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## CONSTANTLY EXPANDING

**Part of a constantly expanding conversation between Jose Alvarez and Silvia Karman Cubiñá, Director, The Moore Space**

SKC: Let's begin at the beginning...how was Carlos created?

JA: Carlos was created in 1988. I've always been fascinated by systems of belief and I wanted to investigate my relationship to them and these kinds of "spiritual" events, the role that charisma plays in these dynamics, and the wilful participation of the audience in creating myth. The original performance was done in collaboration with my friend and mentor, James Randi, a magician and sceptical researcher of the paranormal; he had been contacted by an Australian television station in search of someone who would expose the falsity of supernatural phenomena and challenge what was then an Australian obsession. It was the perfect occasion to create Carlos, a 2,000-year-old shamanistic spirit in the form of a charismatic religious leader. This became a 15-year performance-art project, engaging crowds and appearing before large audiences and on television in Asia, South America, Europe, and the United States.

SKC: What was the concept behind this performance?

JA: It was an exploration into the occult and the psychology of belief and how these intersect with art.

SKC: Very recently, Daniel Kunitz explained your role in performances as "inhibiting belief while at the same time exposing the flimsiness of it". Is this accurate?

JA: Yes. There is a process of mystification and demystification during the course of the performance. My point was to always create an "ahah!" moment where viewers begin questioning their own willingness to believe and their relationship with these kinds of situations

SKC: Carlos was once invited by the Chinese government to appear on TV before millions of Chinese citizens in an event to expose and question popular cults. Can you describe this experience?

JA: The Chinese Academy of Science heard about Carl Sagan writing a chapter in his latest book "The Demon Haunted World" about The Carlos performance and its importance; and they decided to invite me to talk on TV about it and explain its purpose.

SKC: Did you continue your relationship with James Randi? How so?

JA: Yes, we are good friends; we still collaborate on different projects.

SKC: ...for example in "Dejeuner sur le Dish", correct? Please tell us about this video-performance filmed at the Parkes Radio Telescope Observatory in Australia.

JA: It is a visual and spiritual trip. In this performance Randi and I are seen inside the telescope in a kind of a duel, playing chess. At one point, Randi gives me his cloak, and with a cane in hand and a crystal (both very prominent elements in my public performances), I walk like Beuys in his performance, *I Love America and America Loves Me*. The telescope represented for me a step in a new direction: the Carlos character is closing the cycle of the performances by playing chess with Randi who is – in a sense – his opposite intellectual force. I begin to use space exploration as a metaphor for a new beginning.

SKC: What is your opinion of Beuys?

JA: He has some really great work and ideas, but I have a problem with him assuming the role of a Shaman.

SKC: As you know, there is a tradition of artists such as Gilbert and George and Andy Warhol who blur the separation between art and life, by creating “real-life” characters. How much was art and life blurred during the time of your performances? Was there any point when the performances stopped being art and became more “life”?

JA: Never. The performances were always onstage. I did not build a character to reside in. Onstage was where the Carlos character made sense and where the dialogue could exist and have any purpose for me. Carlos was a vehicle for probing and questioning belief. He died once the performance was over, but lived on in relationships and dialogue and – hopefully – in the questioning and thinking that the audience may have taken with them.

SKC: So, in a sense, your performances would have been ineffective in an art space or museum institution?

JA: Totally, because as an artist, the dialogue I sought to develop needed to happen in a context where my performance could be interpreted as real and have a real impact in people’s lives. He needed to exist in the real world in order for the performance to be effective as such and to have the vastness that it ended up having.

SKC: As stated in the 2002 Whitney Biennial catalogue, your work deals with the ways that “belief—artistic, religious, political, and scientific—intersect.” What did you show in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and why do you think it was important to show that work there?

JA: “In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe” was a video-installation involving five monitors that simultaneously showed multiple clips of past performances of Carlos. The clips were all the same, but shuffled in different sequences to show accumulation. The idea was to mimic the way media creates consensus through editing, emphasis and repetition. I took the title from a very curious line in standard TV film contracts that state that your filmed image can and will be used “in perpetuity throughout the universe”. At the Whitney, I also showed a peephole sculpture through which visitors could see me walking amidst a landscape of magic mushrooms, the mushrooms that Carlos Castañeda’s Shaman – Don Juan – told him to ingest in order to obtain knowledge. These two worlds, the magical and mystical juxtaposed to the sceptical and investigative, has always been at the core of my quest. These two opposite views of how to understand the world, propel the work.

SKC: Carlos Castañeda is the Peruvian author of a series of books describing traditional Mesoamerican shamanism. Jose, it is important to point out that your character Carlos got his name from Carlos Castañeda, correct? Please talk to us about how Castañeda and his Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus in his seminal book *Journey to Ixtlan* was an influence or inspiration in your work?

JA: Carlos Castañeda created a myth. When I was really young, I read his books and they were really magical to me. Then, I realized they were works of fiction, total fabrications, but the images that the books conjured up in my mind were marvellous.

SKC: Following your recent exhibitions, *The Golden Butterfly* at Gavlak Projects in West Palm Beach, and *The Visitors* at The Kitchen in New York, you mentioned that your work was going in a new direction in your new exhibition ***Constantly Expanding***. In what direction?

JA: My new works are an investigation about exuberance, joy and pleasure, as opposed to a more conceptual, socially-based attitude. The work is still conceptually rooted in my past attitudes towards art making, but now I'm more interested in exploring a collage of different textures, media, and specially beauty in art as a radical act. To use beauty in contemporary art is a radical and healing act; to create a space where it is OK just to be.

SKC: Don Juan, Castañeda's guru, chronicled the use of mineral crystals, porcupine quills, and feathers as "objects of power". You utilize them in your works to create assemblages. This is fascinating! Comment on the special materials you use in your collages. Do you continue to look back at this book as a source? Are there any other recent reference points or resources?

JA: The materials come from my initial interest in Carlos Castañeda’s writings. As I work with them, they exercise their own "magic". They are very seductive. Lately, I've been developing video animations and digital murals as another element to create environments. His books were the original platform to create this "magical drawings" but as I continue to explore materials, grounds and painting, they became less and less relevant to my work and became their own thing. They have the power and presence that they exude because of the intensity, belief and commitment that I have in their making.

SKC: Can you talk to us about your new digital animations, the process, and how these relate to the works on paper?

JA: It's a natural extension of the process and the images. I'm having so much fun making them. It's a whole new world. They allowed me to use the drawings in a whole new way....

**SKC:** You say that the digital aspect is a whole new world. What does this medium offer you that is new or challenging? I understand the process is very labor-intensive. Can you explain it to us?

**JA:** Well, all of my work it's very labor-intensive. There is an intensity that is created through time and dedication to different tasks...from sorting the quills to collecting and selecting the feathers, splitting the crystals and layering and layering and layering. That is just a small part of it. The computer work it's not any different. It takes a long time to design and to set the correct parameters to create the animations. And rendering? ...let's not even go there!

**SKC:** Do your murals simply function as a larger-scale, static variation of the digital animations?

**JA:** So far, I have only produced three digital murals, and I'm not sure yet how these function. I just like the fact that they can change an environment so quickly and create a very exuberant atmosphere. They are fantastic!!

**SKC:** A little while ago, you mentioned "beauty" when talking about your work. Does beauty play an important role in your new works, and what does beauty mean to you?

**JA:** Beauty as a subversive means, to use imagery that serious artists are not supposed to use. Beauty as a way of healing, as a way of creating a space of resonance and joy for the audience. Not as a shaman, just as an artist creating work. I find that I'd like to start my dialogue with the audience – and go from there.