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Who can erase the Traces?

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Abstract

Despite the increasing democratization that followed the long era of dictatorships, the Latin American continent continues to show the highest indices of social inequality in the world.

This paper will focus on the work of the Guatemalan artist, Regina Jose Galindo (b. 1974), considering how her artistic practice responds to censorship and human rights violations, through a close engagement with “¿*Quien puede borrar las huellas?*” 2003 (Who can erase the Traces?).

Galindo’s work intervened in the daily activity of Guatemala City and by doing so reactivated debates about economic, legal, and military processes that were undeniably problematic. The performance makes a direct comment on military violence in Latin America and is considered “a poetic metaphor for the act of inscribing inerasable memories — in this case, memories of those killed by the military.”¹

The artist reclaims strategies belonging to a tradition of political art that was censored during the dictatorships. Over the course of the transitional periods and the recent re-democratization of Latin America, her work has been seen as an alternative to decorative and post-utopian art.

Galindo tends to promote dissidence in the public sphere through the mechanism of disillusionment and disenchantment. She is intent on understanding reality as historical and conflictive rather than natural or harmonious.

Indeed, through her activist performances, and by using her body, the artist recalls notions of national identity and the formation of a social imaginary.

Key words: Latin America, Performance, Regina Jose Galindo, Guatemala, social-political identity

Introduction

‘Only the slave can change the world.’
Alexandre Kojève, “Introduction to the Reading of Hegel”

A true exponent of Deleuze’s art of "repetition", Regina José Galindo "repeats" actions. Repetition never coincides with the return of the identical, but it restores the possibility of what has been: it does not return the past as such, but makes it all possible (again). For this, it is not the representation of but a kind of theatre of repetition that is at the centre of the rituals that Galindo puts on stage: strange ceremonies, direct performances and recitations, realized in the here and now and repeated in a real action.

Hence, the inherently political nature of her work: not only as the presentation of a discourse of gender, or as an act of protest. Without conceiving of the repetition, her extreme actions — where the artist puts her body into play — are not fully explicable. Indeed, the poetic character of all her works, which she calls “psychomagic acts” (a term borrowed from Jodorowsky), emphasizes the tragic element, consequently they possess a strong emotional charge.

Since her first performance in 1999, Galindo has conjugated the space of her body with the social, when — unheard — she recites her poetry suspended ten meters above a city square in Guatemala City.

Her work explores the universal ethical implications of social injustices that are related to racial, gender, and other abuses that are involved in the unequal power relations that operate in our current society.

Regina’s artistic strategy is entangled with her identity and social politics; her work makes explicit the connections among social and identity politics.

Galindo’s performance can be defined as being motivated by a “redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life”, as a vehicle for social change, and as a radical merging of life and art.²

“During the years of military governments, art had lost its meaning as [an] object, and artists sought other means of expression, particularly through conceptual art and street actions.”³

As Shifra Goldman has asserted, in a country that is constantly impoverished and destabilised — as much of Latin America has been during the twentieth century — a political art that is oriented towards social change is frequently a way to render bearable lives that are otherwise submerged in violence and injustice.⁴

“In this regard, what makes the Latin American versions of the neo-avant-gardes so unique is not so much their radical artistic postulates but a non-aesthetic goal: the social function they were called upon to play with regard to the paradox of unstable societies and their status quo. Therein lies their innermost utopian dimension. The attempt to contest the institutional art world in order to bridge the gap that separated them from society led many of these manifestations to actively engage the public sphere — right there were the aesthetic specifics of their practice dissolved into broader fields, such as politics, sociology, ethnography, and anthropology...”⁵

Who can erase the Traces? [¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?]

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”⁶

Regina José Galindo, a Guatemala-based artist, creates performances that deploy self-inflicted pain and physical suffering to direct attention to a political subtext of protest, expressing the struggle of daily life in her native country under continually corrupt regimes. Presenting her self-abused figure as a spectacle that is put on display in a public space, she puts forward political crimes, social hierarchies, segregation, and the oppression of women for examination. Her impassive expressions may recall those of Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane, and, by extension, Ana Mendieta, not simply through the use of the artist’s body, but in the punishing rituals to which it is subjected.

Galindo’s unapologetic actions amplify her confrontational statements, placing the viewer in the uncomfortable trajectory of her unavoidable gaze.

Quoting Carolee Schneemann, Galindo expresses “a visceral necessity drawn by the senses to the fingers, to the eyes,”⁷ an action that influences both the artist’s creative process and the public’s experience of the performance. Works like *Perra (Bitch)* (2005), in which she cuts her thigh with a knife, or *Himenoplastia (Hymenoplasty)* (2004), in which she underwent surgery to rebuild her hymen, had different receptions in Guatemala and abroad. This reflects the varying meanings of bodily representation, both in modern Latin American cultures and internationally.

Galindo’s childhood and teenage years coincided with the most brutal and violent episodes of the Guatemala Civil War, especially with the regime of Ríos Montt of 1982–1983. Her reaction to that historical contest was to turn her personal and political response to its horrors into a bodily practice.

Despite the fact that most of the fighting between the government forces that were supported by the United States, and the opposition left-wing guerrillas, which led to the destruction of hundreds of Mayan villages and the systematic murder of thousands of civilians was concentrated in rural areas, and was thus almost invisible to the inhabitants of the city, such as Galindo and her family. She has described that period as having a constant atmosphere of fear and oppression.

Among the many consequences of the Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted 36 years and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths, there was the destruction of a generation of artists and intellectuals who were assassinated or exiled, with the result that there was an atrophy of the Guatemalan cultural infrastructure. An aftereffect of what was the longest and most violent conflict in modern Latin American history, many of the people involved in the war, or those who were damaged by it, continued to commit activities for criminal gangs. Consequently, contemporary Guatemala has one of the highest murder rates in Latin America, particularly in relation to the murders of women.

Galindo’s entire life and artistic practice is linked to the violence of the images of these crimes, and has a strong expressive form of representation. Her work refers to unpleasant situations, alarming signs of deep existential discomfort with which our era struggles.

Although her work always draws references from the lower levels of society, and from women in particular, it also refers to global issues, such as unrepentant male violence, marginalisation, subordination, and torture. It deals with all of those “others” who have been subjected to violence.

Galindo denounces the excess of violence against women, often with reference to the deplorable events in the press in her country, but offers a universalized reflection, condemning the excess of social, political, and cultural violence that affects contemporary society in general. The artist returns to the sites where violence is consumed and “re-stages” events in a kind of ritual that is cruelly reactivated. She activates a process of rapprochement with the opposite direction, from the symbolic to the real.

In her work, the body becomes the subject/object of her performances, often pushing her physical and psychological limits towards their absolute thresholds.

Galindo’s image is that of a small woman, seemingly fragile, whose delicate physicality contrasts with the cruelty of her performances, a practice that is constantly nourished by the empathic participation that the artist is able to create with the viewer.

She transforms her viewers into aesthetic strategies that are designed to accentuate the great emotional impact of fragility and suffering on humankind.

Galindo's work recalls what Eric Gans defines as a “*sacrificial aesthetic*”,⁸ where the aesthetic forms that are born from bloody sacrificial practices have evolved from a necessary feature of social organization into intra-psychic elements of the human condition⁹:

This element is repeated constantly by the Guatemalan artist, often putting her own psycho-physical safety at risk.

*“This end of the ability of the aesthetic to discriminate between the sacrificial and the anti-sacrificial is not the end of art. On the contrary, it liberates the aesthetic from the ethical end of justifying sacrifice. Aesthetic form remains sacrificial, but sacrifice is no longer understood as a necessary feature of social organization; it is merely a ‘psychological’ element of the human condition”.*¹⁰

Indeed, this was evident during the Venice Biennale in 2005, when she put herself into a cubicle located in the Arsenal and, hidden from the public, inflicted 279 lashes on her body, which could be heard from outside through a system of microphones and amplifiers. Indeed, the lashes were in memory of 279 women who had been murdered in Guatemala that year. These murders went mostly unpunished and were often compounded by macabre practices. The masochism of the artist is no more than the reduction of human beings to the status of *homo sacer*¹¹ (a person expelled from their social and legal context and thus considered a mere exception).

Nevertheless, none of her gestures can be confused with the martyrs of early Christianity, because she is neither sacrificed nor self-immolated in defence of a faith — what she does is to attempt to call for justice.

As the performance *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, which consists both of a 37-minute video and photographic images that were realized on 23rd July 2003 in Guatemala City, to protest against the unchallenged decision of the Supreme Court of Justice of Guatemala to authorize the candidacy of General Efraín Ríos Montt, ex-political leader of the extreme right, who was responsible for a coup in 1982 and who, as dictator, had promoted the Civil War and had a presidency that was marked by a campaign of violence: killings, rapes, torture and oppressive tactics directed mainly against the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. On that day Regina, dressed in black, came out barefoot from her laboratory, carrying a white bowl full of human blood in her hands, before going to the headquarters of the Supreme Court of Justice. From there, she progressed through the city. At the end of the performance she reached the headquarters of the National Palace, the seat of the Presidency of the country, where she left the last two footprints and the bowl of blood in front of the court building. Her aim was to ensure that a trace of bloody footprints would remain, at least for a short time, on the path from the executive power to that of the judicial power, highlighting the complicity of both in covering up an international policy of genocide.

*“In actual fact, the action does not accuse only the institution that conceals these things, for it is also an action of justice outside of the authority of the State. It adds its own memory to that of officialdom, creating a new form of direct justice that does not accept any form of intercession”.*¹²

For all of its temerity, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* did not push the artist's body to the physical extremes to which her subsequent practice has submitted it — a submission that makes physical pain a kind of raw material, or more ineffably, a method.

With the performance and the body as instruments of her artistic practice, through a sort of re-enactment, the artist impersonates the weak and the humble, the tortured and the oppressed, highlighting the limits of body and mind.

In this context, the artist is seen as a disturber who condemns the shortcomings of the social and political system, offering a clear diagnosis of a sick society, investigating crimes and deviances that alter policies and tackling controversial issues that others prefer to avoid.

Through this suffering that she deliberately imposes on herself, the artist joins the ranks of the oppressed — at least for a certain period of time — in a kind of exorcism of mistaken identity.

Her personal revolution, silent, is a conceptual approach, immensely poetic, and of almost unbearable pain. Her actions represent the manifestations of a wounded soul:

‘...el mundo mordio mi corazon/ y me contagio su rabia’.¹³

Through her active protest, performance art becomes a medium through which to accuse and call for the perseverance of justice, revealing the drama of the aggression that is heavily perpetrated in Latin American everyday life: one of the key areas in terms of the socio-economic and political situations of that country. By breaking the boundaries between life and death, Galindo reaffirms the importance of the intellectual and his or her moral obligation in social life, acting as a lucid witness to the events around us, understanding and explaining the context in the most provocative way possible.

Galindo formalises Adorno’s¹⁴ idea in which art is the language of suffering and not a mere decoration for which the bourgeoisie yearn.

Her operations are based on global issues, transforming the body into a matter that suffers, embodying Mario Perniola’s idea of the *performance of thing*:¹⁵

“If I only could, I would like to some extent to reduce unhappiness on earth... Being radical and opening a breach, sacrificing oneself for others, challenging the law, discredit morals, and the dominant ideology, and all this so that others can live better, and understand better...”¹⁶

Galindo enacts with her works what Foucault calls biopolitics. Indeed, Foucault defines biopolitics as the soil in which the practices act, with which the network of power manages the disciplines of the body and the regulation of populations. It is an area of contact between power and the sphere of life. A meeting that is fully realized in a precise era: that of the explosion of capitalism.

The control of human conditions thus becomes a political affair. It overturns the old symbols of power, which are related to blood and the law of death, into a new one, in which power guarantees life. In this way, and more than previously, power has access to the body. At the same time, the twentieth century shows that, politics continues to put people’s lives at stake. A consequence of the irruption of bio-power is that the law gives space to the norm: the rigid structure of the law can threaten its citizens with death, but the norm is more suitable to encoding life. This liberalism is the political framework that is the background to biopolitics. This, according to Foucault, is part of the action of resisting power: claiming life that is full, not alienated, that is the satisfaction of needs and wishes, health and happiness.

Power and biopolitics are not of course mere concepts but have somatic effects, impress themselves upon the body, even in our very nerves and muscles, enabling us to speak of the body’s memory of power and biopolitics. Remembering is a human capacity and, as numerous theorists state, the act of remembering is one faculty that makes us human. *¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?* deals with memory as an event and as certain collective memories, that, even as precise and as terrible as they are, are transformed into the biography of a society and explain the disengagement of its relations. The work of Galindo’s performance, with its ephemeral and dissolving essence, works on incomprehensible facts, including those that are laden with guilt and shame, which the collectivity wants to remove. Galindo’s work requires an ethic of shared memory.

Galindo’s work makes us wonder if, by erasing the memory, we erase our humanity, or whether such an erasure is limited to an attack on historical awareness. It is a way to free ourselves from the fear of death through collective memory.

As Galindo herself states:

“... Guatemala is a country without memory. The people, with little access to education, are easy to mislead with promises and the little gifts that politicians hand out during election campaigns. The official party, to which Ríos Montt belonged, and belongs, made a huge effort and had all the power to reach the Guatemalan minorities, who had difficulty connecting the actual Ríos Montt (the presidential candidate) to the past dictator-president, who was guilty of the greatest crimes against their own people,

their own blood. Every effort was necessary, any help at all, it was all needed to shout out the truth, by whatever means."¹⁷

By using the public sphere as a proper place in which to debate questions of collective interest, Galindo recalls the concept that *"the ideal public space is one of continuous conflict"*.¹⁸

To that extent, Galindo's works acquire their political character. The critical discourse of her action is at times articulated in the street, in direct contact with the problems affecting everyday citizens. Her work seeks to rediscover that utopian project to debate society in the public sphere, stimulating participation from the spectators as part of contemporary art. Her interventions are close to political activism, or, as Jacques Rancière says, interventions are *"a disturbance of the visible order of the social structure"*.¹⁹ Galindo's art poses uncomfortable questions about the status quo, attempting to understand reality as being historical and conflictual, rather than natural or harmonious, encouraging a testimony of the voices that are excluded from Guatemala's national narrative.

As Adorno has asserted:

*"Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art."*²⁰

Galindo's performance, however, is not only an uncomfortable reminder of the thousands of murders perpetrated by the Guatemalan army, but also, as the title of her performance indicates, her use of blood, which appears in the form of footprints, acts as the trace and mark of a crime. Indeed, the true purpose of the work is perhaps less to denounce the war crimes and more to indict the state of impunity in which those who committed them are still living.

*"Mi cuerpo no como cuerpo individual sino como cuerpo social, cuerpo colectivo, cuerpo global. Ser o reflejar a través de mí, la experiencia del otro; porque todos somos nosotros mismos y al mismo tiempo somos los otros."*²¹
Regina José Galindo

Notes

² V. Perz-Ratton, "Central American women artists in the? global age," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Merrell Publishers, London, 2007, p.140.

² A. Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 13.

³ J. Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001, pp. 296–7.

⁴ S. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p.xvii.

⁵ M.C. Ramírez, "A highly topical utopia. Some outstanding features of the avant-garde in Latin America," in *Inverted Utopias. Avant-garde in Latin America*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004, p.5.

⁶ W. Benjamin *On the Concept of History* (1940), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England.

⁷ C. Schneemann, quoted in Amelia Jones, 'Body Art / Performing the Subject', University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 2.

⁸ Cf. E.Gans, Sacrificing Culture, in 'Chronicle of Love and Resentment', n.184, October 1999,

<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw184.htm>

⁹ D.Polovineo, *L'Estetica Sacrificale* by Eric Gans: from a bloody sacrificial landscape to the origins of aesthetic forms, in *Studia patavina: rivista di scienze religiose, Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Settentrionale-Sezione di Padova*, 2008, vol.55, n.1, pp. 163–190.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Homo Sacer (Latin for "the sacred man" or "the accursed man") is a figure of Roman Law: a person who is banned, may be killed by anybody, but may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. A more comprehensive reflection on the concept *Homo Sacer* and its relationship to the contemporary word appears in: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1995 (Ristampa 2008).

¹² M. Scotini, Regina José Galindo, La ripetizione come forma di resistenza, in *Regina José Galindo, various authors*, vanillaedizione, Albissola Marina, 2006, pp. 16–17.

¹³ *Regina Jose Galindo*, Vanillaedizioni, 2006, poetry, p.169.

¹⁴ T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Press, 1997 [reprinted Continuum, London, 2011], p.296.

¹⁵ M.Perniola, *Il Sex appeal dell'inorganico*, 1994, Giulio Einaudi Editore Spa, Torino.

¹⁶ J. Castro in 'Produciendo Realidad. Arte e Realidad Latino Americana', Prometeo Arte Contemporanea, 2005, coordinated by Marco Scotini, pp. 88–89.

¹⁷ I. Candela, "Art in Latin America," in F. Goldman, *Regina José Galindo*, op.cit., p.40.

¹⁸ I. Candela, Una conversación con David Harvey, *El Pais*, 8 September 2007, p.II.

¹⁹ I. Candela, Art in Latin America, in J. Rancière, *The politics of Aesthetics*, op. cit., p.70.

²⁰ T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Press, 1997 [reprinted Continuum, London, 2011], p.296.

²¹ *Regina Jose Galindo*, Vanillaedizioni, 2006, poetry. [English Translation]: My body not as an individual body but as a social body, a collective body, a global body. To be or to reflect, through me, the experience of the other; because we are all ourselves and at the same time we are others.

Author:

Fortunata Calabro holds an MA in Art History from Birkbeck College, University of London. She has conducted research at *The Wallace Collection* in London and at the *Queens Museum* in NY. She was Associate Curator of *La Bienal del Fin del Mundo* (Argentina and Chile) and Exhibition Manager at *La Bienal de Las Fronteras* (Mexico). She is also columnist at the *International Museum of Women* and an independent researcher, curator and art producer for projects which blur the boundaries between critical education and contemporary art practice. Moreover she is the Production Manager for *Pinta The Latin American Art Show* in London and for *Art Marbella* in Spain.