

DEFER, DISTURB, SURVIVE

ACTION ART IN CENTRAL AMERICA

ROSINA CAZALI

The year 2000 was not only the year that saw the inauguration of a new millennium, but also the moment when the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra presented his piece *12 Workers Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* at the ACE gallery in New York. A reference to that event wouldn't belong in the present text were it not for the special significance the author and the work had for Guatemala. The first version of the piece was created by Sierra in 1999, on the rooftop of an unfinished building in the center of the capital of that Central American country. The action itself, and the presence of the artist, heralded a series of defining inspirations. Some were formed out of the intuition of local artists, mainly those who found in actionism and in performance art a space to trigger critical strategies, many of which were stark and provoked ethical dilemmas. The generation that began with the millennium coincided with Sierra's interest in exploring the fissures in the logic of the state through actions that made manifest the power games of institutional thinking. In Guatemala, a country distinguished

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by a 36-year long civil war and a complex social and economic structure where colonial dynamics of privilege and exclusion are still in force, the discussion of these two realities promised to be short-lived if it continued to be approached by means of existing narratives. In this regard, the notion of “revolution” became anachronistic with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. After the long decades of violence exercised by the state against its civilian population, Guatemala finally reached the end of a dark chapter. In its aftermath, the celebration of the *Octubre Azul* (Blue October) festival was the largest public action to take place in the so-called “post-war” period. Celebrated in October 2000 to coincide with the 56th anniversary of the October 1944 revolution, the festival employed a monochromatic blue banner—as opposed to the red flag traditionally identified with revolutionary activity—to suggest a turn towards a generational vision and a distinctive cultural space. As happens in cities where the power of public squares is recognized, and where urban planning includes those spaces and makes them by design into

centers for public demonstrations and civil actions, *Octubre Azul* was associated with a symbolic appropriation of the city's historic center and with the flowering of a boisterous art scene able to capture media attention and reveal the existence of other forms of art. Ten years have since passed; the expectations generated by events such as *Octubre Azul* have vanished into a spiral in which the old mechanisms of violence have revived and been reestablished. With the conclusion of the peace processes in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador¹, and as a result of the effects that these events had on the entire Central American region, a common need arose to reflect upon the disenchantment prevalent at the end of the civil wars and the manner in which the politicians of the moment were re-orienting it. In this context, "action art" had already secured a place for itself in the debate. The pieces that were developed over the course of the decade pointed the way towards promising critiques and fundamental explorations within actionism.

Every July 19, in the city of Managua, the artist Ernesto Salmerón used to take photos of people in the streets and around the city plaza where they had gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution. As he became aware of the erosion of the Sandinista discourse within the very context that had produced it, and as he saw that celebrating the political event was becoming increasingly void of meaning, he began to compile a body of materials and reflections that would form the basis of projects like *Auras de Guerra* (Auras of War) as well as the complex action with which, in 2009, he participated in the 52nd Venice Biennale. For the latter, he brought to the Venetian Arsenal a truck designated "El Gringo." With the truck came its cargo: a wall fragment, originally from Nicaragua, on which graffiti depicting the guerrilla fighter Augusto C. Sandino had been splashed. Through his account of the bureaucratic red tape involved in exporting an object of apparent insignificance, and through the very gesture of undermining any sense of monumentality, Salmerón alluded to the decay of the values that once sustained the most brilliant revolutionary precepts. In Guatemala,

the art world has approached the exploration of the body with greater clarity, through public exhibition of its nude form, and as a way of re-staging the events that underlie the country's social traumas. Cynicism, humor, the absurd, the fragmentary, ethical debate, and the inclusion of the Other in the art event have been the chief devices structuring the practice of actions and performances like those of the Guatemalan artists Aníbal López, Regina Galindo, José Osorio, and Alejandro Paz. But the cynicism that distinguishes López's work is the clearest reflection of a specific and culturally codified context from within the latent state of emergency. Examples are *El Préstamo* (The Loan), a text that relates the story of the assault of a passerby on a public street; and *Hugo*, a dinner at which the guests, in an echo of the cannibalistic practices of the Guatemalan Kaibiles, are invited to prepare and eat a pig that had been adopted and cared for by the artist himself. His participation in the MERCOSUR Biennial (2007), where he took advantage of the three-way border between Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil and the smuggling routes in the area in order to launch a group of empty plastic-wrapped boxes into the river, revealed his interest in the conceptual use of social relations and their conditioning through power structures. By the end of the 1990s, the presence of women artists had become essential in Guatemala for approaching feminine universes from within women's own bodies, which were converted into altars for performance. Jessica Lagunas and María Adela Díaz exemplified these artists' interest in the poetic and metaphoric investigation of the body freed from masculine desire. Through a certain anthropological logic, Sandra Monterroso carried on this examination of the dilemmas of culture and identity and their respective exercises of power. But it was Regina Galindo whose emergence on the artistic stage attracted uncommon attention. From her first public presentation, her works became benchmarks for psychological and physical risks taken to unimaginable limits. In 2005, during the celebration of the 51st Venice Biennale, she received the Gold Lion award for her presentation of three videos that documented per-

formances like the one titled *Himenoplastia* (Hymenoplasty). In it, the surgical reconstruction of the hymen practiced on her own body became a reflection on the culture of plastic surgery and the moral degradation under way in societies with high levels of violence. Along these lines, Galindo has developed sweepingly baroque conceptual works that make precise references to Guatemalan contexts. While in Guatemala action art has been pervaded by references to violence and death, in Honduras the same themes were treated in less aggressive ways. One of the most active groups between 2002 and 2004 was the collective La Cuartería, formed by artists including César Manzanares, Johanna Montero, Jorge Oquili, Leonardo, Fernando Cortés, and Adán Vallecillo. As the Cuban critic Denisse Rondón sees it, it is these artists who have made the most relevant contributions to performance practice. In Rondón's opinion the Honduran productions, though often naïve in their presentation, have articulated a methodology, discipline, and rigor that allow the consolidation of strategies and the assimilation of more sophisticated codes and languages.² Freed from the discourse of brutality, these artists have developed a poetics reflective of the fragility of the economic, social, and political structures of the Central American nation. One example is César Manzanares' work *Momento mori*, in which a skull containing soapy water is presented to spectators who then use it to produce soap bubbles. Ever since Priscilla Monge's piece entitled *Bloody Day* (1997)³, which left a deep impression on the Central American performance field, productions in Costa Rica have developed in an isolated manner and have been situated in hybrid territories, highlighting the formidable local theatre and dance traditions. If this is suggestive of anything, it is that action art turns out to be a medium with shallower roots in a country that did not go through the same chapters of conflict as the rest of the region. In El Salvador, the name of the artist Alexia Miranda is the essential point of reference for performance practitioners. Her works continue to explore general preoccupations concerning women's roles in society and the conventions associated

with them. With just a few years of experience, her tenaciousness has already created a stimulating atmosphere that is conducive to inspiring other artists. Finally, an essential chapter in this story is the Panamanian experience. The works of Jonathan Harker and Humberto Velez have been decisive in terms of exploring the construction of models of representation. Although reinforced by photographic and video documentation, Harker's work is carried out through a variety of situations provoked by prepared scenarios in which, as the central character, he performs generally absurd and stereotypical gestures. His interactivity and transvestitism weave his vision--an eternally conflictive one--through the simplistic classifications of Panamanian identity. From a distance, Humberto Velez has built an important repertoire of actions and performances that represent in one motion the processes of emigration and deterritorialization. According to the Panamanian curator Adrienne Samos, Velez's works have the characteristic of producing actions in the wrong places and at the wrong times. Velez, for instance, built and destroyed a piñata with a community in Shanghai; organized a boxing match at the Tate Modern in London; and arranged a body-building contest in the Canary Islands and a beauty contest for camels in Cuenca, Ecuador. Currently, he is organizing an action at a public pool, commissioned by the Centre Pompidou in Paris.⁴ His work relies on incorrectness, a quality that can best be gauged by someone who is at once both close enough to and far enough away from a society's codes of conduct, and who recognizes what destabilizes its normalcy.⁵ From its abyssal differences and shared histories, the experience of action art and performance in Central America has been ignored, rejected, and devalued, as much by the institutional art system as by a social environment that is scarcely receptive to anything that is potentially subversive. In Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, the various periods of crisis or political conflict, as well as the determination to render new dialogues with the city and urban life, have been essential keys for understanding that the artists have not replicated foreign experiences but

explored their own; for example, by joining the long Latin American tradition of approaching the city square as a place of public gathering, or by treating the body—a space traditionally subject to moral scrutiny—as a new political presence. Guatemala, a country that has lived through a war that left a tally of 200,000 dead or missing, and which is now living through the process of overcoming that statistical reality, is a country where the body has acquired an essential role in the analysis of representations of a wounded society. Action art has therefore been the most efficient platform to defer, disturb, survive, and conjugate all the verbs associated with its traumas.

1 Between 1960 and 1996, Guatemala suffered through a civil war in which the so-called Guatemalan Genocide took place. In El Salvador, there were conflicts between the government military of the Armed Forces of El Salvador and the insurgent forces of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). This armed conflict lasted from 1980 to 1992. In Nicaragua the process that began in 1978 and ended in 1990, which marked the end of the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, is known as the Sandinista Revolution or the Nicaraguan Revolution.

2 Denisse Rondón, “Notas para un nuevo mapa. Recapitulaciones sobre el arte contemporáneo hondureño”, unpublished writing.

3 The artist goes for a walk through the streets of the central part of the city, an introspective expression on her face, while wearing a pair of pants constructed from sanitary napkins stained with her own menstrual blood. This took place in San José, 1997.

4 From direct communication with Adrienne Samos.

5 A factor that may certainly have been instrumental in involving artists like Harper, Vélez and others was the production of *Ciudad Múltiple* (Multiple City), an international urban art event organized and curated by Adrienne Samos and Gerardo Mosquera that was held in 2003 in Panama City. The project called upon local and international artists to work within a unique urban landscape, one which combined the omnipresence of the Panama Canal, skyscrapers, an historic old town, popular neighbourhoods, free-trade zones, and an extensive forested area. The interaction of the artists with this space and its inhabitants was largely effected through performance art.