

FOOTAGE

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*"I work always ... slightly under the conscious level and I usually don't know what or why I do things for a long time afterwards."*¹

Tacita Dean's work explores the ways chance and coincidence influence daily life while seeking out connections between past and present, fact and fiction. She maps not just the objective world but also our private worlds and traces the complex interaction between the two: real landscapes are layered with inner, psychic landscapes defined by our own desires and obsessions. Dean's art is carried by a sense of history, time and place, light quality and the essence of film itself. It moves from this world into the next, tracing the journeys of others along the threshold between life and death.

¹ Tacita Dean, *Story of Perfect Feet*. Transcript from talk at Schaulger, 7 July 2006

Journeys, walking and limping have found their way into many of Tacita Dean's works, from early sketches of swollen feet such as *Oedipus, Byron and Bootsy*, (1991), to more complex artworks including *Blind Pan* (2004) a series of photogravures that trace Oedipus's final journey of exile, and *Boots*, (2003) a film dominated by her uncle limping his way around a soon to be demolished villa in Porto. Looking back, Tacita Dean comments that, "All that limping is interesting because I limp. I always wonder how much you pre-figure or know something like that in advance. Because I was thinking about Oedipus and Antigone and Byron, all about swollen feet, long before I had my own."²

Gehen, a 2006 exhibition at Schaulager in Basel, brought Francis Alÿs and Tacita Dean together and there was a moment when Tacita wondered if it was a wonderful joke, the placing of herself in such close proximity to an artist renowned for his walking, when she limps with quite severe arthritis. The exhibition's conference invited Marina Warner to discuss Dean's work and during their many conversations, Warner recalled Carlo Ginzburg's writing about witchcraft in Europe as a local form of knowledge and healing, and that shamans and all carriers of wisdom who had a foot in the other world or were able to cross into it, were marked by limping. As he tells us, "The severed heels of [heroes] are clearly the distinguishing mark of those who have accomplished the subterranean journey into the world of the dead".³ Ginzburg calls this "augmented deambulation". While Francis Alÿs might use walking as a

² Tacita Dean, Phaidon, London, 2006, pp36

³ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the witches Sabbath*, Pantheon Books, 1991, pp257

⁴ Tacita Dean, Phaidon, London, 2006, pp37

⁵ Tacita Dean: *Seven Books Grey*, Marina Warner, 'Footage', pp 17

⁶ Tacita Dean to Marina Warner, email, 11 Feb 2009

poetic metaphor for social and political comment, Dean walks towards the underworld in order to slow down time and consider the journeys of others.

The photographs in *Footage* remind us of the immortality of gods and their perfect feet as symbols of their divinity. Once when visiting Delphi, Dean found the *Delphic Charioteer* in the museum there: "I always remember the ankles of a charioteer I saw there. ... They are beautiful, perfect – the most exquisite examples of ankles I have ever seen".⁴ However, as Marina Warner comments in *Footage*, "Divinely beautiful feet summon up their counterpoise, their opposite, as imagining the soul and its lightness recalls the drag of the body".⁵ Our bodies have a way of reminding us of our mortality. Marina Warner goes on to tell us that two years ago, Tacita's right ankle began hurting even more than usual, and she was facing an operation, when the doctor diagnosed a different, genetic condition: she has a wing-bone, or bone-tail, in her ankle, with the technical name of *processus posterior tali*. "I felt very much," Dean said later, "like my Achilles heel had been discovered."⁶

Dean's art moves from this world into the next, exploring journeys taken along the threshold between the two. Through image and text, *Footage* takes us to a place where limpers and the lame have the insight (consciously or unconsciously) to walk between worlds.

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MEDIATIC VIOLENCE AND THE WORK OF REGINA JOSÉ GALINDO

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The Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo is a key figure in the dynamic developments that took place in the Guatemalan arts scene at the end of the 1990s. Within these developments, performances became an important means of artistic expression. Whilst much of the international art world had long adopted the practice, performance art was practically absent within the Central American region —save for a few isolated collective actions.¹ The main reason is the violent historical period that marked the whole region. Guatemala suffered the longest and bloodiest civil war in Central America (1960-1996). Performance art, especially the actions that took place in the streets, such as Galindo's *¿Quién Puede Borrar las Huellas?* (Who can Erase the Traces? 2003), was possible only after the armed conflict

Perez-Ratton, in: Cullen, Deborah (ed.), *Arte ≠ Vida: actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000*. New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008, p 204-210

had ended, when citizens began to reoccupy the public spaces that had been denied to them.

¿Quién Puede Borrar las Huellas? took place on 23 July 2003, when Galindo, dressed in black, walked barefoot through Guatemala City. She went from the Constitutional Court building to the Old National Palace, holding a basin filled with human blood. After every few steps she stopped and dipped her feet into the blood, leaving a bloody trail of footprints behind her. This highly charged walk was a personal (re)action against the still corrupt Constitutional Court that had allowed Efraín Ríos Montt—a former dictator accused of committing genocide during the civil war—to run for president a few days earlier.

The symbolism of the performance seems clear: the footprints represent the thousands of civilians murdered, predominantly by the army, during the civil war. Galindo re-negotiates past and present violence by making it publicly visible. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière's concept of the *partition of the sensible* construes politics as a practice that challenges the established order by making visible that which was not visible, audible as speech that which was previously regarded noise.² Simultaneously, this disturbingly poetic work is able to speak of injustices on a broader level: as philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remark, all difference converges and passes through 'woman,' who therefore becomes 'the Other' *par excellence*.³ Galindo's gendered body, defiantly walking from the Constitutional Court

2 Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010

3 Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp 275-291

4 O'Neill, Kevin Lewis and Kedron Thomas (eds.), *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala*. Duke University Press, 2011, p 14

to the National Palace, denounces the contemporary state of violence and failure of democracy.

Whereas during the civil war clearly identifiable collective bodies exercised violence—the State and its army—presently, it has become an option for a multitude of actors, for a multitude of reasons.⁴ 'Privatised' by criminal gangs, violence has become perpetual, traversing public spaces and crossing national boundaries. Galindo's new performance to be executed at the University of Essex on 4 November 2011, points to these recent developments in the use and control of violence. Titled *Lessons of Dissection*, the performance stages Galindo's motionless body lying on a steel table. A professional surgeon enters the room with a small group of anatomy students to mark the artist's body with a system of black lines indicating where to cut. The marked body parts are the same as the ones that are mutilated in women's bodies in Guatemala: arms, hands, nails, eyes, nose, nipples, legs.

The work explicitly echoes Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* (1632), which was commissioned by the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons and depicts a group of academics observing Professor Nicolaes Tulp who dissects a body. Referring to this group portrait, Galindo points to the increasing professionalisation of violence in Mexico and Guatemala, where Mexican drug cartels are hiring *kaibiles* as mercenaries to perform, with utmost precision, mutilations and other acts of violence. *Kaibiles* is the

name given to an elite corps of the Guatemalan army that gained international reputation for the atrocities committed during the civil war. After the peace accords were signed and governmental military spending diminished, many *kaibiles* entered the free market of violence, in which their reputation assured them a favourable position.⁵ Within this context, mutilations should not be understood as mere acts of savagery. Violence has become a rational enterprise and the mercenaries ensure that these acts have mediatic visibility. Not only to create panic in the population, but also in order to exhibit their competences to (potential) commissioners. Just as Rembrandt's portrait was intended to show off the skills of the Guild of Surgeons, mutilations become at once rational, mediatic and staged.

Galindo addresses these issues by staging her own body in an equally mediatic manner. As Clare Carolin recently argued, from the start of her career Galindo made use of mass media to spread her work. As such, her performances went "from the urban public spaces in which they were performed directly into the larger public space of the World Wide Web via video-sharing sites".⁶ In these globally circulating images, the artist's body becomes a site a constant social and political conflict, symbolically becoming the traumatised social body. She uses mediatic strategies both to enact and to denounce the sensationalistic way in which violence is publicly exhibited, rationalised and professionalised.

5 Botello, Nelson Artega, "Decapitaciones y Mutilaciones en el México Contemporáneo." *Espacio Abierto: Cuaderno Venezolano de Sociología*, Vol. 18 No.3 (July - September 2009), pp 463-486

6 Carolin, Clare, "After the Digital we Rematerialise: Distance and Violence in the Work of Regina José Galindo." *Third Text*, Vol. 25 No. 2 (March 2011), p 222

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