

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

REGINA JOSÉ GALINDO

Exit Art

January 2010

Perhaps few contemporary genres more potently raise the “Is it art?” question than the kind of politically motivated endurance art practiced by Regina José Galindo of Guatemala. This show consisted of video clips of Galindo’s performances, some in public spaces, others commissioned for various art exhibitions, though it is not always clear which is which. For *Libertad condicional* (Conditional Freedom, 2009), which took place outdoors in Milan, she lay on the ground chained to posts as strangers walked indifferently by, ignoring the keys lying beside her. In *Cepo* (To Know, 2007) she was locked in prisoners’ stocks for 12 hours outside the walls of a prison in Rome. Other performances, however, were addressed to politically attuned art audiences: when she carved the word *perra* (bitch) on her thigh, for example, in 2005, at Galleriaprometeo in Milan, or when she underwent a kind of waterboarding—a man repeatedly thrusting her head into a barrel of water—at the Caja Blanca, Palma de Mallorca, in 2007.

Public or art-world directed, these two categories of performance are very different animals. Sophisticated art viewers, prepped in the examples of Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Yoko Ono and Ana Mendieta, all of whom Galindo evokes, are aware of the precedents as well as the rules. The live performance that opened Exit Art’s otherwise documentary exhibition recalled Yoko Ono’s 1964 *Cut Piece*. Members of an audience volunteered to “buy” articles of clothing off the artist’s body, removing them one by one until Galindo was completely naked. It was a bit of a game, with participants absolved in the name of art. A 2003 performance, titled *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (Who can erase the traces?), is quite another matter.



Regina José Galindo
Cepo (To Know), 2007
Photograph of performance
39 by 28 inches
at Exit Art

In it, Galindo walked silently through the streets of Guatemala City to the National Palace; carrying a basin of blood, she periodically put it down and stepped into it so as to create a trail of bloody footprints. This public protest against the brutal policies of the Guatemalan government was carried out under the watchful eyes of the police, who, as history has shown, do not always take a benign approach to provocation.

The point of these performances was to highlight various life-and-death matters: political repression, abuse of women, officially sanctioned torture—some issues specific to her native country, others more universal, invariably, Galindo takes the role of the victim, allowing her body to be the focus of degrading or violent physical acts. The challenge for the viewer is to separate the righteousness of Galindo’s political position from the unavoidable voyeurism attendant on witnessing her actions.

In 1994, New Yorker dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a still controversial non-review of a performance by Bill T. Jones that included footage of AIDS patients talking about their life-threatening illnesses. Dubbing the show “victim art” and noting that the work’s untransformed use of reality rendered it unreviewable, Croce refused even to attend the performance. By inflicting herself with sufferings analogous to those endured by victims, Galindo poses a similar problem. Nevertheless, at their best, her works can be brave political acts that effectively raise our consciousness about the horrors they target.

—Eleanor Heartney