

## LA FUGA – Chilean Cinema Magazine

<http://www.lafuga.cl/entrevista-a-mm-serra-jose-rodriguez-soltero-en-los-archivos-de-la-film-makers-coop-de-nueva-york/559>

Jose Rodriguez Soltero Special

### Interview with MM Serra. Jose Rodriguez Soltero in the archives of the Film-Makers' Coop in New York.

Director: José Rodríguez Soltero.

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By [Julio Ramos](#)

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MM Serra is an experimental filmmaker, teacher, curator of a wide range of film retrospectives, and Executive Director of the *Film-Makers' Coop* in New York City, an institution founded by Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith and others, and holds many important European and American experimental films. Her latest film, *Beauty Bitch* (2011) premiered last year at the New York Film Festival. *Anthology Films Archive* presented a retrospective of the work of MM Serra last June.



**JR:** How did the *Film-Makers' Coop* acquire the rights to the films of Puerto Rican filmmaker José Rodríguez Soltero?

**MMS:** The Film Coop had Soltero's films in distribution, but until the early nineties they were almost unseen. Jose Rodriguez Soltero studied filmmaking at San Francisco and at the Sorbonne. He lived in New York and after making three extraordinary films stopped making films. In the early seventies he was very interested in politics and abandoned filmmaking. Rediscovering *Lupe* (1966) by Soltero was partly by chance, thanks to a researcher at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles who was investigating the first films with the participation of Hispanics and *drag queens*. He discovered *Lupe* in our catalog.

After I screened the film for Jim Hubbard, he curated and screened it at the *Film Festival Mix* and *Anthology Film Archives* in New York. After a complicated and difficult period

of application and fundraising, *Lupe* was finally restored with funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation and with the permission of Jose, who fortunately was still alive at that time. Two films were preserved by Soltero, *Lupe* and *Jerovi*. The latter is the oldest copy we have in distribution. His first movie, *Original Sin*, made in Puerto Rico around the 60s, disappeared. A third film, unrestored, the first film to be made about Che Guevara in the United States, *Dialogues with Che* (1967), was funded with the help of Andy Warhol; it has hardly been seen in the United States because it was made in Spanish and has not been subtitled.

**JR: Tell us a little more about the founding of the Film-Makers' Coop and the experimental film library that stores the three movies by Jose Rodriguez Soltero.**

**MMS:** The Film-Makers' Coop of New York was founded by Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Shirley Clarke and 22 artists in 1961. Mekas was part of a counterculture movement nationally, which included the Canyon Cinema in the Pacific coast. His goal was to create a vision / personal cinema outside the industry. The Coop is owned by the artists. The event which made the Film Coop visible was the scandal surrounding the screening of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*. Cross-dressing was illegal and considered a perversion in 1963. *Flaming Creatures* was screened at a cinema in Lane 8, Bowery beyond, without permission. This resulted in Flo Jacobs, Ken Jacobs, and Jonas Mekas being arrested at the screening. This fact gave visibility to the Film Coop, which now holds the main collection of experimental film in the world.

**JR: Did you meet with the director José Rodríguez Soltero personally?**

**MMS:** Yes, of course. Soltero appeared in the Coop and handed me the restored copy of *Lupe*. I said, "Here, this is now owned by the Film Coop. This copy is for circulation and distribution, and will not be stored in a file or lost in a theater." He also said: "I'm dying, seriously. I have cirrhosis and I have not much time to live." I thought he was joking, but he died three or four months later, in May 2009. When I saw it, it was full of energy, and very passionate. Fortunately he saw the new copy before dying.

**JR: How did you like the work of preserving *Jerovi* and *Lupe*?**

**MMS:** The original film was colorful, like the life of Mario Montez! Mario Montez, a beautiful Puerto Rican drag queen, had presented the role of Lupe Velez in Soltero's film. Back then Montez was a renowned actor who worked with Warhol underground. Mario Montez represents Lupe Velez, who as you know was one of the first Mexican actresses who made it in Hollywood and who tragically died due to an overdose.

**JR: What do you think is the best context today in which to see films by Rodriguez Soltero? In what context do you think these films regain their luster and their relevance in radical aesthetics and politics?**

**MMS:** To give you an example, I was co-curator with David E. James of an avant-garde film festival called *Counter Culture, Counter Cinema* presented by Charles S. Cohen in California in October 2010. In the first program (*Classics of the Underground*), I decided to show Jose Rodriguez Soltero's *Lupe* with *Flaming Creatures*. Historically *Flaming Creatures* by Jack Smith was screened with Ken Jacobs' *Blonde Cobra*. In this program I wanted to show and highlight *Lupe*. Mario Montez (who played Lupe) said that for him it was his best film, and Rodriguez Soltero had been his favorite director. And in having

a new restored print at the Film-Makers' Coop we wanted to show it and celebrate it. Juan A. Suarez wrote the comments of the program and a description of the film in our online catalog. In my opinion, Suarez' provided the best descriptions of the importance of this film. Our copy of *Lupe* is flawless and beautiful because of its great color and texture.

with guest artists  
Jonas Mekas  
Ken Jacobs  
Carolee Schneemann  
and others.

SilverScreen Theater  
Pacific Design Center  
8687 Melrose Avenue  
West Hollywood, CA

October 14-16, 2010

This cinema extravaganza, programmed from the collection of The New American Cinema Group/New York's Film-Makers' Cooperative, showcases the long-term alliance between experimental cinema and counter-culture activity.

Covering 50 years, these films and videos explore sexuality, politics, communal experiments, and transgressive film appropriations.

presented by: Tickets:

The poster features a collage of film stills: a close-up of a woman's face with red lips, a young girl in a blue jacket, and a man with horns. Text on the left provides event details, and text on the right lists guest artists and a description of the festival's focus.

**JR: Where was the festival? What was the public reaction to "rediscovering" this underground classic? Do you think this is a work that speaks well with Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and Warhol's films?**

**MMS:** The film festival was held at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, California. Lately in the press there has been much talk of *Flaming Creatures*, as the Barbara Gladstone Gallery bought the rights to the properties of Jack Smith. I felt that *Lupe* should be as present in the media. Mario Montez was the star of both *Lupe* and *Flaming Creatures*. *Lupe* has been a significant and important work in queer cinema and culture, and it is a gem that should be seen. The program also closed a celebration of the New American Cinema's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC in July 2011. Several people in the audience came to see me afterwards and told me: "The film is a gem. How can we see it, how can we buy it?" They wanted the digital copy and thought we should put it on the net. "I told them, well, it costs a lot of money and to restore it just in 16mm." In order to make these films more visible, we hope in the future to digitize these rare and historical films. You can view it here in New York at the Coop, where we have a little room for projections.

**JR: This film, in contrast to Warhol's *Lupe* (1965) and other underground films, Soltero's *Lupe* introduced a body marked by race and class. With Mario Montez, *Lupe* shows us a socially marginalized experience in America...**

**MMS:** ...it also has remarkable empathy sex workers. Empathy for prostitution, women and men. It is the only film of those years, showing compassion in that regard. Rather than end the story with the death of Lupe, Soltero shows her ascent to heaven; she is thus freed from her physical form and her suffering. In Soltero's film, rather than demonizing Lupe, she is made holy. I would say that the film shows empathy for the lower classes and the oppressed.

**JR: In Warhol's film, Lupe was represented by Edie Sedgwick, a white actress, who was a heroin addict...**

**MMS:** A drug addict; her story is very sad. It was the tragedy of her life, and the thing about her is that she belonged to a different class from that of Lupe Velez. Warhol's *Lupe* was shot in the apartment of the grandmother of the actress, a high-class apartment. The tragedy is that Sedgwick was suffering the effects of her addiction to heroin, this is clear. But there's the makeup... she dances with the food, all in a high class environment. Though in another sense hers' was a tragedy similar to that of Lupe. I think Sedgwick was very representative of Lupe, as a portrait, but Warhol takes some liberties regarding race. And prostitution does not show, nor the effects of Lupe Velez's past living on the street.

**JR: This is a very important aspect of your film work. I just saw your film *Beauty Bitch* which was successful at the New York Film Festival earlier this year (2011).**

**MMS:** In *Beauty Bitch* Anne Hanavan is the protagonist, who for ten years was addicted to heroin in the East Village and transformed her life through her art. The issue of self-destruction and art play a major role in my work. My interest in these issues comes from my name, Mary Magdalene (laughs). I wanted to show the reality of women and carnal images of prostitution, drugs and rape. Myself and others have experience the cathartic power of art. In my opinion, we are living in a culture in decline, with a devotion to consumer goods and luxury, where only appearance matters. I make experimental documentaries that delve into the lives and creative processes of artists. I am interested in these underground artists who use their body as a spectacle to reflect many facets, including life, death and decay. I try to focus on the content and context that reflect my own life, my children, my home. To define my creative process I invented the term *Art (core)*, which refers to the *hard core* / explicit body and body / soul. The Art (core) seeks the essence of being. It is not just the physical self but of unified identity. I thought I would devise a positive term to describe the exploration of the explicit body that is not porn, not part of the sex industry, but an expression of the search for unified self, body and soul.