

# NELSON RIVERA



By The Editors and nibia pastrana santiago

**F**or *Commonwealth*, Nelson Rivera wrote a score for a performance that occurred periodically throughout the run of the exhibition at the ICA.

The script is based on speeches by Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1965), a Puerto Rican attorney and political leader who was the main figure in the movement for Puerto Rican independence from the United States. These speeches, delivered from 1948 to 1950, were made during the US military occupation of Puerto Rico, when it had partial sovereignty and before it was designated as a commonwealth, an unincorporated territory of the United States. In 1948, the Puerto Rican Senate passed Law 53, which made it illegal to display the Puerto Rican flag and limited speech against the United States government. The speeches in Rivera's scripts violated this law by criticizing the US government and advocating for independence. Rivera has required that only nonSpanish speakers perform the score. This gesture also asks that we pay attention to the form and the musicality of political speech.

– The Editors

**Another version of *Álbum de familia*: no order, no photos, just a few years**

**2015:**

*The exhibition Sucio Díficil / Nelson Rivera: teatro, música y*

*performance* opens at Museo de Caguas. “El sucio difícil, sácalo con Lestoil” (“For difficult dirt, use Lestoil”) was the slogan of a T.V. commercial in Puerto Rico. In Nelson Rivera’s words: “This title is my version of the plantain stain, that dirt never comes out, it is invincible. It was originally a pseudonym, I signed my first theater and performance pieces as “Sucio Difícil”, difícil with a capital ‘D’, like a last name.”

### **1970:**

Antonia Martínez Lagares, a 20-year-old student from the town of Arecibo, is shot and killed by a police officer during a student strike at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. The students were protesting against the presence of the ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) on campus.

### **2008:**

I was in my final year at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. I went to see Nelson Rivera’s *El maestro* at the Arcelay Theater in Caguas. Not once, a set, lighting design, actor (Teófilo Torres), or text would move me as much. Theatre itself is political. Pedro Albizu Campos’s words are current and sharp.

### **2012:**

“...I insist on ‘Puerto Rico’ and not on the so-called ‘Commonwealth’, which is a sordid rant that not even us can recognize. For me, what defines Puerto Rican art as a national art is its absolute awareness of its greatness, the assurance of being on equal standing with all of humanity, along with a critical consciousness of our colonial status, which prevents from full recognition of that greatness. My definition is very personal, without any pretensions.” - Nelson Rivera

**1953:**

Nelson Rivera was born in Fajardo.

**1954:**

On March 1st, armed Puerto Rican nationalists Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores, and Andrés Figueroa entered the United States House of Representatives on Capitol Hill in Washington DC. They fired thirty shots, wounding five congressmen.

**2015:**

Nelson Rivera curates my first work in a museum, “taller de nada.” This live workshop, at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, lasts two weeks.

**1971:**

“Nothing could better justify the colonizer’s privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized destitution than his indolence. The mythical portrait of the colonized therefore includes an unbelievable laziness, and that of the colonizer, a virtuous taste for action.” - Albert Memmi

**2000:**

The United States Navy, the FBI, the Puerto Rico Police Task Force, and federal marshals forcibly remove people doing civil disobedience in Vieques, destroying the camps, schools, and chapels built inside the firing range. They brutally arrest 200 civilians, releasing them ten hours later.

**2010:**

Nelson Rivera’s “Sin título: piezas de teatro experimental para un grupo de actores” (Untitled: Experimental Plays for a Group of

Actors) premieres at the Victoria Espinosa Theater in Santurce. From one of the scores: “The entire cast dances a merengue choreography. In complete silence.”

**1993:**

Visual artist Elizam Escobar completes 13 years in prison, out of a 68-year sentence imposed on him as a penalty for his alleged participation in the Frente Armado de Liberación Nacional (FALN/Armed Front for National Liberation).

**1933:**

Pedro Albizu Campos successfully led a strike against Puerto Rico Railway and Light and Power Company, the companies that held the island’s electricity monopoly.

**1980:**

On February 6th, Adolfinia Villanueva Osorio, 34-years old and mother of six children, was murdered by a Puerto Rican police officer. State forces wanted to evict her family from their house and land in Medianía Alta in Loíza.

**1991:**

Nelson Rivera creates *Álbum de Familia* for a single performer: “A desk, a performer with his back to the audience. A microphone. A slide projector. The performer reads a text (per year) about the history of political repression in his country while projecting a photo corresponding to that year. Slides: in chronological order, his family photos. The performer must add a personal commentary at the end of the sequence of photos and text.”

**1891:**

Pedro Albizu Campos was born in Ponce.

**2016:**

Nelson Rivera and I performed together for the first time. The piece was titled “Danza Actual.” The improvisation score had a choreographic sequence of simultaneous gestures, which we did sitting on a bench. The choreography, which lasted exactly one minute, took us about 4 hours of rehearsal. We presented it at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras.

**1987:**

“Art is not a deception of reality, it is not a lack of courage, given the weight of lurking circumstances. Also, we must be ready to support with facts what we so beautifully say; there is no worse misery than continually talking about the value of spirit if we do not feel at the same time the militancy of the common good. Hypocrisy is exhausting already.” - Francisco Matos Paoli

**2006:**

30 years have passed since the murder of Santiago Mari Pesquera, son of Juan Mari Bras. The FBI has not yet provided documentation to clarify the murder and its cover-up.

**2012:**

“I firmly believe that all Puerto Rican art is a forceful demonstration of the injustice of our colonial relationship and, as such, the metropolis has to deny it. José Campeche was already painting in San Juan when the United States of America did not yet exist and, however, when in 1997 there was an exhibition in Washington D.C., the Yankees had the insolence of presenting him as ‘one of our own.’” - Nelson Rivera

**2002:**

Professor José Solís Jordán was transferred to the Guaynabo

federal prison from the United States, convicted for placing a bomb in front of an Army recruitment center in Chicago. Agent Rafael Marrero testified at his trial, admitting to having placed the bomb and receiving \$119,000 from the FBI in exchange for immunity for his testimony.

**2015:**

I started teaching classes at the university. My students in the choreographic composition class read Nelson Rivera's text "¿Y qué es eso de arte experimental?" ("But what's that thing called experimental art?"/1997). I quote: "Myth 11: We cannot compare Puerto Rican experimentalists with true artists like Eva Hesse and Joseph Beuys" Bendito...! If Eva Hesse had been born in Puerto Rico, no one would know about her. Imagine what people would say if an artist exhibited lard spread on the corners of a gallery and blood sausages in glass urns, huh? In Puerto Rico, we don't even have access to the art of the masters (we haven't seen Oller's "French Landscapes" for centuries)."

**-nibia pastrana santiago**

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*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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