FOUR

Making Presence

In the photograph, we see her, a diminutive woman, standing naked as a backhoe methodically crashes down, digging a hole in the earth all the way around her (fig. 4.1). In the video we hear the grinding machine before we see it. The giant claw crashes down, grabs massive mouthfuls of earth, gyrates jerkily, noisily, and throws them to the side, gyrates wildly back, closer and closer to her small body. The hole gets deeper. The machine groans, and buzzes, and smashes just behind, in front, or to the side of her.

She stands still, looking into the distance, her hair braided down her thin back, her hands resting on her thighs. There is nothing erotic about her. Resolutely nonglamorous, her body refuses to transmit a promise of pleasure. Rather, it bears signs of wounding. What's that on her right leg? She seems to have a scar right above her pubis.

The simplicity and the power of the piece are impressive. The frail human body seems both central and incidental. The tenacious materiality of the earth, so green and rich, crumbles under the claw. Gentle gusts of wind push her hair onto her face. She stands silent, rooted like a tree. She may as well be a tree or a rock, an indistinguishable form of materiality that obstructs the machine. Her face impassive, her eyes open, blinking but never flinching. She breathes deeply, as if she were trying to stay calm. But we see the muscles contracting in her neck.

She sees it, and registers it, and does not collapse or falter. The "it" is her certain death in the ensuing demolition—the backhoe that lurches closer, the pit that opens wider and deeper in front of her. Aside from the painful vulnerable materiality of her body, she has only attitude, the slightly defiant show of human dignity and resolve in the face of devastation. She may be a part of the material world under siege, but as a human she nonetheless clings to the part of her humanity that distinguishes her from trees and rocks. ¡Presente! her attitude demonstrates. The unspoken mandate: Get out of the way! Disappear! is met with stillness, a silent animative of refusal. You'll have to disappear me. ¡Presente!, here, as an act of resistance in the face of obliterating power, resonates like a mute war cry. ¡Presente! but absolutely isolated. The machine seems intractable and inhuman, as if it were simply doing its job of digging up the land she just happens to be standing on. But we can see a man at the controls. Presente, always to, with, and among others, even when that other hides its face.

4.1 (overleaf) Regina José Galindo, *Earth*, 2013. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

The gnashing mechanical noise deafens and invades. Yet her body remains absolutely still. The performance is all about proportion and scale, the smallness of the human, the vulnerability of the earth, the magnitude of the crime. In contrast to the relentless, lurching, mechanized violence, the countryside has been domesticated. Swaths of the tall grass have been cut. We see a fence and behind it, a house. The material supports of life over there seem intact. Occasionally, a car drives by in the distance. It's all so civilized. Life apparently goes on.

The only thing that moves is the enormous backhoe jerking back and forth. Even the camera moves minimally. The close-up fades into a wide-angle shot and back in again. Increasingly insulated, she soon stands abandoned on a tiny island of earth. The pit is now many meters deep, and it's clear that she can never get out. It's simply a question of time. Regina José Galindo's live performance lasts an hour and a half; the video of the performance runs about thirty-five minutes.

Where are we? Where is the spectator, the witness, the bystander, the activist who might intervene?

"How did they kill people?" the prosecutor asked.

"First, they would tell the machine operator to dig a pit. Then trucks full of people parked in front of the Pine, and one by one the people came forward. They didn't shoot them. Often they would pierce them with bayonets. They would rip their chests apart with bayonets and take them to the pit. When the pit was full, the metal shovel would drop on the bodies."[1]

Between March 1982 and August 1983, Efraín Ríos Montt's military dictatorship in Guatemala enacted a scorched-earth policy against its Mayan population. In addition to disposing of humans as if they were merely things, indistinguishable from other matter, they destroyed the material basis for their survival. Under the code name Victoria 82, the army exterminated Maya Ixil communities and destroyed their livestock, their crops, and their sacred corn seeds, their living link to their past. The Mayas are, after all, the people of corn. Their fate is bound to that of their land. They demolished men, women, children, and even fetuses—"the seed that must be killed"—the Maya's hope for the future.[2] Genocide, another form of preemptive violence, creates the "ruins yet to come."[3] Time present and time past lead to eradication of time future; genocide is the permanently present, in this scenario. The trial court found that, under Ríos Montt's rule, women were a "military objective."[4] Soldiers raped women and girls not only as the

spoils of war but as part of the systematic and intentional plan to destroy the Ixil ethnic group by exercising violence on women's bodies as a way to unravel the social connectivities that maintain the Ixil population.[5]

The military also terrified people into abandoning their cultural practices. The dance-drama *Rabinal Achi*, which dates back to sixteenth-century Guatemala with roots in Mayan court drama of the fourth to tenth centuries, enacts the encounter between two almost identical noble warriors.[6] The Rabinal warrior captures the Quiché warrior preparing an attack on his territory. The piece stages the dignified and highly choreographed process (literally dance) of negotiation with which one treats one's enemy. The two characters duel verbally—each actor sums up what the other has said before adding his own words. The action reinforces the circularity of the dialogue as the two dance and threaten each other. They mirror each other in word and movement. The dancers wear masks, identical except for the strip of color of the rim at the edges—one blue, one green. Our enemy is almost identical to us, the Quiché propose. While the Quiché warrior will be shown every honor, offered all politically viable options for survival (abandon his kingdom, marry the Rabinal king's daughter and join his court), it is clear that he must die on the sacrificial stone.[7] He will never relinquish his ties to his people and his lands. He asks only to be allowed to return home once more to say goodbye. Permission being granted, the Quiché warrior goes home and returns, as promised, to Rabinal to accept his punishment. That drama could not be performed during the Ríos Montt period when the military targeted the village.[8] Death squads roamed through Rabinal smashing babies' heads against walls, raping young women, and killing civilians point blank. The military had a very different idea of what one does to opponents.[9]

The mandate issued by the military was "Indian seen, Indian dead."[10] Over 200,000 people were killed, most of them Mayans. An additional one million people were displaced between 1960 and 1996. "A UN truth commission later specifically found that the state was responsible for acts of genocide in four designated regions of Guatemala between 1981 and 1983. In the predominantly Ixil towns in Quiché, between 70 and 90 percent of the communities were wiped out during this period."[11]

Ríos Montt was the first head of state in the world to be convicted in his own country of genocide and crimes against humanity.[12] While he kept insisting during the trial that he did not know what the army was doing, documentary filmmaker Pamela Yates had earlier filmed him saying, "If I can't control the army, then what am I doing here?"[13] The prosecution used this video during the trial—art here functions unambiguously as truth telling:

the now elderly Ríos Montt, sitting in the courtroom, watched the younger Ríos Montt speaking at the height of his powers. He was sentenced to eighty years in jail. Ten days later, his conviction was overturned.

Yet Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo chooses not to include the testimony or the trial in her video performance, *Earth*. Only a handful of spectators and three cameras witnessed the live event in Les Moulins, France, in 2013.

I asked Galindo why viewers are not made aware of the testimony.

"I never speak or give information," she answered. "I don't make it didactic; I just carry out an action."[14]

What does this action do or transmit? Does it denounce, expose, or bear witness? Galindo is presente, but present to what, to whom, with whom?

I agree of course with Galindo when she maintains, "the work has several meanings." Like all art, the piece works on multiple expressive, communicative, and political levels simultaneously. Her stark act of being ¡presente! provokes what Nicholas Bourriard might call a series of encounters ("art is a state of encounters") with other artists, publics, and political and historical moments.[15] Performance can bring atrocity to light stripped of the specifics of the when, who, and where. Violence too strips the body under attack of all particularities—she stands as quivering, fleshy materiality that nonetheless makes a claim to presence. The work, clearly grounded in Guatemalan history under Ríos Montt, transcends the particulars to present extermination as a constant. Art from the space of death shows the now and always of criminal practice, as genocide and as environmental ruin, in Guatemala and beyond. The performance balances on the very edge of the poetic and the historical, as differentiated by Aristotle: "Poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars."[16] Galindo's simple but rigorous aesthetic framing of the action allows it to resonate on multiple levels—the particular and the so-called universal.

We can understand her standing by the widening pit as a reflection on the human existential condition: the well of desperation gets deeper, the inevitability of her fate, the silence and isolation more profound and unspeakable. The very earth collapses around her. Ancient Greek tragedy, one particular aesthetic form, is all about asymmetrical relations of power—Oedipus confronting his inexorable fate. Antigone goes to the cave to meet her death: "Alive, I tread the chambers of the dead. / What law of Heaven have I transgressed against?"[17] Closer to (Galindo's) home, *Rabinal Achi* presents the warriors as twins. Wearing almost identical face masks, the two

figures reflect each other in word and movement.[18] Repeating each other's words functions as a mnemonic device but also, I would suggest, as an early example of active listening. Did I understand what you just said? Did I get it right?[19] Violence and war, in the traditions of the Mayan highlands, require close attention to one's other as a part of oneself. Disrespecting one's enemy destroys one's own integrity. The highly codified frameworks within which confrontations take place contain the violence, protecting the individuals exercising it from becoming monsters, and ensuring social stability and continuity.

Earth resonates because of the stark, forceful image of the human confronting certain destruction, because of the devastation of the earth, and because the violence and injustice remain constant. Here, though, I want to rein in its universalizing potential for a moment to explore the urgency of the action's intervention in a specific historical moment as a response to the politics of extermination. In 2013, Ríos Montt, as I noted, was tried and found guilty of genocide. After intense political machinations, a higher court overturned the decision and sent it back down to a lower court to languish. The charges and record remained, poised between oblivion and reactivation. Time ran out—Ríos Montt died at age ninety-one in 2018, having evaded punishment.

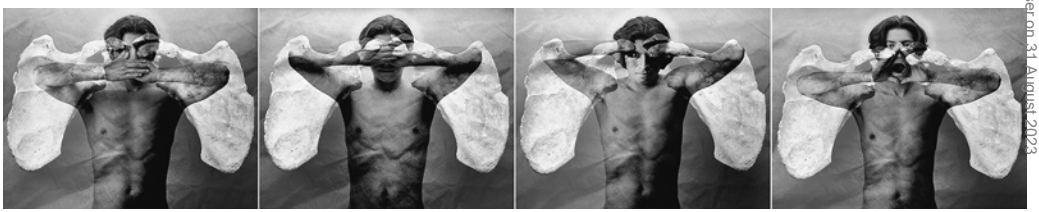
Galindo intervenes with *Earth*. Faced with the political foreclosure of a juridical response even before Ríos Montt died, she responds. Galindo stands resolute, a mute victim/witness who sees what's happening and can do nothing to prevent the inevitable. The very land, as with the Mayans, is being taken out from under her feet. Unlike Antigone, no words express the self-awareness of her predicament. What have I done? No interlocutor or Chorus utters or responds to the question: Why? Seemingly stripped of agency, she has done nothing to merit her demolition except exist. Now, the violence seems incidental—she, unlike Antigone, cannot even qualify as an individuated victim. In ancient Greek tragedy, victims usually die at the hands of their kin. This anonymous death strips her of kin but, with racist virulence, highlights ethnic kinship as grounds for extermination: Indian seen, Indian dead. The fierce subjectivity and political agency demonstrated by Antigone seems impossible for Galindo's unidentified, mute figure. The backhoe of Western colonization continues to uproot and evacuate the very possibility of naming and caring for these victims. Galindo's corporeality, though stubbornly material, also stands for the collective body that needs to disappear so that modernity can happen. She stands there, on the land, an impediment to progress, synonymous to many Latin American leaders with

modernity.[20] In this version of progress, land too is there to be exploited. The performance, on this level, is so literal. Combatants no longer face each other honorably, as in *Rabinal Achi*. The murderers conceal their faces behind the mechanization of the job. No one is guilty. Leaders hide behind their self-granted amnesties and highly paid lawyers. The separation between the one who orders the violence and the one who carries it out eliminates all sense of personal responsibility. The enormous repercussions of Antigone's unjust death will not be visited on Guatemala or her murderers. The grandeur of these earlier works, the exquisite dance that emphasizes the moral implications and social aftershocks of inflicting death on one's other, has vanished, leaving only silent victims, mass graves, and unexamined crimes. Murderers go unpunished, justice foreclosed. Nobody, apparently, cares enough to end the calamity.

In 1997, fellow Guatemalan artist Daniel Hernández-Salazar confronted the see-speak-hear-no-evil attitude of this fellow citizens with the atrocities committed in their country. Every egregious crime had been met with silence. He created three photographs using the forensic remains of victims—their bullet-pierced shoulder blades resembled angel wings. Following the 1998 murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was shot dead immediately after he presented the report on human rights violations, *Guatemala: Nunca Más* (Guatemala: Never again), Hernández-Salazar added the angel with the silent scream (fig. 4.2).[21] Speak up! The images spread throughout the city of Guatemala, plastered on walls, on buses, everywhere, even on the cover of the *Guatemala: Nunca Más*.

Angels were in the air. In 1999, dressed very much like an angel in a gauzy long dress, Galindo suspended herself from the iconic arch of the post office building in downtown Guatemala City and recited poetry. Her words were lost in the wind.[22]

While the works I put in conversation with *Earth* center on death—the unjust death, the honorable death, the unacknowledged death—*Earth* acts from the very space of death. We do not hear from Antigone after she enters



4.2 Daniel Hernández-Salazar, *Esclarecimiento/Clarification*, 1998. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

the cave (until we hear others tell of her death); Cawek, the defeated warrior of *Rabinal Achi*, kneels down to be sacrificed, accepting death as the appropriate response to his bellicose trespasses. Hernández-Salazar's angel screams out to whoever will listen. In *Earth*, the woman's nameless, naked, vulnerable body waits stoically to be returned to the earth, not in the respectful, caring burial that mourners usually perform to accompany natural death but by the brutal thrust of the metal claw. Her posture reminds me of Comandanta Ramona's words at the beginning of the Zapatista uprising: "We were already dead. We meant absolutely nothing."[23] Galindo's character inhabits that space of the "already dead," people pronounced socially dead long before governments dispose of the corpses. Her frail, slightly bruised body is disposable, the refuse of the political in Chantal Mouffe's understanding of the term as the "ontological dimension of antagonism."[24] She's nothing. A no one. Nadie. Ninguno. Octavio Paz coined the verb *ningunear*, recognizing that denying someone personhood is an active process of violence.[25] No angels lament her passing or look back in warning.

As the political turns murderous, politics as "the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organize human existence" also collapses.[26] There is no body of adjudication, no legitimate executive body, no space where people can come together to make a claim for appearance, just the rapidly shrinking earth on the edge of a gaping pit. Only those in power maintain their firm grounding. The face in the cab of the bulldozer might change, but the killing machine keeps moving forward. Galindo takes her stand here, in the face of the catastrophe, making visible the steady demolition as strategic and rationalized political practice.

The Death Space

> There is no *post* or *pre* in this [indigenous] vision of history that is not linear or teleological but rather moves in cycles and spirals and sets out on a course without neglecting to return to the same point.—SILVIA RIVERA CUSICANQUI, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa"

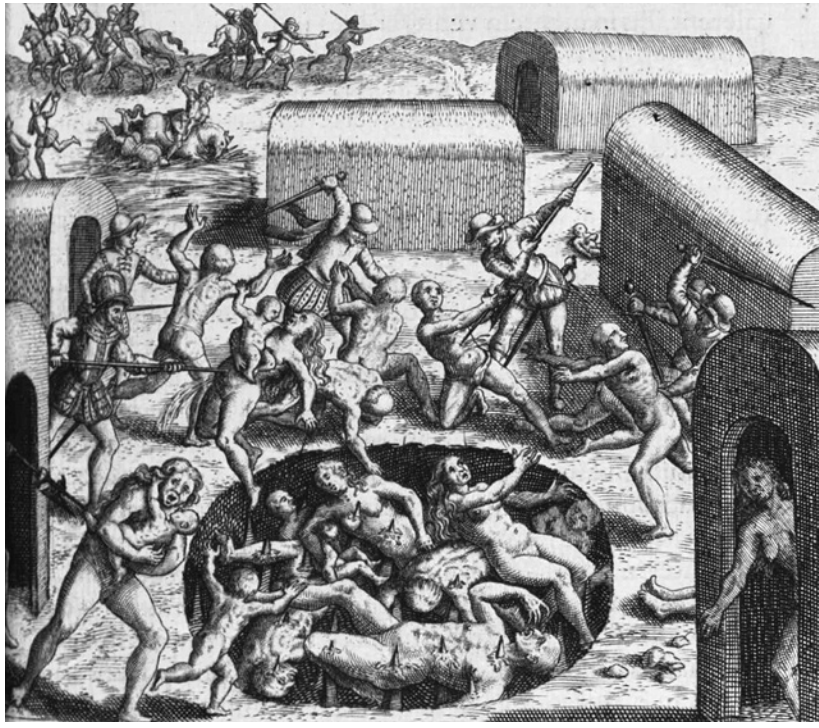
In this one art *acción*, Galindo captures the historical violence of biopower from the times of the conquest to the present. This is a sweeping claim, I know, but I hope to demonstrate it not by presenting a cohesive overview of political history in the area, but rather through repeating scenarios.[27] Much like *Earth*, the continuous nature of the violence can be comprehended as an ongoing performance. Alternatively, it can be captured through stills

(as in still photography) animated to appear as an ongoing act. Using the methodology of the performance itself, then, I separate the never-ending tragedy into three isolated (but internally contiguous) scenarios that meld almost imperceptibly from conquest, colonialism, ongoing coloniality, and imperialism.

SCENARIO I

"They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtered everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. . . . laughing and joking all the while," writes Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1542, a warning to the Spanish monarch Philip II of the atrocities his countrymen were committing in the Americas.[28] The Spaniards, early extractivists, sought gold and other valuable resources in the new territories; the people they found there were disposable—they could either help the conquerors find the resources or be fed (literally) to the dogs.[29] "Indians" came into being through a double strategy—the first undid preexisting entities and affiliations (Taíno, Mexica, Maya, Zapotec, Olmec, and so on) and converted them into an undifferentiated mass, Indians. The second announced a new entity that need never be fully recognized as human, one that could be exploited or exterminated at will. The separation between the conquerors and the conquered was absolute—the autochthonous people were so resolutely nonhuman "that when the European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder."[30] Arendt, in this citation, is writing of the massacres of Africans on what she calls the "Dark Continent." Her understanding of racism does not extend to the Americas, for they, she states in an example of glaring unfamiliarity with the context, "had not created a human world." Nonetheless, her observation that Europeans treated the conquered as inhuman remains on point.

Las Casas's text, immediately translated into all major languages in Europe, was widely read—an early exemplar of the colony as a state of exception governed by the sovereign but that lay beyond the boundaries of the state proper. The asymmetrical relations gave the conquerors absolute power over the conquered, feeding their sense of omnipotence, affirming their right to violate every legal and moral injunction. Las Casas retells the atrocity in the hope that "recognition of the truth will make the reader more



4.3 Theodore de Bry (sixteenth century), illustrations for Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies.*

compassionate towards the sufferings and the predicament of these poor, innocent peoples and oblige him [the reader] to adopt an even more stern and censorious attitude towards the abominable greed, ambition and brutality of their Spanish oppressors."[31] This is an extraordinary document for many reasons. For one, Las Casas names the Europeans as monsters and murderers instead of inverting those terms. Second, it conveys his assumption that reading about (or seeing) injustice will make readers or viewers care enough to intervene.

The demolition wrought by conquest and colonization happened in all social arenas simultaneously—the military, religious, cultural, and epistemic. The newly created Indian provoked major ethical and moral debates in Europe. Back in Spain, Bartolomé de Las Casas debated humanist scholar Juan Ginés de Sepulvida in Valladolid (1550–51) regarding the indigenous populations they encountered. In 1537, "the papal bull *Sublimis Deus* . . . established the status of the Indians as rational beings."[32] The discussion

focused on whether Indians have souls and the capacity to be converted to Christianity or, if found lacking, could they be worked to death? The question itself performed the violent ontological project of evacuating the subjectivity of this newly found object, Indian.

The sixteenth-century colonialist project, then, coproduced and refined the European systems of rational thought in which the isolated, individuated subject came into being as a product of his own self-recognition, best summarized in the seventeenth-century Cartesian "cogito, ergo sum." The European, the subject of knowledge, turns all else into an object of knowledge.[33] The annulment of reciprocity and relationality had devastating effects on those not covered by the defining "I." As Aníbal Quijones argues, "the 'other' is totally absent; or is present, can be present, only in an 'objectivised' mode."[34] There can be no intersubjectivity, no subject-subject recognition of human connectivity. That evacuation of the human capacity for recognizing and acknowledging others as part of a shared, complex, living environment is what makes the "terror system," to use Michael Taussig's term, so terrifying.[35] Western epistemology relied on notions of rationality and objectivity and practices of taxonomy and categorization to legitimate certain kinds of knowledge. Writing and print culture, as I argued in an earlier work, helped cement and circulate knowledge as external to oneself through the separation of knower from known.[36] The many ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge practiced by indigenous communities were repressed—epistemicide, in Santos's term.[37] Western theories of progress, development, and modernity, posited within the spectrum of primitive to European, labeled the indigenous peoples as the anathema of progress, congenitally underdeveloped. Indigenous peoples in Guatemala have long been seen as an obstacle to the progress that underwrites modernity. "Cruel modernity," Jean Franco notes, is "massacre on behalf of 'progress.'"[38]

From the sixteenth century, the foundations of what Foucault calls biopower are in place. Biopower, for him, refers to "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."[39] As I said in chapter 1, I disagree with Foucault's dating of the phenomenon of biopower "starting from the eighteenth century" when "modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species."[40] Foucault does not consider the debates and practices governing the treatment of indigenous peoples and, shortly afterward, African slaves. These preview the governing of populations through the implementation of racialized categories that become central to biopower.[41] While Las Casas

won what some consider the first human rights debate in Valladolid, the outcome had no practical application for the indigenous communities that came in contact with Europeans.[42] The mechanisms of control of the general populations that Foucault associates with biopower were already beginning to take shape—humans could be bought and sold, stripped of their names, kinships, religious practices, languages, to be relocated and worked to death. Human subjectivity was divided into the "people of reason" (*gente de razón*), the Hispanicized, Cartesian self-referential subject "cogito ergo sum" and the "people without reason," the indigenous and African populations relegated to the legal status of minors. We see too the initial formations of racial castas or caste systems that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The denial of political subjecthood of people considered populations to be managed, thus, happens before the shift Foucault writes of as happening in the eighteenth century: "The population no longer appears as a collection of subjects of right, as a collection of subject wills who must obey their sovereign's will through the intermediary of regulations, laws, edicts and so on. It will be considered as a set of processes to be managed."[43]

The management and eradication of populations continued through the centuries-long period of colonialism and, later, with no clear interruption during what Aníbal Quijano calls ongoing "coloniality" and Pablo González Casanova calls "internal colonialism."[44] Colonial domination may have ended in Latin America in the nineteenth century with the wars of independence, but that the new nation-states built themselves on systems of differentiation and racism ensured the dominance of the descendants of the Europeanized elites.

SCENARIO II

In 1982, just at the end of the Ríos Montt dictatorship, Rigoberta Menchú, the testimonial voice of *Yo, Rigoberta Menchú*, tells how her mother was kidnapped, tortured, raped, and laid out as bait by the Guatemalan military to lure in her family members so that they too might be captured. The description is too painful to include here. After her mother died, the soldiers "were there right by her; they ate near her, and, if the animals will excuse me, I believe not even animals act like that, like those savages in the army. After that, my mother was eaten by animals; by dogs, by the *zopilotes* there are around there, and the other animals helped too. They stayed for four months, until they saw that not a bit of my mother was left, not even her bones and then they went away."[45]

Again, this scenario conveys the dominant, unchanging characteristics—the armed forces, representative of the country's highest power, reduce the indigenous woman to bait and a sexual object. By torturing her, they also torture her family, who have to stay away even as she suffers. The military use affective relations to annihilate relationality itself—seeking to destroy the mother and all her family members. How could her family even think of saving her? She was another of the "already dead." Is there a clearer example of what Mbembe calls "the *generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*"?[46] Rigoberta Menchú's mother, like many before and after her, was eaten by dogs. Menchú's testimony became an instant classic—it was read broadly and adopted as a text in high schools and colleges. Menchú herself won the Nobel Prize. Some readers were certainly "more compassionate towards the sufferings and the predicament of these poor innocent peoples," as Las Casas hoped, but the destruction of indigenous communities continued unabated well after the Peace Accords were signed in 1995, and into the present.[47]

The current waves of violence in Guatemala started with the CIA-backed 1954 coup against Jacobo Árbenz, the progressive, democratically elected president who tried to reign in the United Fruit Company and legislate land reform. In response to the Cold War, the U.S. increased its support of the Guatemalan military, including the training of its officers (including Ríos Montt) in the infamous School of the Americas. "Since 1946, the SOA has trained over 64,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. . . . Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, 'disappeared,' massacred, and forced into refugee [status] by those trained at the School of Assassins."[48] Ronald Reagan circumvented Congress to ship armaments to Guatemala in spite of evidence of escalating massacres. He visited Central America in December 1982 and declared, "President Ríos Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment. . . . I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice."[49]

Fast forward to the postdictatorial present in which violence has been privatized and includes many corporate and additional state and nonstate actors. The extermination of the hundreds of thousands of Mayans and the dispossession of their lands has left many traditional lands free for the taking. There is a long history, as Greg Grandin notes, of land expropriation and

human exploitation in Guatemala.[50] The indigenous peoples, who happened to be standing on the land, have disappeared. Canadian mining companies, backed by French capital, now extract resources from that earth, bucketful by bucketful. Galindo's performance subtly reveals the networks and practices that create and sustain this ongoing violence, including the recent neoliberal policies that enable the *dictaduras* and what some have come to call the *dictablandas* (soft rather than hard power), such as those in Mexico and currently in Guatemala.

For centuries now, those in power have pushed indigenous communities off their resource-rich lands. Conquest gave way to colonialism, colonialism to coloniality, dictatorship to so-called democracy. The names only distract momentarily from the continuity of brutal practice. Nowadays, the government grants "concessions" to international mining, hydroelectric, and agricultural businesses that force people to leave their communities and even their country; it colludes with the murder of those who resist or protest. The burgeoning drug trade has complicated the volatile situation by redirecting the drugs to new routes through Central America and Mexico on their way to consumers in the U.S. The recently removed president, Otto Fernando Pérez Molina, who won the 2011 elections, was also a military officer trained in the School of the Americas. Guatemala's transition from dictatorship, as in much of Latin America, was not a transition to democracy but to a particularly savage brand of neoliberalism. The sharp rise in femicides attests to a virulent misogyny coupled with racism.[51] The Central American children arriving at the U.S. border in the mid- and late 2010s, separated from their families, placed in freezing cold rooms (*heleras* or iceboxes), and housed in cages, are only the most recent chapter of the history of that ravaged region. *Rabinal Achi* made it clear—the humiliation and degradation of one's opponent, now coterminous with indiscriminate violence, wrecks the entire social fabric into the future.

Earth took place in France, an interesting choice. Why France? Part of the answer is pragmatic—Lucy and Jorge Orta in Les Moulins offered Galindo an artist's residency in 2013. They could provide her the land and the financial support to carry forward a project of this size and expense. The timing of the residency was fortuitous—Galindo felt the urgency of responding to the recent testimony from the trial. Another reason for staging this performance in France, however, builds on Galindo's strategy of staging work that calls out the complicity of the country she performs in, another powerful animative. In her 2010 piece, *Looting*, she paid a dentist in Germany to extract eight gold fillings from her teeth:

> On one side, conquest, war, scorched earth policies, pillage of the soil, the humiliated. On the other, the conqueror, he who gives the orders, the man from the Old World, he who raises his hand and keeps the gold.
>
> In Guatemala, a dentist perforates my molars and places 8 fillings of Guatemalan gold of the highest purity.
>
> In Berlin, a German doctor extracts the fillings from my molars. These small sculptures, 8 in total, are exhibited as objects of art.[52]

In the United States, for the Hemispheric Institute's twentieth anniversary in late October 2018, which coincided with the Trump administration's political frenzy about the caravan of migrants at the southern U.S. border, Galindo performed *Carguen con sus muertos*/*Carry Your Dead* through the streets of New York (fig. 4.4). She lay in a body bag while volunteers carried her through the neighborhood and those of us attending the anniversary accompanied the funeral cortege. "Is there a dead body in there?" people would ask us. "Yes, our dead. Those we are responsible for," some of us would reply.

The choice of France for *Earth* reveals two deeper connections—one that points to the history of colonial violence in Guatemala and another to its updated, neoliberal presentation. Marie-Monique Robin, in *Death Squadrons: The French School*, outlines how the French army developed counterrevolutionary and dirty war strategies in Indochina and perfected them in Algeria, including covert action, secret centralized information, surveillance, psychological warfare, terror tactics, and torture. This model was exported to the U.S. at the beginning of the Cold War, and the word "disappearance" enters our lexicon in 1954 in Guatemala, which, along with other Latin American countries, became "empire's workshop" as the U.S. perfected its own counterinsurgency prowess.[53] It was there, Grandin argues, that the U.S. developed its counter-insurgency chops and "tactics of extraterritorial administration."[54]

Regina José Galindo, standing still at the edge of the pit in France, connects these various moments and practices. Still. Still here. The performance, moreover, demands the rigorous physical practice of stillness. Stillness requires enormous muscular effort. "Stillness," as Nadia Seremetakis reminds us, "is the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness."[55] That stillness conjures up all the pasts. As with *Oedipus*, "It is precisely the sudden and paradoxical emergence of a pattern connecting the distant past to the present, which gives the movement of events so much of its force."[56] The scenarios are

4.4 *Carguen con sus muertos*, New York City, October 26, 2018. PHOTO: DIANA TAYLOR.

almost interchangeable. A scenario, as I defined in an earlier work, serves "as an act of transfer, as a paradigm that is formulaic, portable, repeatable, and often banal because it leaves out complexity, reduces conflict to its stock elements, and encourages fantasies of participation."[57] The basic elements remain the same, albeit with variations, century after century. Conquest, colonialism, and coloniality as Quijano argues, all contributed to cementing a "new world order" predicated on the same objective, the "violent concentration of the world's resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority and above all, of its ruling classes."[58]

Biopower and biopolitics, I agree with Mbembe, very rapidly become necropolitics as Amerindians and African slaves experience "social death," that is, "expulsion from humanity."[59] Necropolitics, for him, refers to a "specific terror formation" that includes, among other things, territorial fragmentation, surveillance (inwardly and outwardly oriented), and "the overlapping of two separate geographies that inhabit the same landscape." Necropolitics creates "death-worlds . . . new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead."[60] I would question Mbembe's use of "new" here but rather see these death spaces as being continually refashioned to serve the needs of evolving local powers and global capital. Moreover, the "dead" we see continue to talk back, ¡presentes!

Art from the Space of Death, Necroart

How can one convey asymmetrical power relations more directly or more simply? "Don't you see?" she might be asking us. Or better, where are we, the spectators, to witness this atrocity? Performance can bring atrocity to light, stripped of the specifics of the when, who, where.

Galindo's body faces an enormous pit, the very vacuum of the political that withholds recognition of indigenous peoples. Alone, except for the shadowy figure of the backhoe driver, her gaze (as is often the case in Galindo's work) resists human contact. She does not look at him or beg for mercy. She does not look inward or betray traces of individual subjectivity. Why communicate a sense of interiority, of humanness, or hope of connectedness that for centuries has been denied? Neither does she seek reciprocity or acknowledgment from the spectator. What spectator? Buber's I/Thou has been severed; she accepts her condition as a "nothing."[61] Her impassive face accentuates rather than hides her human vulnerability, even as she cannot hope to make a moral demand on others, as Levinas envisioned.[62] The performance, like the Guatemalan context, negates the possibility of a space of appearance that "arises out of acting and speaking together."[63] There is no together, no shared space for empathetic connection or recognition. Galindo stages the demolition of the between and the beside. This is the death space.

No one, it seems, is there to see. Two hundred thousand murdered. Who was there to witness and demand an end to the genocide? No one. The spectators were missing. No one on both sides—the victims denied personhood and the nonpresence of those who might have borne witness to the crimes. Violence has destroyed the victims, the witness, the audience

(perhaps those the Zapatistas would call "civil society"). This performance stages the crisis of care I have pointed out through the various scenarios. No one seems to care. Not individually. Not collectively. Not politically. No one has ever cared about these populations. Caring, in one sense, is about positionality. Who cares about the "over there" when there's so much to care about here? As Richard Nixon made clear to Donald Rumsfeld, "As long as we've been in it, people don't give one damn about Latin America."[64] In case he hadn't been clear enough, he added, "'People don't give one shit about' the place."[65] It is not a priority for the United States even though, or perhaps because, Latin America is where it "acquired its conception of itself as an empire."[66]

Caring acknowledges the interconnectedness between ourselves and others, ourselves as only a part of that larger entity. Studies on empathy "as an affective capacity or technique via which 'we' can come to know the cultural 'other'" keep the hierarchical self-other distinction firmly intact.[67] Empathy, the way I understand it, is an innate, adaptive capacity living creatures have to connect with other forms of life (not exclusively human) through neurological mechanisms. As biologist Frans de Waal puts it, "Seeing someone in pain activates pain circuits to the point that we clench our teeth, close our eyes, and even yell 'Aw'!"[68] This understanding does not carry the colonialist fantasy of understanding or knowing our cultural other but rather recognizes the interconnections between living organisms that could potentially produce cultures of care. People have the capacity to care about those they do not know, as I explore in the epilogue to this study. But even an innate, involuntary biological capacity collapses when confronted with othering. Resisting othering and recognizing interconnectivity might enable us to register or acknowledge that the pain of others is often politically induced: some benefit from the exploitation of others. We can get used to it, or we have to work for a political system in which pain or deprivation are more equally distributed.[69] A study on empathy finds that "despite its early origins and adaptive functions, empathy is not inevitable; people routinely fail to empathize with others, especially members of different social or cultural groups."[70] Not only "Who cares?" but "They deserve it." Not caring, in fact, has been promoted as hip and attractive in today's U.S. culture. Memes of "Who cares?" circulate constantly. In June 2018 when Melania Trump, first lady of the United States, visited the migrant children held in detention on the U.S.-Mexico border as part of the family separation program, she wore a jacket that read, "I really don't care, do u?"[71]

Galindo stands alone. No one serves as a witness to the violence.

How to perform the ongoing annihilation without evacuating the copresence that underwrites the performatic contract? Performance, almost by definition, relies on spectators to complete it. Galindo's look, in the video of her performance, is alienating, and for many, off-putting. It's hard to take spectatorial pleasure from this performance. This work falls outside the Aristotelian tragic aesthetic form that allows us to take pleasure in the pain of others. As opposed to works that fill us with pity and fear, Galindo's *Earth* destabilizes the viewer and denies us being. True, this is a work of art. Galindo will not die in that pit. But by depicting the death of intersubjectivity, the character denies herself and by extension us, the viewers. If as, Jean-Luc Nancy maintains, "being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another," then how can a scenario that annihilates her validate us? Interrelationality has failed. This performance builds on the failure to recognize some humans as human. How can spectators become a "we" without some form of shared recognition? The basis for solidarity has crumbled beneath our feet, giving way to a very profound solitude.

Nothing apparently can be done to evade the devastation.

And yet she does something. In the face of *nothing can be done*, she exerts her choice. She stands still. She enables us to see it. Not with her, perhaps, but through her. Again, the "failure" succeeds in exposing the viewer's role in the ongoing nature of the devastation.

Galindo's performance for the camera forms part of another aesthetic lineage, now in contemporary performance practice. Artists such as Francis Alÿs, Ana Mendieta, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, The Yes Men, and others intervene through video for a variety of reasons that might involve strategies of circulation, target audiences, political cover, self-protection, and philosophical and aesthetic reflection.

The video of this action has a life of its own. Though not equivalent to the act, it is not simply its documentation. The performance continues to act on many of those who have seen the video or perhaps just the photographs. The image of the vulnerable woman on the edge of the abyss lasts with us not because it documents the horror of an actual event (as in the testimony of the massacres). It lasts because, on some level, we know it's true, whether we understand the video to be about the ongoing practices of femicide, violence against indigenous communities, and/or extractivist policies. It encapsulates the image of the disposable nonsubject whom no one cares about or acknowledges. Criminal practices, such disappearances, are hard to see directly. They take place at the margins of the public gaze and are visible, if at all, through acts of performance or documentation.

At the same time, the video does make a claim to its status as an archival artifact. It reminds us that some video is true in another sense as well. The image of Ríos Montt facing his younger self on film during his trial indicates that art, documentary filmmaking in this case, can also provide evidence that holds up in court. The videos and documented testimony of the victims being thrown into the pit are also part of the archival record. Yet I would argue that this is not an archival performance. It does not reveal a specific transaction or event such as a particular massacre. Although it performs testimony, the work is not directly about testifying or witnessing. If anything, Galindo withholds reference to the detailed testimony that inspired her. Rather, the aims of the work seem broader, more far reaching, more about embodying the country's ferocity, the unilateral and seemingly endless violence directed at women, at indigenous people, at the defenseless, at the environment. Her minimalist gestures depersonalize the singular massacre to expose the ongoing traffic in weapons, drugs, resources, and people. The disappearance and disposability of populations constitutes an unending moneymaking, transnational event.

Yet *Earth* is also an artwork by a major artist. It has been shown at the Tate, the Guggenheim, and other major museums around the world. The video of the live performance circulates, separated from the physical presence of the artist and the context that gave it rise. The performance is frozen; it is now an original. Galleries and museums can buy it. The embodied performance, the physical endurance and stamina required of Galindo as she stood for an hour and a half facing the backhoe, has become something else—the universally intelligible cultural product that circulates successfully in the art market. People probably assume the video refers to some violence or other, but here too, who knows? Who cares?

Galindo does.

No matter where she performs, this political background informs her approach to her work. She recounts being at work in an office when she heard that Efraín Ríos Montt was running for office as president of Guatemala in the 2003 elections even though the constitution forbids the participation of former dictators and coup leaders in the democratic process. She says she went home, locked herself in her room, screamed, and kicked her legs. On a lunch break shortly afterward, she put on a simple long black dress, took a basin full of human blood, and walked slowly, dipping her feet every few minutes in the blood, all the way from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace in Guatemala City. When she stopped at the National Palace, the sight of the soldiers stationed outside so incited her that she walked up

to them with the same determined, implacable expression on her face we see in *Earth* and placed the bowl of blood at their feet. She then washed her feet, changed her clothes, and went back to work. The Regina José Galindo lunch hour. This piece is called *Who Can Erase the Traces?* (2003).

When Guatemalan author Francisco Goldman asked Galindo in an interview what their poor country had done to deserve so much tragedy, she responded, "You ask me what Guatemala has done to deserve all this? Maybe the more appropriate questions would be: What have we *not* done? Why have we been so fearful and tolerated so much fear? Why have we not woken up and reacted? When are we going to stop being so submissive?"[72]

For Galindo, the difference between artists and activists is that activists protest specific issues, and they evaluate the efficacy of the act by whether or not it can change the outcome of the cause. As an artist, she claims the right to reflect on these issues in a more personal, idiosyncratic manner. She will not claim her work has testimonial weight. She has no illusions that she can change the political situation, or make people care about atrocities that seem very far away. But she does everything in her power to make the situation known in the most powerful way possible.[73] I think she would agree with Ricardo Dominguez that "activists break the law, while artists change the conversation theatrically, by disturbing the law."[74]

But Galindo also wants to avoid the romanticism of those who struggle for social justice. And unlike activists, she does not believe that it's crucial (or perhaps even possible) for her to change the system of power. In 2008, she was invited to participate in *Horror vacui*, a group show of young Guatemalan artists around the theme of denunciation. How had they intervened in a society marked by criminal violence? Galindo's contribution was to pay an intelligence expert who had worked for the security forces during the dirty war to investigate the artists participating in the show, just as he had during the dictatorship. He prepared a dossier about each artist containing personal data (address, names of family members, daily routine, bank transactions, everything). The intelligence expert came to the show and exhibited his findings: all those artists who considered themselves denunciators had not, in fact, decried anything that was not already well known. He concluded that they posed no threat to the army or the government and were, rather, more like children at play. She presented this as the performance *Infiltrado/Infiltrated*.

So what is the political force and efficacy of Galindo's performance? Perhaps none. She certainly would not call herself a denunciator. Does her standing naked by the open pit communicate anything that was not well known

before? Maybe, says Galindo, it is sufficient for the performance to impel the spectators to reflect on the issue. For her, this modest goal is sufficient. But she needs to do something. On International Women's Day, March 8, 2017, she staged *Presencia*, a performance during which she recited the names of victims of femicide: "Patricia, Saira, María de Jesús, Cindy, Sandra, Carmen, Ruth, Mindi, Florence, Kenia, Velvet, Flor de María, Karen. All of them with life projects, family, work, dreams. All of them were silenced, snatched up in the most violent ways on earth, against their will. They were all murdered in Guatemala. Wounded, humiliated, tortured, and murdered for the sole reason of being women."[75] Galindo puts on their clothes; saying their names, she wants to acknowledge their lives and their deaths: "Their bodies are no longer here, but they remain in memory, in their dresses, in their objects."[76]

Some say that there is nothing people can do to change the world, or even the immediate situation. There are many reasons for not acting: they are not from this country, or from this community, and so on. How does someone dare involve herself in the business of other people? Is she exploiting them? Appropriating their pain, their stories? Is that ethical? The asymmetries of power leave others feeling impotent. Who is able to effectively confront military might? Or deeply ingrained economic inequalities? But for people like Galindo who feel the need to intervene, these excuses don't hold up. The question is not *if* something can be done but *what* can be done and how to do it in a way that is powerful, responsible, and ethical.

I asked Galindo about her future plans. She confessed she didn't know.[77] She can't make plans. She has a notebook filled with project ideas, and she is working on a new performance now. But life is too uncertain in Guatemala to plan ahead. She was offered a prestigious two-year residency in Berlin and was excited about going, but she was denied a visa. So how can she plan? "Guatemala doesn't have a future," she said, "and I don't know if I have one either."

And still, she keeps working, exposing herself to the cruelty and corruption and injustice she encounters everywhere. ¡Presente!

Whenever people lament that there's "nothing we can do" about some awful situation or other, I suggest they go tell that to Regina José Galindo.