Extensión (2008) By Regina José Galindo:

Why Davidson College Must Stop Silencing This Anti-Femicide Work

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Regina José Galindo is a performance artist from Guatemala who specializes in creating art from trauma and bringing awareness to deep-rooted issues. She focuses on the body in her work, particularly her own body and its relation with others'. One of Galindo's pieces, *Extensión*, which focuses on the issue of femicide in Guatemala, is being silenced by Davidson College.

Femicide is broadly defined as the sex-based murder of a woman or girl. Examples of femicide range from domestic murder, to honor killings, to machista violence, and occur in every region of the globe. While the cultural context varies widely, I will focus on the broad definition in this paper. Femicide is not just a Guatemalan issue, but Galindo does consider her work to be especially relevant in her home country. In Guatemala, which has the third-highest rate of femicide in the world, the numbers are horrifying: between 2014 and 2016, there were 611 formal reports of femicide and 2,264 women murdered overall.[1] Numerous activists work to change the situation, but thus far femicide remains a serious problem in Guatemala. *Extensión* is a response to this femicide crisis.

To create *Extensión*, Galindo made extensions from the hair of six unidentified and unclaimed femicide victims.[2] She and five other female volunteers wore the extensions in their hair for a week as they went about their daily lives. The image below, from Galindo's website,

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[1] Johnson, Sarah. "Can health workers stop thousands of women being killed in Guatemala?" In *The Guardian*. 2018. Accessed May 4, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2018/mar/07/health-workers-stop-thousand-women-killed-guatemala-femicide. (n.p.).

[2] It is important to acknowledge the ethical issues of displaying human remains. What rights do the dead have? Who is able to give consent for them? Is Galindo's work important enough that it doesn't matter? For more on the code of ethics for museum displays, please see Gachi, Andromache. "Exhibition Ethics - An Overview of Major Issues." In *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*. Accessed May 4, 2020. https://www.jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1021213/. For more thoughts on the ethics of witnessing trauma, please see the works of Susan Sontag.

shows an extension being sewn into the artist's hair for the performance. The sewing took place in a gallery as an audience looked on.

One of the extensions is sewn into Galindo's hair during the original performance. From Galindo's website, http://www.reginajosegalindo.com.

After the week was over, Galindo framed the extensions as pictured below. When she did a gallery exhibition at Davidson College in 2015, she donated the extensions to the institution. I will be arguing that these extensions are an important memory object and a form of anti-femicide activism, and as such they need to be on permanent, thoughtful display. I will begin by laying out the existing scholarly engagement with the work, discussing hair as a memory object, and conclude that *Extensión's* important message must not remain silenced.

This image shows the six extensions on display in the Davidson College Van/Every Smith Gallery in 2015. Courtesy of Elizabeth Harry.

While Regina José Galindo has gained international prominence following media coverage of her works, few scholars have discussed "Extensión" at length. The most prominent conversation surrounding this piece deals with the effectiveness of the victims' hair in memorializing them both during and after Galindo's performance.

Hair, scholars say, was an intentional and effective choice for memorialization. Two art scholars, Lia Newman, and Barbara Schreiber (Newman coordinated Galindo's exhibition at Davidson College) argue that hair is a good way to commemorate victims, as it is a part of the murdered women—as Newman puts it, "organic matter impregnated with each individual's unique DNA."[3] Therefore, the women were, in a sense, attached to the heads of Galindo and her

[3] Lia Newman, "Regina José Galindo: Bearing Witness," In *Regina José Galindo: Bearing Witness*, (Davidson: Davidson College, 2015), 13; Barbara Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance: Regina José Galindo," In *Sculpture* 35, no. 9 (Washington, 2016), Accessed May 4, 2020. https://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/docview/1825182565?accountid=10427. (n.p.).

assistants, joining in their daily routines.[4] Thus by wearing these extensions, Galindo and her assistants created a literal and symbolic *extension* of the victims' lives.[5]

After the performance was finished, Galindo framed the hair as an artifact—an object. Newman points out that the extensions as objects also function as a memorial, because their physical presence tangibly reminds viewers of the victims from whose heads they were taken.[6] Schreiber agrees and adds that the framed hair extensions function as *memento mori*.[7] *Memento mori* literally translated as "Remember you must die" are objects or works of art that serve to remind the viewer of death. In this case, as Schreiber makes clear, the reminder is of a violent death: "here, the… is for anonymous, abused, and abandoned women."[8] In other words, Schreiber argues that in Galindo's performance the hair serves to memorialize life, while in archival form it commemorates death.[9]

Hair has been used as a memory object for centuries, evoking both life and death. The list of examples is long, but includes relics (both religious and secular), love and friendship tokens, amulets, and funerary jewelry dating back to pre-Christian times.[10] In her analysis of reliquary in Victorian-era British literature, Deborah Lutz delves deeply into the greater context of hair relics. She describes the functions of the varied hair mementos thusly, "The lock of hair can represent

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[4] Newman, "Bearing Witness," 13; Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[5] Newman, "Bearing Witness," 13; Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[6] Newman, "Bearing Witness," 13.

[7] Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[8] Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[9] Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[10] Deborah Lutz, "Hair Jewelry as Congealed Time: Hardy And Far From the Madding Crowd," In *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Accessed May 4, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139924887.006. (n.p.); Kimberley Knight, "Hair in the Middle Ages", In *Internet Archaeology*, (2016), Accessed May 4, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.42.6.10, (n.p.).

both comfort and grief, reminding us of the eternal in the finite."[11] In other words, hair relics evoke both life and death.

Lutz connects hair's power to symbolize life with the fact that it maintains its color, shape, and texture after death.[12] In essence, she says, hair is able to "fossilize the instant and the organic life and growth of the body, thus turning it into an (almost) unchangeable thing."[13] Preserving an unchanging piece of the deceased keeps them alive in their loved ones' memory—or in the case of Galindo's extensions, perhaps keeps the femicide victims alive forever (or at least as long as viewers can see the hair).[14] In addition, for Christians and others who believe in the afterlife, Lutz argues, hair mementos are a token of faith in a future reunion, and a promise that the deceased will live again.[15]

On the other hand, the lock of hair cannot bring the deceased back to life. Through the combination of the present hair and absent owner, hair objects inevitably remind the living of their sorrow and the death that took place.[16] Lutz believes that keeping this grief present is an intentional way of memorializing the dead and an essential function of hair memory objects.[17] Beyond that, she argues, they link the living to the deceased through confrontation with death's inevitability: everyone will die in the end; every moment is temporal.[18] Ultimately, Lutz sees two functions of hair as a memory object: reminders of life and reminders of death, much as Schreiber sees Galindo's extensions.[19]

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[11] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[12] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[13] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[14] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[15] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[16] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[17] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[18] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."
[19] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."

In contrast to this analysis however, Regina José Galindo's extensions are not exactly typical hair relics. Although they do evoke similar reminders of life, death, and grief, they are not private devotional objects.[20] While I agree with Schreiber that the performance worked to extend the lives of the murdered women, the overall focus of both the performance and the memory objects is to serve as a reminder of these women and bear witness to what happened to them.[21] Unlike the Victorian-era relics, they are not tokens of the departed kept by their loved ones as a reminder of their passing.[22] Instead, Galindo's extensions function best in a public setting.

One reason that Galindo's works must be public, as sociologist Jeffrey L. Kidder explains, is that her art functions by inserting something that does not belong into everyday spaces.[23] This is definitely true of the original performance of *Extensión* in which Galindo and others added the hair of dead women into their daily lives. While the extensions were made to look natural and not everyone would notice them, for the performers who wore the hair and anyone who did notice, they inserted the reminder of death into the everyday.[24] By doing so, they kept the story of femicide ever present. And once the artifacts were displayed in a gallery, they became even more public, serving as a reminder of femicide for everyone who entered or walked past.

While Galindo's extensions are not like Victorian-era love locks, they are indubitably memory objects, because they serve as reminders of the victims.[25] There are other examples of

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[20] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."

[21] Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

[22] Lutz, "Hair Jewelry."

[23] Jeffrey L. Kidder, "Regina José Galindo and the Social Significance of Space," In *Regina José Galindo: Bearing Witness*, (Davidson: Davidson College, 2015), 25.

[24] There is no record of who was aware of the performance outside of those who were present in the gallery, the volunteers, and the hairdresser. The different levels of engagement may have included family, friends, or even strangers, but it is impossible to say for sure.

[25] Schreiber, "Acts of Endurance."

hair memory objects that go back even further than Lutz', as scholar Kimberley Knight points out in her analysis of medieval hair relics. Knight's primary focus is on the original use of relics: religion.[26] During the Middle Ages, saint worship was hugely important, but theologians wished to emphasize the holiness and sanctity of saints, so body parts were initially prohibited as relics. [27] Hair (along with teeth and fingernail clippings) was one of the first types of relics theologians allowed, because it "provided evidence of the saints' holiness": the hair's lack of decay was a sign that their bodies were incorruptible (despite the fact that the hair of any person decays more slowly).[28] Although theologians soon permitted other relics, and European reliquaries filled up with bones, hair remained important. Later in the Middle Ages, the hair of martyrs and other religious figures was kept in addition to that of the saints.

Galindo's work, though secular, resembles a religious relic because it turns the women into martyrs. Martyrs do not have to be religious—anyone who sacrifices or dies for a cause can be considered a martyr. While the femicide victims from whom Galindo took her extensions were probably not killed for being too religious, they were certainly killed for being women: something they could not or would not change. Furthermore, with Galindo's extensions, their deaths are used to inspire other women to the cause of feminism.

While Galindo claims not to be an activist, because she does not believe her work can make change, we can see that *Extensión* does have that potential as it takes a powerful position advocating against femicide. Scholars have shown that many of her other pieces are a form of activism. In one instance, her piece *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (Who Can Erase the

[26] Knight, "Hair in the Middle Ages."
[27] Knight, "Hair in the Middle Ages."
[28] Knight, "Hair in the Middle Ages."

Footprints?) actually assisted in the defeat of a genocidal dictator.[29] In addition, because activism is acting on behalf of a cause, I define performance art which makes a moral or political claim as a form of activism. *Extensión* takes a stand against femicide and calls for others to join Galindo in her position. By choosing to 'extend' the lives of murdered women, she argues that their lives should have been longer—that they did not deserve to lose them. And by choosing to save and display the extensions afterwards alongside an explanation, we can see that Galindo wanted to ensure that the women and their wrongful end were remembered, and that more people knew and cared about the anti-femicide cause.

Sadly, the extensions are currently housed in the basement of Davidson College's art center; by not displaying them, the college is silencing the story of the martyred women. This is evidenced by the lack of scholarly engagement with *Extensión*. While there are 647 results for "Regina José Galindo" in the Davidson College Library database and 7,290 on Google Scholar, I was only able to find 2 scholarly articles on *Extensión* and a partial video of the performance uploaded by its commissioner. In contrast, the well-publicized *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, which took place in a public setting rather than a private gallery show, is discussed by more than 100 scholars. While the performance of *Extensión* took place in a private setting, the extensions could be used to gain the same type of recognition if displayed properly. If the extensions had a permanent home where they were visible to the public, there would likely be far more scholarly engagement with Galindo's powerful anti-femicide message.

Galindo's works need a permanent home, and that home must be chosen carefully. It needs to speak to the Guatemalan aspect of the hair's story—for as Galindo herself said, she

[29] Newman, "Bearing Witness," 8.

draws on her homeland and her identity as a Guatemalan and a woman for all of her works.[30] It also needs to speak to the body, because the body is Galindo's method of demanding empathy and a "social response to injustice."[31] Because the piece is made from hair, it speaks to the body innately, but an explanation of the work that describes whose body the hair is from and what happened to that body would enhance the connection. Few people at Davidson college have an intimate enough connection to Galindo and Guatemalan femicide to understand the piece without context. For this reason, a thoughtfully-written background piece must be displayed alongside the art. And, as Kidder argues, it is key for Galindo's work to stand in a space where it inserts something unusual into everyday life.[32] The extensions must also be housed in a public-enough space that they can serve their role as a memory object.

There are two options for where the objects can be housed: on-campus or off-campus. If the objects remain on campus, they can be easily placed in a public location, but only the campus population will regularly access them unless there is an active push to draw visitors. And the larger issue is how to keep them connected to their Guatemalan roots. I urge the college to form a committee in conjunction with the Latin American Studies department (ideally including Guatemalan specialists), Visual Arts department, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department, and Organization of Latin American Students to decide on a location for the extensions and the supplementary materials that should be displayed with them. The same committee could be used to determine an off-campus location for the extensions. Should they be loaned to a museum? Set up outside the Guatemalan Embassy? Returned to Guatemala?

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[30] Newman, "Bearing Witness," 6.
[31] Kidder, "Galindo and the Social Significance of Space," 25.
[32] Kidder, "Galindo and the Social Significance of Space," 27.

There are myriad options for where the extensions could be displayed; the most important thing is that they are housed somewhere that they will be seen and understood. Their current location in the basement of the Davidson College visual arts center is inadequate. Not only is it clear that objects which are meant to be seen only function when people view them, but the message of *Extensión* is a deeply important one. Femicide is particularly frequent in Guatemala, which has the third highest rate of such murders in the world, but it is a relevant topic everywhere.[33] Women all over the world are murdered for being women. As an anti-femicide memory object, Galindo's extensions need to be on permanent display, and I will reach out to Davidson College about forming a committee to decide where to place them.

[33] Johnson, "Can health workers stop thousands of women being killed in Guatemala?"

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