

‘Body-Art Performance from Latin America: Ana Mendieta and Regina José Galindo in Dialogue’ – Dr. Rebecca Breen, 02.05.2013

Introduction

This short paper stages a dialogue between two body-art performance artists from two different regions in Latin America, and across two different time periods, with the aim of situating today’s broader engagement with contemporary performance art from Latin America: (1) Ana Mendieta (b. 1948, Cuba / d. 1985, USA) elaborated her performative aesthetic during the 1970s to mid-1980s, when body-art performance was in its zenith – even if operating on the margins of more mainstream tendencies in centres such as New York, where Mendieta lived and practised; and (2) Regina José Galindo (b. 1974, Guatemala), whose performative practice has been gaining increasingly international recognition since the late 1990s, particularly since her Golden Lion award in the category of ‘artists under 30’ at the Venice Biennale in 2005. Hence, her practice coincides with a contemporary resurgence of interest in the medium.

The dialogue that I am setting up also necessarily extends out between these two artists’ respective audiences, both geographically and temporally, if we consider that Mendieta was a Cuban living and practising in the USA at the remove of more than a generation from the Guatemalan, but equally transnational Galindo. Additionally, the reductive and sometimes ghettoising notion of a unique or distinctively “Latin American” – or even “Puerto Rican” – (performance) art, as signalled in my title today, is one that this ever expanding network of communication problematises. It is, therefore, a critique that we should hold to the fore throughout our discussions today.

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The device that I am using to bring these two artists together is the trope of the trace, as evident in Mendieta’s so-called ‘body-tracks’ – which will be represented today by her 1974 work, *Untitled (Body Tracks)* – and compared with the bloody footprints in Galindo’s by-now familiar *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas? (Who Can Erase the Traces?)*, 2003). I aim to explore the interlocutive space which is set up by the pairing of these two performance artists and their representative works – a space which is sustained by the indexical trace; but also the dialogue that is facilitated for a majority

of these artists' viewers via the *documentary* trace, i.e. the film or photo record of an otherwise ephemeral performance.

In part, this frames our engagement here today with the mediated encounter with Deborah Hunt's performance piece, brought to us 'after the event' by video. Questions arise around any privileging of presence and liveness in the performance scenario when we tune into the recorded traces of Hunt's original audience's attendance at and firsthand witnessing of what, for us, can only be experienced belatedly. These indicators of presence which call our attention to an audience *other* than ourselves include: audio markers, captured movement, and heads and/or limbs which intervene on the shot framed by the camera, as we shall soon see.

This problematising of presence and liveness, in turn, speaks to our experience of Awilda Sterling's performance, simultaneously happening in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and here – virtually – at firstsite, Colchester. Coming to us via Skype, Awilda's performance flags questions around *access* to the transient performance event, pre-empted now by Galindo's *Who Can Erase the Traces?*.

Aravind Adyanthaya's 'escritura acto' (or 'writing act') further challenges our engagement with the performative (speech) act and the record, and with communication, dialogue, and their documentary and indexical traces.

Parenthetically too, certain aspects of the syncretic religious practice of *santería* which informed the Cuban/Caribbean Mendieta can help our understanding of and engagement with references to the syncretic – and even the popular – in Sterling's performance, as I aim to elaborate too.

Blood as Trace

For Mendieta, as much as for Galindo, the bloody trace is deployed for its deliberate provocation of the viewer; but it carries with it more specific cultural references than, say, the use of blood by Mendieta's feminist performance art contemporaries of the 1970s and early 1980s, such as Carolee Schneeman, Nancy Spero, Shisego Kubota, and others who exploited the abjection of menstrual blood as an infraction of feminine modesty and social norms. In fact, Mendieta, in her entry to the catalogue which

accompanied an exhibition she curated at the feminist gallery ‘Artists in Residency’ (A.I.R.) in 1980, asserted her *difference* from ‘American Feminism’, as she calls it, which is ‘basically a white middle-class movement’.¹ Mendieta’s deployment of blood, then, had a feminist political function, yes; but it also had more culturally-specific roots in the rituals and rites of *santería*, or *Regla de Ocha*, one of the three branches of Afro-Cuban syncretic religions actively practiced in Cuba (besides *Reglas Congo*, or *Palo Monte*, and *Abakuá*, or *Ñáñiguismo*). These have their origins in indigenous practices imported to Cuba by African slaves, and particularly those of the Yoruba tradition in Benin and other areas of Western Africa; however, they also incorporate the religious beliefs and practices of other faiths – particularly Catholicism – and *santería* deities (or *orisha*) typically correspond to individual Catholic saints.

Significantly, moreover, while certain *santería* rituals are restricted to men, others are dominated by women and the *santero*, or *santería* priest, has his counterpart in the *santera*. This aspect of women’s agency within the *santería* tradition particularly appealed to Mendieta’s growing feminist consciousness as marked by her own cultural background; while the transformative aspiration of its rituals provided a pretext for her own performative practice. This gradually developed such that it came to consist of ever more private rituals, typically performed outdoors and in nature, with the artist’s own body acting as a sacred conduit for ‘magic’ and transformation.² ‘A sense of magic, knowledge and power [...] has influenced my personal attitude toward art-making’, Mendieta states in her personal writings; ‘I confront the problem by duplicating my body and my state of mind’.³ *Santería*’s ambiguous relationship with magic and the occult also signalled a disturbance of the socially permissible, particularly when transplanted to a mainstream, North American context and facilitated an especially transgressive re-inscription of ‘feminine’ agency.

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¹ Mendieta, A. (1980). *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (Ex. Cat.). New York, A.I.R. Gallery, n. p.

² Jacob, M. J. (1996). ‘Ashé in the Art of Ana Mendieta’ in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. A. Lindsay. London; Washington, Smithsonian Institution, p.192

³ Mendieta, A. (n.d.). *Ana Mendieta (Personal Statement)*. Artist’s File, Museum of Modern Art, New York, n. p.

A series of six colour photographs and archival Super-8 film document the process involved in *Untitled (Blood Sign #2/Body Tracks)*, 1974, for example. In the first, Mendieta stands fully-clothed, arms outstretched as though in supplication, with her back to the observer. She faces a wall on which has been hung an expanse of white fabric, a sheet or shroud – another recurring motif in Mendieta’s practice, and comparable to Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s deployment of the sheet as screen, or parergon (in the Derridean sense), at once revealing and concealing. In *Blood Sign #2/Body Tracks*, the blood which Mendieta had applied to her hands becomes visible when she makes contact with the sheet-covered wall and slowly drops to her knees, dragging her hands downwards. As she slumps further, she draws her hands from their extended position inwards, towards her body, creating two streaks of blood that converge. As she reaches the floor, the red tracings of her hands reach one another. Laid out, collapsed on the floor, Mendieta appears as though in a state of ritual ecstasy, on the one hand, and entreaty or supplication, on the other, before the markings of her body. The final documentary image reveals that the artist has now been displaced from the scene; however, the evidence of her presence remains in the form of bloody, bodily markings. Reference can be made to the veil of Veronica, recording a trace element of the real. Retaining her favoured use of blood as a medium, Mendieta underscores the witnessing of the process of her labour as necessarily as significant as the finished tableau, itself a trace of the artist’s presence.

According to this process-artefact aesthetic, the artist’s performing body is central to what Mendieta called ‘blood writing’, or the direct application of blood onto the wall (or a sheet-like ream of fabric hung on the wall) using her own body. What is of significance in these actions is that which remains after the process of inscription, i.e. the trace of the artist’s work, or her ‘body tracks’. Mendieta would continue to elaborate ‘body tracks’ from 1974 until her death in 1985.

That the processes involved in Mendieta’s ‘body tracks’ performances are as important as the completed product is demonstrated in the many photographs, Super-8 films stills, and colour slides which document Mendieta’s actions and mediate our encounter with them today. The viewer is called upon to witness not only the end product, where there is one, but also an ephemeral action and body-art ‘event-taking-

place'.⁴ The significance of what remains is that it is residual, a fragile trace that marks where the artist has been; or, an inscription that, in her absence, marks the presence and trajectory of the artist's performing body.

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In a similar way, Galdindo's bloody footprints trace the artist's movements through the streets of Guatemala City in her performance, *Who Can Erase the Traces?*, 2003, plotting out each step of her course. These prints do not only stand in for the artist's performing body, however; they also serve as indexical markers of presence in relation to those violently disappeared during the 36-year-long Civil War in Guatemala, which ended with a Peace Accord only in December of 1996.

Incidentally, the historic trial of former head of state José Efraín Ríos Montt and his chief of military intelligence, Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez, resumed just two days ago. Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez are being prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity; specifically, for violence committed against Ixil Maya communities in the Guatemalan highlands during Ríos Montt's 17-month rule from March 1982 – April 1983. This violence comprised such human rights violations as torture, forced disappearances, and the infamous 'scorched earth' warfare which saw the displacement of over 30,000 Guatemalans across the border into Mexico. Importantly, Ríos Montt's trial marks the first time that a former head of state is prosecuted for genocide in the domestic courts where the crimes occurred.

Galindo's 2003 performance, then, was developed, according to the artist, as a spontaneous action in response to hearing in a radio news report that Ríos Montt was putting himself forward for presidential candidacy in that year's elections. In this performance, we see Galindo walk barefoot through the streets of Guatemala City, stopping occasionally to dip her feet in human blood from a white basin she carries in her arms and leaving a trail of bloody footprints from the Constitutional Court building – which had recently allowed the former military dictator to run for president despite the Constitution's barring of past presidents who had gained power by military coup – to the old National Palace. The walk lasted approximately 45 minutes. The footprints, Galindo asserts, symbolized the thousands of civilians murdered during the

⁴ Merewether, C. (2000). 'From Inscription to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the Work of Ana Mendieta', in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. C. Fusco. London, Routledge, p. 137

country's civil war and are an indexical marker of presence in absence. '[...] these efforts were necessary', Galindo has argued in interview, 'because Guatemala is a country without memory. [...] Every effort was necessary, any help at all, it was all needed to shout out the truth, by whatever means.' 'My long walk of the bloody footprints was not initially understood as a performance,' she goes on, 'but every step was indeed understood as memory and [as] death.'⁵

Galindo's staging of absence and violent displacement through reference to the *forensic* trace, in particular, aims to reinstate and re-inscribe remembrance of the victim. As forensic trace, the bloody footprints serve as *punctum*; the uncanny startle of the real of traumatic death. However, where the dangers of spectacle and/or voyeurism, which shadow Galindo's subject matter, threaten the artist's stated aim of re-inscribing the memory of absent victims, we can see that Galindo conceals, rather than reveals her references to the dead and brutalized body. Instead, the body is referenced only indexically via its forensic trace. It is concealed in a play between presence and absence, and such that its affect on the viewer is at once incremental and lasting. Galindo's deployment of the forensic trace also carries with it the weight of a witness statement and constitutes the construction of a body of evidence in relation to victims' deaths given the problem of impunity or judicial negligence. As with Mendieta, the bloody traces of the artist's body represent a provocation for the viewer, but one which emerges out of a specific context. In the case of Mendieta, the bloody trace references the ritual practices of *santería*, while for Galindo it is in reference to the violent displacement and disappearances of bodies during the Guatemalan Civil War. In both cases, the bodily trace equally represents a poetic gesture of restitution and reinscription.

The Document as Trace of the Performance

We can identify in Mendieta's archive, in particular, a compulsion to record her body-art performances, which is to flag the mediated experience of encountering her performance artworks via their photographic or filmic trace today. If, as one of its principal protagonists, Victor Burgin, describes, body-art performance is the desire to

⁵ Goldman, Francisco, 'Interview with Regina Jose Galindo', *BOMB Magazine* (New York), no. 94; available: <http://bombsite.com/issues/94/articles/2780> [last accessed 28/04/2013]

make absent the present,⁶ we can consider Mendieta's unrelenting documentation of her ephemeral body-art performances and installations, conversely, in terms of a drive to make present the absent. The repetition and re-creation inherent to performativity, as distinct from the mimesis implied by performance, per se, find a parallel in Mendieta's approach to record-making, since she not only documents with multiple images from a variety of angles and perspectives, but across several media too, including black-&-white and colour photographs, negatives, lifetime and estate prints, Super-8 film, 35mm slides, and an artist's book of works. The insistence on making a record, however, is problematized by there being no one, definitive perspective offered to the viewer. Rather, a multiplicity of viewing positions and interpretative possibilities are opened up, and so the viewer's engaged participation is stressed.

Relevant, therefore, is Amelia Jones' problematizing of the issue of liveness and presence as an essential feature of performance artworks, and the degree to which intermediation between viewer and artist is possible via the document – or, indeed, was ever possible in the live performance art scenario in the first instance.⁷ Jones argues that the live performance is not, in fact, to be privileged as an unmediated experience. Neither is it to be privileged over the particular knowledge of intersubjective experience that is offered by the documentary traces of a performative event.

Moreover, Jones highlights performance art's actual *dependence* on documentation to ground the intersubjective relations it enacts.⁸ As Jones argues: '[t]he body-art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body-art event as an ontological "anchor" of its indexicality'.⁹ The relationship of performance to document, hence, is one of mutual dependency. Rather than simple substantiation that a particular event took place, as Henry Sayre, for example, would

⁶ Burgin, V. (1996). *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*. Berkley, University of California Press

⁷ Jones, A. (1997). "'Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation' in *Art Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 11-8

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16

hold,¹⁰ the document itself can be experienced as performative in that it is both a re-enactment and re-creation; it restages and creates anew with each new encounter.

Our encounter with Galindo's performance today takes on a different meaning in the context of the trial of Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez – which is also accessible to the viewer via the internet – than did Galindo's performance for the Biennale-going audience of Venice 2005. Equally, our virtual access to and mediated presence at the performance by Awilda Sterling shortly represents another kind of encounter than it will for her 'live' audience in San Juan. Consequently, Jones' claims that the intermodality facilitated between performance artist and viewer through the live event – or technologically mediated 'virtual' presence, I would add – is no less relevant to the viewer's encounter with the documentation of its occurrence. In fact, Jones further argues that the objective distance which is implied in this encounter can allow for a greater appreciation of relevant historical context and contemporaneous social factors, which neither the viewer, nor the artist can objectively recognize as significant during the original performance, since they are necessarily embedded in these at the time of the 'event-taking-place'. A dialogue is set up then between the live audience and subsequent audiences who necessarily experience the performative re-enactment via the documentary trace of the original performance, and across generations of performance artists and their audiences.

¹⁰ Sayre, H. M. (1989). *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press