

Fear and its Double

(Real and Imaginary) Fears in contemporary performance art from Latin America

“The ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility”. **Judith Butler**

Does Art production embody the social and political context in which the artists live and work? Perhaps the answer is positive in many ways, but what can be said in regards to a particular discipline, and a particular time and region of the world? How strong is the incidence of the socio-political status of a country or region in performance artworks?

If we analyze a region that is no stranger to persistent socio-political fears and strains, can we also find a parallel presence of personal and/or social fears among the performance art works from the region? Is the presence of fear in contemporary performance art practice a reflection of a contextual ‘social fear’, or an indication of a different state of humankind in which fear is pervasive to all spheres of existence?

This essay seeks to speculate about the evidence of ‘fear’ in contemporary practice of performance art in Latin America, in relation to the recent history of the region in which the work has been produced, and its implications in the future artistic strategies of the discipline.

Politics in Latin America were dominated by the military authoritarian regimes since the mid-60s, to the early 90’s; beginning with the Brazilian coup of 1965, the military seized power in most of Central and South America until the late 1980’s. The influence of the United States’ foreign policy in the region is evident in the development of the so-called “doctrine of national security”, a political agenda seeking to contain the expansion of the influence of Cuban politics in the region. In the case of most Latin American countries, the factual authoritarian regimes were equal to the partial or complete losing of civil liberties by their citizens, and in the most extreme situations, even the losing of their own lives under the state-owned repression systems.

During the late 60’s to the 80’s, performance artists dominated the art scene of Latin American avant-garde, mostly in response to the political situation of their respective countries; but since the 90’s, as the whole region (with the exception of Cuba) was experiencing a full democratic process, thus performance has become a more vast tool in the hands of the contemporary generation of artists.

There is a tradition within performance art that has always functioned as a radical indication of the societies in which the artists were raised and as a factor for the understanding of trends of thought and sensibility of a certain historical time or region. “Performative identity is not homogeneous, stable, essential, and unified (and therefore limited to personality and/or ethnic type) but unfixed and destabilized in a way that makes its political imbrications paramount”¹. One can speculate on whether the contemporary Latin American ‘identities’ (as diverse and complex as they are) are, to some extent, a construction of the past military actions in the region or an ideal stable representation with no

¹ Blocker, Jane, “Where is Ana Mendieta. Identity, Performativity and Exile” (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), page 24.

possible correlation to reality. “To what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?”²

To start analyzing performance art and the presence of fear in Latin American avant-garde, we must briefly stop to consider the artists from such imaginary territory located not in the actual countries comprising the region, but those living in exile, mainly in the United States.

Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-born artist who lived and died in the U.S., developed a notorious body of work under the series name of “*Silueta*” (1973 - 1981), in which she performed traces of her own body in several natural locations, documenting the performative action in photographs. In the series, she refers to her own presence / absence as an exiled citizen of her own country, thus implying her ontological fear of disappearance in the sense of never being able to return from where she was forced to depart. Her work also contains the immanent presence of the border: as an exile, her existence is inscribed in the places she can not reside. This initial approach, maybe can be called the “ontological fear”.

The tension and fear at ‘the border of Latin America’ is evident in the work of the Mexican-born artist and writer, *Guillermo Gómez-Peña*. In his solo work, as well as with “*La Pocha Nostra*” (with Roberto Sifuentes and other collaborators), he addresses the state of post-9/11 world through immigration, cross-culture and globalization. His often apocalyptic spanglish diatribe, refers to the United States world actions as the main source of global unrest. In the recent work, “*Mapa Corpo*” (Fig. 1), *La Pocha Nostra* offers a war-driven view of “body politics”, with the use of acupuncture on a naked body and the flags of the “coalition forces” over the needles as a metaphor for the inevitable to come. Here, we see a sort of “discursive/territorial fear”, both a real and imaginary fear is displayed, and no solution is to be found for it.

Mexican contemporary performance art is much less imbued in the fearsome relationship with its northern neighboring country, though. In the work of *Elvira Santamaría*, the personal makes a connection with the political, by means of the confrontation of the public space. In her work “*Arrastrando un cuerpo*” (“Dragging a body”) in 1995, she wraps the body of a collaborator in a white sheet and drags it through the large Zocalo square in Mexico City. Her father was assassinated very recently, so her public provocation / invocation is a call to the people living in the mega city, in which crime and kidnapping are unfortunately common. By addressing her personal fear and pain, she confronts the other with their own personal insecurity.

Perhaps the approach of Santamaría can be descriptive of the contemporary generation of Mexican performance artists: instead of ‘radical’ pieces, the works are subtle (therefore more intense) reflections of the life of people hardly surprised by anything. “It’s like the lack of limits in this society, too open to be beaten during the last twenty years, is keeping (the artists) to take more radical positions, both in artistic and political terms”³. Here, the personal becomes a public fear. Our personal fears become public in an effort to extend their reach, perhaps to communicate their imminence.

The personal fears reaching the public confrontation in a different level are visible too in the work of Central American artists. Central America was a major ground for unstable dictatorships during the late eighties, and to this day, in some countries the real power still resides, to a large extent, in the military.

For some countries in the Caribbean region, the social tensions, violence and the forced immigration of people, have invested the social acceptance for the ‘fear of the other’.

² Blocker, Jane, “Where is Ana Mendieta. Identity, Performativity and Exile” (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), page 16.

³ Meyer, Mónica, “*Rosa Chillante. Mujeres y Performance en México*” (Mexico City: Pinto mi Raya, 2003), page 45.

At the Dominican Republic, located in the West Indies, sharing a permeable border with Haiti at the island of Hispaniola, the issue of Haitian immigration is synonym of 'social unease'. Haitian immigrants, speaking their own language (Haitian Creole), often inspired 'fears and distrust' among Dominican nationals, though Haitian people usually take the worst jobs and are commonly abused. The work of Dominican artist, *David Pérez* (also known as Karmadavis), explores the constant fear for the other: he decided to tattoo on his forearm a phrase in Haitian creole, requesting a text to an Haitian immigrant living in his city, whose meaning is unknown to him at the moment in which it was tattooed (Fig. 3). "I requested him a commentary about the political and historical situation of both our countries"⁴. So he decides to confront his own fear and distrust of the other by forcing himself to trust a stranger to make a lasting (yet unknown) impression of a message on his own body, turning his fear into empathy for the other people's fears and suffering. So there is some cleansing process happening: fear is transformed into another human exchange, and by this is overcome. The transformation of fear into empathy is evident in the art production of many areas of the most instable countries in Latin America for the last decade.

But there is also a more radical transformation of fear, in countries like Colombia. As the country has been suffering from a non-stop spiral of violence, mostly derived from drug-related crime gangs as well as political unrest for the past two decades, the artistic production has taken two different approaches. The first approach is based in the 'rejection' of the personal fear and its transformation into 'rage': this is evident in the work of *Rosemberg Sandoval*. In his work "Mugre" ("Filthiness") he carries a homeless person from anywhere in the city to the all-white gallery space, leaving the traces of the dirty clothes of the homeless in the gallery walls, drawing a black line and accentuating our own forgetfulness for the other people surrounding us. The artist fear of being consumed, regurgitated, and finally forgotten by society, is returned as rage into our own faces. "I use (the homeless) as a dirty cloth, and carrying him on my shoulders, I draw a line of pain and filth on the white wall of the museum"⁵. Here the amplification of personal fears transforms them into outrage, so the others become 'victims', who must confront such fear by themselves.

The second approach can be found in the younger generation: turning the personal fears into a chain of global empathy. In *Pertuz*, the approach is made possible by the use of internet. In his work, he confronts his own fear of death, to the global fear, requesting the audience to make their fear of death public, sending messages to a website for later publication (Fig. 4). The dissolution of the personal fear happens then, only at a global scale.

Simultaneous to the promulgation of a new constitution in 1999, by Venezuelan president Chávez, the capital was devastated by the largest rainstorm killing thousands in Caracas. Such fear for the unpredictable destruction from the most common of elements, water, inspired the work of *Consuelo Méndez*, in which she sings the Venezuelan national anthem with water in her mouth, to the point of exhaustion and choking. In a very subtle way, she also expressed a fear to a potentially explosive socio-political situation in her country.

Argentina suffered one of the most brutal dictatorships in South America, during the '70s and '80s, after their return to democracy, has suffered from several economic crisis and social instability, during the past decade. The delicate economic and social balance between Argentina and its neighboring countries is one of the sources of fear found in contemporary Argentinean performance artists. In the work of *Calixto Saucedo* (Fig. 5), "Ar-Chi-Bo" (first letters of Argentina, Chile and Bolivia) he reflects

⁴ Somaya, Sandra, "Primer Encuentro Mundial de Arte Corporal" (Caracas: Ministerio de la Cultura, 2006), page 64.

⁵ Sandoval, Rosemberg, "Rosemberg Sandoval" artist catalogue (Bogota: 2004), page 25.

upon the weight of economic interests in his fear of instability in the relationship among 3 bordering countries, his body acting as a symbol for the 'collective fear'.

In Chile, performance art engages in a dialog with its political past in the work of *Leonardo González*. The artist summons back the terror in his work "Intro" (Fig. 6), which took place in the former jail of Valparaíso in 2002, the performance becoming a powerful device for the memory in a country suffering greatly during the military dictatorship. The fear in his work is omnipresent, strong and confrontational, acquiring a violence that outrages the memory, stressing the artist's body as well as the social body to suffer, once again, the rigors of history. This problematic and particularly violent relation with history is manipulated and intensified by the artist, who turns the site into a hostile experiential laboratory that revive torture, imprisonment, execution and the disappearance of bodies during the recent past in the country. This hostility and violence are maintained thanks to the durational aspect of the work that run for eight hours, adding the mental and physical exhaustion to it.

In the works of artists from the younger generation, as *Jonathan Vivanco*, another type of more global fear experience is found: instead of addressing a particular citizen of a country, the artist is addressing the world. His body, dispossessed of any type of territory, nation, politics, and in constant relation with the technological and virtual, becomes a neutralized body, a post-human body that is more akin to the new world order. In his work "The Man who (...) the world" (Fig. 7), developed in Valparaíso in 2002, the artist demonstrates the latent paranoia that lies under the sound of an alarm. This paranoia is a phenomenon underlying in antiterrorist policies mostly in the United States, as well as derived from the natural disasters happening in relation to the global warming of the planet. The subject of paranoia in the audio installation within the gallery reveals a sense of fear that is determined by the unmanageability of the situation, in which the vulnerable bodies become subject to an omnipresent and virtual danger that it is imposed by the new global order, thanks to technology. The sound of the alarm in the work, places the audience in an apocalyptic site in which he/she is hearing the sound of 'potential death', turning spectators into victims, and leaving as the only alternative to 'survive', a code to deactivate the annoying sound. Here we see traces of a certain "global / generational fear", which is declared as omnipresent, therefore its imminence is not questioned or discussed.

There seems to be a problematic correlation between the personal or collective fears as perceived by the artists and the apparent socio-political conditions of their own existence. The presence of fear in the work of performance artists in Latin America is informative of the strategies of 'the artist as a social entity', who absorbs and interprets reality, sometimes articulating a reflection, or eventually transforming it into something else. "Already immersed in the chaotic and disorganized flow of late capitalist society, the only strategy is to 'map' the social from within"⁶.

Understanding the different strategies concerning the "sense of fear" in contemporary performance artworks in Latin America, can provide us with traces of the multiplicity of social processes in current societies in the continent, and however rich and complex as it is, the region presents strong similarities in artistic approaches. The recent past acts as a contemporary and tragic imbrication for the whole region, which is not completely dissimilar with the common colonial history.

Fear in contemporary performance art practice in Latin America functions as a catalyst for the understanding of the living social processes taking place in our societies, a maze in which our recent past, present and future co-exist.

⁶ Wolff, Janet, "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism", in "Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism" (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), page 224.

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