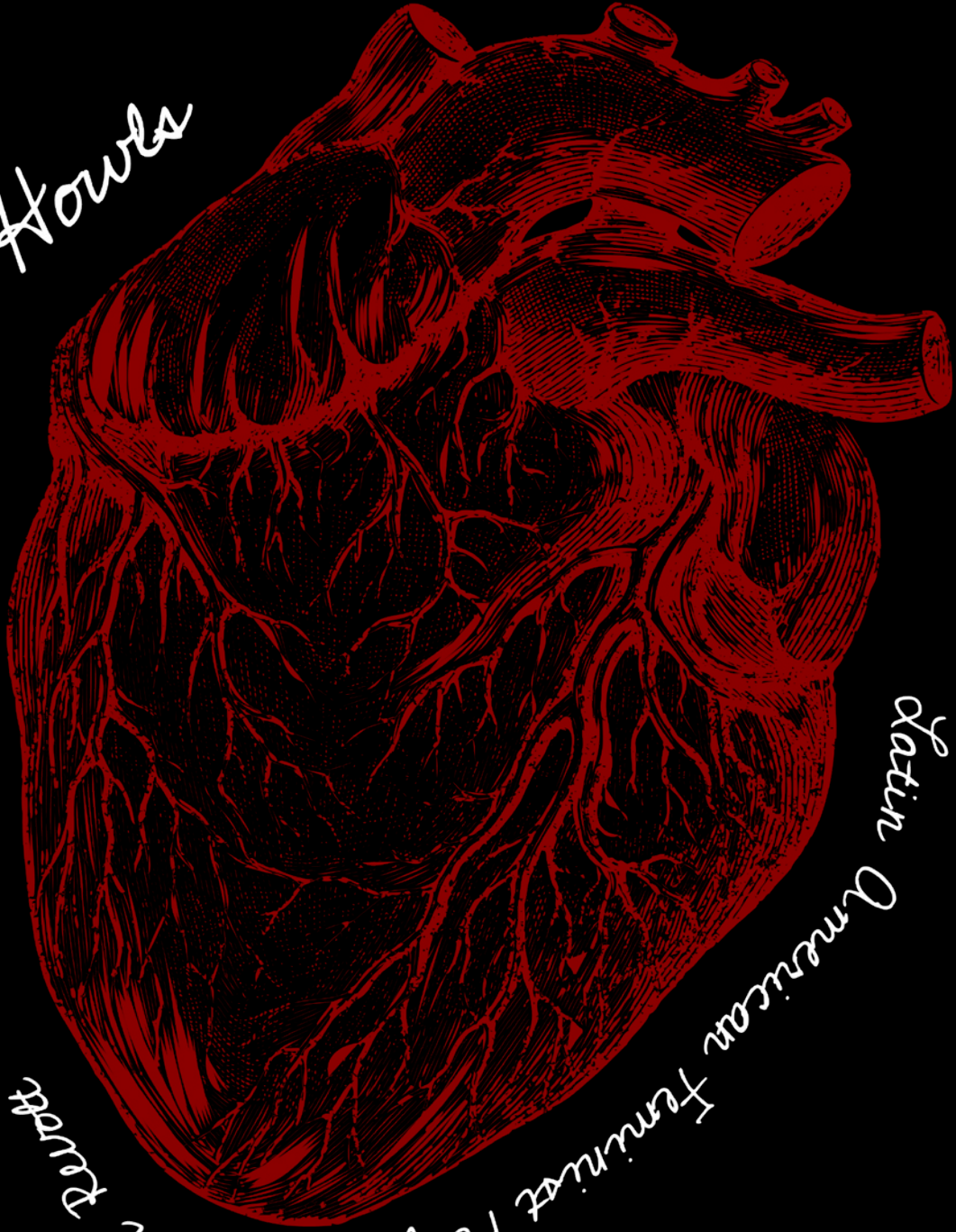


Heart Howls



Latin American Feminist Performance in Detroit

El Corazón Aúlla (Heart Howls): Latin American Performance in Revolt

Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.

—Maya Angelou

Gender violence in Latin America is an urgent concern. It ranges from the growing number of feminicides, rapes, misogynistic and transphobic attacks, to the absence of laws that guarantee women's power over their own bodies and protect their lives from structural patriarchal violence. In *Heart Howls*, as curators we present fourteen artists who identify as cis women, trans women, and non-binary people, who use performance to scream, grieve, claim power, heal, and link their liberation with that of other women. This collective sense of sisterhood connects the Latin American fight against gender violence with the demands that are currently being made in the United States and around the world.

Artists from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina, take advantage of their practices for rebellion, activating spaces of rage, fear, madness, rejection, ritualized mourning, and feminist community care.



Regina José Galindo, *Monumento a las desaparecidas (Monument to the disappeared)*, 2020. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist.

Performance is a particularly powerful tool for confronting brutal absence and loss because, like life itself, everything is experienced in the moment and then passes. Once both performance and human life have passed, we are left with only documents and memories.

These performances, their aesthetic decisions, and their particular contexts answer questions that other, more traditional, artistic media cannot answer. Through performative language, *Heart Howls* denounces gender violence, which reaches its highest peaks in feminicide and state violence, an issue that needs to be howled when shouting is not enough.

It is also a problem that must pass through a politicized body and the most feared emotions, when common sense is insufficient for us to generate change. And it is, finally, a matter that justifies disbelief in the institutions of power, in a region where right-wing Christian fundamentalist political parties are advancing and thereby



Rossella Matamoros-Jiménez, *¿Cómo llegué aquí? (How Did I Get Here?)*, 2020. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

reducing the social guarantees of women and LGBTIQ+ people.

Nation states lack completely reliable statistics, which makes it difficult to count the cases of feminicide by country or by area. Even “official” data contradicts the numbers collected by different groups or Non-Governmental Organizations that investigate the subject. These discrepancies are due in part to the categorization of the term “feminicide” as a different type of crime than murder. Feminicide is, specifically, the murder of a woman at the hands of a man for “machismo” or misogyny, in other words, the killing of a woman for her status as a woman. Whether or not this legal recognition of feminicide exists in each country makes a significant difference in the statistics and in the classification of cases. The word “feminicide” is, however, more than a legal term, since its utilization has led to less and less dependency on incorrect, romantic, and patriarchal terms such as “crime of passion.”

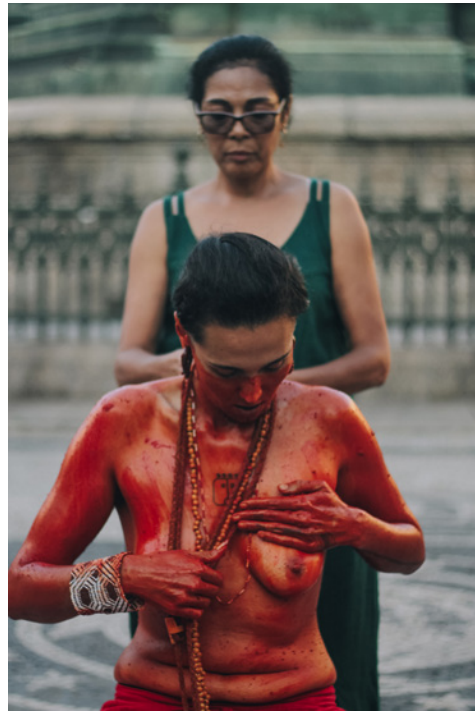
The curatorial concept of this exhibition is interested in performance as an aesthetic manifestation, imbued with a political character, that transcends its original field when exhibited in public space. For Diana Taylor, performance, or action art, works as a vital act of transference, which transmits social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity through repeated actions, characterized by Richard Schechner as “twice behaved-behavior.” Behaviors of civil subjection, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and reproduced daily in the public sphere.¹

In the context of contemporary art, the term “performance” was reinvented by the German theoretician Erika Fischer-Lichte, who coined the concept of “performative turn,” to refer to a model that replaced the written word in its capacity to apprehend and understand the world. Other perceptions come into play beyond the intellectual, such as affects, volition, energies, physiology, and motor skills.² By going beyond verblatency and entering the realm of the unspeakable, performance manages to access other registers of expression and incorporate itself into many other cultural discourses that have expounded on identities, collectives, and subjectivities.¹

This change can be observed in some theoretical and artistic proposals of the 1960s, a decade in which performance began to unfold as a complex and heterogeneous repertoire of living art that crossed artistic and disciplinary borders. In the words of Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones: “Throughout history, artists have drawn, sculpted, and painted the human body. However, recent art history reveals a significant shift in artists’ perception

of the body, which is now used not simply as the subject of work, but as canvas, brush, frame, and platform.”³

Within the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, the idea of art as beauty, separated from reality had already been dismantled, and the new space that art established in the face of social problems made performance a medium capable of producing change. It bears a heavy social and educational responsibility.⁴ Thus, the practice blurs artistic and disciplinary borders in search of new languages, sites, and materials, to



Bárbara Milano, *MÃE (MADRE, MOTHER)*, 2019. Digital print on vinyl. Courtesy of the artist.

generate “unprecedented experiences that emphasize the process of creation and conceptualization as opposed to the product, and that make the artist’s body their raw material.”³

Performance is directly articulated with urban intervention, since it is through the use of public space that the action takes part in a conflict and becomes a creative tool for raising awareness.⁴ For Paul B. Preciado, these actions have a reflective character, making performance an instrument of social protest and transformation of the public-private space into a political space.⁵

As an artistic language, this medium is eclectic. It sparks dialogue with different branches of knowledge, allowing for a multidisciplinary interpretation. Subsequently, it becomes a proposal that, in the words of Anne Johnson and Adriana Guzmán, “has been cradled and grown in the relationship between theater and anthropology, between structure and process, between reflexivity and flow, between Manchester and Bali, between art and ritual, between canonization and rebellion, between identity and alterity, between form and contingency, between tradition and renewal, between one and the other: on the bridge. (...) It allows breaking down, or at least questioning, the borders between discourse and practice, art, science and politics, academia and activism, creativity and rigor, reflection and perception, reasoning and imagination.”⁶

Historically, this particularity has caused performance and feminism to have significant points of intersection, constituting a politically solid multisensory language and a common agenda. Being a fresh discipline, not vitiated by the conditioning factors of official male art, performance was easily accepted among female artistic communities. The exercise of embodying and empowerment² that made performance possible, contributed to the achievement of a new sense of ownership over the discourse of women in the history of art.

Starting in 1970, during the second wave of feminism—influenced by the student movements of 1968, as well as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States—women artists began highlighting the



Eina Chauvet, *Mi cabello por tu nombre (My Hair for your Name)*, 2014. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist.

discursive, formative, and theoretical restrictions prevailing in art institutions, and denouncing art history and academia as male dictatorial devices.

Linda Nochlin noticed the urgency of building a feminist critique of art history, which would push the patriarchal and political limits, the insufficiencies, and the prejudices of a system that had excluded women for centuries.⁷ It was the time of “the personal is political,” which implied, in a reading of performance, that “every bodily experience carries with it an inevitable social aspect, and that every political commitment has an unavoidable bodily component.”³ Performance was allied with the feminist urge to be heard, and for this reason, it helped that it was aided by its consideration as an alternative artistic discipline, removed from the traditional institutionalized practices and circuits monopolized by men.⁸

In Latin America, performance gained momentum in the 1970s, a time of strong political agitation and social movements for democracy, given that many countries in the region and in the global context of the Cold War, were controlled by military dictatorships or undemocratic governments. The region was shaken by student movements, protests for the rights of rural and urban workers, feminist struggles, and demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Through this political lens, Latin American performance became a vehicle for expression and political denunciation.³ Artists from Central America, Mexico, and the Hispanic Caribbean explored, from this time onwards, the connection between imperialism and gender violence through innovative artistic propositions. With decolonization as an over-arching theme, their research led them to use the female body as a metaphor for both the invaded geographic territory and the patriarchal incursion into women’s lives.⁹



Berna Reale, *Rosa púrpura (Purple Rose)*, 2014. C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Nara Roesler.

During this time, ultra-homophobic and transphobic policies were added by violent military dictatorships, leading to the appearance of a first wave of Latin American performance artists who claimed the right to sexual freedom, using the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York as a precedent. The first militant queer groups in Latin America, such as *Our World* in Argentina and the *Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action* in Mexico, professed a strong affiliation with leftist movements. In the 1980s, due to the AIDS epidemic, the thrust of sexual dissident



Luiza Prado de O. Martins, *The Weeds Became Long Graceful Grasses*, 2019. Performance documentation. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Raisa Galofre.

groups was aimed at exposing the urgency of medical solutions, as well as destigmatizing those who contracted the virus.¹⁰ However, as Brianna Cano Díaz points out, “the modern historical construction of individual subjectivity and the heterosexual division of the body that had an influence on aesthetic, classic and modern art discourses, paradoxically ended up making the body of the artist and the viewer invisible as sexed-generic subjects.”¹¹ That is why performance functions as a voice for the sexual dissidence of artists: the artist and the public are equally vulnerable and politicized bodies.

In the early 1990s queer or “cuir” discourse emerged, following the activism of groups like *Queer Nation* and *ACT UP*, along with the publication of

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, which has been reinterpreted in a variety of ways throughout Latin America. The 21st century saw the development of post-porn aesthetics and the visibility of trans and non-binary identities, all of which have been evident in Latin American performance. The region became an ideal setting for new corporalities to challenge heteronormativity,¹⁰ and to call for the creation of alternative communities for political and affective work.

Contemporary Latin American performance has continued to grow significantly since its inception. Countries like Colombia, Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and the Dominican Republic, to name a few, are essential references when talking about international performance gatherings.³ The region’s feminist concerns have been central to the medium’s growth. To quote Irene Ballester Buigues, this is because the “artists have captured their own subverted body, their need to speak, think and act, and this has served as a support not only to speak about the issues that conditioned their female situation, (...) but they have turned their art and their body into a platform to denounce the abuses of patriarchal terrorism such as gender violence and feminicide.”¹³

As an intersectional issue, it should be remembered that Latin America is marked by its diversity of population, such as the indigenous people inheriting pre-Columbian civilizations, Afro-descendant roots, Asian diasporas, and the new emerging identities arising from migratory movements and the crossing of national, cultural, and linguistic borders.

There have been multiple discussions in Performance Studies around the relationships between original actions, copies, media, and records. Many thinkers consider the documentation and archiving of performance essential to constructing the history of this artistic practice, so as not to lose the efforts, political gambits, and ephemerality

of bodily action. The authenticity of preservation is an exercise in creating memory.¹⁴ *Heart Howls* aims to accurately show the documentation of recent performative works carried out throughout the region.

Two Central American artists in this exhibition have worked for decades on the issue of gender violence through the medium of performance. Regina José Galindo (Guatemala City, 1974) and Rossella Matamoros-Jiménez (San José, 1960) show the local realities of Guatemala and Costa Rica, and have consistently denounced the continually increasing rate of feminicides. Systemic acts of aggression at state and local levels are investigated

by Galindo in *Monument to the Disappeared* (2020), where she collaborated with 28 women who remained in a park day and night, protesting the identical number of women who disappear every week in Guatemala. “Your daughters and sons, your sisters and brothers, your parents are looking for you. We search them. Where are they?” asks the artist.



Cristina Flores, *Ojo protector (Protective Eye)*, 2020. Textile sculpture woven with mixed fibers, bronze sheet and eucalyptus dyed fibers. Courtesy of Ginsberg Gallery, Lima.

In contrast, shown in an enclosed space, the video works of Matamoros-Jiménez emphasize the detrimental impact of gender violence, imploring the public to consider their complicity in systems of inequity. In *How Did I Get Here?* (2020), the artist refers to the killing of women in Costa Rica, inspired by the statistics, lists, and sensationalized media coverage surrounding such events. In a country of 5 million inhabitants, profound trauma and widespread social damage have become culturally ingrained.

Some of the artists presented draw from their personal experiences. Heartbreakingly, Bárbara Milano (Piracicaba, 1987), made a series of performances to honor and heal from the feminicide of her pregnant sister. For her work *MOTHER* (2019), Milano covered her body with red achiote food coloring and Brazilian indigenous healing jewelry, while her mother braided her hair in the shared mourning of motherhood and their painfully broken lineage. In a

text accompanying the performance photographs, the artist states, “My mother braids my hair. I try to prepare myself. Life must go on. All displacement is action. My sister died without being a mother, without knowing Rio de Janeiro. I always asked not to die for love of my mother. I never thought she would bury a daughter. My sister’s daughter was not born, I think that’s why she was killed by him.”

Similar to Milano, Elina Chauvet (Chihuahua, 1959), presents photographic documentation of her performance *My Hair for Your Name* (2014). The original piece began with the artist reading a father’s account of identifying his daughter’s remains: “All I kept of my daughter is her hair.” Chauvet proceeded to unfurl her long, braided hair, from which she cropped portions at the root, securing them with elastic bands and ribbons bearing the names

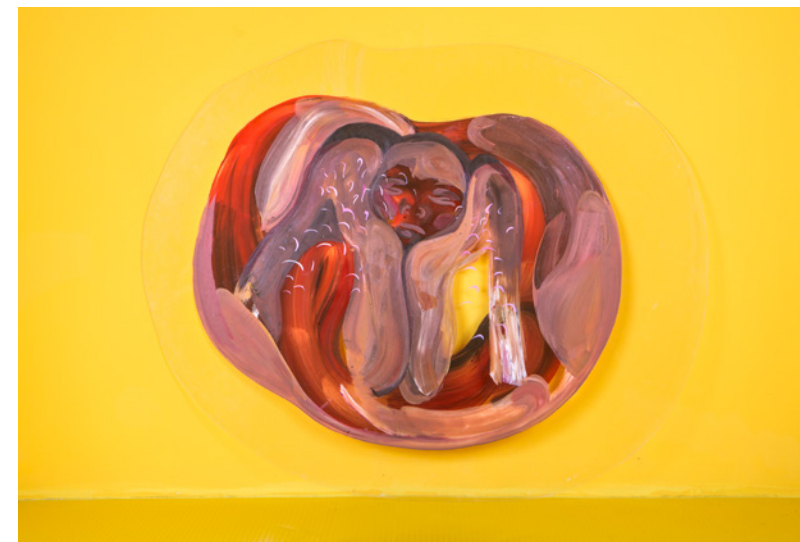
of victimized women. The artist then shaved her scalp and had the word “justice” tattooed on it. In *Heart Howls*, the public is invited to contribute an addition to the artist’s original offering, by cutting small strands of their own hair, tying them with pink ribbons on behalf of a loved woman who has suffered similar circumstances.

Berna Reale (Belém, 1965) achieved an impressive feat of performance in the public arena with *Purple Rose* (2014), in which she paraded 50 schoolgirls, dressed in uniforms emblematic of traditional Brazilian schools, through her native streets in Belém, followed by a military band. In their mouths, each girl carried prostheses that imitated the oral cavity of inflatable sex dolls, denouncing how, through the reification of the female body, sexual and gender violence runs through us as women from an early age. Posters featuring portraits of the participants with the oral prosthesis were later pasted throughout São Paulo in sites such as cinemas, theaters, cultural centers, and art schools. During the show, the Reale posted testimonials from some of the participants—who described their experiences of sexual coercion—on her website.

Luiza Prado de O. Martins (Guaratingueta, 1988) will present a new performance for *Heart Howls*, titled *The Sermon of the Weeds*. Dressed as a priest, the artist will recite an original text in the form of a liturgy, with

audience members invited up to the pulpit to receive communion. In response to recent attacks on reproductive rights in Brazil and the United States the artist will serve wafers and libations, prepared with everyday herbs and ingredients that can also be used in traditional preparations for birth control and abortion. Although the edibles served will be safe for consumption, through their usage, the artist seeks to encourage conversations about the medicalization of bodies, radical care, and the heritage of herbal remedies as intrinsic to indigenous and popular knowledge.

Cristina Flores (Lima, 1986) also demonstrates rites honoring her ancestors in her practice. Flores weaves her family history, presenting a



Wynnie Mynerva, *Sin título de la serie Cerrando para abrir (Untitled from the series Closing to Open)*, 2021. Oil on plexiglass. Courtesy of Ginsberg Gallery, Lima.

decolonial feminist perspective, to summon her longing for healing through textile and performance. Working with the memory of women who suffered medical violence, feminicide, and an unmooring from their own sense of peace, the artist casts a protective eye on their stories, creating rituals to help set herself—and all women—free. This can be seen in *Protective Eye* (2020), a sculpture made with mixed fibers, bronze sheet,



Flavia Marcus Bien, *De la noche a la tierra (From Night to Earth)*, 2020. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.



Nayla Altamirano, *Las Nobodies (The Nobodies)*, 2011. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

death, presented on a monitor surrounded by a tropical environment, where humans hold no dominion. As the artist states, “Cities, where the majority of trans women exist after leaving behind their rural environments, transform and often dictate what our bodies look like and how we should exist as feminized beings. Contrasting pineapples, one of the most polluting and violent crops ever developed (and where most rural Costa Ricans work for little money) with silicone breasts, a material often injected by trans women into their bodies, builds a relationship between neo-colonialism and patriarchal violence.”

Some performances in *Heart Howls* criticize the failure of one’s own country and the rule of law to guarantee

and dyed eucalyptus fibers. The artist considers weaving as an extension of her own corporeality and proposes rituals for recovery, reconciliation, rebellion, and empowerment. This allows her to meditate on the construction of her own identity as a woman, while simultaneously connecting with other diverse bodies.

The exhibition also addresses the growing and persistent violence faced by queer, non-binary, and trans women. The non-binary Peruvian artist Wynnie Mynerva (Lima, 1993) decries a world where difference is pathologized and non-normative gender

identities are criminalized, where any challenge to the heterosexual binary system seems to require a medical explanation. In *My Freedom is Generated* (2021), the artist recorded the surgical closure of their vagina, allowing for different possibilities of existing beyond binary-based oppression. The closure is a carnal metaphor of a grand reopening that allows reconstruction and compromise.

Likewise, Flavia Marcus Bien (San José, 1991) celebrates her birth as a trans woman with her work *From Night to Earth* (2020) in honor of the many lives that have been lost throughout the world in intersectional struggles for the protection of the environment and trans liberation. This is the beginning of a series of performances where the artist discusses the cycle of birth and

minimum living conditions for women. Both are accomplices to the patriarchal pact, each has generated the need for imposed migration, while exposing the uselessness and scarcity of state protection against gender violence. In *Las Nobodies* (2011), the Mexican artist Nayla Altamirano (Mexico City, 1986) of Zapotec and Chilean roots, sought to restore the dignity, power and dreams of her “hermanas” who are raped and murdered by men



Jazmín Ra, *Falo x Falo—El Estado de Chile nos viola y nos mata (Falo x Falo—The State of Chile rapes us and kills us)*. 2019. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

while trying to cross into the United States—one of the most dangerous borders in the world. Collecting, and then using, bras that the “polleros” left behind as symbolic trophies of sexual assault, the artist takes on the pain of these silenced women. These atrocities perpetrated by state security forces were used as a way to repress the protests and political activism of women that emerged during the country’s social unrest that year. Ra subjects herself to a firearm, the barrel of which points upwards between her spread legs, with the trigger rigged to fire if she attempts to move. This act symbolizes the structural failure that enables abuse to dominate. On her head she wears a hood, alluding to the widespread political kidnappings which have historically occurred in her country, bearing the nation’s coat of arms on her forehead.

The grassroots actions of citizens are shown to us in the work of Denise E. Reyes Amaya (San Salvador, 1989), and the archive of artist Fernanda Laguna (Buenos Aires, 1972) and writer, activist, and queer theorist Cecilia Palmeiro (Buenos Aires, 1975). On the one hand, Reyes Amaya examines the public’s tolerance of retaliatory violence against women at the hands of organized gangs (“maras”) in El Salvador, one of the most violent countries in the world. Acting as a “discarded body,” in her performance piece *Colored Bags for Trash* (2014) she lay covered in garbage bags on the side of a busy street in San Salvador, while a surveillance camera recorded

the apparent indifference of the many passers-by, in a society that has normalized, tolerates, and allows feminicide.

On the other hand, the collaborative work of Laguna and Palmeiro shows a more conscientious side of society, one that resists allowing gender violence and femicide to continue being normalized in Latin America. From 2015 to 2020, they compiled a living archive of artifacts and ephemera from *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less), a community movement opposing assault and advocating for rights of Latin American women, of which they are co-founders. Comprised of banners, flyers, protest clothing, photos, and a timeline of events, their archival installation *High on the Tide* captures the urgency, rage, and collective power of the feminist struggle for safety, bodily autonomy, and equality. According to Laguna, since 2015, with the emergence of *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina, feminist movements around the world have experienced an unprecedented growth and acceptance: “In oceanic demonstrations of hundreds of thousands and even millions, sexed and feminized bodies began to take to the streets throughout the planet to demand an end to violence against us, creating a transversal, horizontal and intersectional movement capable of confronting neoliberalism. We call this movement the feminist tide,” state Laguna & Palmeiro.¹⁵



Denise E. Reyes-Amaya, *La bolsa de colores para basura (The Colored Garbage Bag)*. 2013. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

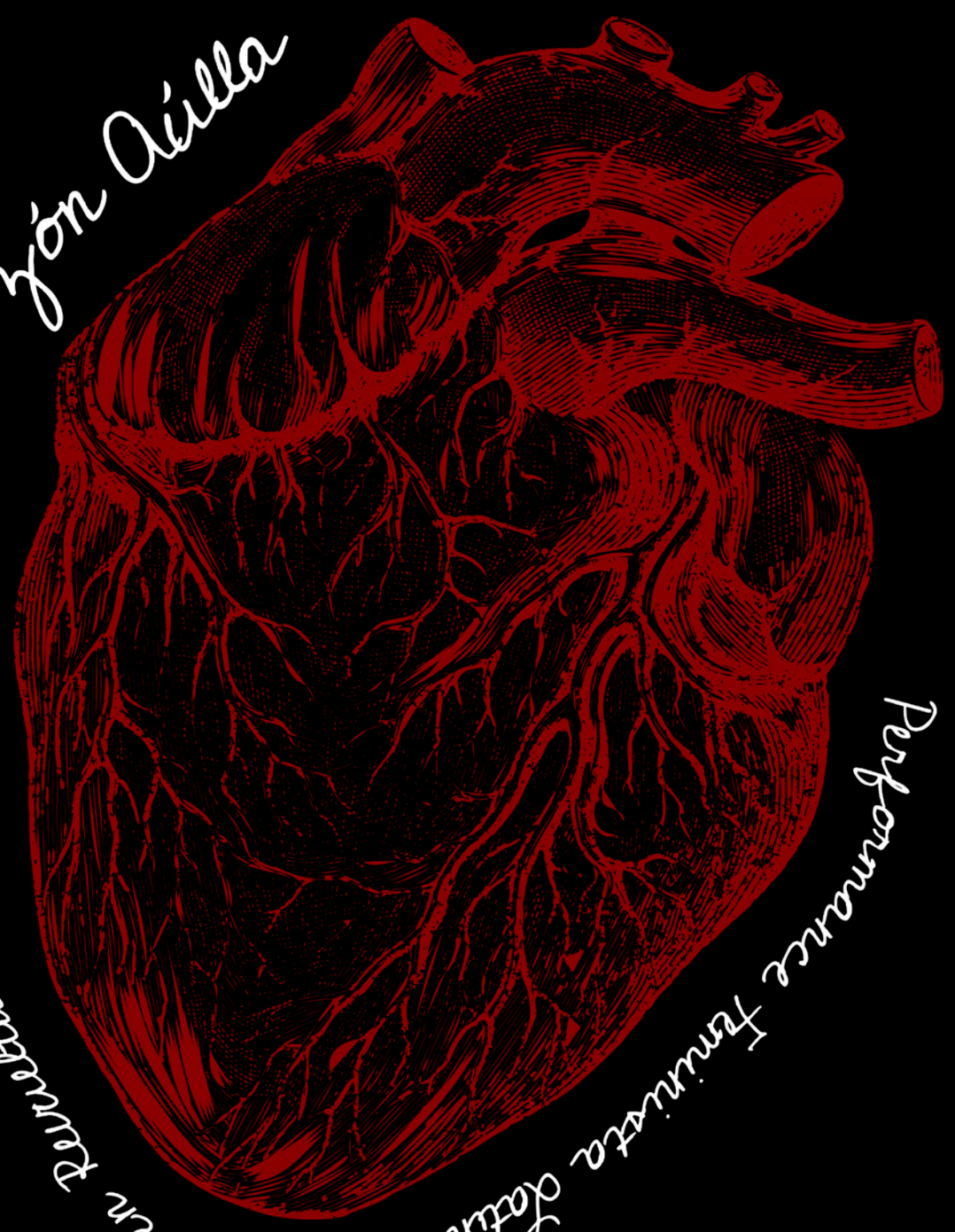


Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Palmeiro, *Mareadas en la Marea (High on the Tide)*, 2017-present. Archive of South American feminist protest ephemera. Installation view at The Drawing Center, New York, 2022. Courtesy of the artists and The Drawing Center. Photograph by Daniel Tierna.

causing the medium travel its own unique trajectories. This is demonstrated in *Heart Howls* as a plurality of methodologies and approaches, which tackle broad issues crossed by gender violence: discrimination, sexism, mourning, love, difference, racism, environment, indigenous heritage, memory, migration, sexual repression, hetero-binary impositions, fear, pain, and death.

—Tatiana Muñoz-Brenes, August 2022

El Corazón Añela



Y latinoamericano en tenerla
Performance Femenizada