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## **The secret life of Diego Rivera**

*In early 2001 I set out to find a medium in order to make a series of posthumous interviews with figures of Mexican modern art. I imagined it would be possible to create a parallel history, credible or not, from the perspective of a series of agents who were alien to the official version of that cultural history. Perhaps I would be able to obtain data that could eventually make its way into the chronologies and accounts of an era already charged with romanticism. What is history if not an entanglement of arguments which can be altered with the intention of resisting those alien histories that one is supposed to assimilate?*

*The project was a failure for different reasons and subsequently abandoned; with the exception of a first attempt, of which there remains a strange recording that I had never reproduced before writing this text.*

*On the afternoon of our appointment, I first went to pick up Cuauhtémoc Medina, with whom I write this account. Intuitively I knew that this was not to be an individual experience. On one hand, I think that the idea of going to an unknown place in Mexico city to meet a medium alone scared me a little, and at the same time I did not feel sufficiently prepared academically to interview a figure like Diego Rivera --who by virtue of his controversiality emerged as the first choice for my interviews. Given the nature of the event, I needed at least two witnesses, or I could have easily been accused of making everything up. Cuauhtémoc, although somewhat incredulous and mocking of our enterprise, had accepted to join me after other historians refused to do so, finding this an idiotic, dangerous and distasteful adventure. Little did I know at that moment that it would be Cuauhtémoc who*

*spontaneously would ask most of the questions and in the key moments. As memory is treacherous we also decided to write the following paragraphs together since that which lies recorded in the phonogram has become only a distant echo of what happened during that encounter.*

*MGT*

## **The Secret Life of Diego Rivera**

by Mario García Torres and Cuauhtémoc Medina

What we witnessed that afternoon could be no more than a private theatrical monologue, which even if entertaining turned out to be excessively expensive. None of us had the least intention of believing in the medium's powers. Rather, we wanted to put her to the test, to the extent it was possible, concealing from her that the object of our interest was Diego Rivera. However, we came out somewhat intimidated, by an experience that had been far more disturbing than we had imagined.

The visit started with a strange vision, even in Mexico City; a transvestite helping cars park and looking over them on the street where we left ours. He himself gave us the directions to our address: the building where we were going to was a classic pseudo-modern building from the 1950s, with an ugly but durable mosaic facade, and never-ending anonymous corridors. We went up the stairs with some anxiety as to what and who we would encounter. When we spoke to the woman over the phone in order to inquire about the possibility of contacting the dead, she stated, apparently scared, that she did not perform that kind of job everyday. In fact, she made us wait a few days until confirming our appointment, as if she had to consult it with herself. Nevertheless, our calls to her never lasted for more than a few seconds. We never mentioned, on the phone, the name or any other relevant details

of the life of the painter. The only question she asked on the phone was to know if the deceased was in any way related to us, which we promptly denied. In reality, it was not difficult to make her overcome her misgivings.

The medium was a woman, aged perhaps around 45. We had contacted several “psychics” on the phone, but this was the only one who claimed to be capable of summoning the dead for a conversation. However, the scene we found upon arrival in her house most definitely did not correspond with the classical representation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois spiritualist’s parlor, with the half-lit table seemingly set for a poker game. The medium was obviously lower class and she received her clientele in a house monstrously devoid of any furniture. In what must have been the living room of her apartment there was a mess of several objects: plastic buckets with cheap flowers on the floor, small piles of newspapers that looked as if they had been used for some sort of ceremony, candles of different colors and sizes, and a pair of plastic chairs. The walls were bare except for a mirror. Here and there were scattered catholic images and “estampas” on the floor. Definitely, our medium was a quack. She did not appear to be a specialist in initiating dialogues with the dead, but rather the practitioner of a range of supernatural rituals and activities that she adjusted to fit the petitions and needs of her clients.

The first surprise was that this ceremonial space, instead of being pagan as we had imagined it, was not only religious but Catholic as well –in the popular sense of the term in Mexico. The medium prayed in order to communicate with the netherworld, since she was a popular shaman who combined Christian symbols with the memory of indigenous rites and a more or less original delirium. Her practice was fundamentally domestic; she practiced divination and offered cleansings in the living room, while a young man, who could be her son or her lover, stuck his head out to peek from his room, from which we could see the light of a flickering television. She was not someone who lent her body to souls so they could communicate with the living but a clairvoyant who did not claim to have any knowledge that could explain her “gift”, and who limited herself to repeating what she “saw” and

what she was “told.” A couple of times she told us “he was here,” and every now and then she would say “yes, yes, I hear you.” Thus, we were in the presence of a popular witch or sorceress who owed her powers to charismatic personal illumination rather than to the labor-intensive apprenticeship of a tradition.

We told the medium we wanted to contact a certain “Diego María Rivera Barrientos”: using the complete name of the painter so as to somewhat disguise his identity and avoid having her repeat the legend of the communist painter and unfaithful husband of Frida Kahlo. Following the medium’s instructions, we brought with us a bag of “pitayas” (or dragon fruit), since it was a fruit that Rivera surely found delicious; two candles for *santería*, one black, one pink; and something that had belonged to the deceased, an original manuscript text. Touching the document, the medium immediately summoned him. According to her, the soul of Diego María Rivera Barrientos had come to our encounter several times, for short periods, and had the intention of speaking to us, even if we had never coincided in a known space or time. It was the dead man who, unbeknownst to us, had summoned us: he had an important message to communicate.

Accustomed as she was to give consolation to mortals after the death of their closest relatives, the medium started to tell us that at the end of his life, Diego –as she called him—had changed, but for reasons beyond his control. At a point in his life, Rivera had been tortured, and for this reason he had withdrawn from people and exhibited a strange behavior. At times, as if trying to read our expectations, the medium seemed to almost suggest that Rivera had been murdered. But as if she had realized that following this path would not be so effective, she described the scenario of a great conspiracy, where the people who “had made him do things” were related to important spheres in the worlds of politics, business or entertainment. Apparently Diego wanted us to know that he had confronted a secret alliance and in order to calm down the living it was necessary for him to reveal the secret that bound him. “He was not a bad man. He just had to accept certain situations, bide his time, otherwise he would be hurt.” The message to be communicated to us was something he had been unable to reveal during his lifetime because it was a matter of life and death.

Moreover, the medium's technique was at best rudimentary. Her only attempt to confirm that the spirit she invoked was in fact the correct one was to corroborate it with us while she continued to pray with her eyes closed: "His body was in pain, wasn't it? Before dying. Where?" Rivera had died from cancer in the penis, so we jokingly said that his pain had been "in the middle." The medium nodded as if that enough reassured her of the identity of the deceased. "he was a big man, wasn't he? Certainly ...

But as we have already mentioned, the revelation was not limited to the regret that Rivera might have felt towards his loved ones. The people who had tortured him were part of a more complex plot. We knew that Rivera had belonged to the strange Mexicanist-Indigenist lodges that emerged in the 1920s. One of the tricks we used to interrogate the medium was to go further in that direction, largely unknown to the general public. We asked, then, if Diego María had belonged to some kind of lodge. The woman confirmed it immediately and added that the enemies and torturers of the artist were also freemasons. She then proceeded to weave a yarn that combined conspiracy with a romantic plot: "He really did not want to be there, but a woman had forced him." Once in the lodge there was no way out. This was a group that held its followers under threat. According to the clairvoyant, the ghost had told her about all of this.

Later, she proceeded to describe an episode she saw in wealth of detail. There was a cold place, in the "outskirts of the Distrito" —that is, Mexico City—in which they would gather and do "strange things." The group was large but only six people would go to those meetings, our Diego's wife among them. In that place, surrounded by often-snow-capped mountains, there was a table with a black tablecloth, monogrammed on one corner with the word a-t-h-o-s. "Athos, no?" she said opening her eyes to see what she had copied on the paper in her apparent trance.

After a long silence, Rivera had come back to us, still apologizing, with short phrases we attempted to articulate: "yes he did love some people, but the experience was too strong. It left a mark on him. He felt betrayed. He was beat up on the street, by people who were sent to beat him. What he really

wanted was to write a lot.”

We then decided to be more daring and ask precise questions. We never found a straightforward answer in regard to the relation between Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros; the medium apparently did not read into our doubts based on the rumors of their very public fights. When it seemed that the ghost’s complaints were waning, Cuauhtémoc began to ask about the lives of his close friends, specifically about Tina’s (Modotti) implication in the death of (Julio Antonio) Mella. “Yes, he says yes. She had to do with it on various occasions, pointing out to the person.”

Mella, founder of the Communist Party in Cuba, was murdered while walking with Tina Modotti on the night of January 10, 1929. Initially the police and the press tried to implicate the photographer, model and actress, who lived in Mexico, but it is speculated that the assassin was Vittorio Vidali, who aside from wanting to disrupt the Trotskyist networks in which Mella had involved himself was also engaged in a love affair with Modotti. “It had to be” –said the medium—“she is suffering a lot, (Mella) has to do with politics. Why do you want to know about him?” –she asked with her eyes still half closed, as if asking this entailed some kind of risk.

In the recording we discreetly made there are pauses. The story does not progress in a linear way in its entirety. The clairvoyant had a disorganized mind; to reconstruct her message we had to fit bits and pieces. In some parts, there are no voices in the recording; we submitted to her silence. In the distance you can hear the television, as well as the cars outside. It’s as if there were communication failures with the netherworld: birds on the wires, digital sound, static in the spiritualist radio. Finally, the signal goes on again; the woman prays and rubs Rivera’s typewritten manuscript with her hands (a review of an unknown painter) ... Nonetheless, this text became of radical importance in the ritual: “His paper, it makes me feel something. Close your eyes, when I begin speaking you can open them again.” During the séance there were always elements that escaped her understanding. “They dress in a strange way,” she said repeatedly. “There are things that come from abroad.” Almost at the end of the session she mentioned several names, stopping longer at the mention of a certain Jean W. But it

was only that; a bait meant to keep us busy with our inquiry.

Finally, the medium chose to go for a theatrical ending: “There are people in that group that are still alive”, she said, and then asked us if Diego ever had a relationship with an actress, which we failed to answer. “She knows something”, she said, and added with a mysterious tone: “But the time for that hasn’t come yet.”

Then, as if wanting to give herself importance regarding the current political controversies and the stuff of police and romance magazines, the medium assured us that she had predicted the economic crisis in the country, and that Mario Bezares, a television comedian who was brutally implicated in a murder, would be set free. “A journalist came to see me and recorded it”. But referring now to a singer, who was also in jail, she said “Gloria Trevi will not leave prison. She did mess with politics.” A typical thing in Mexico; every evil is negotiable, except that which involves public power.

We then asked her how we could find out more about the group that Rivera was involved in, and the response was immediate: “Diego signed some papers. And they are safeguarded.” The medium then described a scenario involving some sort of treasure and an inheritance; the truth about the secret group, their activities and some of the names of its members was, according to the medium, kept in some sort of basement or crypt. “Some documents, there were many, he never destroyed them” –she told us as if we were heirs looking for possible lost family fortunes. When she noticed our interest in the location of the basement, she pushed the situation further giving the ghost an imperative tone: “He is pointing to some papers. They were given to him. There is something written. There is a female relative, whom we will find before finding the papers. There you will find what you seek” –she said.

End of session; we should have been more than satisfied. Even so, the witch had the bad taste to give us a farewell gift. Taking the candles used in the ceremony and giving them to us inside plastic bags, carefully, as if they were contaminated with radiation, she made predictions about our love lives.

These we keep to ourselves as a separate chapter, just in case they may become true in the future.

Almost three years after that experience, it was finally made public that at the time of his death in 1957, the painter Diego Rivera instructed his secretaries to store a series of objects and documents in boxes which should not be opened until fifteen years after his death. For unknown reasons, Dolores Olmedo, trustee of his inheritance, kept the archives in one of the bathrooms of the now Museo Frida Kahlo, in the southern part of Mexico City, where they remained hidden for fifty years, ignored by historians, biographers and critics. These papers were revealed after Olmedo's death in 2002.

When the existence of this "secret archive", as the press called it, was revealed, some specialists like Raquel Tibol and Blanca Garduño both agreed that the archive must have contained information that Rivera preferred to keep out of sight, such as details of the prostate cancer that caused his death and documents related to his activities in the Communist Party. The secret archive --which for the past years has been classified and digitalized-- will be displayed to the public in the coming years, according to a communiqué from the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Trust of the Bank of Mexico.

As the medium told us: "You took a difficult path, but eventually you will arrive where you wanted to...but it will be difficult, because it is ugly."