly, gently touching and being touched by the audience, haunting and deeply moving. Yes! This is Merián Soto, the solo choreographer and performer of this event, the ghostly OUT-FIT figure who floats about the audience as well as on the video screen. Soto is dressed in the shape of a rare object of contemplative beauty—the embodied image of an apparition from the beyond. One notices quickly that the hands of the live

performer are the same as the hands scavenging through the personal remains of the departed on the video screen (video by Soto and Irene Sosa). I imagine this otherworldly body is in search of the memory of her dearly departed, their place and time, and, above all, the memory of belonging together as a family on earth.

The performance unfolds with utter simplicity. Everywhere you look are small shrines dedicated to Soto's *muertos*. An arresting sense of everlasting time pervades the space. The mood of the audience is carnivalesque—festive and even voyeuristic at times. Both the video montage and Soto's performance are, by contrast, meditative and contemplative, creating a liminal quality. As Soto is gently caressed and passed from person to person, her demeanor remains neutral yet deeply empathic. She appears before us blindfolded, and her body is painted ghostly yellow. All kinds of reliquaries adorn her transcendent figure. The most important among them, if I had to choose, is the flower drum-vessel (a *canasta*) that crowns her head. It is made from photographs of her dearly departed. She appears before us as a moving object, full of presence of the dead. This unity of opposites—the living and the dead, the object as the subject, the sublime and the everyday—profoundly merge into the image of “a thing” that conjures the mysteries of death and rebirth. How can a thing conjure the presence of living things, past and present? Why is the performer yearning to be the things of the dead? Indeed, to be alive in the things of the dead? How is the performer's persona obliterated by the blindfold and the objects that assemble about her? These are some of the questions that *TMM* inspires.

“The piece has the nomadic quality (present in many burial rituals) of carrying everything one needs. Actions include saluting and invoking the four directions, honoring the earth, caressing/eating the soil, dancing with the dead (the skeleton figure), mourning, conjuring, eating, drinking, dancing, communing, and finally resting in the dirt.” [M.S.]

Merián Soto in the reconstruction of *Todos Mis Muertos (All My Dead Ones)*, Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA, November 2015.



photo © Bill Hebert

Could it be that objects in the diasporic Caribbean retain the presence of their makers and their beholders? In *TMM* and many of her other works, such as *Historias* (1992) and *Telenovelas* (1987), Soto instills a sense in the audience that the genius loci—Spirit of Place—is ever-present in all matter, all the time. Caribbean performativity is premised on this very notion that life is eternally embedded in the objects we handle every day. To become the object is to infuse it with energy. As Soto remarks in *Corpus Delecti*, “I have been interested in the exchange of energy between performer and audience for a long time.” In *TMM*, Soto is interested in the exchange of energy between the departed, the performer, the objects of the dead, and their energetic presence. Soto explains, “Yellow is also the Soul Light in Actualism, a form of psychic training developed by Russell Schofield in the ‘60s, also known as Agni Yoga or the Star Path, and which I was studying at the time. The Soul Light lives in the energy center (chakra) that is at the top of the energy field 30 feet above the head.”

To become the object of one’s dead allows the performer-conjurer the opportunity to bridge the space-time continuum and regain the closeness lost in material death. For over a decade, I conducted ethnographic research among Dominican shamans. During this time, I was privy to extraordinary occurrences. In one instance, I was gifted a beautifully carved Haitian cane, or *bastón*, by a Romanian art collector, which I showed to one of my shaman confidantes. She and her Cuban *Palero* (high priest) husband took great interest in it. I mentioned that the cane vibrated in my hands and that it seemed to move about when left alone at times. Needless to say, I was spooked by the object and gave it to her. She and her husband were ecstatic; they said it possessed the spirit of a very powerful conjurer and with it they could greatly help others. It wasn’t long before the cane turned on them, creating all kinds of havoc, including making her vomit uncontrollably. They ended up rushing it to the ocean, where it was allowed to sink.

In my own work, as developed in my upcoming book *Choreographycking, A Post-Visual Ethnography of Dance Composition*, I refer to these kinds of items as Discovery Objects, those tangible things that we handle in everyday life and in art. Discovery Objects cannot be readily grasped by their outer appearance alone. Because they have disambiguated potentialities across multiple domains of meaning, they are able to change symbolic order and interpolation. They help us *discover* our inattention—the gaps in our own interpretive code, the divide between the imagined and the real. For example, Soto’s garment—her OUT-FIT—is designed in this fashion. It cloaks the body in object-like significance to paradoxically supra-highlight the subtleties, softness, and vulnerabilities of the energetic body in motion. *TMM* possesses its

own dialectical energetic currency, if you will, as it unveils the unity of the carnal body and the energetic body.

The Place

A video screen sits high atop Fleisher’s Romanesque church altar, partially covering the Egyptian-Christian iconography that gives this place of worship its aura of authenticity, its religious legitimacy. Everywhere in this sacred place are the deep markings of a carnivalesque funeral ritual, an annual *rite de passage*, enveloped by loss and sublimity-in-the-making. The pews of the priesthood are transformed by Soto and designers Leticia Nixon and Valesca Garay into pagan altars: skeletons semi-dressed in vibrant colors grouped with votive candles, food offerings, play dolls, streamers—Discovery Objects of all kinds. The public is scattered in informal clusters throughout the space. One generation is plastered over another, sequestered by the previous, to be conjured by the solo dancer (Soto) in performance. The atmosphere is colored by an overwhelming feeling of solemnity and, simultaneously, utter irreverent joy.

Entrance of the Yellow Ghostly Body

Enter Merián Soto walking slowly. From a heavy iron-clad crypt-like black door on the side of the Fleisher Museum’s church nave emerges her own Ultra-Soma-Bodyfull Self—a ghostly YELLOW-painted EPICBODYSELF—somnambulant, poised, set off from the ordinariness of the expectant crowd by the monumentality of the Discovery Object on her head. This object is a vessel-like yellow drum, figured sculpturally in the round and bounded by photographs of Soto’s own dearly departed. The portraits of her *muertos* are collaged around the yellow container. She appears ghostly but awake. This *canasta* (basket-vessel) has period-specific photographic close-ups from the ‘80s, ‘90s, and the millennium. Some are Technicolor, others black-and-white Polaroids. We see Soto’s dead, perched above her, *montao* (mounted, on top).

In the Caribbean, it is believed that the dead mount the spirit of the living’s cerebellum (the *little brain*) to take possession of their human capacities and to *body through* the extraordinary powers of the moving body from the immaterial plane. Like the video above the altar, Soto’s Ultra-Othered body is transfigurative—lost of carnal identity, whole, and inconsistently plentiful. Human.

Eating Libations and Disrobing

After lighting a candle and rubbing herself with yellow dirt from the yellow satchel that she carries on one of her arms, Soto usually eats libations of chocolate, maize, and rum. Then she disrobes, stripping down to a pair of yellow men’s underwear at the Fleisher; in earlier iterations, she stripped down to women’s underwear.

Bare breasted and to her panties, Soto lies on her side on the floor near the altar.

Every OUT-FITted body has a binary body—a nude, cloaked beneath the layers of the living. The work began with every inch of the setting covered in all kinds of colorful objects and textures, like Buddhist, Christian, or Yoruban altars. Likewise, the body is garlanded with majestic photographs, artifacts, flowers, and decorations—OUT-FITted with place, time, the cultural, personal, historical, inter-subjective memory, and the spiritual memory of the dead among the living.

Soto gradually outstrips her SoSomaBodySelf of these objects of memory and place, which she carried throughout the piece. She allows herself to empty out like a hallowed vessel. Soto is herself again, no longer a container for the memory of the dead. She now lies amid the plenitudes of memories and Discovery Objects scattered about the mise-en-scène and among us, the living. The split between the living and the dead is resolved.

"Todos Mis Muertos reminds me that we are all travelers through the cycle of life and death." [M.S.] Merián Soto in the reconstruction of her work Todos Mis Muertos, (All My Dead Ones) (1996) for the Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA, November 2015.

Denouement

In her final moments of disrobing, Soto gently covers her relaxed face and turns inwardly into a fetal position. This is the turn-around moment when the work comes together for me. Transitory, it seems less like an ending and more like a continuity. The real OUT-FIT of Soto's *TMM* are the spirits living among us in the numinous objects left behind for the arousal of the SoSomaBodySelf and our memories. In repose, Soto's body is beatified by our gaze.

I have nothing to say, and I've said way too much....



Material drawn from Alejandro's upcoming book, *Choreographycking, A Post-Visual Ethnography of Dance Composition*.

To contact Pedro Alejandro: <http://pedroalejandrodance.com>
To contact Merián Soto: www.meriansoto.com



Choreographer's Update, 2015

"I created *Todos Mis Muertos (TMM)* in 1989, for a Day of the Dead altar by María Hinojosa at BACA Downtown in Brooklyn, dedicated to my grandmother Mamita.... After my dad, Henry Soto, passed, I was compelled to restage *TMM* and presented it in various venues, including Judson Memorial Church and El Museo del Barrio in NYC, and the ICA in London, UK, in 1998.

I have now arrived at an age when many of the elders in my life have gone; my mother and father-in-law, Benjamín Osorio and María Luisa Encarnación, most of my aunts and uncles, and my teachers Barbara Lea and Elaine Summers. And then there's the loss of good friends and collaborators, such as Lourdes Torres Camacho and Niles Ford. Last year, I lost my mom, Andy Soto. *TMM* is a performance altar offering to the dead as well as the living. The dancer, blindfolded, becomes a constantly transforming altar. *TMM* is about the intersection of light and gravity; the extraordinary demands of the balancing of various objects and weights (gravity), and the loss of sight, opening a channel of energy (light) beyond everyday reality."

—Merián Soto, from the program notes of the Fleisher Museum performance, November 1, 2015