

Regina José Galindo: Politics of Memory and Affect

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Abstract

This text seeks to examine the performance work of Regina José Galindo. Our objective is to look at Galindo's performance *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* seeking to underline how *political memory* and *affect*—categories intrinsic to the work of Galindo—are at the core of a new emancipative language traceable in origin to the event. Embracing Alain Badiou's concept of event, it is possible to present further questions about art and the possibility of its interaction with *evental* truths, moreover, to produce evental truths as part of art's integral processes.

Keywords

Event; performance; Guatemala; affect; memory; violence; history; truth; simulacrum.

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Regina José Galindo: la política de la memoria y el afecto

Resumen

En este trabajo se busca examinar el trabajo performático de Regina José Galindo a través de su *performance* *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* para destacar cómo la *memoria política* y el *afecto* (categorías intrínsecas en la obra de Galindo) son ejes transversales de un nuevo lenguaje emancipador del acontecimiento. Al adoptar el concepto de acontecimiento de Alain Badiou, es posible plantear nuevas preguntas sobre el arte y la posibilidad de su interacción con las verdades del acontecimiento, además de generar verdades a partir del acontecimiento como parte de los procesos integrales del arte.

Palabras clave

Evento; *performance*; Guatemala; afecto; memoria; violencia; historia; verdad; simulacro.

Regina José Galindo: a política da memória e do afeto

Resumo

Neste artigo, pretende-se analisar o trabalho performático de Regina José Galindo por meio de sua *performance* “Quem pode apagar as pegadas?” para destacar como a *memória política* e o *afeto* (categorias intrínsecas na obra de Galindo) são eixos transversais de uma nova linguagem emancipadora que provém do acontecimento. Ao adotar o conceito de acontecimento de Alain Badiou, é possível propor novas perguntas sobre a arte e sua interação com as verdades do acontecimento, além de gerar verdades derivadas do acontecimento como parte dos processos integrais da arte.

Palavras-chave (Fonte: tesauro da Unesco)

Evento; *performance*; Guatemala; afeto; memória; violência; história; verdade; simulação.

Introduction

When faced with the material real of what it is to sense the social fading away of memories from a particular and specific milieu (in the following example, the memory of genocide), there is, of necessity, a choice. Do we, as subjects, make a political stand of some kind, counting ourselves among those who refuse to forgive and forget, or do we sit passively and silently as the truth is distorted and oppressed? One might argue that there is no such election in a properly organised hegemony, that adequately controlled, monopolised, mediated, and distorted social memory is the property of power. It is power (in its mediated form) that decides, as Scotoni (2017) has noted, “how long an event can last and which subjects have the rights to exist” (p. 14). In the case of Regina José Galindo, we find that she does indeed decide to make an active choice, based partially, at least, upon a set of political and material realities; she materialises herself as a *subject of truth*. Of the processes behind her performance ¿*Quién puede borrar las huellas?* Galindo has clearly remarked:

When it was announced that Efraín Ríos Montt had managed to win acceptance as a presidential candidate, I was in my room, and I suffered an attack of panic and depression. I shouted out, I kicked and stomped my feet, I cursed the system that rules us. How was it possible that a character as dark as this would have such power with which to bend everything to his will? I decided then and there that I would take to the streets with my shout and amplify it if I had to. (Galindo & Goldman, 2006)

There is then a plainly defined temporality, a moment when Galindo *decides* to formulate herself as a subject of truth. Her pronouncement to resist can be read as a subjective attempt to confront the falling away of communal social memory, to prepare herself in her performance as a *point of reference*. When we refer to communal social memory, we do so regarding what is present in the community as a form of resilience, what is shared from the past, and how historical events are interpreted in those same communities. In this respect, Galindo articulates herself as that which reveals the (alternative) truth of power. For this reason, we may regard her as a subject of truth (Badiou, 2009). As she notes of this particular performance, there is a question of communal memory and manipulation (Galindo & Goldman, 2006):

I say that these efforts were necessary, because 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.

Evental Truth: Badiou

Taking onboard this statement in full, it is necessary to begin asking some concrete questions. We can see that Galindo somehow problematises social memory, but is memory contingent from the point of view of an unclosed and therefore changeable temporality, and likewise, does Galindo, as she intercepts memory, interfere with an *evental truth* (Badiou) process? This being the condition, it becomes feasible to argue for the recognition of an interconnected non-sequential experience of time, one that perhaps necessarily guides an exploration into a possibly new experience of an actual temporality. In such a time, we would no longer be upon the ground of truths relayed to us by history *per se* (seen as the result of a determined process); rather, that of a contingent political memory based upon evental truth(s). Before we continue this line of inquiry, it is useful to give some timely clarifications as to what is referred to by these ideas: *event*, *truth*, *evental truth*, *subject of truth*,² and so on. Doubtless, the reader should want to refer to the ample writings of Alain Badiou; for the purposes of a rudimentary understanding, however, we can begin by stating that an event for Badiou is something that occurs in any place, at any time, yet is entirely unpredictable from within the world on which it has an effect, that is inside the domain that will recognise it as an event (those stakeholders, actors, legislators, community participants, artists, and so on). We should also realise that an event is not communal in the sense that it has meaning only to a specific group. Although particular groups may have been affected by its aftermath, it is generally understood to be *that* thing by all. And the event, having oc-

2 For an excellent overview of the key concepts applied from Badiou in this text, please see Robinson (2015).

curred, disappears as quickly as it had appeared, yet leaves behind what we may recognise as *evental truths* (affect). These are the names created to explain the truth, the process of naming and deciding the parts of the new situation; this is called the process of truth. Now appears the *subject of truth*: a subject of truth is an obliged subject. They do not pre-exist the event in any way and become (due to there being a direct effect of the event) agents of that event in the detail of their fidelity to it. A subject is the presence of the event's truth that remains; *evental truth* is eternal and can only be determined through its continued creation; truth does not pre-exist as a referent but must be constructed as part of a process (and here we may find such undertakings to be entirely communal). This is, of course, a highly simplified explanation by which the reader may be permitted to go on. But what does this all mean concerning memory and affect?

Memory

Memory under certain conditions may become a two-way continuum; what this means is that interaction with communal history (social memory of the recent past qua event), be it the process of *forgetting* or *remembering*, becomes a creative act, the consequences or parameters of which are decided in the temporality of the present. If the present has been constructed upon a dubious narrative erected by the State, then it would be vulnerable to attacks from those who seek to present a set of truths that might accumulate to build counter memories. Scotoni (2017, p. 13) has noted that memory in our times is open to reconstruction. This is because today, power has adopted new strategies for capturing time (he refers to historical narratives) that are extremely “non-linear, reversible, virtual” and should be contemplated alongside subjectivities, based now upon “perceptions, memory, intellect.” It is observable that Galindo, who designs to posit an antagonistic approach to the dominant narrative, adheres to evental truths to provide purchase—Galindo performs evental truths that open the possibility of creating a new *dialectical* space.³ This is equal to the production of truth, pro-

3 Dialectical here refers to Alain Badiou's criticism of classical dialectics that he equates with negativity. Instead, Badiou will argue not for a creative novelty based on negativity, but upon affirmative dialectics based upon the possibilities created by events. Concentrating upon the negativities of the situation in order to gain purchase produces further negativity. See *The Tragic Community* (2014).

ductive in that it creates a third element: the extension of evental material in the form of truths (hitherto obscured).

In a sense, what Regina José Galindo achieves is the means by which to reconstruct social memory. Scotoni (2017, p. 11) refers to this kind of work by contemporary artists as a kind of archaeology of the present. It is the questioning of current truths while simultaneously presenting a new set of possibilities. This is what we may call the *politics of memory* because the ethics of a truth, once reignited, perform an alternative to an official cataloguing of the present. It is clear that there is a tripartite arrangement to the political structure of memory, identifiable as *memory per se*, *forgetting* and, in the case of genocide, *forgiving*. To this conceptual trio, we shall need to return. Before that, let us first turn our attention to the methodology of Galindo regarding a particular performance.

Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, Guatemala City, 2003.



Source: <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/quien-puede-borrar-las-huellas/>

Method

One of the central themes of Galindo's work is violence, and this violence is often directed at the female gender; often, however, as is our case here, it is directly related to serious—and as yet—unpunished crimes against humanity. The political corruption that converges to disguise the realities of genocide in Guatemala is at the heart of *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* but there are many secondary themes that may now be discussed. Galin-

do undertakes this particular performance, which is deeply rooted within her own material and subjective involvement with the event sequence of genocide (Guatemala)⁴ on 23 July 2003. The terrain is very specific, Guatemala City, where Galindo directly calls out two of the country's corrupt institutions: the Corte de Constitucionalidad and the Palacio Nacional de Guatemala. These Galindo unswervingly views as direct accessories to the slaughter of tens of thousands of the indigenous populace of Guatemala. In her action, Galindo resurrects the meaning of the original event (genocide and its attendant affect), thus activating a new incursion into the territories of social memory.

For her work *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* Galindo is animated primarily by the announcement that Efraín Ríos Montt⁵ had been given state permission to present himself as a candidate in the forthcoming elections. This was the same man who had, as a dictator, been in power (for a spell) during a murderous period of history wherein some 200,000 persons became victims of state-controlled genocide.⁶ Galindo reactivates the affect surrounding this event sequence, recognised as a human stain on the history of her country's memory—by making visible and present again the victims whom the State would wish to obscure from the final count. *How could they suggest this murderer would be fit to once again serve as a political leader?*

As interlocutors, there is first something we ought to be mindful of: Galindo is not in any manner offering a re-memorising process of historical narrative but is instead instigating a sequence of disrupting informa-

4 The violence inflicted by the Guatemalan security forces upon the Ixil Maya people of Guatemala was, according to Guatemala's 1999 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) to be deemed "acts of genocide". See Seils (2002).

5 Although his Defense Minister, Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, overthrew Gen Ríos Montt in August 1983, he is considered to have had a major impact on the conflict through the so-called 'Guns and Beans' campaign. The rebels were offered terms through which they would be fed if they supported the regime but crushed if they continued fighting. Prosecutors say that during his 17 months in power, Gen Ríos Montt, and his chief of military intelligence, Gen Jose Mauricio Rodríguez Sanchez, ordered the deaths of more than 1,700 members of the Ixil Maya ethnic group, whom they suspected were supporting the rebels. In 2013 Montt was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to 80 years in jail. See Doyle 2013).

6 Montt rose through the ranks to become a brigadier general and the army's chief of staff in 1970 during the military regime of President General Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio. He came to power through a coup in March 1982 in the middle of Guatemala's bloody war, in which Marxist rebels battled the military regime. Civilians—the vast majority of them indigenous Mayans—were murdered by state forces. An estimated 200,000 were exterminated, and their lands cleared before a truce was reached in 1996, making the conflict one of Latin America's most violent wars. See Brodzinsky and Watts (2017).

tion—at the symbolic level of *representation*—in so doing rupturing the official cataloguing; this is a reviewing process that occurs whilst simultaneously questioning the very dynamics of a systemic program of forgetting. All this is achieved through a direct engagement with the topic of violence (and the attempts to forget it).

**Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas*,
Guatemala City, 2003.**



Source: <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/quien-puede-borrar-las-huellas/>

Simulacrum

In her action, Galindo expresses a fully controlled and immensely courageous performance; she walks a clear line from the Corte de Constitucionalidad to the Palacio Nacional de Guatemala, soaking her feet in a bowl of human blood, printing a soaking foot, tracing a bloody connection between these two state institutes. In so doing, she creates a division or interruption to the accepted narrative flow; this is an injunction of a possible *truth* into a situation that Badiou (2012, p. 73) would recognise as belonging to “a simulacrum of truth”; Badiou (2012) describes such phenomenon in the following manner:

When a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth processes, convokes not the void but the “full” particularity or

presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a simulacrum of truth. (p. 73)

The foundation for Badiou's theory is based upon his analysis of the Nazi Party in Germany, who were, according to Badiou, able to pass off a simulacrum for a true event when they spoke about the 'National Socialist revolution.' As Badiou (2012) notes:

[...] they borrowed names—'revolution,' 'socialism'—justified by great modern political events (the Revolution of 1792, or the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917). A whole series of characteristics are related to and legitimated by this borrowing: the break with the old order, the support sought from mass gatherings, the dictatorial style of the State, the pathos of the decision, the eulogy of the Worker, and so forth. (p. 72)

These designations applied in such a way lend credence to the notion that a true void has been named and that these names, which for the trace of a true event, are subsequently retained—so that they may guide fidelity—in the now (Badiou maintains that a true void is the site from which an event emerges; the void itself can never be known)⁷. So power is established upon the grounds of a simulated event. It is clear that Badiou's theory is developed not merely as a means to approach the historicity of the Nazi Party and Hitler's development of a simulacrum; rather, there is the establishment of a means by which we may recognise and call out *all* simulacrum. That is, specifically on the basis that only a true event is universally significant (an event is an event for *all* subjects). We can diagnose then a simulacrum as it appeals only to a select few, as in the case of the 'German' revolution, which, as we know, although formally very convincing, is nonetheless a counterfeit action due to its being concentrated only upon the supposed national substance of a people, and this to the exclusion of all others. Badiou (2012) provides the theoretical grounding for the possible detection of *all* simulacrum. As he notes:

⁷ Discussion of the void is central to understanding what Badiou means when he talks about truth. Truth, he says, always begins by naming the void. The evental site takes us up to the edge of the void. The void, until the event occurred, has been hidden; it has been universally included in every part of the situation and for that reason, has remained hidden. The edge of the void is locatable even if the actual void is not. See Hallward (2003).

‘Simulacrum’ must be understood here in its strong sense: all the formal traits of a truth are at work in the simulacrum. Not only the universal nomination of the event, inducing the radical break, but also the ‘obligation’ of a fidelity, and the promotion of a *simulacrum of the subject*, erected—without the advent of any Immortal—above the human animality of the others, of those who are arbitrarily declared not to belong to the communitarian substance whose promotion and domination the simulacrum-event is designed to assure. (p. 74)

In our example here (Guatemala), the name ‘war’ is taken to represent what is not. ‘War’ is not applicable universally as there are not warring factions but rather tiny pockets of political resistance that launch a futile attempt to resist a brutal U.S.-assisted state-organised abuse. Through adopting the term ‘war’, the simulacrum is established, the content of which, in the case of a true event, would lead us to assume there was some liberating and just foundation—based upon the fighting between two equally capable forces. Instead, we have the simulacrum of ‘war,’ whereby massacre and genocide are the only possible outcomes.

The simulacrum is, as was in the case of the Nazi ‘German’ revolution, formally convincing; soldiers and military equipment are displayed in the media, Ríos Montt appears in public in army fatigues, and so on, and the word ‘war’ is applied with regularity to describe the successive events (both inside and outside of Guatemala). But the truth of the matter was put succinctly into words by Ríos Montt when he told unarmed Guatemalan peasants (who, to the extent of the simulacrum, are recognised as the ‘enemy’), “If you are with us, we will feed you, if not, we will kill you” (Kinzer, 2018). Later as we know, Ríos Montt, after his trial in January 2013, would be found guilty of orchestrating a mass murder. He and his former chief of intelligence were charged with responsibility for massacres in 15 Ixil Maya villages in which 1,771 unarmed men, women, and children were killed. At the trial, Judge Yasmín Bar Ríos said she was “completely convinced” (Kinzer, 2018) of General Ríos Montt’s guilt. She sentenced him to 80 years in prison. There was then no “war” in Guatemala, but rather a systematised genocide and state-produced oppression based upon ethnic cleansing.

Truth and Counter-Memory

Galindo, in *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, performs a direct action, forming at once a present-day rejection of the proposed candidate (Ríos Montt) whilst making visible the connection between real physical blood and the visible state institutions—historically guilty of genocide. In our example, it is clear that Ríos Montt, in his attempts to become the leader of his country, is, in fact, attempting to formulate a pseudo-truth; this is a *simulacrum* of truth. A simulacrum is then “an ethical lapse that emerges from a misunderstanding of the relation of an event to the situation too” (Pluth, 2010, pp. 141, 142).

Montt positions himself as the legitimate potential leader of the country. This can only come to pass should the ethical processes of the event—the relation to the specific situation—be mistreated. What is intended by the notion of *mistreatment* is related here to the construction of evental truth(s). At length, the event’s truth is decided by the name applied. As this naming is, however, in itself the production of the event, it is vital that this naming should be the result of an ethical pursuit of the “truth” or meaning of an event. What Galindo achieves is a clear and concurrent interaction with evental truths via affect: she intervenes where the situation is at its most vulnerable, that is, at the point where the truth(s) are even now creating a specific “World.” This is precisely why we can refer to her as a subject of truth. She has become a truth token of the event.

Those who find themselves at the intersection of an event—and a World—are subjects to a truth that necessarily produces an ethical dilemma. Badiou informs us clearly that ethics do not pre-exist any situation; like truths, they must be constructed and decided upon as part of a process, as the unfurling in the now of the event’s truth. Although it is not always conscious, this truth (produced by an event) will become *truthful* via its subjects—as and when an individual subject is absorbed by this (local) procedure—to the extent that they begin to feel its affects; moreover, they will be open to addressing its ethical concerns at that moment they become faithful to its claims (Pluth, 2010, pp.128-153).

Galindo succeeds in conjuring a foreboding reality: the institutionalised state-sponsored violence behind the local establishment of hegemony. For Galindo, it is also a personal act of resistance, a small yet individual step towards confronting her own source of anger and bitter disappointment. By selecting a courageous and critical subjectivity, Galindo demonstrates the potential of the emerging situation. She is at risk herself,⁸ yet it is a price she must pay if she is to remain faithful to a truth if she is to present an alternative to the State's simulacrum. From this moment, it is possible to build upon a nascent understanding of a new truth within the situation, to establish a set of counter memories that may (equivalently) produce new subjects along the lines of an alternative truth.

Evental Affect and the Subject

More in-depth details are required to clarify our particular reading of Galindo's interaction with evental affect. For Badiou (2009), there is a distinction between *subjectivation* and what he calls *subject processes*. It is essential to note that these subject components (Badiou, 2009) essentially define the region of practical materiality—this he refers to as “subject-effect.” Furthermore, and this is critical to our understanding of affect as material, the subject does not in any manner pre-exist these affects or ethical concepts; they are not subjective experiences (psychological) but rather *styles* by which the subject may emerge (materialise).

It is interesting to note how these subject processes are observable throughout the performance by Galindo. For example, take the subject affects of *anxiety* and *courage* (explained in more detail below); by walking (a physical material action, itself a symbol of freedom), Galindo emphasises (even as a disapproving and potentially violent police force look on) that for denizens of an oppressive state there can never be any true liberty or authenticity—at least not within such a political structure. Further-

8 The action is undertaken by Galindo on the same day that the FRG (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco) organizes a public display of support for their figurehead Ríos Montt. The mobilization of support included acts of violence and terror in the capital, using petrol bombs and direct violence against press members (a journalist was killed in the chaos), and finally barricading themselves in front of the Palacio de Justicia. Their idea was to terrorize a democratic process, and their violent actions were left entirely unpunished by the State police forces which merely looked on. This was a day of extreme political tension accompanied by aggression and violence from those who supported Montt. See Sancho Ribés (2017, p. 124).

more, there will always be those who, for the State, are not permitted to appear. The bloody trail created in *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* forms the complete metaphor: the line between those who are counted in society and those who are not (those made absent are present in the performance through Galindo's own personal appearance—her femininity). This is also an attempt to trace the contour of aesthetic representation, applying aesthetics in such a way as to directly antagonise the political establishment's hegemonic structure—now revealed as a manipulation (simulacrum) of the way things appear.

In relation to the subject, this action is not the desperate act of a subject driven by *anxiety*, who has been rendered witless by an event—throwing herself against power in a last-ditch attempt at confrontation. Instead, she is controlled and *courageous*. So as not to lose sight of her critical intentions, Galindo's performance demands that she carefully plans her approach to power. She then presents a specific set of subject styles informed by evental truth. But how might we then best interpret these styles?

Reading Galindo: Affect

Badiou's framework of *affect* is useful as we try to understand Regina's work and how exactly it is connectable to evental affect. As Pluth (2010) points out, for Badiou's affect framework, there are a limited number of styles: to *subjectivation* belong the affects *anxiety* and *courage*. To the subject-process belong the *superegoic* attachment to law and the pursuit of *justice*. For Badiou (2009), superego, anxiety, courage, and justice are knotted together and form the components of a subject; on the topic, he notes that:

The four concepts...are neither virtues nor capacities. Better: they are not experiences. [...] Neither anxiety nor the superego, neither courage nor justice, are states of consciousness. They are categories of the subject-effect. What they reveal to us is a specific material region, ruling every destruction of what supports it. (p. 291)

Anxiety, like *courage*, is a style of subjectivity that Badiou (2009), in *Theory of the Subject*, designates as primarily both *political* and *collective*. These are the principal affects present at the beginning of a movement's

establishment. Anxiety is a form of interruption which pits itself directly against the first-hand forms presented in the new situation. Anxiety is chaos, an explosion of undisciplined reactions, riots, for example, which eventually subside to leave the social order once again intact. For Badiou (2009), *anxiety* is a failed mode of revolt and emerges from the very outset as accepting the impossibility of any meaningful and emancipative social change; in fact, as Pluth (2010) signals, it destroys all possibility of destruction.

In Galindo's performance, we can see clearly that the subject she portrays is comparable to *courage* and *justice*. As per Badiou's (2009), two affects relating to subjectivity production, Galindo selects a very particular form of performance—via which to present the figure of *justice* and *courage*. She carries a basin filled with human blood through the city streets. From time to time, she pauses to dip her feet—in an action (on one level) clearly linked to female domestic work. The bowl, reminiscent of the type of bowls female house cleaners use, domesticates the action, revealing its social rootedness in the collective. Galindo activates her own female body and, in the process, demonstrates that affect can be transformed into a message through art. This is the message of affect; the public cleansing of affect, the affects of *shame*, *indignation*, and *fear*, are given material form—and are directly connected to the original evental truths of genocide via an overt and singular coupling of the performance and its site. Galindo asks the question succinctly: *What is the object of power?*

Galindo's visual language uses a direct and technically orchestrated phraseology in contra. Within *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, her bloody footprints map the affects of genocide in the streets; in so doing, they evidence a clear perversion of event, which is equal to corrupt power. Galindo directly accuses several institutions, and as Sancho Ribés (2017, p. 125) has noted, these include political, civil (law), and military—and to this list, we must add religious—all are implicated in the violence experienced within Guatemala.

As interlocutors of Galindo's performance, we are granted a privileged experience of an event process that is now demonstrably contingent, as per the affects of memory and those affects of *courage* and (the absent)

anxiety. As Pluth (2010) notes, courage is the affect—the portent of a new non-submission to the symbolic order—revealing in the process the dissolving injunction of the real. Anxiety calls for the death of the symbolic order, while courage, as we can clearly observe in Galindo’s performance, positively brings about an interruption.

For those subjects, however, who intend to remain faithful to the truth of an event, it is not sufficient to rely solely upon courage. Justice and the superego are the two styles in which the subject-process also occurs. The *superegoic* style, and Pluth (2010) noted this point, is perhaps the antithesis of that which occurs during the anxious destruction. The force of the real is seen in excess of that of the symbolic. In such instance, the real of genocide is in excess of the simulacrum of the event (victory in “war,” reaffirmation of state power, Christian Evangelical legitimacy, etc.); the superegoic style thus comes into play here as a *buttress*. The crumbling facade of the State is now ruthlessly reinforced in the name of the law (Montt as potential president). Here the subject participates in the restructuring of the symbolic order. In turn, *justice*, the other style of subject-process, operates as a relativising force vis-à-vis the law. It is not, however, as Pluth (2010) notes, anti-law per se. Instead, justice establishes the ground by which we may question the legitimacy of a current law, and, indeed, replace this law with a new law. As Badiou notes, the superegoic is then restorative (hegemony), whilst *justice* (Badiou, 2009, p.159) is faithful to the original truth of the event (emancipative).

Pluth (2010) notes that there is a natural coupling of the affects; Badiou, he notes, has recognised that there are two combinations by which a subject may emerge. First is the juxtaposition of anxiety and the superego, and second is the linking of courage and justice. For Badiou (2009), the latter is, of course, preferable and is that style of subject that is most closely linked to the truth of an event.

Symbols and Violence

In the “World” in which Galindo performs, a key truth token of genocide, as she is fully aware, is blood. In the context of *¿Quién puede borrar las*

**Regina José Galindo, *El Peso de la sangre*,
Central Plaza, Guatemala City, 2004.**



Source: www.reginajosegalindo.com/el-peso-de-la-sangre/

huellas?, blood forms a symbol of genocidal violence, a detail echoed in another performance of Galindo's *El Peso de la Sangre* (2004).⁹ In this performance, which takes place just a year later, Galindo had organised a litre of blood so that it would drip, slowly, spattering directly upon her head. The action is performed in one of the main plazas of Guatemala City, right in front of the Cathedral, and is therefore witnessed by the multitudes that visit the plaza on that day. As Sancho Ribés has noted, Galindo implicates the public within this performance, as it is they only, in the face of state-organised violence, who might wield the power of action or, conversely, *in-action* (Sancho Ribés, p. 125).

Galindo invites the public to step into her created World, whereby they may encounter a truth—which has, as we have noted, been subject to a process of deformation or recharacterisation as part of a process of *simulacrum*; this is an invitation to formulate oneself as *a subject of truth*. Blood here functions as a symbol of aggression and violence that spills out from the event of genocide (genocide because this has been the prevalent se-

⁹ <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/en/el-peso-de-la-sangre-2/>

quence of violence in the context), but simultaneously, State violence, in general, is called into question. The blood splashes equally upon Galindo as it does those who stand nearest the spectacle, thus implicating, by extension, the society within which violence has become an accepted norm.

Returning to *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, it is the bloody line traced by each of Galindo's materialised footprints that recall the gory victims of genocide. There is no way to distinguish the human blood with which she soaks her feet from that of her own. She thus forms a living interruption, a material juxtaposition of the subject and object. Performing the role of victim, yet, as the intellectual orchestrator of the performance—she is in no sense truly a casualty—maintaining instead complete control of the action as it develops precisely in front of those figures of power now held directly accountable.

Ultimately, this is the quoting of those bodies that are materially no longer present—yet remain in the material as body affect. As Garbayo Maeztu (2017, p. 20) notes, in the performance, the body appears in front of others to reiterate the bodies of *others*—permitting the consideration of those absent bodies—simultaneously performing the potential for further material corporality; more *others* (who may have been part of the future from the perspective of the past) who may yet become themselves present.

The Dissolution of the Other

The “Other,” though, it must be said, is only present in the sense that it should dissolve. This occurs inside the performance, which takes place in the context of a “World” (Badiou, 2013). The demarcation of a specific physical space signals the realm of possibility for that which appears at a certain time in a specific place. Galindo is a performance artist, but she is working in a particular *Latin American* moment. This is then the making visible of the victim—not as insignificant *Other* but as *another*, a universal material real. By this, it is meant that her performance of a truth necessarily cancels all states of otherness in favour of sameness at a time when the State would like to make it all disappear—at a time when the State would prefer to normalise the process of *forgetting*. By activating affect, Galindo is

able to perform the role of *aporia*; she is neither subject nor object: but a material assemblage of evental truths present as affect. Viewed in this manner, we see that her performance is incumbent upon the situation by the insistence of the truth therein (in the work as affect); that is, she performs truths that construct counter memories. Here, for example, are the material realities of *trauma*, of oppressed *truths*, reformulated so that their affect may resist the hegemonic attempts to force (state-induced amnesia) so that all of that which has come to pass (genocide/state-organised violence) should be forgotten.

Appropriation of Christian Symbols

The political motivations and methodologies are then clear. But what about the aesthetic concerns—what does this performance actually look like—and why does it look this way? Meditations upon the aesthetics of *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* as well as *El Peso de la Sangre* reveal a number of interesting particulars relating to the symbolic nature of the work and underscore Galindo's intention to go beyond the mere accentuating of violence. Both these performance works mark an intentioned move, a direct and rigorous interrogation of the status quo, to the extent that underlying supports for the impunity pinpointed in society come to light. In *El peso de la sangre*, as in *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* Galindo leans in on Christian symbolism—appropriating politically tacit codes to directly subvert the impact of a specific experience of Christianity (Guatemala). We can thus recognise one of the strategic foundations for that which formulates part of a hegemonic—and therefore ideological buttressing (the affect categories of the superego and anxiety as stipulated by Badiou (2009, p. 292))—tacitly sustaining the corrupt State in its pursuit and control of, or better still, elimination of the public/social memory. This crucial observation shall need to be further unpacked below.

So now, let us draw attention to the remarkable use of a specific Christian symbolism central to the critical language that Galindo constructs in her performances *El peso de la sangre* and *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* Viewers of the video recording of the performance *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* cannot help but be struck by the initial relevance of Galindo's corpo-

rality, the determined and purposeful manner in which Galindo sets about her task of printing her feet along the pavements of Guatemala City. Her dignified pose and posture suggest a messianic presence, capable of confronting power, and this, be it a conscious or unconscious effect on the artist's part, sets a marked religious undertone to the work. That is not to say that Galindo is in any way religious; on the contrary, she criticises Christianity and its manipulation rather—whilst, however, and simultaneously—she employs the methods and tools of a classical Christian aesthetic. This adopted aesthetic permits Galindo to make affective inroads into the temporal construction of the State's organised *simulacrum* (a just “war”).

So we see that Galindo is exploiting several religious motifs to counter the Christian faith's tacit involvement in the very action of state-organised processes—not only *forgetting*—but also *forgiving*. It is necessary to return now to the three concepts mentioned at the start of this text: *memory*, *forgetting*, and *forgiving*; to develop these ideas, we must first set about discovering why Regina José Galindo would reach out towards a Christian symbolism.

To respond to this question, we need only look at some of the basic details regarding the religious background of the country and the government's collaborations with both the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church (although we must pay homage to the many Catholic priests who during the period of the '36-year-war' were tortured and murdered as they attempted to protect Mayan Guatemalans from what had become a state-sponsored onslaught).¹⁰

History and Evangelism: Ríos Montt

The importance of the United States' influence cannot be underestimated; as the object of a concerted foreign effort, Guatemala had begun a spiri-

¹⁰ The following is taken from an interview with a former refugee who had escaped to Mexico when the war broke out: “For one, the government created a vacuum when it targeted the Catholic Church because it was seen as siding with insurgents. The military wanted to neutralize, depoliticize the population and many priests were assassinated. [...] So the Evangelical church grew exponentially during the war. It was an extraordinary growth. And also many people turned to evangelicalism to save their lives. I mean, if you join the evangelical church, the military won't bother you.” See the interview with Miguel Leon Ceto in Braken (2016).

tual reformation via the adoption of the Evangelical faith (largely due to connections with the United States of America).¹¹ Ríos Montt was first a Catholic, who then switched his religious path to firmly absorb Evangelical teachings through his direct friendship with leading American Evangelicals. For the situation, it is of extreme importance to note here that central to Evangelical doctrine is the notion of redemption. Montt would himself preach the Evangelical path, even though his brother was to become a Catholic Bishop. These minor details aside, recent counting of religious attitudes in the country mark that there are very few Guatemalans of atheist persuasion and that almost the entire population believes (and continues to believe) in some form of Christian deity.¹² It is clear that a principal and considerable obstacle—to any sustainable critic or interrogation of hegemony inside Guatemala—would need to include this initial confrontation with the kind of Christian symbolism that Guatemalans were (are) used to—because it is this same that effectively forms part of an aesthetic system that buttresses power.

The adoption of a religious foundation by government policy in Guatemala is, as has been noted by Sancho Ribés, something that can be traced as far back as Rafael Carrera,¹³ who, despite his comparative leniency towards indigenous groups, was also inclined to abuse those same groups by manipulating them so to adopt the guise of a Christian army. Carrera formulated an army of 4,000 “guerrilleros,” made up of indigenous tribesmen, who would enter and destroy villages the State considered “liberal,” shouting “*Viva la religión y mueran los extranjeros*” (Long live religion, death to foreigners) (Sancho Ribés, 2017, p. 15). These same features of government continue through to the temporality of the works in question, as evidenced in the actions of the FRG (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco) (Sancho Ribés, 2017, p. 13).

11 The Reagan Administration backed Ríos Montt as he implemented his so-called *beans and guns* policy—feeding and arming supposed sympathizers to help him fight the rebels. The feeding part was carried out in part by American Evangelical missionaries, who operated as Ríos Montt’s representatives in the countryside. See footnote 9.

12 A survey taken in 2018 shows that 42% of respondents were Roman Catholic, while 39% claimed to follow the Evangelical Church. Just 13.8% said there had no religious faith at all. See Statista (2022).

13 José Rafael Carrera Turcios (24 October 1814–14 April 1865) was the president of Guatemala from 1844 to 1848 and from 1851 until his death in 1865.

Galindo had already adopted elements of Christian symbolism when she performed herself as an angelic figure in her first large-scale public performance: *Lo voy a gritar al viento* (1999)¹⁴. Now, in *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* she assumes the black clothing of a Christian widow, deep in mourning. Indeed, mourning is undoubtedly one of the central practices of the Christian faith regarding death. Here the symbolism lends itself to the passing of some 200,000 persons during the Guatemalan genocide. There is also the barefootedness to contemplate. Almost all Christian saints and martyrs are depicted throughout art history as walking barefooted as they preached; Christ himself is depicted in both film and painting as going about his business barefooted. The biblical tales of the washing of the feet are explicitly alluded to by Galindo in the very act of placing her feet inside the bowl; indeed, the stopping and starting, at almost every dozen or so steps, neatly forms an echo of the stations of the Cross. However, by far, the most important symbol in regards to Christianity is found when we contemplate the blood.

Referring then to the blood, as far as Christianity is concerned, the Blood of Christ is that which is shed on the Cross. This is the blood that, by and large, has a two-fold meaning. Firstly, it is the blood by which we are to be saved; Christ died on the Cross—this is the Christian event—so that humanity might be absolved of sin. Secondly, the sacrament or “Last Supper,” the very body and blood of Christ. Above all, it is important to note here that accepting salvation means we are “covered by the blood” or “washed in the blood” of Jesus—and we are made pure and clean in his sight.

Forgiving and Forgetting

The question for Regina José Galindo—and that which her performance throws into doubt—is this inferred *forgiving* and *forgetting* sensed in the actual memory of the social communal mind. By adopting the key symbols of Christianity, Galindo succeeds in subverting and repurposing their central meanings in an attempt to portray power in a new and questionable light.

¹⁴ <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/en/lo-voy-a-gritar-al-viento-2/>

The State (the government in Guatemala at the time the works were conceived), as noted above, claims the duty (implicit in the adoption of Evangelicalism) to forgive and forget in the name of a Christian God; after all, it was Ríos Montt who would claim that “amnesty is the spirit of the law” (Ríos Montt, 1982a). There are numerous quotations from Montt himself that support this view of him as an Evangelical Christian foot soldier, but it is interesting to begin such a review with a section of the Gospel of Matthew, which Montt no doubt knew very well from his own regular televised Gospel readings:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14–15)

We can compare this Gospel excerpt with Montt's own choice of wording in a sermon he delivered on 18 April 1982:

It is very easy to define concepts of politics and philosophy, but to live in reality means that one's own interests be detached, and see how we want to make a Guatemalan society reality [...] from this Tuesday amnesty is in effect, and amnesty is the spirit of the law.

Montt's real motive, however, was not to forgive, to grant amnesty to those rebels who had started to agitate in favour of a more egalitarian society in the country, but to suggest that forgiveness was part of what he might share with those who would disagree with his version of what it is to be Guatemalan (the moral high ground). For Montt, one could be forgiven under but one strict code, that you subdue yourself in the name of God, his Christian Evangelical version of God, as he notes:

But for that (amnesty), you and I must have a reunion, we must have a reconciliation, we must feed the roots, the roots of a greater Guatemala which only happens when you renounce your interests and I renounce my pride, but it is achieved when you believe in God. (Ríos Montt, 1982a)

So, all rebellion must be quelled, and all must surrender in effect to a Christian Evangelical reality which is what Montt stressed as the foun-

dation for his vision of what amounts to “the (heavenly) fatherland” (Ríos Montt, 1982b), as he notes:

What I want to say is [...] the amnesty wants to offer pardon [...], it wants to pardon; the fatherland wants to pardon; it is extending its arm; your embrace, your lap that your children return to; homes await the presence of its members. We take advantage of the amnesty that wants to offer pardon. He that pardons is noble, and the person who accepts it is a noble person; we make our *patria* something noble. We reconcile, we make our family the root of the country. (Ríos Montt, 1982b)

What Montt means when he refers to the “root” of the country returns us again to the Gospel of Matthew and the Christian indispensability of forgiveness. For Montt, all is forgivable once Christ the saviour is accepted. Furthermore, in his name, all crimes against humanity are to be written off as necessary evils in establishing the fatherland (Christian Evangelical). The fatherland must be purged of dissension, so all non-Christian voices must be either converted or utterly dominated and destroyed. This much is confirmed by Montt (1982b) in all that he says and does:

Listen well, Guatemalans. We are going to combat the subversion by whatever means we want [...] totally just, but at the same time with energy and vigor [...] We are prepared to change Guatemala; we are prepared to do so with honesty and justice, peace and respect for those who are peaceful and respect the law, [but] prison and death to those who plant [the seeds] of criminality, violence, and treachery.

A Rebuttal of Forgiving

So, we have a simulacrum with the semblance of an event (just war) but with the contents only of violence and brutality (genocide). *But how might an open and shut case of religious-based sectarianism and ethnic cleansing be further explained in more rigorous theoretical terms?* In his short and scathing essay directed towards Paul Ricoeur’s book (2004), *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Alain Badiou sustains a critique of Ricoeur’s theory of the subject on the grounds that it is only to be understood as a minor piece of a loftier Christian theological construction. Badiou (2006, pp. 27.1-27.9) accuses Ricoeur of subtracting history from what he calls the “duty to remember.”

By this duty, and in contrast to the Christian doctrine of salvation, *evil*—as of the kind witnessed within genocide—must be recognised by history as such. Badiou directly accuses Ricoeur’s interweaving of *memory, history, and forgetting*, noting that his view of memory (seen as an ongoing process and able to overlay itself upon pre-established structural processes)—simply forms itself as a consort to forgetting. This is because (this same criticism is contained by Galindo’s performance) “the victory of the Christian vision of the historical subject” means that “by virtue of the narrative’s sovereignty” (Jesus died for our sins)—nothing is ever able to subtract itself from forgiveness—from the remission of sins, “from the absolution of crimes, from ethical forgetting” (Badiou, 2006, pp. 27.1-27.9).

Galindo adopts Christian symbolism in order to subvert a political hegemony that is tacitly underpinned by Christianity and therefore claims a theological power capable of wiping a public memory clean, of bringing about the insistence upon the social process of forgetting, and in the case of Ríos Montt, *forgiving*. Badiou (2006), having by now thoroughly debunked Ricoeur’s thesis, continues channelling Saint Paul:

Belonging to the collective is ideally secondary to what commands charity: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Let us add: you will remember it all the more to the extent that you have no memory of yourself. Here we witness the preparation, between the lines, of the subordination of memory, as the supposition of a collective imperative, to the saving space of forgiveness that a self grants to others. (pp. 27.1-27.9)

Through her use of blood, Galindo evokes this sense of an unstated Christianity and is, therefore, able to interrogate the current situation: *In whose name is the power of absolution, and how can a corrupt state disguise its actions behind the notion that all that occurs has been for the “greater good,” that what Montt has done has been forgiven, and is now fit for forgetting, who claims this authority exactly?* Badiou (2006) is clear on the matter; speaking on the symbolic urge towards forgiveness inherent in the Christ image, he states that:

Whatever the scandal at stake (including that of the massacre of innocents), our power of judgment is nothing in the face of the infinity of sacrifice to which Christ consented for our sins. (pp. 27.1-27.9)

This is precisely what is in the balance: all things are forgivable under Christ, and this is what Montt was almost certainly relying upon. This much we can assume from his direct involvement with the Evangelical movement, which he unswervingly promoted in Guatemala. Even as thousands were being murdered during his spell as a dictator, Montt would appear on TV every Sunday preaching the Gospel.¹⁵ It is clear that Galindo attempts to confront this kind of forgiving, which can only take place under the auspices of a simulacrum.

A “just war” has not then been the truth of the situation, but this notion, supported by the invocation of the Christian theme, is now challenged by Galindo, who confronts the narrative with her own form of counter-Christian iconography. When the final count has been made, as far as the State is concerned, it is the Evangelical message (the Christ Event) that must be adhered to at all costs—the message of redemption. This is the key to understanding these particular performance works by Galindo: not that she is criticising Christianity per se, but that she is subverting the societal symbolism quietly embraced throughout the instituting of hegemony.

Almost as if to anticipate this reading of her work, Galindo titled a subsequent action (in which she herself did not use her own physical body) *Ablución* (2007). Ablution is a word explicitly used in connection with religious rites, particularly those of the Christian faith, whereby blessed water, or the blood of Christ (in symbolised form), as noted above, is used as part of the ritual of salvation and forgiveness of sin. As in *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, the blood is to be seen in terms of its dual symbolic power. It signifies directly the blood related to gang violence, which this young man had no doubt seen and participated in (he is a known gang member and reformed criminal), as well as the blood of Christ, as per the holy Christian rites of ablution. By using this particular human subject/object (subject because he is actively seeking redemption, object because he has become the focus for a work of art), Galindo is, as noted by Sancho Ribés (2017,

15 While Ríos Montt was enforcing news blackouts about military violence, he made sure to utilize mass media for his own ends. Within days of taking office on March 23, Ríos Montt began delivering television speeches broadcasted weekly on Sunday nights. They were his “discursos del domingo”, which were also known as “sermons.” Ríos Montt addressed his audience “about love, the family, abstinence from alcohol and other moral issues.” See Bonner (1982).

pp. 155-157), alluding to the culture of gang violence and macho aggression that has been permitted to develop within Guatemala. In the action, the man is first saturated with a litre of human blood, which he then undertakes to wash away with water. The blood of his crimes, until now invisible, has become clear for the audience to observe—and for himself to materialise upon his own flesh. The act of washing away the blood indicates the man’s sincere attempt to clear his conscience of his previous crimes. Galindo is, however, again demonstrating that the ablution of one’s sins—and the question of the State’s unspoken involvement in impunity—must forever be connected. A policy that promotes gang violence, whereby members are permitted to rape, torture, and murder members of the civil society, often at the State’s behest, is called out in the work.

**Regina José Galindo, *Ablución*,
Guatemala City, 2007.**



Source: www.reginajosegalindo.com/en/home-en/

Ladgarde y de los Ríos (2010, p. xi-xxv) observes that in Guatemala, femicide must be located within “a continuum of sexual violence” against women that started during the armed conflicts of 1960 and 1996 and continues after the signing of the peace accords into the present. She notes that

“the pervasive and systematic use of sexualised torture and rape of women by the Guatemalan State during the 36-year internal armed conflict [is] a factor that has normalised these forms of violence,” especially when considering that this type of violence was institutionalised in military training. Added to this, she notes that “ongoing structural impunity” allows crimes against women to be viewed as admissible or even state-sanctioned.

Conclusion

Galindo underscores that civil violence is partially underwritten by the speedy forgiving that occurs once gang members decide to resign from their life of violence. Therefore, the ritual of cleaning away the sin is the symbolic adaptation of Christian rites to accentuate the State’s shortfall in truth and justice within civil society. The State, which draws upon Christianity to fulfil its necessary quota—in terms of sovereignty—is placed into a new dubious light by the performances of Galindo. Her performance work reminds us of the true character of the State; that which, as is the case with the event—appears and disappears. The State acts then as an event’s natural accompaniment. The political evental sequences, in this case, related to genocide and state-promoted violence, are thus registered as *an action by the State*, now viewed as an excess, a measurable force that can be regarded as characteristic of evental aftermath. Once the event has passed, the State will attempt to fall back into the shadows, effectively camouflaging itself behind its processes of subterfuge and corruption. Badiou (2005) has noted of such situations that:

Empirically, this means that whenever there is a genuinely political event, the State reveals itself. It reveals its excess of power, its repressive dimension. But it also reveals a measure for the usually invisible excess. For it is essential to the normal functioning of the State that its power remains measureless, errant, unassignable. The political event puts an end to all this by assigning a visible measure to the excessive power of the State. (p. 145)

It is possible to interpret Galindo’s work by admitting that there are potentially two sides to the *subject* post-event. On one side, the affects leading to reconstruction (forgetting and forgiving) whereby the *superego* and *anxiety* function reactively; on the other, the subject affects of *courage*

and *justice*, through which the truth of the event calls subjects to arms and is—theretofore—extended. At the very end of her performance, Galindo marks two joined footprints together, the toes pointing towards the doors of degraded power. In front of the corrupt police officials now seen lining the staircase, she places down the bowl of remaining blood and, turning on her heel, withdraws. The message is as simple as it is clear: the (her) truth of the event has been delivered. This is the continued coming to pass of an event of truth: truth extends beyond the bounds of simulacrum. At this final juncture, what is assumed here is that one day soon, the currently indiscernible truths (those upon which she acts) will become verified and adopted in equal measure.

Galindo functions as a militant subject of the event (Badiou, 2009); she performs herself as but one of the event's soon-to-be-many tokens of truth. Furthermore, she behaves as if this certainty has, indeed, already come to pass. In her performance, we see the presentation of the symbolic as per the material transformation of affect. This text has so far demonstrated how Galindo adapts, performs, and materialises the affects of a specific political moment (which we can link to a particular event sequence). Galindo is, in fact, referencing, giving material form (presentation) to that which has no real foundation in the objectified world yet is—in so doing—able to refer directly to the injustices of power.

Accordingly, we have been attempting to demonstrate how affect and memory are at the very centre of what Galindo endeavours to achieve (the reissue of a truth as a direct confrontation of a hegemonic policy of forgetting). Our text has set out to examine how the event is present in the material world of the work of art, *per se* (as affect). As the ontological frame for this materiality begins to take shape, we shall need to be mindful that an intervention into memory is tantamount to an intervention into the event; this is because memory is an affect of a given temporality which continues to impinge upon the temporality of the present (from both the future and the past). The trace of evental truth, which, as we know following Badiou, is infinite. Furthermore, we need also be acutely aware that memory and the act of remembering, and therefore forgetting, is itself the active participation in the truth of an event. This is the knowledge that braces this analysis of Galindo.

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