

“A sudden spiritual Manifestation”

Regina José Galindo's „Aparición“ as Epiphany, Allegory, and Action

Imagine strolling around a picturesque historic city, taking your dog for a walk around the block or simply doing the shopping. All at once - more feeling than comprehending - you realize an unusual occurrence: the glimpse of a grayish specter, seemingly a person standing still, fully covered by a large cloth falling to the ground in folds. You have already passed the calm and pure figure, but the picture of the clearly temporary yet oddly striking appearance remains in your mind.

However, to understand „Aparición“ by Regina José Galindo as a mere „appearance“ wouldn't do justice to the piece. Every single one of her site-specific and temporary living memorials is no less than a conjunction of epiphany, allegory, and action.

Rendering femicides visible - worldwide

In Regina José Galindo's artistic work, the female body — vulnerable, scarred, but alive and combative — typically portrays how systems of oppression and violence are ingrained in our societies. Her performances depict injury, assault, and defenselessness, they denounce patriarchal and colonial power structures, ultimately giving visibility to sexual violence and eventually the murder of women - termed „femicides“.

The starting point for a new perspective on our very own reality is her native Guatemala: Due to the early usage of the term „femicide“ to raise consciousness for the indeed high number of gender-related killings (very often by a partner or ex-partner) in Latin America, Western Europe tends to regard those murders as a distant phenomenon of developing countries.

Meanwhile, Germany has one of the highest absolute femicide numbers in the European Union. Every third day a women is murdered by her partner or ex-partner, regardless of their perpetrator's religion, nationality or education - in fact (against popular belief and populist agenda) two-thirds of the murderers are German nationals from all parts of society.

In 2008 - a full decade before Germany joined the „Istanbul Convention“ as the first binding document to prevent and combat violence against women“ - the state of Guatemala tackled femicides on a constitutional level with Decree 22: „Act Against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence Against Women“. Even though enforcement and prosecution continue to be unsatisfactory, Guatemala indirectly accepted the gender-related killings as crimes of a state not protecting its citizens.

ἐπιφάνεια, epiphanea, epiphany

When James Joyce coined the secular usage of „epiphany“ as a „sudden spiritual manifestation“ in „Stephen Hero“ he extended its meaning beyond an exclusively religious context. Yet, his term is more than apt to describe the piece „Aparición“ and its aim. In its visual appearance as well as conceptually the work refers to patriarchal contexts such as Christianity or colonization and a long tradition in the arts reaching back to Ancient Greece. The unexpected appearance of not only God(s) but of the dead is a topos known in all cultures. „Aparición“ is a contemporary unexpected manifestation of the dead and „virtually“ dead female victims of (mostly) domestic violence. If not a spiritual experience in a religious sense it still personifies a spirit, a specter, or a ghost - an almost archetypal image, which - during the performances - most notably children were able to make sense of immediately.

Even Joyce's idea of „evanescent moments“ corresponds with the nature of an unexpected public artwork aiming to change the astonished viewers perspective on their social conditions. Beyond the control of a regulated art space the fleeting encounter is unexpected and involuntarily, giving visibility to the in these parts overly neglected phenomenon of femicides. It might be the first stepping stone or invitation for a passer-by to adapt a new point of view and to reflect on his fragile perception of reality.

Place & context

Place and context form an inherent (partially uncontrollable) part of any artwork or intervention in the public domain. The site, its surroundings and its genius as well as its people become a resonance chamber and provide unexpected interpretations.

„Aparición“ started in fall 2020 during corona lockdown as a series for the exhibition project „Owned by Others“ on Museum Island Berlin. At a time of deserted city centers, contact restrictions, and rising numbers of domestic violence the UNESCO World Heritage Site provided a context of national history, classicism, colonialism and ubiquitous memorials. In many cases the performances merged with their immovable environment and almost seemed to mimic the visual vocabulary of fallen empires and the products of top-down politics of remembrance. A strong reference to antique models, public sculptures and a visual resemblance to the drapery of José Galindo's temporary memorials set the stage to ask for whom our societies erect memorials and in which form. Whoever is in power determines the narratives and historiographies for generations to come. So far living sculptures or the subject of murdered women are not part of our public culture of commemoration. (A rare exception is an empty pedestal by Jenny Holzer labeled with her slogan „Men don't protect you anymore“ in the Colonnade Courtyard.)

ἀλληγορία, allegoría, allegory

The living and reoccurring sculptures of „Aparición“ also function as personifications of the complex societal reality of worldwide femicides. On one hand the ghostly figures appear to mimic the allegorical protagonists of a Renaissance painting while being an almost ironically literal representation of „veiled (visual) language“. On the other hand the fully covered human bodies are the greatest possible abstraction and reduction of an allegorical figure. The cloth hides the ineffable and makes it visible at the same time. The performances produce a direct dichotomy

between the aestheticization of place and form - captured in a single picture or experience - and the severe reality of femicides.

The balancing act between those contradictions make the work so powerful and appealing.

Time

In Berlin José Galindo's allegorical representations and living sculptures appeared in intervals of three days as every third day a woman is murdered by her partner or ex-partner in Germany. The temporary memorials become time-dependent personifications, provide a sense of temporality and urging immediacy: every time you come across a new appearance - for every picture and visual representation of a performance - another woman has been killed.

Tool for Action

After only a few weeks „Aparición“ - as an artwork, as a performance, and an action - gained international attention, giving visibility to murdered women worldwide: The work or its documentation travelled from Berlin to the Canaries and was adopted by activists in Buenos Aires. By now it arrived in Milan before it will continue in the German Ruhr area.

In the last decades the term „femicide“ gave visibility to murdered women in the political discourse and on a cognitive level. With its sudden spiritual manifestations of allegorical living sculptures „Aparición“ addresses an emotional dimension and therefore provides an aesthetic equivalent tool for action for the years to come.

Text by Lutz Henke

“EL CANTO SE HIZO GRITO”

Regina José Galindo

opening with performance on 22.06.2021 at 6.30pm
23.06 - 30.07.2021

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