


# Dossier | Fear and Its Double. (Real and Imaginary) Fears in Performance Art from Latin America

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## **Fear and Its Double. (Real and Imaginary) Fears in Performance Art from Latin America**

**By Alexander Del Re & Patricia Contreras Fuentes**

“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 artists live and work? Perhaps the answer is positive in many ways. Yet what can be said of a particular discipline, at a particular time and place? How strong is the incidence of the socio-political status of a country or region in performance artworks? If we look at a region that has known persistent socio-political fears and strains, can we also find in parallel personal and/or social fears among the performance art work of 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 pervades all spheres of existence? This essay seeks to speculate about the presence of “fear” in contemporary performance art practice in Latin America, in relation to the recent history of the regions where the work has been produced, and its implications in the future artistic strategies of the discipline.

In Latin America politics were dominated by military authoritarian regimes from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s. Beginning with the Brazilian coup of 1965, the military seized power in most of Central and South America until the late 1980s. 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 most Latin American countries, the actual authoritarian regimes meant the partial or complete loss of civil liberties by citizens, and in the most extreme situations, the loss of their lives under the state-operated repression systems.

From the late 1960s to the 1980s, performance artists dominated the art scene of Latin American avant-garde, mostly in response to the political situation in their respective countries. But since the 1990s, as the whole region (with the exception of Cuba) experienced a complete democratic process, performance became a more important tool in the hands of a generation of contemporary 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 means to understand thinking patterns and sensibility at a certain historical time or in a particular 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 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 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 United States, developed a notorious body of work in a series entitled *Siluetas* (1973-81), in which she performed by leaving 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 where she cannot reside. This initial approach can perhaps be called "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 a post-9/11 world through immigration, cross-culture and globalisation. 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*, 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," where both a real and imaginary fear is displayed and no solution is to be found.

Mexican contemporary performance art is much less imbued in the fearsome relationship with its northern neighbouring country, though. In the work of Elvira Santamaría, the personal makes a connection with the political, by means of confronting 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 his or her own personal insecurity.

Santamaría's approach can perhaps describe the contemporary generation of Mexican performance artists: instead of "radical" pieces, the works are subtle (therefore more intense) reflections of the life of individuals hardly surprised by anything. "It's like the lack of limits in this society, too open to be defeated during the last twenty years, is making [the artists] take on more radical positions, both in artistic and political terms." (3) Here, personal fears become public, perhaps to communicate their imminence. Personal fear reaching public confrontation at different levels is also visible in the work of Central American artists. Central America was a major ground for unstable dictatorships at the end of the 1980s 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, social tensions, violence and the forced immigration of people have created social acceptance of the "fear of the other." In the Dominican Republic, located in the West Indies and sharing an open border with Haiti on the island of Hispaniola, the issue of Haitian immigration is synonymous with "social unease." Haitian immigrants, speaking their own language (Haitian Creole), have 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 of the other. Deciding to tattoo his forearm with a phrase in Haitian Creole, he requested a text from a Haitian immigrant living in his city, whose meaning was unknown to him when it was tattooed. "I asked him for a commentary about the political and historical situation of both our countries." (4) Choosing 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, he turned his fear into empathy for the other people's fears and suffering. A sort of cleansing process is happening here: fear is transformed into another form of human exchange and is thus overcome. This transformation of fear into empathy has been evident in the art production of many areas of the most unstable countries in Latin America over the past decade.

But there is also a more radical transformation of fear, in countries like Colombia. While the country has been caught in a spiral of violence for the past two decades—drug-related crime gangs as well as political unrest—artistic production has taken two different approaches. The first is based on the "rejection" of personal fear and its transformation into "rage": this is evident in the work of Rosemberg Sandoval. In his work *Mugre* (Filthiness) he carries on his shoulders a homeless person from anywhere in the city to an all-white gallery space, leaving traces of the homeless person's dirty clothes on the gallery walls, drawing a black line and accentuating our own forgetfulness of those who surround us. The artist's 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 into outrage, so that the others become “victims” who must confront such fear by themselves.

The second approach can be found in the younger generation who turns personal fear into a chain of global empathy. With Pertuz, the approach is made possible by the use of Internet. In his work, he confronts his own fear of death to global fear, requesting the audience to make its fear of death public, sending messages to a website for later publication. The dissolution of personal fear only happens then on a global scale.

Just as Venezuelan president Chávez was promulgating a new constitution in 1999, a massive rainstorm that killed thousands was devastating the capital Caracas. Fear for unpredictable destruction from the most common of elements—water—inspired the work of Consuelo Méndez, in which she sang Venezuela’s national anthem with her mouth full of water, to the point of exhaustion and choking. In a very subtle way, she also expressed fear for a potentially explosive socio-political situation in her country.

Argentina went through one of the most brutal dictatorships in South America, during the 1970s and 1980s. Since its return to democracy, it has suffered several economic crises and known social instability during the past decade. The precarious economic and social balance between Argentina and its neighbouring countries is one of the sources for fear found in contemporary Argentinean performance artists. In his work Ar-Chi-Bo (first letters of Argentina, Chile and Bolivia), Calixto Saucedo reflects upon the weight of economic interests in his fear of instability among three bordering countries, his body acting as a symbol for “collective fear.”

In Chile, performance art engages in a dialogue with its political past in the work of Leonardo González. The artist summons back the terror in his work Intro, taking place in the former jail of Valparaíso in 2002. The performance became a powerful device for memory in a country that has suffered greatly during a military dictatorship. The fear was omnipresent, strong and confrontational, acquiring a violence that outraged memory, causing the artist’s body as well as the social body to suffer, once again, the hardships of history. This problematic and particularly violent relation with history was manipulated and intensified by the artist, who turned the site into a hostile experiential laboratory that revived torture, imprisonment, execution and the disappearance of bodies in his country’s recent past. Hostility and violence were maintained thanks to the durational aspect of the work that ran for eight hours, adding mental and physical exhaustion.

In the works of artists from the younger generation, as such as Jonathan Vivanco, another more global type of fear is found: instead of addressing a particular citizen in a country, the artist addresses the world. His body, dispossessed of any type of territory, nation or 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, developed in Valparaiso in 2002, the artist shows latent paranoia as a phenomenon underlying antiterrorist policies mostly in the United States, as well as derived from natural disasters happening in relation to global warming. The audio installation in the gallery reveals a sense of fear that is determined by the unmanageability of a situation where vulnerable bodies become subjected to an omnipresent and virtual danger that it is imposed by the new global order, thanks to technology. The sound of an alarm in the work, places the audience in an apocalyptic site where they hear the sound of “potential death,” turning spectators into victims and leaving as the only alternative to “survival” a code that can deactivate the annoying sound. Here, we see traces of a certain “global/generational fear,” declared as omnipresent, whose imminence is therefore neither questioned nor discussed.

There seems to be a problematic correlation between the personal or collective fears as perceived by 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 cultures on the continent, and however rich and complex they are, the region’s artistic approaches share strong similarities. The recent past acts as a contemporary and tragic backdrop for the whole region that is not completely dissimilar from its 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.

#### NOTES

1. Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta: Identity, Performativity and Exile* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 24.
2. *Ibid.*, 16.
3. Mónica Meyer, *Rosa Chillante. Mujeres y Performance en México* (Mexico City: Pinto mi Raya, 2003), 45.
4. Sandra Somaya, *Primer Encuentro Mundial de Arte Corporal* (Caracas: Ministerio de la Cultura, 2006), 64.
5. Rosemberg Sandoval, *Rosemberg Sandoval, artist catalogue* (Bogotá: 2004), 25.
6. Janet Wolff, “On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,” in *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 224.

