

Spring 2005

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Recommended Citation

Feldman, Sharon G. "Rodrigo García's Ruins." *Estreño* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 16-18.

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RODRIGO GARCÍA'S RUINS

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Haunted by the spirits of the avant-garde, the work of Rodrigo García embraces a hybrid theatrical language that is at once profoundly rooted in the aesthetic tendencies of performance, installation art, and text-based drama. García, a playwright, director, designer, and video and installation artist of Spanish nationality, was born in Buenos Aires in 1964. Since the mid-1980s, he has lived in Madrid, a city that has served as a laboratory for his company La Carnicería, which he founded in 1989. A runner-up for the Marqués de Bradomín Prize on two consecutive occasions (for *Reloj* and *Macbeth-Imágenes*), García has staged his own work—and has seen it staged by others—throughout Spain, Latin America, and Europe. He has played a prominent role in energizing the alternative theater scene in Madrid and, in addition, has enjoyed impressive success in the realm of experimental performance in France. To cite one example, in 2002, three of his pieces were produced simultaneously at the Avignon Festival: *After Sun* and *Je crois que vous m'avez mal compris*, which were staged under his own direction, in addition to *Prometeo*, staged by François Berreur.

In García's work, the cathartic awe that is an inherent part of any theatrical event is converted into a provocative flood of images. He grounds his spectacles in the plastic arts: installations, environments, and collages comprised of recycled materials, which disturb, unnerve, and incite curiosity. Joan Anton Benach, a critic for *La Vanguardia*, has characterized his theater as *te-atroz*; but, perhaps "autism," a concept that has likewise emerged in the work of Robert Wilson, would be a more apt metaphor: abnormal introversion and egocentricity, an acceptance of fantasy rather than reality. García's theatrical universe is a paradoxical realm. His work conveys an arrogant, petulant, irreverent tone; yet, it is substantive and enthralling at the same time. He dares to venture into the most vulgar dimensions of everyday life; however, even within the most prosaic of realms, he is capable of revealing a hidden poetry and even a sense of the spectacular. And just when he leads us to believe that image is everything, and everything is transparency and visibility, he reveals a textual dimension of his theater that is of extraordinary lyrical and rhythmic beauty.

Throughout his artistic trajectory, García has exhibited a persistent interest in creating a theater that is disengaged from the historical burdens of conventional theatrical communication. In the prologue to *Macbeth-Imágenes*, a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy, he tells us that a play "IS NOT LITERATURE," but "nor is it theater. It is a type of energy—which is incomplete—" (91, my transla-

tion). This incomplete energy is a confluence of artistic languages, in which García does not disregard the spoken word; but instead, betrays, transgresses, or macerates it. In *Notas de cocina*, perhaps García's most well-known text, which premiered during Madrid's Festival de Otoño at the Sala Pradillo in 1994, a feminine character, situated at the center of a love triangle, makes a series of pleas in the form of a monologue:

Encuéntrame
Asústame
Venérame...
Ignórame...
Elígeme
Arráncame...
Deshuéame
Destrípame...
Saboréame
Apréciame...
Agótame
Conságrame
Elévame
Perdóname
Sálvame. (56-57)

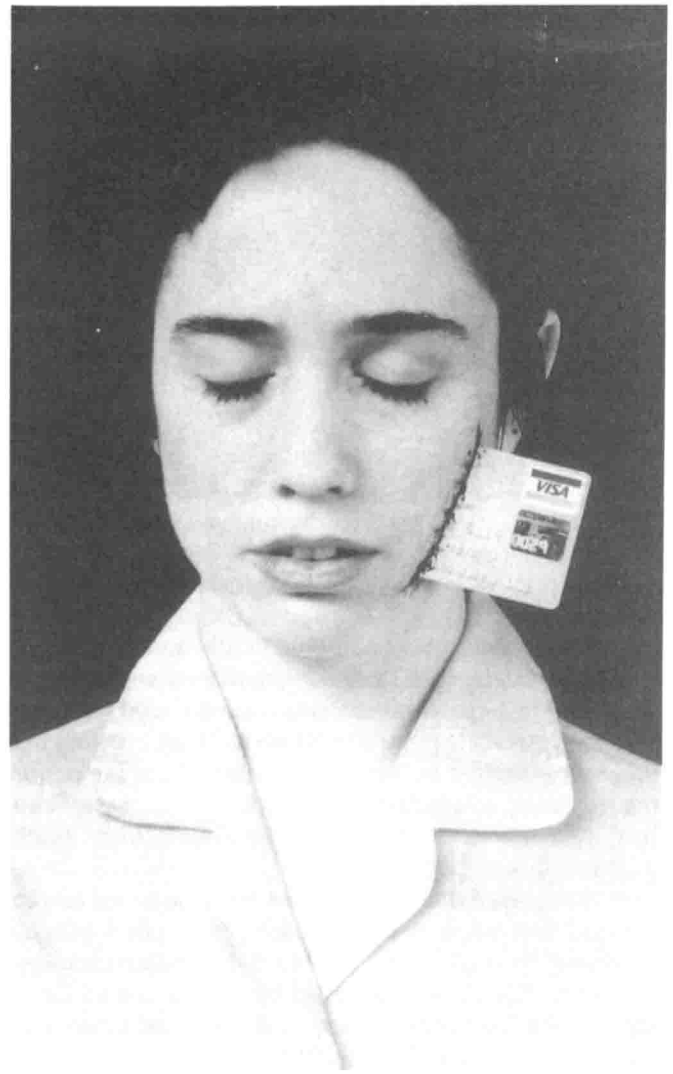
The fragment of monologue reproduced here is a small sampling of the poetic dimension of García's verbal expression. With a concise, minimalist language, he takes us from amorous desire to religious salvation, and on the way passes through the daily rite, or pleasure, of alimentary nourishment (that is, eating in all its figurative possibilities). The realm of the kitchen, referenced in the title of the play and in the name of the company La Carnicería, is ever present as a "space of organic construction-deconstruction" (Matteini, my translation, 129). Gastro-nomic pleasure is fused with sexual, and even mystical, desire, united in their connotations of sacrifice and fulfillment. There is something traumatic about this constant inundation, accumulation, and flux of images and words. As in the theater of Heiner Müller, the installation art of Bruce Nauman, or the wall drawings of Sol Lewitt, García's vision of the world seems to emanate from a naked consciousness, its protective filters removed so that a torrent of overlapping images and intrusive voices can effortlessly gush forth.

At the beginning of *Conocer gente, comer mierda*, a show that premiered in 1999 at the Sala Cuarta Pared, the spectators are bombarded with the blaring high-volume music of Donna Summer's *Bad Girls*, a popular song from

the “disco” era of the 1970s. As the music plays, they have the opportunity to contemplate the scenery laid out before them. Postindustrial residue from the pure reality of daily life, it is a curious and seemingly aleatory assembly of objects that, placed within a theatrical frame, begins to acquire its own poetic force: a few chairs, a projection screen, two mattresses, some sheets, a phonograph, several cans of Coca Cola (exhibited in the form of a pyramid), a portable stove and frying pan (which will be used to prepare food), a chain of Christmas lights, and some illuminated plastic bags that hang above the stage. For García, paradigmatic playwright of the postmodern theatrical imagination, an apparent obsession with the fragment, or “the ruin” (as Walter Benjamin would have it), emerges as an aesthetic signature.

Summer’s music eventually concludes, and a young man and woman appear on stage, sit in the chairs, and open up a few bags of potato chips. With the large, phallic microphones very close to their lips, they read aloud passages from two hefty tomes of literature, all the while chomping on the chips. The loud consumption of the potato chips hinders the spectator’s efforts to comprehend the literary reading. It is a gesture that contests the power of the theatrical word and invites the audience to speculate with regard to the nature of contemporary consumer culture and of art as commodity. The music returns—this time operatic in style—and the man and woman, still fully clothed, go through a series of physical postures that are evocative of sexual intercourse. Simultaneously, they continue to read aloud and ingest the potato chips. In García’s “incomplete energy” of intense corporality, profoundly odiferous and sensual, a visceral Dionysian impulse prevails, whereby primordial human urges and desires converge: eating (even cooking), reading, and engaging in sexual intercourse. In sum, a whole gamut of activities that “feed” the human soul is condensed into a single act of consumption.

According to García’s ironic gaze, often influenced by the contemporary language of advertising, the most ordinary and mundane gestures and expressions can become denaturalized and even spectacularized when placed beneath the stage lights. Later on in *Conocer gente...*, in lieu of a dramatic personage, he presents center stage, illuminated under a spotlight, a carton of “Don Simón,” (a commonplace, easily acquired brand of beverages). Emanating from the speakers at a jarring volume is a reggae-style advertising jingle, widely recognizable because of the ubiquitous promotion of the product throughout Spain. Behind the carton, García projects a sequence from a 1970s pornographic film in which a man and woman appear to be engaging in sexual intercourse to the rhythm of the “Don Simón” advertising jingle. Between the consumption of the drink and the consummation of a relationship between the man and woman, there are no longer any distinctions. When the scene concludes, the houselights go up briefly, offering a discreet invitation for



Compré una pala en Ikea para cavar mi tumba.
Foto: José Antonio Carrera.

all offended audience members to exit the theater. It is a self-referential gesture of irreverence that underscores the ironic intentions of the scene.

In *After Sun*, which premiered in 2000 under García’s direction at the European Cultural Center in Delphi, Greece, he continues to convey an interest in uncovering the spectacular dimensions of everyday life and those moments in which the erotic and the alimentary converge within the most commonplace contexts of consumption. In the final scene, actors Patricia Lamas and Miguel Ángel Altet, portraying employees of a fast food eatery, engage in an absurd erotic dance to the rhythm of British rock group Roxy Music’s *Love is the Drug*. What follows is a vocational training session in which she teaches him the technique of preparing cheeseburgers. The scene subtly invites the audience to consider the consequences of



Poulet. *Compré una pala en Ikea para cavar mi tumba*. Foto: gentileza de La Carnicería Teatro.

intellectual conformity, consumer culture, and multinational exploitation. On the night that I witnessed the show at the Sitges Festival Internacional 2001, several audience members found the scene to be so irritating that they were inspired to leave the theater before the performance had concluded. "Haberlos quedado en casa, capullos" (the title of another piece by García from 2000), might well have been his reply.

With *Compré una pala en Ikea para cavar mi tumba*, the text that appears in the pages that follow, García continues to explore the use of a fragmented, collage aesthetic. The show was staged by García and La Carnicería at the Sala Cuarta Pared in 2002, with actors Juan Oriente, Patricia Lamas, and Ruben Escamilla. Here, García launches an attack upon the institution of the family and those individuals who have lapsed into a state of calm and complacency, having surrendered to the monotony and conformity of a global society that increasingly finds itself under the spell of the multinational corporation. As one French critic put it, García presents a "Sauvage vision du monde que ... nous crache au visage." Perhaps this theater of "alternative" environments may be disturbing for some, for García's ruins of incomplete energy reveal the traumas, the violence, and the wounds that permeate our own everyday experience.

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