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Apartarte/Casarte (review)

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APARTARTE/CASARTE. By Josefina Baez.
New York City. 21 May 1999.

Performance artist Josefina Baez approaches her work as an intimate dialogue with the audience. *Apartarte/casarte* is a performance series initiated by Baez in 1996 as an alternative to her work in traditional New York City theatre venues. The performances, organized as social events, take place in livingrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens in Washington Heights and other Dominican immigrant households throughout the city. The host, a member of the community, collaborates with Baez in organizing the gathering. Invitations are sent out, food and drinks are served, and an air of camaraderie dominates the event. In the intimate environment of a home, Baez sets out to explore with her audience the pains and pleasures of the Dominican immigrant experience in New York City. The performance is as much about creating community among the participants as it is about the development of Baez's performance work.



Josephina Baez in *apartarte/casarte*.
No photo credit given.

At about six o'clock on a rainy summer night, guests started to arrive for the performance I attended at the crowded one-bedroom apartment in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The smell of a vegetarian *sancocho*, a traditional Dominican stew, mingled with the hot air from the street to make the place feel homelike. Guests were recognized and welcomed with great affection. The audience was small; for this performance twelve spectators filled the space to maximum capacity. As we gathered in the small hallway and chatted with one another, Baez ran in and out of the kitchen in preparation for her performance, pausing casually every now and then to greet the recently arrived. After an hour or so, the audience was directed towards the 1940s kitchen where Baez was to perform. Usually, Baez interrogates the hosts about why they decide to hold the event at their home, but this night marked the beginning of another season for *apartarte/casarte*, which Baez was hosting at her own home.

The performance was more of an exercise, a fragmented presentation of various pieces that Baez is developing concurrently for her theatre practice. A simple boom box and a photographer's light provided all the technical support for the piece. The open rehearsal was preceded by a short introduction and an invocation given by Baez. Ceremoniously, she proceeded to establish intense eye contact and breathing synchronization with each of the members in the audience. Some of them, veterans of the process, reciprocated in recognition while others laughed nervously and commented on the alien experience. By the time Baez was done with this introductory exercise, the friendly tumult of the social scene transformed into a silent trance-like witnessing of the performance process.

Baez rehearsed portions of three different pieces: fragments from *Dominicanish*, a *kuchipuri* movement sequence, and some selected new material. To the sound of 1970s *bachatas*, Baez entered the performance space wearing a wedding veil of exaggerated length and the colors of the Dominican national flag (red, white, and blue). Highly skilled as a dancer, she struck a series of poses as if in front of a camera. Her facial expressions began to change, moving from the natural smile of the recently married to the forced smile of the social performer and ending in the desperate laughter of the recently imprisoned. Baez mimed the transition from the public event of marriage to the confining practices of gendered domesticity. She began to perform (dance/mime) a progressive series of domestic routines—peeling oranges, mopping, cooking—as the festive expressions of her entrance mutated at times into comical exaggerations or tragic gestures of discomfort and frustration. Her voice was powerful, her movement a combination of *kuchipuri* dance with *merengue*, sophisticated in stylization and delicate in execution.

In another section of the performance, the veil hung from the ceiling and turned into a mosquito net, a must in the rural areas of the Dominican Republic. Baez, inside the net in a fetal position, lit from the back, began to perform a hip isolation sequence, moving her leg in and out of the fabric cocoon. Simultaneously, and to the background of *bolero*, she presented a compelling monologue about domestic oppression. The fragmented narrative presented images from a childhood on the island and the struggles of relocation, culminating with a scene of rebirth into a life of activism where Baez's breaking through the net spoke assertively against police brutality in New York. Baez's use of language was difficult and visual, moving freely from Spanish to English and exchanging grammatical



Josephina Baez in *apartarte/casarte*. No photo credit given.

conventions between them, referencing US and Dominican popular culture as needed to construct a complicated portrait of Dominican women in diaspora.

The realm of the domestic provided the site for a feminist critique of women's lives, both in the Dominican Republic and the United States. The performance was followed by an open discussion in which members of the audience shared with Baez and one another their experiences. The audience engaged in a deep conversation about their own lives and the roles that gender played in them. The making of meaning in this exercise was always part of a collective negotiation. *Apartarte/casarte* is a collaboration between a community and an artist, a safe site of mutual support where identities are exposed in their fragility. Baez opens up the space of home to explore publicly the Dominican experience in New York City, making her piece about the struggles of everyday life and the hope of survival through community.

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