

# The Collective Violence and Institutional Critique of Who Can Erase the Traces?/Regina José Galindo

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In 2003 Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo performed *Who Can Erase the Traces?* The piece arose from the artist's "rage and fear" at the presidential candidacy of Efraín Ríos Montt, a former dictator responsible for acts of genocide against Guatemala's indigenous population. Within this piece, Galindo unflinchingly presents the collective violence of the Guatemalan and Latin American experience, also visible in the work of other Latin American artists such as Teresa Margolles. The collectivity also encompasses the public's distribution of the performance footage online, thereby exposing human rights violations and extending the performative act to an unlimited, digital audience.

<SLIDE 1 – Huellas> In 2003, Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo performed *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* or *Who Can Erase the Traces?* in the streets of Guatemala. In this work Galindo repeatedly dips her feet in a basin filled with human blood as she walks, leaving a trail of bloody footprints from Guatemala's Constitutional Court to the National Palace. The piece was spurred by the artist's "fear and rage"<sup>1</sup> at the presidential candidacy of Efraín Ríos Montt, a former military dictator responsible for acts of genocide against the Guatemalan population. Within *Who Can Erase the Traces?* Galindo unflinchingly presents the collective violence of the Guatemalan and Latin American experience. Although she is an individual engaging in performance set in a specific context, her work supersedes the personal, linking to a collective human experience. By using imagery embedded with universal signifiers in her performance, Galindo launches an institutional critique against the power abuses at the root of the violence. In doing this Galindo magnifies the critique presented in *Who Can Erase the Traces?* beyond the initial scope of the performance, exposing human rights violations and extending the performative act to include an unlimited, digital audience.

Guatemala's volatile and bloody socio-political climate made a profound impact upon Galindo, informing and inspiring her artistic practice. Born in 1974<sup>2</sup>, Galindo's childhood coincided with the worst period of Guatemala's 36-year civil war, which occurred between 1979 and 1984.<sup>3</sup> <SLIDE 2 – War> It was during this period that 90% of human rights violations<sup>4</sup> took place, totaling 61,648 violations according to the Guatemalan Truth Commission.<sup>5</sup> The war, which lasted from 1960-1996, was the result of deeply ingrained social inequality resulting from colonialism paired with government instability<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Regina José Galindo and Francisco Goldman, "Regina José Galindo," *Bomb*, no. 94 (2005), 38-44.

<sup>2</sup> Regina José Galindo, Regina José Galindo, <http://www.reginajosegalindo.com/es/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Rubiana Chamargwala, and Hilcías E. Morán, "The Human Capital Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from Guatemala." (2010): 41-61.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Aida Toledo, Anabella Acevedo, and Elaine Bolton tr., "Through their Eyes: Reflections on Violence in the Work of Guatemalan Performance and Installation Artists," *N.Paradoxa*, 21 (2008): 56-66.

<sup>6</sup>Rubiana Chamargwala, and Hilcías E. Morán, "The Human Capital Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from Guatemala." (2010): 41-61.

The duration of Guatemala's internal conflict was marked by extreme violence, much of which was directed towards Guatemala's indigenous population under the command of Efraín Ríos Montt. As an army general during the conflict's apex (1982-83), Montt staged a military coup and seized control of the government<sup>7</sup>. Under his command, Montt's militia brutally massacred thousands of Guatemalan civilians<sup>8</sup>. Over this period of time more than 200,000 people were murdered or missing, and 83% of the victims were indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup> Although the conflict ended in 1996,<sup>10</sup> the extreme violence and resulting wide spread poverty have left indelible scars on twenty-first century Guatemala.

Having grown up in the volatile climate of the civil war, Regina José Galindo has addressed the violence and injustice of this period in her works. In 2003, Galindo responded to Montt's bid for the presidency<sup>11</sup> by creating her iconic performance piece, *Who Can Erase the Traces?* In the performance her diminutive figure is dressed simply in black garments and she carries a large white bowl filled with dark, red human blood. The harsh juxtaposition of the colors evokes a heightened sense of drama, emphasizing the intense coloration of the blood, while her somber clothing and demeanor recall a funeral procession.

In *Who Can Erase the Traces?*, Galindo connects herself to a larger collective consciousness. This assertion encompasses universal experiences of brutality, particularly within Latin America, and shared artistic concerns with other artists, accentuating the universality of pain within the motivation and imagery of their work. While Galindo's performance is strongly rooted within the Guatemalan context,

<sup>7</sup>Talea Miller, "Timeline: Guatemala's Brutal Civil War," MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (2011).  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/latin\\_america/jan-june11/timeline\\_03-07.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/latin_america/jan-june11/timeline_03-07.html) (accessed ).

<sup>8</sup>Kate Doyle, "Justice in Guatemala," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 45, no. 1 (2012): 37-42.

<sup>9</sup>Aida Toledo, Anabella Acevedo, and Elaine Bolton tr., "Through their Eyes: Reflections on Violence in the Work of Guatemalan Performance and Installation Artists," *N.Paradoxa*, 21 (2008): 56-66.

<sup>10</sup> Kate Doyle, "Justice in Guatemala," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 45, no. 1 (2012): 37-42.

<sup>11</sup> Regina José Galindo and Francisco Goldman, "Regina José Galindo," *Bomb*, no. 94 (2005), 38-44.

her emphasis on being a part of a global collective gives her works a potency that resonates with viewers beyond Guatemalan borders.

When describing her role within the context of the world and her work, Galindo has said,

“My body not as an individual body but as a social body, a collective body, a global body. To be or reflect through me, her, his or others experience; because all of us are ourselves and at the same time we are others.”<sup>12</sup>

Galindo’s assertion of being connected to a community is an essential aspect of *Who Can Erase the Traces?* When explaining her motivation for making this piece Galindo said,

“It emerged from rage and fear. When it was announced that Efraín Ríos Montt had managed to win acceptance as a presidential candidate... I suffered an attack of panic and depression...I decided then and there that I would take to the streets with my shout and amplify it. I had to do it.”<sup>13</sup>

The “rage and fear”<sup>14</sup> that prompted Galindo to create *Who Can Erase the Traces?* was not limited to her alone, but rather indicative of a larger sentiment present throughout Guatemala’s civilian population.<sup>15</sup>

<SLIDE 4 – Cleaning> Galindo cites the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles as an important source of influence.<sup>16</sup> Margolles describes her own engagement with the concept of collectivity: “I realized that I didn’t know how to talk about human loss, human pain. I thought my own pain was the most important, but then I discovered that there is a collective pain.”<sup>17</sup> Drawing upon this collective pain and her experience as a forensic technician, Margolles uses bodily matter from murder victims in her work to comment on social violence in Mexico.<sup>18</sup> In her piece *Cleaning* (see Fig. 2), presented at the 2009 Venice Biennial, Margolles and volunteers mopped the floor of the Mexican Pavilion daily with a mixture of

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Rodrigues, “Performing domination and resistance between body and space: The transversal activism of Regina José Galindo,” *Journal of Media Practice*, 12, no. 3 (2011): 291-303.

<sup>13</sup> Regina José Galindo and Francisco Goldman, “Regina José Galindo,” *Bomb*, no. 94 (2005), 38-44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kate Doyle, “Justice in Guatemala,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 45, no. 1 (2012): 37-42.

<sup>16</sup> Clare Carolin, “After the Digital We Rematerialise: Distance and Violence in the Work of Regina José Galindo,” *Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 2 (2011): 213.

<sup>17</sup> Santiago Sierra and Teresa Margolles, “Santiago Sierra,” *Bomb*, no. 86 (Winter 2003/2004): 62-69.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Scott Bray, “En piel ajena: The work of Teresa Margolles,” *Law Text Culture* (2007)

water and the blood of murdered Mexican citizens.<sup>19</sup> Performed for the duration of the biennial, the deathly residue formed a “scab” on the floor that would adhere to visitors’ shoes.<sup>20</sup> When interviewed about the piece Margolles said, “I’m merely bearing witness to a retelling of the facts: thousands dead, and hundreds of children killed in the crossfire.”<sup>21</sup>

<SLIDE 5 –Huellas> In *Who Can Erase the Traces?* Galindo also bears witness to victims of violence and incorporates blood into her performance. However, unlike the subtle scabbing evoked in Margolles’ *Cleaning*, Galindo uses more direct imagery that unquestionably evokes a shared experience of violence making the work relevant beyond its original context. Galindo has said about the performance, “My long walk of the bloody footprints was not initially understood as a performance, but every step was indeed understood as memory and death.”<sup>22</sup> This understanding is gleaned from the blood and footprints functioning as universal signifiers for violence and a shared humanity, respectively.

The clarity of the imagery within *Who Can Erase the Traces?* is essential to the effective communication of Galindo’s institutional critique. The political nature of her message paired with the immediate access to the performance footage through online file sharing reference the concerns of the institutional critiques of Situational International in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>23</sup> The tactics employed by this radical collective were centered on the principles of immediate access, the ability to speak to a “real-space situation,” and had to be established within a sense of community.<sup>24</sup>

Galindo engages with all of these concepts within her treatment of *Who Can Erase the Traces?*, and effectively updates this form of institutional critique by using the internet to share the performance.

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<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Scott Bray, “Teresa Margolles’s Crime Scene Aesthetics,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, (Fall 2011):933-948.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Regina José Galindo and Francisco Goldman, “Regina José Galindo,” *Bomb*, no. 94 (2005), 38-44

<sup>23</sup> Eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: an anthology of artists’ writings*, (Cambridge: MIT Press): 14-16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

I would like to assert that the performative act of this work did not end when Galindo abandoned her basin of blood. Rather, the performance is continued through the digital dissemination of the piece.

Initially, the images and video of the performance were created for documentation purposes. However, that changed when friends of the artist began sharing these visuals online accompanied by text declaring Montt's presidential bid as unacceptable.<sup>25</sup> Regarding the online distribution of *Who Can Erase the Traces?*, Galindo has said,

“As for the performance itself, it was all over in a moment, and I felt as I always do, that it hadn't done any good. But a group of artists began the necessary work: spreading the word of the performance and the message.”<sup>26</sup>

By stating the necessity of the work's circulation, Galindo is making the act of sharing an essential part of her piece. This assertion aligns Galindo with contemporary artists and collectives who use the internet in their performances to effect social awareness.<sup>27</sup> <SLIDE 6 –Engineering> One such group is the Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA), who incorporated the internet in their performance of *Engaging Ambivalence: Interventions in Engineering Culture*.<sup>28</sup> (see Fig. 3) In the piece the IAA criticized military and non-government agencies for protecting engineers from assuming responsibility for the effects produced by their work.<sup>29</sup> This was accomplished by the artists who posed as engineers and distributed their views online in the form of research papers.<sup>30</sup> In the case of *Who Can Erase the Traces*, Galindo is not personally sharing her work digitally, but through her powerful imagery she invites her viewers to do so, thereby involving them in her performance.

<SLIDE 7 – Huellas> Regina José Galindo's emphasis on the collective nature of *Who Can Erase the Traces?* effectively exposes the human rights atrocities committed under Efraín Ríos Montt to an

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: an anthology of artists' writings*, (Cambridge: MIT Press): 14-16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

expansive audience. By using universally recognized imagery and including a digital audience in her act, *Who Can Erase the Traces?* does more than connect with viewers. Galindo's performance forces her audiences to confront the reality of violence, thereby increasing the potential of her work to influence and effect social change.

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