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The Assumption of Lupe Velez

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Rita Aida Gonzalez

Committee in charge:

Professor Steve Fagin, Chair
Professor Anthony Burr
Professor Grant Kester
Professor John Welchman

2014

The Thesis of Rita Aida Gonzalez is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's been some years since I worked on the video *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* (1999), and in that time, there has been a surge of interest in the dynamics of underground culture in New York in the late 20th century and its connections to a growing Latina/o population. At the time I conducted research (in New York at Filmmakers Coop and in Pittsburgh at the Andy Warhol Museum, among other libraries and archives), the main subject of *The Assumption*, Mario Montez (nee René Rivera) was thought to be lost in Floridian retirement and few scholars were writing on his performance career or its connections to (and influence on) Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Ron Rice, Charles Ludlam, Hélio Oiticica, and Jose Rodriguez-Soltero. A decade and a half down the road and much has changed.

Starting in 2009, Mario Montez (Rivera) made his comeback at the bequest of Berlin based film scholar and curator Marc Siegel. Siegel first lured Montez back into the spotlight at "LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World" (2009) at the Arsenal Cinema in Berlin. One year later, a conference entitled "Superstar! A Tribute to Mario Montez" took place at Columbia University. Both Siegel and Juan A. Suarez have published essays on Montez's work with the New York underground film and theater scene.

Therefore, it seems like the right moment to revisit my own initial groping through a belated consideration of my experimental video portrait as well as my collaborative writing/lectures with A.L.A.R.M.A. (Artists in Los Angeles Reconfiguring Media Art). A.L.A.R.M.A. was a short-lived laboratory for cultural investigation and a

fusion of performance and scholarship that I worked on with the literary scholar and poet Ramon Garcia and the art historian C. Ondine Chavoya. A.L.A.R.M.A. did various performance lectures at various venues in the United States, including at the alternative art space Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and the Center of Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. My collaborative work with Garcia and Chavoya is exemplary of an important shift that occurred during the completion of my artistic projects at U.C. San Diego, marking a move to archive based research with a variety of outcomes, from experimental video to curatorial work.

My subsequent curatorial projects, in particular the retrospective on Asco, co-curated with fellow A.L.A.R.M.A. member Chavoya, have been shaped by this the research conducted for *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*.

For his unwavering support of my years at UC San Diego, as well as my ongoing development as a curator, I want to thank with deepest earnestness Steve Fagin. The video *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* was influenced not only by the Underground filmmakers of the 1960s but by the type of radical and hybrid media art that Fagin has produced for three decades. At UC San Diego, I would also like to thank other advisors and faculty supporters including Jordan Crandall, Anya Gallaccio, Grant Kester, Ruben Ortiz-Torres, and John Welchman. Previous U.C. San Diego faculty Adriene Jenik, Jesse Lerner, and George Lipsitz were also incredibly supportive during my time on the campus.

My videos *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*, *St. Francis of Aztlán* (1997), and *Electronic Bodies* (1996), among others, were produced during my years as a graduate

student in the Visual Arts department. I would like to acknowledge my peers from that moment in UCSD history including Rebecca Baron, Rachel Mayeri, Liza Johnson, Emile Devereaux, Jennifer Reeves, Igor Vamos, Adele Horne, Kate Haug, Laura Nix, Melinda Stone, Justine Angelis, Glenn Kaino, and others who provided a wonderful context in which to make and exhibit my work.

Since the completion of *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*, the video has been discussed and analyzed by Ramon Garcia in “New Iconographies: Film Culture in Chicano Cultural Production” (published in *Decolonial Voices*, edited by Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi Quiñonez, 2002); Rosa Linda Fregoso in *Lupe Vélez: Queen of the B’s* (published in *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*, edited by Myra Mendible, 2007); and William Anthony Nericcio in *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive hallucinations of the “Mexican” in America*, 2007. The video has screened at various festivals, included MIX, and at various museums internationally, including the Wexner Center.

Chapter one of the thesis gives a critical foundation for the video’s production including some insights gathered from archival research at the Andy Warhol Museum and the Filmmaker’s Coop. The focal point is the figure of Mario Montez as a character that vexes the typical history of the avant-garde in New York in the 1960s. This chapter charts the expressive interests of Queer underground filmmakers in translating the bad performances of Maria and Mario Montez into their own modernism, one informed by ethnic signifiers of tropicalism and camp.

Chapter two gives insight into the structure of the video, in particular engaging how the video was positioned in the context of a Latina/o art scene in Los Angeles. *The*

Assumption moves rapidly across cultural references, culling from the “legitimized” queer avant-garde of the East coast. In situating the video in present Los Angeles with a cast of Latinos, the video attempts to situate the underexposed contributions of Latinos to the avant-garde.

The first appendix is the screenplay of *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*, written by Rita Gonzalez with quotations from writings and interviews by/with Gary Indiana, Mario Montez, Jose Rodriguez-Soltero, and Andy Warhol.

The second appendix is comprised of an essay and manifesto for and by the members of A.L.A.R.M.A. (Artists in Los Angeles Reconfiguring the Media Arts), a collective comprised of C. Ondine Chavoya, Ramon García and Rita Gonzalez.

A small portion of the essay and the entire manifesto were published as “A.L.A.R.M.A.’s Manifest(o) Destiny,” in *Wide Angle* 20.3 (1998), special issue edited by Jesse Lerner and Clark Arnwine. Both Chavoya and García have been hugely influential on my thinking as well as my curatorial and artistic practices.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Joseph Mosconi and my family for their constant support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Assumption of Lupe Velez

by

Rita Aida Gonzalez

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Steve Fagin, Chair

This thesis gives scholarly and production context for Rita Gonzalez's *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* (1999), an experimental video produced for completion of Gonzalez's Masters of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts. Gonzalez conjoins two essays, the first that build upon research on Mario Montez, the queer Latino performer involved with various facets of the New York underground theater and film worlds of the 1960s, and the latter on the strands of writing and relationships that constitute the making of The

Assumption of Lupe Velez. One of the focal points of the video is the real life performer Mario Montez. The thesis examines how Montez's performances in various productions by Jack Smith, Ron Rice and Andy Warhol vex the published accounts of the avant-garde in New York in the 1960s. This thesis charts the expressive interests of Queer underground filmmakers in translating the bad performances of Maria and Mario Montez into their own modernism, one informed by ethnic signifiers of tropicalism and camp. The thesis also gives insight into the structure of the video *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*, in particular how the video uses the contemporary context of a Latina/o art and literary scene in Los Angeles as a "stand-in" for the East coast avant-garde. *The Assumption* moves rapidly across cultural references, culling from the "legitimized" queer avant-garde of the East coast. In situating the video in present Los Angeles with a cast of Latinos, the video attempts to situate the underexposed contributions of Latinos to the avant-garde.

Chapter One

Background to the Making of the Assumption of Lupe Velez, or the Perfect Appositeness of Mario Montez or What's So Underground about Puerto Ricans?

As J. Hoberman has suggested, the “pathos archive” of experimental film is made up of a select pantheon of failures.¹ These lower-case superstars (in a term coveted by Andy Warhol) give performances so convinced (as opposed to convincing) that countless ships have been set adrift into postmodern seas by their winds. I am reading Queer underground film’s anti-aesthetics through the roles of Dominican-born B-movie actress Maria Montez, and sub-stratum superstar Mario Montez, central performer in many films by Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Ron Rice. This chapter charts the expressive interests of Queer underground filmmakers in translating the bad performances of Maria and Mario Montez into their own modernism, one informed by ethnic signifiers of tropicalism and camp.

A certain unknowable beauty in the faces and bodies of Maria Montez and Mario Montez became both the foundational logic and eccentric aesthetic of the underground, and would come into conflict at times with the images of sublimity and romanticism espoused by P. Adams Sitney in his text Visionary Cinema. Thus the images and identities of a 1940s Dominican icon and a Puerto Rican cross-dresser would serve to draw out the differences between the poetics and sublimity of underground cinema vs. those of avant-garde cinema.

¹ Hoberman, J. *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

What is leftover is generally what has been left as a remainder, in terms of cuisine, what is left unconsumed or perhaps what it entirely inedible. In the economies of Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, leftovers are associated with bad performances, ethnic codes, lower class positions, the inauthentic, lousy taste, and in the case of Maria Montez, exposed nipples. Smith champions the “appositeness” of Dominican B-movie actress Maria Montez. Theatre of the Ridiculous dramaturge and performer Charles Ludlam exalts the Baroque of Puerto Rican visual culture. Is it from Maria Montez a queer aesthetic gets its plastic tangent...its liquid vocabulary (“*Geef me the coparah chewels*”)? How does pseudo-exotic transvestitism give luster to a performance of failure? How is it set off against a mid-western beige sheen?

Using Tin Pan Alley, old National Geographic, thrift shop, and socially rejected human trash, Smith celebrates the commonplace with a vengeance! (Also, its dialectic—the exotic—again anthropological—though the ‘exotic’ of his concern is obviously twice-removed from nature being always the childish and simple-minded Hollywood version.)²

Thus, the dialectic at work in the transgression of Hollywood by way of a middle-American Queer sensibility must invariably intersect with an exotic imaginary, and not just any presentation of the other, but the other through the distorted aperture of Hollywood’s machinery.

B-movie and bad performances provided the stimulus for many underground films and theatrical performances.³ Jack Smith set out to enshrine Maria Montez as the

² Jim Hoberman. “Ali Baba is Coming!” *Village Voice*. 3 February 1972: 69.

³ B movies as a category emerged from Depression audience demands for more entertainment for the price of a single ticket. Independent exhibitors began to incorporate the double bill into their own standard practice in the mid-1930s. For a detailed account of the history of B movies, see Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, *King of the BS: Working Within Hollywood*. New York: Dutton, 1975.

most perfectly asymmetrical performer of all time. The Montez mythos featured a world of plaster temples and consecrated costume jewelry, “glamorous rapture, schizophrenic delight, hopeless naïveté, and glittering technicolored trash!”⁴ While the avant-garde filmmaking practices of Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas dealt with formal ruptures and with intertextual modernist tendencies (poetry and painting into film), Smith and Warhol’s films were shaped by a longitudinal awareness of difference, embodied by the extravagant forms of those excised from the serious constitution of normative glamour.

What actually composed the “residue” of Smith’s “residue of notions”?⁵ And who exactly was “left over” in the realm of glamour? The underground’s concern with Hollywood was not just an extreme dialogue with studio system and its mode of production but a seeking out of the remains of Hollywood, the so-called “leftovers” that were at the core of Warhol’s Factory productions.

Warhol didn’t evolve in the plastic world of stars, but in the demimonde of vamps. His cinema plays on the bland dreams of 1950s Hollywood only to materialize the terror that the Hollywood of the ‘20s still knew how to signal.⁶

Thierry De Duve summons the common casting of Warhol as vampire, and therefore attracted to beauty as harbinger of possession. Yet perhaps the terror signaled was due in part to costume miscegenation, the feathered speech the silences the Midwest of Theda Bara (born and raised Theodosia Burr Goodman in Cincinnati). Is this the terror

⁴ Jack Smith. “The Perfect Appositeness of Maria Montez.” *Film Culture* (27) Winter 1963-63.

⁵ Jack Smith, quoted in J. Hoberman’s “Jack Smith: Bagdada and Lobsterrealism,” in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*. New York and London: High Risk Books, 1997, 16.

⁶ Thierry de Duve. “Andy Warhol or The Machine Perfected.” October, 48 (Spring 1989), 13.

that boils to the surface in Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) as ghosts let loose on a decaying studio set while a cartoonish late-night movie vampire takes on the disguise of Veronica Lake and Mario Montez's flamenco persona sets off sexual anarchy?

Two accounts circulate concerning Smith's discovery of the languishing icon Maria Montez. In one version, a young Smith is an usher in a small mid-western movie theatre that features a tribute to the recently deceased actress in 1951. The other version finds Smith searching out images for his wild collages in the New York Public Library and coming across the clipping file of Montez.⁷ Less is known about Smith's first encounter with Rene Rivera. Rene Rivera (a.k.a. Dolores Flores, Mario Montez) was a complex figure on the underground scene. As a performer, he was enraptured by the possibility of superstardom yet aware of his own marginalized status. His conflicted Catholicism and anxiety over the straights in his family knowing of his "perfs" were evident in a 1964 *Film Culture* interview. Apparently, Rivera kept a day job as postal worker and later as office clerk, and rarely left his apartment in costume but would arrive for rehearsal with Bill Vehr or Ludlam, or on the set at the Factory or at some decaying location of Smith's with a bag full of transformation.

Mario Montez, Puerto Rican superstar, was sought after for the role of Juanita Castro by dramaturge Ronald Tavel, a frequent collaborator of Andy Warhol from in the mid-1960s. Montez' refusal pertained to his disinterest in mixing art and ideology. Falling short on time, Tavel loosely convinced Marie Menken to perform the role. Tavel

⁷ David E. James. "The Warhol Screenplays: An Interview with Ronald Tavel." *Persistence of Vision* 11 (1995), 45-64, and Ronald Tavel's "Maria Montez: Anima of an Antediluvian World." *Flaming Creature: Jack Smith His Amazing Life and Times*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997, 88-138.

had been entertaining the idea of women performing in the roles of men and the drag queen Montez continuing the large-scale bluff. Montez had appeared in Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, Ron Rice's *Chumlum* (1964), and was a constant figure in Warhol's films.

Rivera took the name of Mario Montez following the suggestion of Jack Smith.

The 'closed set' of Smith's (Maria) Montez fantasies is...a kind of closet, but a closet with a difference: one that has been enlarged, opened, and populated with other actors, so that while it retains some of its potential for atomistic self-isolation, it has also in Smith's fantasy become a kind of palm-sheltered halfway house for 1950s queers.⁸

Whether perfectly calculated or spontaneous, Warhol sought out Mario Montez to perform amidst his groupings of personalities and fantastics. Montez' conjoining fascination with celebrity scandals led Warhol to cast him in a series of celebrity portraits. *Screen Test (#2)* (1965) is a departure from the silent format of Warhol's five hundred other one hundred foot roll screen tests (shot over the years 1964-66).⁹ Playwright Ronald Tavel, who went on to contribute to the Theater of the Ridiculous, was consigned by Warhol to work on a series of scripts in the mid-60s. One such collaboration was a screen test with Mario Montez. *Screen Test (#2)* centers mostly on the face of Montez. The performer is given cues and lines to perform. Tavel is the producer heard and not seen, Warhol hovers in the backdrop, and Montez is the talent. Tavel and Montez share a queen's knowledge of signification. Believing it, being it...

⁸ Michael Moon. *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998, 85.

⁹ See Callie Angell's "Andy Warhol, Filmmaker" in *The Andy Warhol Museum*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1994, 121-146.

The “closet with a difference” takes place not only on the “closed stage” of Maria Montez flicks with in the realignment of “pasty” identity to fit the exquisite otherness of Puerto Rican visual culture. Mario Montez became an alternate fit for the Maria Montez cultists. However, Mario as a Puerto Rican with a difference somehow became transposed with the stellar triumphs of Hollywood failures. And the question follows, how atomized were the queer white male communities from the Puerto Rican populace? Were the performances of Mario as Maria not articulated recognitions of *othered* othering? In the end, we should consider, as Charles Ludlam once wrote of Mario Montez, “She’s the first Puerto Rican artist who knew she was Puerto Rican and used it.”¹⁰

¹⁰Charles Ludlam. *Ridiculous Theatre Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam*, ed. Steven Samuels. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992, 150.

Chapter Two

The Assumption of Lupe Velez

One of the body sequins and gossamer burns candles and incense on the intra-altar, doing her best on two foot high wedges to stabilize a form. Vulgarity, as such, let's read as excess made ex nihilo. Let's look at the No Movies of Asco (for Nausea). It's two dollars for the aquanet, another for the reheeling of the glitter platforms, and a ten for the 35 mm camera film—give or take Hollywood.

Is it from Maria Montez and Lupe Velez, a queer aesthetic gets its plastic tangent? Its liquid vocabulary (“geef me the coparah chewels”)? Its stunning display of “latin tem-per-a-ment?” How does pseudo-exotic transvestism give luster to a performance of failure?

My video *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* (1999) stakes out a sampling of bad performances and excessiveness to reconstitute tackiness (or their Latino and Latin American equivalents—*rasquache* and *cursi*) as a form of cultural subversion. The video expresses how ethnically-coded gestures of excess from the pathos archive (which I read as performative failures) can be re-deployed in an effort to posit identity as constantly negotiated through the multiple intersections and contradictions of desire, violence, and representation. Researching the video involved engaging with scholars such as Celeste Olalquiaga on Latino culture and kitsch, Jose Esteban Muñoz on disidentification, as well as the primary sources of Andy Warhol, Jose Rodriguez Soltero, Jack Smith, the underground Theater of the Ridiculous of Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam and John Vacarro. *The Assumption* blurs the distinction between remake and re-imagination by summoning extracts from two underground films by Rodriguez-Soltero and Warhol to

produce a mockumentary that mistakes the contemporary art scene in a Latino community in Los Angeles for the New York avant-garde of the 1960s. The Assumption of Lupe Velez starts with two underground films entitled Lupe, one by Andy Warhol (1965) and the other by Jose Rodriguez-Soltero (1966).(FN) Both films were inspired by chronicles of Velez's suicide that had been recently published in two books, Hollywood RIP (1963) by I.G. Edmunds and Hollywood Babylon (1965) by West coast experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger. Perhaps the more infamous of the two was Anger's book as it compiled for the first time (in print) Hollywood's queer archive. Anger himself has grown up in the vicinity of movie studios and celebrity homes, and (claimed to have) performed as a child actor in the role of a "changeling prince" in Warner Brothers' *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1935). Anger's writings move nostalgically through a pre-Hayes code Hollywood, reimagining the perversions of Tinseltown, and loosely citing (or making up) primary texts, police reports, court records and coroner's notes.

Experimental film on the West coast, including the films of Anger, Bruce Conner, and Ed Ruscha, dialogued with popular culture and the heritage of Hollywood as image factory. It is perhaps fitting that Warhol made his first film after a journey to the West coast in 1963, a collaboration that featured Taylor Mead, Naomi Levine, and Dennis Hopper. Anger was attracted to the underside of Hollywood, especially celebrities' relationships to the occult. His film *Puce Moment* (1949) follows the languid afternoon of a fading movie starlet as she prepares to walk her mastiffs. Anger's treatise on Hollywood was the first to provide an open and out queer dialogue with "straight" movies by deciphering codes and double entendres, as well as utilizing gossip.

Imagining Los Angeles as one huge soundstage, one scene in *The Assumption* follows the ghost of actress Lupe Velez as it roams through the Movieland Wax Museum, a now defunct shrine to celebrity populated by wax figures). The text spoken by Velez's phantom is inspired by the postmodern Baroque writings of Cuban exile Severo Sarduy. In this Sarduyian free-association, Velez interrogates her own distorted and stereotypical representations in Hollywood films and popular media. Velez's career has been addressed by film scholars as emblematic of the limitations found for Latino/a and Latin American performers in the mainstream American film industry. Perhaps the most well-known of Velez's films were the "Mexican Spitfire" series of screwball comedies for RKO (1939-1943). These vehicles were formulaic comedies replete with mistaken identities and linguistic misinterpretation and malapropisms, all detonated by the spitfire's inability to assimilate and by her uncontrollable "Latin temperament." In a highly stylized address, the monologue of Velez in *The Assumption* allows for her to resist and challenge the demands for extreme theatricality put upon her. The viewer begins to surmise that in order to perform at incomprehension, one must deeply understand what it is that one does not comprehend. For example, in my script for *The Assumption*, the ghost of Velez (played by Mexican video artist Ximena Cuevas) comments:

You know, I've played Chinese, Rococo furniture, Eskimos, checker board(ers), Japanese, haute cuisine, Indians, valves, Hindus, Fascist architecture, Swedes, Malays, country cabins, Mexicans, molten lava, and French Canadians. How many apparitions I have stood up against while writhing on a mountaintop as some wild vexation? To you my gestures teeter in dysfunction. Somewhere between Mexico and absurdity. I twist my tongue to make unholy conflagrations out of your distinct consonance. Meanwhile, laying low, I slurp up conjugation and secretly revel in the silence of divine excess.¹¹

¹¹ See Appendix for full screenplay of *The Assumption of Lupe Velez*.

The Assumption, as critic C. Ondine Chavoya has noted, queers documentary. For Chavoya, the tape is documentary in drag.¹² Source materials are referenced and utilized in the video to substantiate the theory that as a labyrinthine, charged site, the archive both holds and withholds historical proof. Andy Warhol and Jack Smith both worked with the archive in distinct ways. Warhol's compulsive collecting of objects and people, created a mobile archive, one always in progress. Smith's archive was a static and cloistered world, a RKO movie set circa 1945 disintegrating in a loft on the Lower East Side decades after its construction. For Warhol, drag queens were "ambulatory archive of popular culture." And for Smith, the "perfect appositeness of Mario Montez," (an epic homage Smith wrote to pay tribute to his muse the Dominican star of Hollywood B movies) connected the filmmaker's joint interests in Latino camp, queerness, masquerade, and performativity. *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* simulates, assimilates, and dissimulates several key moments of the East coast queer avant-garde in a distinct blurring of documentary and experimental video.

The video is composed of both fabricated sequences from two 1960s avant-garde films entitled *Lupe* (one by Andy Warhol and the other by Puerto Rican filmmaker Jose Rodriguez-Soltero), and sequences that fantasize Lupe Velez's last night via the performance of a Chicana/o drag queen. Included within these narrative fragments are screen tests (shot in Echo Park, a predominantly Chicano and Latino neighborhood of Los Angeles). These screen tests function as both tribute to Warhol's fetishization of faded Hollywood glamour and as verité footage of a Latino/a community of performance

¹²C. Ondine Chavoya, panel discussion, The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2001.

artists, scholars, poets, divas, and visual artists currently living and working in Los Angeles.

L.A. Lupe, the Chicana drag queen who pays homage to Lupe Velez, is introduced early on in the video through an establishing shot ripped directly from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* S/he spends the rest of the tape occupying herself with an elaborate preparation (costuming, face painting, martini sipping—another homage to Kenneth Anger's *Puce Moment*). All of this preparation is for a ritual tribute in the spirit of Lupe Velez's last day on earth. L.A. Lupe embraces the scandal surrounding the death of Velez (made infamous by Anger's description in his book *Hollywood Babylon*) for its absurdist glamour in the face of muck, for its survivalist impulse, and for its failure to validate an uplifting model of cultural iconicity. In these sentiments, s/he is kin to the outer-Hollywood engagements of the Chicano conceptual art group Asco, who were active in Los Angeles during the seventies and eighties. *The Assumption* moves rapidly across cultural references, culling from the legitimized and historically appraised queer avant-garde of the East coast. In situating the video in present Los Angeles with a cast of Latinos, the video attempts to situate the underexposed contributions of Latinos to the avant-garde.

Appendix

THE ASSUMPTION OF LUPE VELEZ (1999)

SCREENPLAY

Written by Rita Gonzalez

With additional text by Gary Indiana, Andy Warhol, Mario Montez and Jose Rodriguez Soltero

Epigraph: “Because they have used you they believe you are dead
You would at least have to begin life over again from the beginning.”

Jack Smith

Voice Over (Steve Ausbury)

Lupe. 1966. This may be projected as a thirty-five minute movie on multiple screens with sound on both images. Starring Edie Sedgwick and Billy Name (star of Warhol’s Haircut). The last evening in the life of Lupe Velez. Andy Warhol’s first film with a serious theme and plot.

Title: The Assumption of Lupe Velez

A Video by Rita Gonzalez

Image fades up on young woman with short hair laid over a toilet bowl. The image is grainy black and white. It seems like a stilled image but is slowed down. The song “You Are My Destiny” by Paul Anka plays while the credits roll.

Dissolve to image of Edie/Lupe in bed on the telephone. In back of her are velvet curtains and she lies languidly with eyes blinking slowly.

Edie/Lupe (Jennifer Reeves)

Andy discovered some tawdry little book on the great deaths of Hollywood. He loved the chapter on Lupe Velez—the Mexican Spitfire. She tried to go out like some gorgeous bird of paradise. A real slow fade-to-black. After putting on her designer gown, lighting some candles and getting the set just so, she pumped seventy-two Seconals and ended up with her head in the toilet. Andy thought it was wonderful. He loved fashion mistakes.

Fade to black

Lupe (Ximena Cuevas): *A Harald; Que Dios te perdone y que me perdone también a mí, pero prefiero quitarme la vida y la de nuestro bebé antes que traerlo con verguenza o matarle.*

Lupe

Sound: Opening fanfare for MGM

Dissolve from close-up of face into establishing shot outside the – apartments— somewhere in Echo Park...Image from Sunset Blvd.

Dissolve to L.A. Lupe (Bianco Arellano) slowly unscrewing the top of a nail polish bottle. Slow cuts and zoom out to slowly expose L.A. Lupe in front of her dressing mirror.

Voice of L.A. Lupe (Fred Salas): To live in this city, you must be aware of the fact that we all exist on top of the ruins of Cecil B. DeMille's Babylon. When you walk down the street and hear the clattering of bells and the crumbling of pillars, know that you are tuning in to the ghosts of former soundstages.

Why just last night as I walked down Sunset, I knew for sure that the gasping and stirring was none other than Nazimova gathering shifts of gossamer and plumes for her thrilling veil dance.

Let me introduce myself—L.A. Lupe (pause) not the singer, but a dramatic recreation of Lupe Velez. For me it began with a late night viewing of Mexican Spitfire's Baby...or was it The Girl from Mexico? No mind. Let's traverse the course of events; from San Luis Potosi to Mexico City to Hollywood and on to New York—The Factory, Puerto Rico by way of Cinemaroc Island. And where do we end up? Here in my room...in Echo Park.

Cut to marquee lights overlaid with an image of Lupe's lips.

I arrive on the scene they say with one dollar, when I open my mouth here are my first words in English: chocolate, malted milk, strawberry ice cream and HELL.

Mario Banana retake in the theater.

Title: Lupe (1966) Jose Rodriguez Soltero

Shots of Mario Montez being prepared for a screen interview—in lurid color!

Mario (played by Joey Krebs)

Jose Rodriguez-Soltero (played by Ramon Garcia) describes his film Lupe: An improvised film which supposedly was to depict the rise, fall, and assumption of Lupe Velez, as played by Mario Montez...turned out as a satire (or is it glorification?) of 1930s Hollywood.

Structurally, it should be titled 'Rushes from a film with Mario Montez playing Lupe Velez, Unfinished version, Of course'...the mood is constant: nostalgia of 1950s television, and it has some nice sequences. It was primarily a result of viewing Dietrich in Sternberg's oeuvre and from reading Anger's Hollywood Babylon. But it sure doesn't look like it.

I hope Vivaldi doesn't blow his wig! I suppose many people will find it silly and superficial, and it is...but as it goes...should one person enjoy it...Mario loves it. Anyway we had a lot of fun shooting for nine months.

Mario Montez (Joey Krebs): My heroes are Maria Montez, Lupe Velez, Marilyn Monroe—because she's so sweet—um, James Dean, Fred Astaire, and let's not forget Ginger Rogers.

Why Maria Montez?

Oh, because she's one of my favorite screen sirens. I adopted my name after her. She does everything with such fire! Nothing is pretended.

Title: Echo Park Screen Tests Take One

Voice of Andy Warhol (Steve Cosson): I never understood why when you died, you just didn't vanish, and everything could just keep going the way it was only you wouldn't be there. I always thought I'd like my tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say 'figment.'

In the wax museum: sumptuous boudoir filled with crystals, candles and mirrors.

Voice of Lupe Velez (Ximena Cuevas): Hedda Hopper wrote Lupe was never lovelier as she lay there, as if slumbering like a child taking nappy. Like a good little girl. Hark! There are the doggies! There's Chops. There's Chips, scratching at the door. They're whispering. They're whining. They want their little Lupe to take them out to play.

Dissolve to L.A. Lupe in her room readying herself for the evening.

Close up of Mario Montez's face--fragmented

Sound from Maria Montez film swords and sandal in an infernal loop

Voice-Over (Steve Ausbury): In addition to providing a pervasive vision that informs every image and the general tone of the films, this mystique makes possible the creation of symbolic superstars like Mario Montez, named after the late star of the 1940s grade B movies. Mario, who appears in *The Chelsea Girls*, *Flaming Creatures* and at least ten other Underground epics, has a divinity achieved by no Hollywood Goddess. With that eternal feminine gesture of pushing the hair of his/her rat's nest wig from a pancaked cheek, and pouring from the depths of his/her liquid dark eyes a painful sweetness

that passeth understand, he/she projects a vision of androgyne mysteries, a glimpse of the unio mystica, the blessed union of all striving opposites.

Title: Andy's Hollywood

Image: Swimming pool—a woman in a long red dress swims slowly across the frame.

Andy's Voice (Steve Cosson): I always like to work with leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good. When I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think what the audition must have been like and about all the takes where maybe one girl didn't have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her left over on the swing. So that scene was a leftover on the editing room floor—an outtake—and the girl was probably fired, so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn't jump is the star of the outtake.

Image: A costume of crinolines on a wax figure. The camera slowly pans down the leg of the wax figure to reveal another waxen dummy placing a red shoe on the costumed one.

Voice of Lupe Velez (Ximena Cuevas): Laying under the tragic star Proscyn, I turn to depletion on the set. Today, I read in the newspaper, Ms. Velez does not act too well, but she acts loud. Her display of Latin temperament resembles the law of molecular motion.

Echo Park Screentests Take Two

Voice of L.A. Lupe (Fred Salas): I have in mind the image of a film I've never seen. In my screenplay, Mario imagines his cakey cheek as the surface of a movie screen. Andy plays Louis B. Mirror producing a queasy extravaganza of the unbecoming. And I make an appearance in the finale having fashioned a Cinderella ball gown out of the sequin buds and pearl droppings that have fallen from those who have gone before me.

Trailer for L.A. Lupe

Images of L.A. Lupe cut like a movie trailer

Voice-Over in the style of trailer voices (Eric Meis): L.A. Lupe of Echo Park, the drag queen next door, stars in a dramatic recreation of Miss Lupe Velez's mythic last night.

The Mexican Spitfire of Hollywood Hills seems to be the phantasmatic twin of L.A. Lupe. We watch as L.A. Lupe takes an hour to do her nails, listens to Thee Midnighters, and cultivates a transient notion of things borrowed. Before your eyes, a history of imposition and exposition.

Fifteen minutes—or we've got all night.

The swinging chandeliers of aging Echo Park villas take her back to the film with Fairbanks.

Yes, it is true that Hollywood has polluted our backyards with leftover backdrops. Discover this truth by taking a dip in Maria Montez's pool and coming up for air with traces of 1001 Nights Glitter.

(Voice rises)

Oxnard née Mesopotamia!

(Louder)

Mullholland née Andes!!

(Louder still)

Echo Park née Hollywood!!!

Palms Springs née Baghdad!

Slip into the plat-formed recreation of this stolen scene. Glamour as a series of studied accidents...

Paramount as Studio, Street, and Rank!

Afterwards, take the MTA tour bus that runs from L.A. Lupe's house up Sunset straight to Norma Desmond's creaking palace.

Interview with Mario Montez (played by Joey Krebs), part two.

Do you play your roles with fire?

Well, I try.

What about you performance in Screentest?

Well, a little bit. But I can't help it. Um, I wasn't born to be that wicked. I mean the director wants me to be wicked...he wants me to be Latino. He wants for me to be Puerto Riqueno. But—which I am..but I just can't do it. I mean, probably cuz I was born in the wrong month. That's why I can't. I'm a Cancer, didn't you know that?

Title: Lupe's Babylon

Scene from *The Gaucho* of Lupe Velez fighting furiously with another actress. Fairbanks grabs and they wrestle over drinks and food in a cantina on top of the Andes.

He carries her away literally—as his mounted men tie up a portion of the cantina where he sits with Velez and dislocates part of the building. Velez and Fairbanks toast as the ripped off section of the cantina is stripped and ridden down the mountain.

Lupe Velez (Cuevas): You know I've played Chinese, Rococo furniture, Eskimos, checker borders, Japanese haute cuisine, Indians, valves, Hindus, Fascist architecture, Swedes, Malays, country cabins, Mexicans, molten lava, and French Canadians. How many apparitions I have stood up against while writhing on a mountaintop as some wild vexations? To you my gestures teeter in dysfunction, somewhere between Mexico and absurdity. I twist my tongue to make unholy conflagrations out of your distinct consonance. Meanwhile, lying low, I slurp up conjugation and secretly treasure the silence of divine excess.

Close-up on wax figure's face. The face (of Sophia Loren, actually) has a frozen teardrop. As the camera moves, the body of the wax figure seems to go forth.

Music: Chavela Vargas's *No Soy de Aqui Ni Soy de Alla*.

Screen Tests:

Ondine

Julio

Reina

Ramon

Bianco

Fade to black and credits

Distributed by SubCine in the United States

Los Angeles de A.L.A.R.M.A.

ALARMA - Artists in Los Angeles Reconceptualizing Media Arts
Rita Gonzalez, Ramon Garcia, C. Ondine Chavoya.

The manifesto portion of this appendix was co-authored by A.L.A.R.M.A. and published as "A.L.A.R.M.A.'s Manifest(o) Destiny" in *Wide Angle* 20, no. 3 (1998): 79-83.

“Once upon a time there were three little Chicanitos who went to the University of California, and they were each given very nationalist agendas. But, I took them away from all that, and now they work for me. We are ALARMA.” – excerpt from performance “Los Angeles de ALARMA,” 1997, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE)

“La basura no me mancha” Anon.

Opening shot

The last attempt at his Human Geography was in a Land Without Bread. Unkempt looking hillsides with teeth on parade. Another challenge to the surplus of images. He said, “My aim in making this film was to objectively transcribe the facts offered by reality without any interpretation, less still any invention.” By 1950, Luis Buñuel had left the goats on the mountain and departed for Mexico City.

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE DEPARTING FOR THE CITY: threshold of modernization, the face of Dolores Del Rio, the construction boom, the land without bread, Jorge Negrete.

This too Buñuel said was a documentary like the other entomological studies he had authored. This one with Jaibo and Ojitos—one a city boy, a juvenile delinquent, and the other a boy from the rancho displaced in D.F.

This was not a fiction about a city boy, a juvenile delinquent, and a boy from the rancho. This was a documentary about the “profound horror” of official folklore.

And so the actor reflects on the opening sequence. His face is gaunt but we see Jaibo still there. He is in a hospital speaking about Don Luis. And his voice blurs into the narrators.

A voice that headmasters the cityscape. All the buildings, streets, and the meaningless throngs are captured below. As one film scholar tells us, here is a rare Mexican film of its species. It has no volcanoes or ranchos set against white clouds in sight. No murals in the backdrop.

A documentary study of scaffolding, the fortunes of cement manufacturers; the comedy, drama or subversiveness of road construction; the psychology of the street vendor; the smoking habits of ten year old boys, the varied career of Estela Inda (you did see her in *La momia azteca*, right), and jokes about Porfirio Diaz.

In an alternate take staged by ALARMA, the ghost of Buñuel is the conductor of a symphony that plays atop the scaffolding of a high rise under construction. It is with the unfinished frame of a high rise development that a number of bloody fights will occur. And in this key moment, as Jaibo struggles with Julian, the one boy who ratted him out, the sound of the symphony will dramatically rise.

And now with Bunuel's permission I use his words sparingly—to give you-- the dear audience--a sense of the sonic uproar to unfold in our alternate framing of the forgotten ones:

The violins have entered menopause. And the piccolo is the anthill of sound. The ants have escaped from a text on the history of surrealism, and emerge from a tuba.

The flute is nostalgia sitting on its own hands. The oboe is Verlaine's twin brother.

The tenor oboe likes little boys. The contrabassoon is in flannel hot pants. The trombone has a German temperament. The French horn is a summit, a sunrise, Catherine Deneuve!

The cymbals are modernity shattered. And the end is a thunderous drum shard somewhat menacing. Obfuscation, coarseness, Boom. Boom. Boom.

Or so goes, ALARMA's variation.

There are nights so suggestive in Los Angeles, that the horizons of imagination need not expand too far for you to be transported to a queer, far away place as distant, yet as near, as across the street. Perhaps you are walking on Sunset, near Vermont, and hear muscles flexing, bells clanking, and pillars toppling, and know that you are near the site of a long gone sound stage used to film Nazimova's "Salome." Perhaps, you are heading out to the Laundromat and notice your neighbor getting into his evening negligee for his weekly memorial to the faded glamour of Lupe Velez and Ramon Novarro. Walking after midnight under a starless night amidst the rats of Echo Park Lake, you are paralyzed beneath the panoptical gaze of the ghetto birds above. The surveillance light casts erotic

shadows upon your aesthetic calling: This is your screen test of the night; your apotheosis in the star system of criminality.

ALARMA (Artists in Los Angeles Reconceptualizing Media Arts), a group of Chicana/o media artists and scholars in Los Angeles, formed in 1996 to work collectively on projects reflecting the manic terrain of their urban backdrop. The urban fabric is torn - - we investigate its cracks and its Sunderings. We like the crime pages will provide our audiences metaphysical *chismes* and spiritual morbidity.

ALARMA views the city as the real live “Theatre of Cruelty.” The history of Los Angeles is a history of hysteria--we are its inheritors. Hear the police sirens at midnight answering another murder? They are the cries of our urban motherland, our Llorona -- for we are estranged in our own home, our orphaned territory. This is our local color: the young girl from the Americana provinces anachronistically replaying, in her daily life, the clichéd dreams of Hollywood stardom; the rats who make their home the shadows that sketch themselves out in Echo Park Lake; the lyrical cadence of paleteros and street vendors; the dreams disintegrated by AIDS; the drag queens on Sunset and Vine; the trannies doing their Las Vegas show at Plaza on La Brea; the cholos on the corner of Laveta Terrace and Duncan; the teenage cholas with their baby strollers on Sunset; the crime of passion on the West Side; star sightings in restaurants; Eartha Kitt at the CineGrill; Angeline in her pink Cadillac, etc., etc. Local color is a myth that must be replayed and disfigured in an accented mode. We are here to support and conspire with the unacknowledged truths that surround us. We champion the curios and denounce the predictable, the tried, the culturally safe.

[We are interested in not only identity but its doubles. Reframing the psycho-geographic images of dehumanization and subjective and corporeal violence, the artists and critics of ALARMA also dislocate the foundational myths and originary narratives of Chicano/Latino identity in Los Angeles.] As third generation Chicana/o artists and scholars, we recognize that we have inherited a language of community in quicksand and narratives of nationalism that uncritically confirm and support a politics of nostalgia.

Our reality has not been represented: our collaborative projects are explorations of that underrepresented reality. Through conceptual, nomadic maneuvers we set out to problematize versus illustrate.

ALARMA recognizes the connection between the critical work of artists and the artistic work of critics. We are a forum, a network, a collision of critical and associative practices - a call for the interdisciplinarity needed to represent Chicano and Latino art and activist performance in Los Angeles. The current members of ALARMA all originally meet while Chicanos in-the-making at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the late 1980s. At that time, Rita Gonzalez was a barrio princess making video luchador matches that pitted La Llorona against Roland Barthes. Exhilarated by a comment from a USC film school recruiter that any Chicana making experimental media was an "anomaly," she decided to run headlong into a career of producing No Movies. Ramon Garcia was straight out of Modesto and learning for the first time about Chicano altars and Day of the Dead. He was writing rootesque poetry full of Aztec gods imagery. He was trying to reconcile his bad Chicano poetics with a conflicting taste for Baudelaire and Marguerite Duras. Although his identity crises were mostly imaginary and literary, he was, in fact, a modernist mutant trying to be a nationalist Chicano. Ondine Chavoya was

lost in the oblivion of Euro-trash fetishization, traveled with the band Bronski Beat, and from them earned the title “The Spotted Wonder” for his penchant for wearing outrageous combinations of polka dots and vertical stripes. Almost a decade later, we were reunited beneath the shadow of the Hollywood sign: our conceptual training ground. We share and exchange ideas, projects, concerns. Thus far, we have worked together on multi-media projects that fragment myths, distort mirrors, and decode suicide notes left behind by the ghosts of Hollywood, including: *The Assumption of Lupe Velez* (video, 1999); *Los Angeles de ALARMA* (performance, 1997); *Echo Park Screen Tests* (16mm, 1997); *St. Francis of Aztlán* (video, 1996); *Chupa-Selena: Monster Tex-Mex Superstar* (abandoned project, all film/video stock buried in Griffith Park and never to see the light of day); *Electra Woman and Cha-Cha Girl* (on-going performances at random L.A. bars, parties, and cruising areas); *Saints and Sinners* (a series of on-going docu-drams reconstructing the good, the bad and the beautiful this side of paradise).

We declare Los Angeles an ALARMA playground, a pocho purgatory. Like pages turning through back issues of !ALARMA!, these are the days of our lives...

A.L.A.R.M.A.’s Manifest(o) Destiny

1. We live in a moment of danger.
2. We appropriate the phantom spectacles of the city to practice and produce counter spectacles.
3. History is not nostalgia; it is an act of presence and an active present.
4. We create situations for critical and creative thought and action.

5. We do not assume that identity and community are predetermined factors, but constantly negotiated through the multiple intersections and contradictions of desire, violence, and representation.

6. We make our absence palpable.

7. We mark and work within the multiple sites of subjection to restructure relations of desire, pleasure and power.

8. The artistic trappings of the last century have putrefied, as have those of postmodernism.

9. We cannibalize existing icons and media images.

10. We stage movement and possibility as opposed to the prescribed stasis of iconic mythical representation.

11. We create drive-by identities like the passing glance of desire and recognition.

12. Lo Chocante is our point of origin.

13. Lupe Velez is our corn goddess.

14. Mario Montez is our patron santo.

15. Yma Sumac (or is it Amy Camus?) is our sacred diva.

16. We declare Walter Mercado our spiritual advisor.

17. Set to the theme song of “La Tocada”: Veronica Castro's bad feathered hair and over-permed split ends will replace the unibrow icon.

18. Selena's bad fashions are an inspiration to us all.

19. Maria Felix lives!

20. We want to bring real tackiness back in popular culture.

21. We rescue camp from the sole property and fetish of white queer sensibility.

22. We will rescue fashion victims, recognizing that only the well dressed will survive.

23. We are neither stereotypes nor archetypes, nor prototypes nor caca-types.

24. We do not mediate, we deviate.

25. We are neither American Me nor American You.

26. Repulsion will be convulsive or will not be.

27. We live docu-dramas that are too close to reality.

28. All our actions shall have theme music.

29. The border as brokered metaphor is tired.

30. We can afford to be sarcastic, sardonic, ironic and satirical, but refuse resignation and nihilism.

31. We work outside the binary of resistance and assimilation.

32. We reclaim this land as Aztlán, Sodom and Gomorrah and the Land of the Lost.

33. We refuse the normative landscape of the city, its blissful nihilism and resignation in order to reconfigure its cognitive foundation and effects.

34. We come from Modesto, Santa Ana and Whittier.

35. We perform the unimaginable: We Walk in L.A.

“Manifest(o) Destiny” presents the ideals and aims of ALARMA. We will continue to bring you real and imagined news from life in Los Angeles.

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