

Archeology of experience: process as art in the work of Elisa Garcia de la Huerta

by Renwick Heronimo

Elisa Garcia de la Huerta, a Chilean-Born artist based in New York City, was one of the two artists that participated in *EXCHANGE*. Her interdisciplinary arts practice utilizes a wide array of media including photography, video, fabric collage, and experimental painting.

In her artist statement Garcia de la Huerta describes her work as follows,

“Memory churns the psyche, itself a churn of memories. My multidisciplinary work explores the periphery of interior space once colonized. Nostalgic murmurs, veils, layers and scars approximate the secret crevices lodging the physiological residues of conditioned vulnerability— the emotional gaps and psychological lacunae in which we hide, and heal.”

Her statement highlights key aspects within her modus operandi—aspects of memory, history, and layers of space. And it is especially within these layers that the confrontation with hidden truths and emptiness manifest throughout modern existence is brought to light. It is through these fissures that one is able to perceive the layered dimension—her artistic process becomes palpable allowing the many layers of her Baltimore experience to manifest itself.

So it is under these conditions that this engagement got underway, allowing artist, host family, and community to come in contact and to be able to embrace this process that unites human beings allowing for fruitful interaction within the built environment of the city.

It is this artistic process of allowing oneself to open up as a medium and be a conduit of experience and analysis that sets this



Elisa Garcia de la Huerta (artist) + Renwick Heronimo (essayist)



Elisa Garcia de la Huerta
Dwelling. Gathering Stitches
Two channel multimedia textile
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artist project apart. The artist in this case is not within the comfort zone of the studio space, but finds herself immersed in a direct experiential encounter—on many levels of intimacy—with the host family as well as the city of Baltimore. A daunting task, especially when considering the short time frame allocated for this project.

The phases of the residency project allowed for different orchestrated channels of communication between artist, host, and community initiating the process of reconnaissance of the city; the lives, the smells, the walks, the conversations, the interactions, as well as collaborations. These became the foundation upon which Garcia de la Huerta gave form to her experience.

So let us start with how the concept of the home or dwelling or rather intimate space manifests itself in the work of Garcia de la Huerta. In his book *The Bourgeois Interior*, John Lukacs describes the home as follows, "domesticity, privacy, comfort, the concept of the home and of the family: these are literally principal achievements of the bourgeois age."

Her home in Baltimore, and in connection to the project, was the residence of Don Palmer and Beth Frederick, two Baltimoreans. Described by the artist as open-minded, culturally savvy, socially active, community involved and highly educated interracial couple.

Their home offered the space for silence and reflection as well as the moments of intimate conversation and exchanges that led to the sharing of private as well as collective anecdotes, memories and histories. Many of these found their way into her final installation via slide projections, video projections, and photographic images thus defining the rich and multilayered fabric of her experience.

It is the idea of privacy, protection, and safety, contrasted with that of the public, exposed, and separation that has resonance with the work of Garcia de la Huerta. In her work the dwelling/home defines the intimate space and allows for a zone where the imagination of the artist envisions the many explorations and paths of her journey and is able to reminisce on the meaning of her experiences. The public space on the other hand, becomes the space of community, engagement, and interaction where the artist's body and its sensorial experience functions as the relational vehicle.

The city of Baltimore has been confronted with post industrial decline for decades and exhibits these signs of decay and fissures. It is a city where we find social tension as well as homelessness and drug-addiction. All this with thousands of boarded up real estate properties in time waiting for better days.

It is within this context of colonial, post-colonial, and postmodern realities of this historic city that we find the other aspect that has resonance within the work of Garcia de la Huerta. It is the aspect of the *unheimlich* (unhomely, uncanny) as coined by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919). Baltimore is filled with spaces and places where the familiar has become redefined with the feeling of unease and ambiguity. It is a place that confronts one with the real problems facing many North American cities today suffering under economic decline.

This aspect of the *unheimlich* was very present during her process/performance in the cemetery which was directly connected to an anecdote shared by Don Palmer in the intimacy of the home. An anecdote that relates the colonial and post-colonial sensitivities present within the city. It was the story of a cemetery in state of abandonment and decay, the first African-American cemetery in Baltimore and the place where Don Palmer's ancestors were buried. Through subsequent flooding and neglect it was now difficult to locate these specific graves.

So it was in this cemetery that Garcia de la Huerta had one of her most memorable experiences. It was through her action/intervention where she activated the remnants of an abandoned chapel located at the center of this cemetery. It was through the vivacity, color and texture of the utilized fabric and through her installation and action, that she brought warmth of the everyday to this place of the dead—a symbolic act in response to the shelter and warmth offered by her hosts. This became a loaded and emotional moment within the layered experience within the city. Garcia de la Huerta put a cross on the structure and placed the names of Don Palmer's ancestors, Ada and Clarence, on this abandoned chapel. In her own way she had transformed an abandoned space—created a home for the dead and a meaningful gesture towards her host.

The many memories, collected fragments and other visual

elements, were elaborated into a final installation at School 33 Art Center in Baltimore. There Garcia de la Huerta illustrates the multiple layers of her encounter. The richness of multimedia elements, use of stitching, and material quality of her fabrics allows for interesting juxtaposition and layering within the installation space. Her eloquence in accentuating the aspects and interior intimate space as well as public open domain allows us to partake in her experience.

As spectators, we find ourselves immersed within her space of reflection, filled with the symbolic remnants of her passage through Baltimore; in her installation we can discern the intimate conversations with the host family, videos of daily intimate rituals, slides of collective memory, as well as anecdotes of past history. We also encounter images of her other collaborative projects in abandoned buildings inside city neighborhoods as well as the cemetery—all of these defined in space by the large size stitched fabric piece that is both intimate, ephemeral and experiential.

This large size quilt can be described as a collage or assemblage, where the synthesis of this process —*textura cotidiano* (daily texture) is manifest. This collaborative effort that allowed participants to partake in the making, as well as engage in dialogue with the artist. Thus allowing them to learn about her experiences as well as bring theirs. It is this quilt and the way it conveys the layers of history, the mapping of difference, and moments of laborious ritual, that enables another crucial concept within the work of Garcia de la Huerta: that art can be found as a traditional piece in a gallery, as well as reconstructed through the many moments of relational experiences where art became manifest.

Within the fabric of life.



Elisa Garcia de la Huerta
Detail from Dwelling. Gathering Stitches
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