

## MAROONING THE MUSEUM: NICOLÁS DUMIT ESTÉVEZ' *OFFICE HOURS (OH)*

By Alanna Lockward

Marronage, the lifestyle, ethics and socio-political organization of runaway enslaved communities outside the plantation system, has been an intrinsic component of the radical imagination of countless liberation struggles in the Americas. The interest in these transcendental yet hidden narratives is consistently gaining attention in the humanities. Its legacies and current entanglements in Afro-Equatorian communities, for example, confirm that ethno-education and marronage are inseparable. The teachings of the ancestors that have been labeled as “primitive” and even “diabolical” by state and private educational systems are now part of a decolonized curriculum entirely conceived and implemented by Maroon descendants.

There are distinct analytical and ethical implications embedded in the problematization of enslavement, the Triangular Trade and the plantation system when their factual co-existence with marronage is silenced. Oral archives are instrumental in this regard and the moving image is indeed a treasured medium in challenging this erasure.

In Sergio Giral's *Maluala*, the resistance of Maroons, or runaway enslaved Africans, is done majestically. Although verbal, mental, and physical abuse intertwine in a symphony of cruelty, Giral's faithful accounts show how resistance counteracts the barbarism of the European “civilizing” mission with courage and blood, supported by prayers of Islam, Yoruba, Congo, and Christian traditions. Quilombo, palenque, maniel, manigua are some of the many names of those physical and spiritual spaces where the enslaved reinvented themselves as inhabitants of a free world, creating their own rituals in conversation with their surroundings.

The following insights into the self-proclaimed Maroon artistic practices of Nicolás Dumit Estévez are also part of a recent epiphany on the self-explanatory imprint of marronage in my own mental, emotional and spiritual decolonization processes which I have named Afrocentric but were still lacking this connection with Maroon legacies.

**AL:** My first question is: why did you choose to leave empty the seat of the collector, of the private art patron in this fabulous project?

**NDE:** Your question made me *tragar en seco*, a saying that, as a matter of fact, does not have an equivalent in English. The closest I can get to translating this is by explaining how the act of swallowing is eased with

saliva, and how there is no saliva involved when one *traga en seco*. The saying also implies that one was left speechless by a poignant comment or situation. Thank you for reminding me about collectors and patrons. I did not take them into consideration when developing *Office Hours (OH)*. The closest I came to these important categories was by thinking about potential actions involving El Museo's Board of Directors. Some of these actions were suggested by the Development Department and played with the idea of asking board members to loan personal items that visitors to El Museo could check out and wear while looking at artwork in the galleries. Board members are responsible for making major decisions shaping the life of the organization, such as approving work proposed for the permanent collection. With your question still fresh in my mind I want to publicly nominate to this governing body an artwork in its own right. This is a "piece" one can call historic, radical, visionary, or groundbreaking: the actual founding of El Museo by Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

**AL:** Is *Office Hours (OH)* some kind of a statement of what all museums in the world should become forever, or do you imagine it as only possible in the particular context of El Museo del Barrio?

**NDE:** *Office Hours (OH)* had its origins while Chus Martínez was working as a curator at El Museo. The agreement was that I would work in conversation with her as part of an exhibition that she was developing. My initial proposal for Chus's show was to invite all of El Museo's offices, most of which are located on the third floor of the building, to pack and move to the ground floor space that El Café occupies. El Café is a location within the building that experiences noticeable shifts of energy, triggered by the visits of large groups, or by the individuals and small cadres that trickle in almost unnoticed. Asking the offices and the staff to move to El Café, I believed, would bring them side by side with the galleries and its audiences. Likewise it would generate new synergies between curators, artists, and administrators, among others. I foresaw this action as serving to generate horizontality. Chus left El Museo and my plan had to be reconfigured due to budgetary as well as administrative reasons. Securing permissions to use El Café for months, relocating computers and desks, and dealing with reinstalling telephone lines was not feasible.

I am aware that I have digressed from answering your original question, but it is important to give you a brief summary of how *Office Hours (OH)* was born. I initially operated under the premise that my work would have no constraints as a result of budgetary concerns. The reality was different and one that, in the end, pushed me to work in a more resourceful direction; making do with what I/we had at hand. As someone originally from a "Third

World” country, that is, an exploited nation, the work format I am describing was not new to me. In the Dominican Republic there is a saying that states that: “*cuando el hambre da calor, la batata es un refresco,*” “when hunger makes one thirsty, a sweet potato is a drink.”

*Office Hours (OH)* was conceived with El Museo del Barrio in mind. Nevertheless, I am open to the possibility of implementing iterations of it in other organizations. I do have to say that I am fortunate to have launched this project with El Museo. With the exception of the red tape that, understandably, one has to deal with to produce experiences such as *Office Hours (OH)*, I have been given the green light to create. I must admit that I would be curious to see how *Office Hours (OH)* translates to other contexts. There is a sense of horizontality and comradeship at El Museo. I can’t imagine this would be the case in places where the division of labor is more marked. Experience tells me that because of my accent, racial features, and places of origin (the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, and the South Bronx), there will be art institutions in New York City where I would very likely have to assert my role as an artist constantly. I find this draining.

**AL:** What was the easiest part of implementing this multidimensional intervention and what was the most difficult one?

**NDE:** I will change the wording of your question because of the replies that this compels me to give you. The most rewarding experience *Office Hours (OH)* has opened for me is the opportunity to do away with some of the trappings that restrict who one is to a title, role, brand of clothing, or degree. In my going in and out of El Museo’s offices, *talleres*, kitchen, café, and yes, galleries, I have been able to connect with its staff at a more personal level. There have been times when some of us have looked at each other’s faces, point blank, wondering if some of the components of *Office Hours (OH)* were actually going to work. There is a great amount of trusting and risk-taking at a personal as well as a professional level involved in all of this. Conversely, there is a need to keep a healthy balance between our behind the scene personas and the more public ones.

As I am talking with you, I am visualizing the traditional nameplates that people used to put on their desks, and which bore their names and titles. Wouldn’t it be liberating if we could all relinquish what society expects from one, and instead list our passions and true selves on the plates I am describing: e.g.; Dumit, Cat and Raccoon Lover; Alanna (please fill in the blank) \_\_\_\_\_.

Personally, the most difficult part of *Office Hours (OH)* has to do with the introspective learning it requires me to do. Learning often involves growth,

and true growth can be both exciting and painful. To be more specific, while El Museo and its staff have been genuinely welcoming, there are institutional protocols I must observe when implementing any of the components of *Office Hours (OH)*. All in all, learning to listen and to communicate clearly can ease any of the discomfort that the growing pains I am undergoing as an artist, and foremost as a person, demand. The discomfort I am talking about does not necessarily have a negative connotation, but relates to the turning upside down of one's world that meaningful art and deep engagements with life are meant to provoke.

**AL:** You started your career in the arts as a curator when you were a medical student. Do you see this type of work as going back to your curatorial "roots"?

**NDE:** Time flies! I did not attend art school until I was 19. However, before taking my first 3-D or anatomy drawing classes, I co-curated an exhibition with Arvedits Tápia Polanco, at Casa de Arte, Santiago, Dominican Republic. The subject of the show was the local carnival, one of my favorite performative, spiritual, visual and political art forms, one that has no qualms about deviating from the expected. A quarter of a century later, I find myself curating an exhibition for El Museo del Barrio (*Playing with Fire: Political Actions, Dissident Acts and Mischievous Actions*) and working on *Office Hours (OH)*, an endeavor which demands a curatorial approach. Curating for me is a channel for enacting community, and for kindling collective synergies. It is also a valuable opportunity for allowing hidden, dismissed and radical voices, images, dreams, gestures, and visions to surface. Curating allows me to invite fellow artists, friends, participants and collaborators to disrupt History (with capital h) with histories and herstories.

**AL:** El Museo del Barrio started in itself as a decolonizing institution, in close dialogue with its constituency. Does your project aim at reminding everyone the true mystique behind its foundation, or did you have other intentions in mind?

**NDE:** The founding of El Museo in 1969 by Raphael Montañez Ortiz planted a decolonizing seed, or maybe more than a seed, a Molotov Cocktail in a complacent Art world that often dismisses the work of artists pushed to the margins (the Global South, the Third World, the Fourth World, undeveloped countries; you name it). In Montañez Ortiz's words "The cultural disenfranchisement I experience as a Puerto Rican has prompted me to seek a practical alternative to the orthodox museum, which fails to meet my needs for an authentic ethnic experience. To afford me and others the opportunity to establish living connections with our own culture, I founded El

Museo de Barrio.”<sup>1</sup> This poignant statement was posted at the entrance of El Museo’s main gallery, as part of *Museum Starter Kit: Open with Care*, a recent exhibition curated by Rocío Aranda. Forty-three years later, Montañez Ortiz’s words continue to ring true.

The implementation of *Office Hours (OH)* at a post-millennial El Museo seeks to fan the flame that Montañez Ortiz’s lit. The awareness that my presence at this organization may offer invites the staff to continue to keep their eyes/ears/mouths/pores open to the sounds, smells, tastes and textures that come through the windows of their offices. Talking about senses, one of the actions presented as part of *Office Hours (OH)* was *Cookie Break*, a culinary disruption for which Fabulous LuLu LoLo and myself, assisted by Bibi Flores, baked cookies in El Museo’s kitchen for the staff.

**AL:** How does your radical presence as a Dominican-York, born-again Bronxite resonates with the large group of people involved in your project: do they say something like “it is about time,” or do they assume that your Dominicanness is self-explanatory in this context?

**NDE:** I would say that most of the staff at El Museo knows about my origins and identities in flux. Some don’t, yet there are no questions asked about where I “come from.” I find this liberating, especially in the context of an “American” society so preoccupied with Othering and excluding. The same applies to my roles at El Museo. I have been acting at this organization both as the guest curator for an exhibition and as a catalyst for *Office Hours (OH)*. Again, the staff has engaged, contributed to, and participated in these activities without a need to get into titles, but more in the spirit of teamwork and *familia*. Talking about a subject dear to you, decolonization, it has been Puerto Rican-launched organizations like El Museo that have been responsible for so much of my own coming of age as a Lebanese Dominican, Dominican York, and a Bronxite. Interestingly enough, I have been realizing that I cannot become a Bronxite without also becoming Puerto Rican and Nuyorican.

**AL:** Do you see yourself in the future as a “decolonial coach” for museums all over the world or are you aiming larger than that?

**NDE:** This an enormous task. Linda Mary Montano, my mentor and performance art guru, made a similar suggestion. I am up for the idea of decolonizing the museum as institution at large. So much of the *Wunderkammern* mentality in the Art world has yet to be shattered. I often dream of the opportunity to be invited to perform a good old fashion

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Ortiz, “Culture and the People,” *Art in America*, May-June, 1971, 27.

Caribbean *despojo* (*una limpia*), a cleansing, of some of the most colonized gallery spaces around. I recently learned that botánicas in New York do in fact sell the guava branches required for this ritual.

My greatest thanks to you for the interesting conversation, to Sofia Reeser del Rio for her amazing job with *Office Hours (OH)*, and to El Museo for its hospitality. What a great place to work as art and to put art to work!