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Lizbeth Miscles Rivera
lmiscles@unm.edu

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Three Generations Explore Danger and Control Through Global Performance

Art: *Regina Jose Gallindo, Laurel Nakadate, and Marina Abramovic*

Lizbeth Miscles-Rivera

New Media and Contemporary Art

Kevin Mulhearn

Art that uses the body as the primary medium is one of the most visible fruits of the 60's. What is often over looked is the international and femme influence in this influential moment in the arts. Though the work of Yoko Ono, is canonized and even an icon of performance, performing *Cut Piece* (1964) in Kyoto, Japan, New York, and London. There are many women, all over the world and across generations that are yet to be written about and compared to the cannon. Latin American artists like Regina Jose Gallindo are using their bodies and performance to be dissident of the political oppression they had been experiencing since colonialism. Though photography, painting, film, and sculpture have all been accepted by most, even those not within the institutions of art, as 'art,' performance art is still questionable to audiences outside artists and art academics. Laurel Nakadate, Regina Jose Gallindo, and Marina Abramovic all make art that because of its un-aesthetic nature, and its real-life displays of pain and discomfort is more likely to be dismissed. Despite the criticisms of the work for its lack of traditionalism and the underestimation they face on the basis that they are women, Nakadate, Gallindo, and Abramovic are highly respected as artists. All three artists put themselves in perceived danger for the sake of their statements about society and power dynamics.

For this exhibition, I explore Nakadate's *Beg For Your Life* (2006), *Oops* (2007), Gallindo's *Confession* (2007), and Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1964). These works though from different regions and generations, grapple with danger and control. For Nakadate and Gallindo the point is to reverse gender power dynamics while engaging in dangerous situations with men. Though Gallindo's work does play with gender dynamics, it has a strong thread of questioning and protesting the state and

critiquing the imperial violence faced in her country. Abramovic seems to take a more general approach and questions society. She gives up control by taking responsibility for other's actions to expose what humans are willing to do to each other. Through the exhibition the viewer might see how all three artists make the uncertainty of what damage their bodies might suffer to be a theme in their work.

Laurel Nakadate was born on 1975 in Austin; Texas but grew up in rural Iowa. Nakadate uses performance, video, and films to explore the uncertainty of new relationships with strangers. She attended Yale where she received her MFA in Photography in 2001. Her early work was all shot in low-tech and in the style of home video. For her artwork, she would meet men on craigslist, in grocery stores, and other public spaces and go to their homes where she would come up with narratives spontaneously, at times having the men dance with her, sing her happy birthday, or posing for them while they would draw her. Her work is described by *Afterimage: the Journal of Media arts and Cultural Criticism* as, "Part diary entry, part sexual exposé, her narratives are a clever mix of voyeurism, tragedy, and slapstick in the style of Laurel and Hardy." What is so compelling about these videos is that as the viewer experiencing the video, you are not really sure if you should be laughing, cringing, or feel worried. Nakadate takes those who encounter her work through a journey their own emotions as a voyeur.

Nakate's *Beg For your Life (2006)*, uses jump cuts to take viewer from one man's living space to the other. In each shot a man is on his knees saying, "please don't kill me" while Nakadate, points a toy gun at their head. The men are willing in their degradation and aware of the camera. It is apparent that the men are aware

that they are in no serious danger by the way in which they ask Nakadate not kill them. They often say it in monotone or seem to find the whole event humorous. In most of the videos Nakadate wears a jean mini skirt, pink camisole, and black strapped heels. In the early 2000s' this style was considered provocative and scandalous. Her clothing choices offer an interesting point when one considers rape culture, a system that contends that women who wear revealing clothing are asking for harassment and rape. The viewer of her videos might wonder why Nakadate would make the intentional choice to wear clothing that may be interpreted in this way. Not only is she meeting unknown, older, and sturdier men—an already perceived danger-- she is also wearing clothing that society deems dangerous because of the connotation that she is asking for "it".

There are other details that might make the viewer uncomfortable; for example, the camera is placed so that it cuts out Nakadate's head from view. The camera is at the same level as the men's face that are always on their knees. Based on other works by Nakadate one can assume that she is the figure standing causing one to look up at the headless body of a woman in 'provocative' clothing.

Oops! Follows the same foundational format as *Beg For your Life*, jumping through several different men in their setting. This time, both the men and Nakadate look towards the camera. *Oops I Did It Again* by Britney Spears plays in the background while Nakadate enthusiastically dances to the song, some men are willing to ineptly dance with her, though one man stands stiffly the whole time while Nakadate is avidly dancing. This time, Nakadate wears sweat pants and the eroticism comes instead from the highly sexualized figure of Britney Spears.

Brittney Spears was the most idolized female sex symbol in popular culture at this in the early two-thousands. Every clip ends with the line in the song, "I'm not that innocent."

The camera angles and choice and choice of music sexualize the performance in an uncomfortable way. In regards to the criticisms of her interactions with these men Nakadate states, "Many young women have said they identify with my work or feel empowered by it because I'm not portraying a naive woman or some vapid teen character; I'm looking back at the camera and saying: I know that you know that I know."¹ Here it becomes apparent that there is a feminist tone that Nakadate finds in her video art, she controls a narrative in which she gets to dictate her relationships with men. She is the one choosing the camera angles and music. This makes her the one in control.

Regina Jose Gallindo was born in 1974 in Guatemala City, Guatemala. The performance artist explores the universal implications of social injustice in regards to racial discrimination and other abuses implicated in the function of power in current society. Her primary medium is her own body. Since the beginning her works have involved physical danger, in her piece, *Se Lo Voy a Gritar al Viento* (1999), she hung herself from a governmental building and read poetry of protest for hours. In the late nineties, when Gallindo started making performance work there was a lot

¹ Morgan, Eleanor. "Dancing with strangers: the disturbing videos of performance artist Laurel Nakadate" *Guardian*, October 8th, 2011

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/09/laurel-nakadate-video-performance-artist>

scandal, mocking, and negation of her work.² For example, *Se Lo Voy a Gritar al Viento* made it onto to every newspaper in the city but none of the publications stated that she was an artist. Most papers dismissed her as a woman begging for attention.³

For the exhibit, I would include her work, *Confession* (2007) in which Gallindo hires a man to dunk her underwater for seven-second intervals. The male subject is someone Gallindo identifies as someone who tortured rebels of the dictatorship. The video does not aim for technical perfection or aesthetic where the only intent of the video is to record the action. At the end of the video, the man throws Gallindo across the room. The piece was in response to the United States government's approval of waterboarding on "enemy combatants." The artist gives the power to the male subject here that benefits from patriarchy, is stronger and was professionally tortured. Regardless of what type of verbal agreement she and the subject may have, the viewer may be inclined to believe that she is putting herself in danger by giving all the power to man. Gallindo discusses how it was not pre-planned that this man would throw her across the room. Again, this might make the viewer feel like Gallindo put herself in danger by giving up her control. But she

² Latin-American Canada Art Projects, *LASS Interview Regina Jose Galindo*, YouTube Video. 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QVOWF86Y0o>

³ Gallindo, Jose, "Untitled" (lecture series, *Decolonizing Methodologies in Art* Albuquerque, NM, November 16, 2016).

argues that she is always in control. For Gallindo, by putting this man in the situation of harming a body, she put him in a situation where he would lose control.⁴

Marina Abramovic, who considers herself the grandmother of performance art, was born on 1946 in Serbia Belgrade. Her work explores the relationship between performer and audience, the limits of the body, and the possibilities of the mind. Similar to Gallindo her work involves physical harm. In *Light/Dark* (1997), Abramovic, sits across her romantic partner. They begin to slap each other slowly. As the twenty minute video progresses the slapping gets faster and rougher. In *Relation in Space* (1979), Abramovic and her partner walk towards each other, in the nude, to collide with one and other. As the video progresses, the viewer sees Abramovic become weaker and weaker as they both keep slamming their bodies against each other.

For this exhibition, I would choose her most well known performance *Rhythm 0* (1974), in this six-hour performance, Abramovic gives the audience instructions “There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. Performance. I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility.” Among these 72 objects were a rose, a feather, honey, a whip, olive oil, scissors, a scalpel, a gun and a single bullet. About her performance the critic Thomas McEvilley said,

It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arms into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her

⁴ Gallindo, Jose, “Untitled” (lecture series, *Decolonizing Methodologies in Art* Albuquerque, NM, November 16, 2016).

abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina's head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions.⁵

Abramovic purposely put herself in danger by trusting a crowd of people with her body. Where her body became an experiment of torture. Perhaps if it was not in a public place where the participants may be known by others in attendance she would have been killed and that is the point of her performance.

The works of these three artists show the different ways in which feminists were engaging with body politics from the 60's to the early 2,000's. Though they all pose questions of control they do it for different reasons as well. For Nakadate, it is to take power in situations where she is not expected to have any in the first place. For Galindo, it is to express how the one putting someone in the situation where they have to torture is the one with the power. An allusion to how the state controls. While Abramovic, gives up control to explore a society where there are no legal consequences. Though all of these works can be considered feminist work they do not necessarily all fit under the same umbrella. They offer different levels of discomfort for different reasons and I imagine that any feminist might like one artist while feeling that one of the others is problematic or wrong in approach. However, they all offer important questions to the viewer such as, is a woman ever in power? Is Nakadate bending gender dynamics or being exploitative? Can a woman be in control while subjecting herself to the force of a man? Is society naturally bad? The

⁵ Fraizer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience*, (University New England: Press of New England, 2012). 125

exhibition does not offer a political or social message but instead explores how women artist have used their bodies to explore the political and social.



Laurel Nakadate, *Beg For Your Life*, 2006.



Laurel Nakadate, *Oops*, 2007.



Regina Jose Galindo, *Confesion*,
2007.



Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

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