

# The Making of Self as Bridge: Pilar Rodríguez Aranda, Poet and Videopoet

Claire Joysmith\*



Courtesy of Pilar Rodríguez

Frame from the video *Return or the Inexactness of Centre*.

Coiffed with a striking mass of curly pepper-and-salt hair, Pilar Rodríguez Aranda's broad smile inaugurates her happy laughter. As she talks, her candid brown-eyed expression matches her openness in talking about her motivations and work. A versatile creative artist, she has for many years now set her heart mainly on her own brand of "videopoetry," bridging words and images, in many ways becoming herself a bridge.

What is videopoetry and what kind of scope does she perceive it to have?

**Pilar:** As I understand it, videopoetry would be a genre within experimental video, in which a video becomes a piece generating the same feeling a poem would: mystery, reflection, musicality, and awakening of the senses. Some people

read poems, adding images, and call this a videopoem. One could call that, at the most, an "adaptation." A true videopoem, as I see it, is "born" with and within the media: that is, it could very well have no words—or it could be just words. But it would be a poem that could exist only in video. Of course, it's difficult to define, to draw a line. An experimental video can be poetic and considered a poem; I guess it's the creator's intention that comes into play here. When I began working with the video medium, it was only later I found out I was doing "videoart," and now I refer to it as "videopoetry."

It's an ideal form for me because I started writing verses as a teenager, although I also wanted to be a filmmaker. I guess I could call myself a visual poet, since I also explore photography. I've also worked with radio and enjoy performing my poetry live. With video I can explore every facet of poetry, and then go beyond each of these as individual forms

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Pilar Rodríguez

Self-portrait.

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and create a larger piece, where more meanings are involved. Also, in video, time is a prime element, which makes it very different from, let’s say, the printed form. Therefore, I can collaborate with musicians or performers, or else do it all on my own, especially now that technology is readily available.

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As we talk about the malleability of videopoetry as form, I ask her about how this medium is able to articulate a collage or medley of experiences, perspectives, perceptions, and feeling worlds, in addition to bridging the individual and the collective, the private and the public self/selves.

**Pilar:** In terms of creating a video, I blend words, sounds, images, patterns, repetitions, light, silence; really, the possibilities are endless, that’s how malleable it is. The other day I saw a brief piece consisting of two phrases and one image;

in my video *Return or the Inexactness of Centre*, I have various layers of images and sounds going on simultaneously, lasting close to 20 minutes.

What’s wonderful about photography and video (and audio recording) is that one captures (that is, take notes, document) events, colors, textures, things, the world outside. Writing requires a different process. Words surge from within, and then I have to find a pen and bring them out. However, all of these are private actions.

But artwork only truly becomes alive when it becomes public. Without an audience it continues to be a work in progress—that’s how I view it. When you share your work and generate a reaction, then as a creator, artist, communicator, whatever, you have finally completed the circle. My pieces are very personal and subjective, so having an audience gives me a sense of being part of a larger world, because the others “get it,” so the personal becomes collective.

One of my first really “mature” works (in contrast to prior student videos or films I produced) was *The Idea We Live In* (1991), a collage of texts, written by others and some of mine included, around a common theme. I put together all these phrases and excerpts of texts; I was saying we all think/ feel/ say similar things, in this case around the idea of how “we all carry our home with us.” In fact, the piece was inspired by a painting I saw of a man pulling a child’s wagon containing a miniature version of his home.

The other thing that made this piece so strong was collaborating with others. I have this anecdote: the man who did the lighting and camera work, George Dolis, told me after reading the script, “I didn’t understand it at all, but I came up with some images.” I think poetry is like that, the way dreams can be; we don’t need to understand the meaning, or the details, we only need to let it grow inside us, whether it’s the rhythm or a phrase, as long as something touches our unconscious as well as our conscience, our soul, and our mind, then it has accomplished its purpose in life.

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Pilar Rodríguez Aranda asserts she “totally believes” that “the personal is political,” so I ask her how this finds expression in her creative work.

**Pilar:** Every choice/action I take in life has consequences: what I eat, where I buy, what I do with my trash, if I recycle or use a car, how I speak, the words I use, the way I deal with my feelings, whether I pay my taxes or pay someone under the table to get some bureaucratic procedure done. Every choice/

action others take affects me and others as well, so how could we say the personal is not political?

When I write about my having been molested or how I feel about women being murdered, I am opening myself up and, therefore, others might feel they can do the same. It's the first step toward healing. We are a sick society, or as writer Susan Griffin would say,<sup>1</sup> we are the result of the ideologies of madness, and until each of us is aware of this, we'll continue to reproduce these, generating more and more sickness, whether physical, mental, and/or spiritual.

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Pilar Rodríguez Aranda's work has received wide recognition in the U.S., Mexico, and Europe and she has been the recipient of several awards. Personally, I find her videopoem *Ella es frontera/Border She Is* (1996) to be a small masterpiece of flowing visual and oral creativity that interweaves, bridges, connects and brings together—even as it clearly recognizes a wide range of fronteras/borders, of differences. I find it provocative in the ways it explores the soft hurt-places where the bridging touch happens, and the gashing within that replicates in outer heridas (wounds). I ask her to comment on this videopoem, its main roots, rivers, and clouds, as well as on the reasons she resorted to the poetry of several Chicana women writers.

**Pilar:** Araceli Zúñiga once called this video “a classic.” I'm honored by such comments. I guess I'm a bit of a perfectionist, so when I see my videos I mainly see all the things I wish I could change, ha! In any case, from its inception, *Border She Is* emerged from my experience living in Austin, Texas. It was not only that I actually met other women poets, learned about the Chicana/o experience of bilingualism and biculturalism, but I was also touched by their solidarity, their sense of community, and their committed political activism.

Originally I thought of doing four different small pieces, adapting the work of four poets: Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Lucha Corpi, and a fourth one I can't recall now. In the end, I did something similar to *The Idea We Live In*, a collage, where I interweave whole poems or fragments of poems written by Chicana poets. I wanted to pay homage to these women who had inspired me, who taught me I was not the only one who felt this need to define myself in a divided world. The “main character” in the story is a poet who is starting to write, and

through her imagination and words—really, the words of many others—she creates a poem, perhaps at the end of a sleepless night.

In fact, this video starts with, “I am alone now,” from one of Sandra Cisneros' poems. And that was the other aspect that interested me and continues to be one of my obsessions: why has it taken us so long, as women, to learn to live alone? Alone as in not married, or being a man's “other.” It has been as if we are nothing without a male, and even if we know this isn't true, we still struggle with this nowadays.

I think that *Border She Is* talks to other women, because it explores this very same struggle of becoming “free women,” as Doris Lessing would say. I “translated” this into the video by using the words and poetry of other women who happen to be Mexican-American, whose duality is so close to the surface that it's easy to identify and identify with. Before I left Mexico, I never felt divided by culture or language. But as a woman, in terms of what was “acceptable” or was expected from me, I was constantly being told to bury my instincts, my “wildness.” I realize now that such a duality exists for all. To quote Griffin again, even though science has proven that there's no separation between matter and energy, our civilization continues to insist on such a dualism in which our consciousness seems separate from our material existence.

When I write about my having been molested or how I feel about women being murdered, I am opening myself up and, therefore, others might feel they can do the same. It's the first step toward healing. We are a sick society.



Renata Luna

## About Pilar Rodríguez Aranda



Francisco Quintanar

In 1990, *America's Review* published Pilar Rodríguez's interview with Sandra Cisneros, "On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-three,"<sup>1</sup> which has been widely quoted in writings about her work. She has published in the anthologies *Género y gestión cultural: un esbozo de México y América Latina* (Gender and Cultural Promotion: a Sketch of Mexico and Latin America) (PUEG-UNAM/Unifem), *Speaking desde las heridas. Cibertestimonios transfronterizos/Transborder. September 11, 2001-March 11, 2009* (CISAN-UNAM/ITESM/Whittier College), and *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra. Testimonios de latin@s in the US through Cyberspace* (CISAN-UNAM/Colorado College/Whittier College), and also in various magazines in North America, among them, *Replicante*, *Voices of Mexico*, *Tierra Adentro*, *Norteamérica*, *Saguaro*, *The Bilingual Review*, *FEM*, *Confluencia*, *Sin Fronteras*, *Blanco Móvil*, and *Tinta Seca*.

Rodríguez has received grants from the Austin City Arts Commission (1990); Mexico's National Fund for Culture and the Arts, Young Creators, 1995; the Mexican Film Institute (Imcine, 1998), and the Morelos Institute for Culture (1999). *The Idea We Live In* won first place in the Second Video Biennial of Mexico (1992) and the Athens International Film and Video Festival, Ohio (1991). In 1998, Chon Noriega included it as one of the Best 100 Chicano Films (UCLA). Rodríguez's *The Unexpected Turn of Jim Sagel*, a documentary on writer Sagel, who won the Casa de las Américas Prize (Cuba) in the 1980s, was declared Best New Mexican Film at the Roswell Film Festival (2004)

*Return or The Inexactness of Centre* was shown in Palestine as part of the Twenty-second POETRONIQUE Video Moments Festival, 2009, and was included in the 2008 VideoBardo Showcase of International Videopoetry, and screened at the Loop Videoart Barcelona 2009 Festival. Other videos include: *Border She Is*, *El guajolote* (The Turkey), and *El entierro del mal humor* (Burying Bad Moods).

Rodríguez has shown her videos in various festivals and museums, among them: the AFI National Video Festival (1993); the Museum of Image and Sound, São Paulo, Brazil (1993); San Francisco Cinemathèque (1994); Mexico's Center of the Image (1995), El Chopo University Museum (V Biennial of Visual Poetry, 1996), National Cinemathèque (1996), and Carrillo Gil Modern Art Museum (1996); the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1997); the Whitney Museum (2000); the CineFestival San Antonio, Texas (1987, 1990, 1992, 2001, 2002); the Santa Fe Film Festival, New Mexico (2002, 2003, 2004); and the Boston Latino Film Festival (2004).

Featured in Cynthia Pech's *Fantasma en tránsito. Prácticas discursivas de videastas mexicanas* (Phantoms in Transit. Discursive Practices of Mexican Videomakers),<sup>2</sup> she also collaborated with Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes in their 1998 performance *Museum of the Apocalypse: End-of-Century Specimens*, CUT-UNAM. For more details, please visit <http://www.anarcafilms.blogspot.com/>.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, núm. 69, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Published by the UACM, in Mexico City in 2009.



Courtesy of Pilar Aranda

Frame from the video *Return or the Inexactness of Centre*.

I like to write down my dreams,  
because they are coded messages and, sometimes,  
when I'm just walking or swimming, something  
about those very same images becomes clearer.  
Words are limiting.

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Pilar Rodríguez Aranda is familiar with crossing borders, quite literally, having lived at times in Mexico, and at others in the United States over a period of many years. So what kind of strategies did she resort to in seeking ways to deal with these experiences in her videopoem *Retorno or the Inexactness of Centre* (2008)?

**Pilar:** In 2003 I had finished my documentary on New Mexican writer Jim Sagel, a friend of mine who committed suicide in 1998. I did this wanting to understand why he'd killed himself, again coming across this tormenting duality (in his case, he had been diagnosed as bipolar, among other things). It took me almost five years to do this video because I did it on my own, without any funding, with support from the local community. And because he was a "public" figure, I felt a lot of pressure. So, after that experience, I was ready to embark on something totally personal.

I decided to keep notes using video and audio, something I always do in writing. I keep a journal, although I am not always disciplined about it. At that time I purposefully taped myself visually and aurally, about my reflections arising from my decision to go back to Mexico. What makes one decide a concept like "Mexico" is me? In *The Idea That We Live In*, I used the image of a house, one that encompasses memories and that we carry with us. In *Border She Is*, the images were

of a border as holder of self and the other. In *Retorno or the Inexactness of Centre*, I chose the structure of the labyrinth, the path of the pilgrim,<sup>2</sup> where one walks toward what one thinks is the center, only to realize that you have to walk back out again in order to talk about it.

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At this point in her life and career, what is a central inspiration for her creative work?

**Pilar:** I'm inspired to write by things, events, news, or anything I read that causes an emotional reaction in me that, in turn, provokes me to think: why am I reacting to this? Sometimes I don't even ask myself this, I go straight to writing and pour out feelings and thoughts, try to explore what's going on if it's not clear. I like to write down my dreams, because they are coded messages and, sometimes, when I'm just walking or swimming, something about those very same images becomes clearer. Words are limiting and I very seldom feel I have successfully expressed it all. That's probably why I also resort to images, sounds, moods.

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What kind of work has she been inspired to do recently?

**Pilar:** In my latest work I've entitled *Poemas de Isla* [Poems from Isla] I've tried to emulate one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, and just be in the natural world, and learn from it.

I never stop writing, really, but right now is a time to put my work out there more. I'm tired of having drawers full of words and keeping them closed. I would like to play with digital technology and create a web-book to include my writing, images and, hopefully, performances. Performing my poetry is something I'm planning to do more of as well, exploring the use of images, not as videopoems, but, rather, as a support/contrast to the spoken word. As I mentioned earlier, I also take a lot of photos, so I am finding ways to finally fuse these into my work, whether by incorporating them into my live presentations, or the videos. I'm also working with a visual artist on a book fusing my writing and his visuals into an *Imago Ignota*.

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Pilar Rodríguez Aranda has been a professional translator for many years now. In what ways does this relate to her creative

career? And how does that relate to bridge-making, or perhaps to bridge-being?

**Pilar:** It has mainly been a way to make a living, but I also think one my roles in the world is to be a bridge. A translator or interpreter does that very clearly. When I started doing video, I was in a way translating the written word into another medium. I've also done other translations and published them, both poetry and essays, such as Chicano poetry in Mexican literary magazines, or John Beverley's prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*.<sup>3</sup> Lately, I've been translating some of my favorite Mary Oliver poems, as an exercise, but also as a way to learn from and share her wisdom. There are so many good poets that are not being translated into Spanish, let alone published, in Mexico.

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Until 2010, Pilar Rodríguez Aranda was involved with Artists in a transborder project called "A Prayer for Juárez/Una oración por Juárez." The same collective continues working together today, redubbed *Contra la Violencia el Arte* (Against Violence, Art).

**Pilar:** What inspired me to get involved was a small event held by Self Help Graphics in Los Angeles, where perhaps 30 of us, mostly artists and activists, got together to do readings and performances in response to 16 years of feminicides.

She explains that what she had been looking for was "a ritualization of a deeply hurtful experience," adding that her hopes are that "this will contribute to end the cycle of violence, in which," she concludes, "the real enemy is, in fact, ourselves." ■■■

NOTES

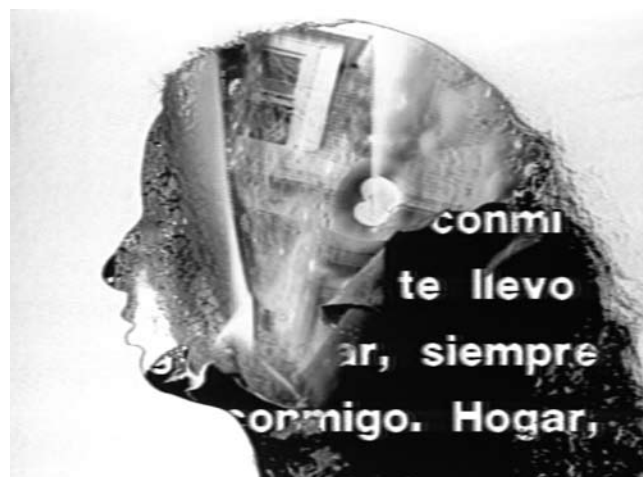
<sup>1</sup> Author of *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Claire Joysmith, ed., *Speaking desde las heridas. Cibertestimonios transfronterizos/transborder*. Prologues by John Beverley, Cristina Rivera Garza, and María Antonia Oliver-Rotger (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM/ITESM-Cátedra Humanidades, campus Toluca/ITESM-Cátedra Alfonso Reyes, campus Monterrey, and Whittier College, California, 2009).

FURTHER REFERENCES

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<http://poemsheis.blogspot.com/>  
<http://anarcafilms.blogspot.com/>



Courtesy of Pilar Rodríguez

Frame from the video *The Idea We Live In*.

BILINGÜE FOOL

by Pilar Rodríguez Aranda

*Words sometimes are  
 puras chingaderas  
 Repeticiones parangoneras  
 Repetitions of falsas promesas  
 Pochas calmas de monolingua espera  
 Why, I have even switched codes  
 as if in disguise  
 Las words somehow have become  
 my way to surmise  
 Pages of dolor - rincón  
 Looking for an imposible perdón  
 Worst of all  
 Looking for entendimiento  
 Las palabras siempre engañan  
 ¿Es love? Es lust?  
 ¿cómo los separas?  
 ¿Cuál es el que nos chitea?  
 Do you know what you quieres?  
 Do yo?*

