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REDEFINING THE MEXICAN TRADITION OF DEATH: TERESA MARGOLLES AND THE EMBODIMENT OF ABSENCE

With the headline: “Mexican narcoterror to be exhibited in Venice,” *Reforma* —one of Mexico City’s most renowned newspapers— announced Teresa Margolles’s participation in the 2009 Venice Biennale. Her installation exposed the unbearable violence that has been afflicting Mexican society in the last decades. For this project, Margolles used blood and small pieces of glass she recovered from assassinations related to the narco trafficking war. Despite the crudeness and illegal nature of her work —she has been working with human remains since the 1990’s— it has not caused any significant controversies in Mexico.¹ It was rather her exposure in the Venice Biennale that shocked international spectators, who called her work: “gut wrenching,”² “a temple of blood,”³ and even “disturbing”⁴.

Margolles was born in 1963 in the northwestern Mexican city of Culiacán, which has had a reputation of being a narco city and the birthplace of the Sinaloa Cartel since the 1960's. In the early 1990's she simultaneously worked on her artistic career and at the Mexico City morgue, thus from the beginning Margolles's work blended the world of art with that of the morgue by adopting human remains —parts of corpses, blood, skin, small pieces of flesh, and the water used to wash corpses— as her media. Considering such biographical details along with the actual state of violence and impunity of the Mexican state, it would be easy to dismiss the complexity of Margolles's work by simply categorizing what Ruben Gallo calls its "necrophiliac aesthetics"⁵ as a byproduct of her surroundings or even as a critique of the *status quo*. Although the criticism of her work is undeniably relevant to its context, her work should also be read in the broader context of Latin American Conceptualism, and within the narrative of Mexico's quest for a truly national art. Furthermore, Margolles's work must also be understood as part of —if not an evolution within— an ancient, yet ongoing Mexican affair with death.

Given the prevalence of conceptualism in the contemporary art world, describing Margolles as a conceptual artist does not provide a valuable insight into her work. The use of this globalizing term implies the risk of disregarding the particularities of its regional developments; if simply called conceptual, Margolles's work could seem anachronistic. Since its emergence in Latin America in the 1960's, conceptual art has been used as a protest tool. Whereas mainstream conceptualism was concerned with the philosophical issue of art vs. the materiality of the everyday object, Latin American Conceptualism was principally concerned with politics. In this sense, Margolles's use of the object —or, to be more precise, what remains of the object— follows this tradition of politicizing the artwork, for it denounces the unbearable inequality that prevails in Mexican society. The sole title of her *Kunsthalle Fridericianum* installation in 2010, *Frontera* (Border or Frontier)

evokes the highly politicized issue of the U.S.- Mexico border. For this installation, Margolles rebuilt in the German gallery two gunshot concrete block walls she removed from the Mexican cities of Ciudad Juárez and Culiacán ([fig. 10.1](#)). Through the minimalist aesthetic of these two gunshot-ridden walls, the artist exposes the violent reality of Mexico. As the recognition of Margolles's works increases and reaches international audiences, the regional critique of her work acquires a global status; it now involves global politics.

Frontera's walls also exemplify how Margolles —like most Latin American conceptual artists— does not necessarily fit into mainstream conceptualism's trajectory towards its complete dematerialization. Instead, what happened in this region was, in Mari Carmen Ramírez's words, "(an) appropriation and inversion of the original concept of dematerialized art,"⁶ which explains why Latin American conceptual art remained object-based. Being part of this tradition, what takes place in Margolles's work is a displacement that has been described by Justo Pastor Mellado as a "formal transmigration"⁷ of an object that once removed from its original context, acquires a shocking value. But Margolles's displacement of the object is quite different from the old Duchampian ready-made paradigm; hers entails additional physical processes that involve an intense interaction with the actual matter of the object. Her forensic art pieces show how Margolles's object is not only displaced, but is highly mediated by mortuary and sanitary processes. Instead of dismissing the materiality of the art object, the artist celebrates it by altering its matter in order to preserve it. And by doing so, Margolles carries on the Latin American tradition of inverting the dematerialization ideal.

Although particular aspects of Latin American Conceptualism are apparent in Margolles's work, the cultural and political heterogeneity of the region demands a look into its immediate context. In Mexico, the decade of the 1990's was marked by a forced opening to international markets and by a generalized state of social unrest

FIGURE 10.1 Teresa Margolles, *Frontera* (2010)

that preceded the fall of the one-party political system that dominated the country for over seventy years. Therefore, the work of Teresa Margolles emerged in a difficult period of transition, amidst crucial events that ranged from Mexico's participation in NAFTA to the *indígena* guerrilla movement in Chiapas. At a time when it became clear that the promise of the nationalist modernizing ideology of the post-Revolution had failed and the institutionalized aesthetics of the regime needed to be rethought, artists of Margolles's generation responded to the challenge of reinventing a national art that had been restricted to the language of the post-Revolution muralists.

Lengua (Tongue) reflects this quest for redefining a contemporary national identity. While working in the morgue, Margolles came across a body of a teenage boy who —like many others— would end up being buried in public anonymous graveyards, since his family could not afford his burial. The piercings of the corpse caught the eye

of the artist, who offered to pay for the young man's proper burial in exchange for his pierced tongue, which according to art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina “metaphorically, ‘spoke’ about his defiance of the social norms.”⁸ That is how the artist obtained the material for *Lengua*, which after going through the pertinent embalming processes became what Medina describes as “a perverse example of Duchamp's progeny.”⁹ It is through pieces like this, that Mexican artists of Margolles's generation resumed the search for an authentic Mexican art that had been abandoned. Furthermore, *Lengua's* use of the globally established language of minimalism and conceptualism to address the regional issues of poverty and inequality not only was “adjusting such traditions to the dark social setting of the third world,”¹⁰ like Medina points out, but it also attests to the Mexican urge to realize an identity. It speaks of what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called the paradox

of our times: the desire to take part in the globalized world —represented by the tongue’s piercings— while having a unique national identity.¹¹

The centrality of the concept of death in Margolles’s work certainly reflects Mexico’s ongoing drug war and the violence it entails, but is also testament of the overwhelming incidence of death symbols in Mexican culture. The conspicuous presence of death in both pre-Columbian and Hispanic cultures makes this concept an important unifying agent for the two radically different mother cultures of the Mexican nation. Thus the construction of a particularly Mexican idea of death has been one of the few successful attempts to merge the heterogenic Mexican nation with a unified collective view. Although the artist does not resort to literal representations of death such as skeletons or skulls, her work nevertheless reminds us of the ephemerality of life. It is therefore, a sort of conceptual *memento mori* that at the same time involves, like Pastor Mellado suggests, a natural “desire for permanence”¹² —or what Miguel de Unamuno called *the tragic sense of life*— and deeply Mexican identity issues.

The universality of Margolles’s work is particularly evident in her sculptural piece *Entierro* (*Burial*). Consisting of a concrete block in which the artist buried a stillborn fetus, this sculpture alludes to the inevitable ever-presence of death as an intrinsic part of human experience. The universal quality of Margolles’s work is further highlighted by her characteristic use of minimalist aesthetics and by her employment of common materials, such as concrete. But while traditional *memento mori* or *vanitas* often acted as social levelers by portraying death as a universal fate, Margolles’s art acknowledges the differences between the death of the rich and that of the poor. In Margolles’s work death remains unavoidable, but is no longer impartial. As a review in *All Art News* indicates, pieces like *Lengua* “suggest that not even death eradicates social inequalities,”¹³ while the walls of *Frontera* denounce a violent, unfair death that remains impune.

But despite Margolles’s successful treatment of the universal theme of death, her work is profoundly Mexican. It certainly belongs to a long national tradition that takes pride in the notion of having a particular view of death.¹⁴ And more importantly, given the illegal trading of human remains it involves, her pieces could not be created anywhere else. As Medina points out “the most disturbing element in Margolles’s forensic art does not lay in the horror of the images and objects she creates but in the institutional conditions which make them possible.”¹⁵ As a way of critiquing the Mexican government that had already turned the post-Revolution murals into the official language of the regime, *avant-garde* artists of the 1990’s tended to ridicule official institutions through their work. This trend, which has been identified by Gallo as institutionalism,¹⁶ exposed the lack of pluralism of the national artistic scene. It was precisely at that time, amidst the critical art of the 1990’s when Margolles formed a group called SEMEFO, which stands for Forensic Medical Services, the government agency that oversees the morgue. Originally conceived as a rock band, the group soon started doing conceptual art. While in SEMEFO, Margolles declared in an interview with Gallo:

In many ways our work is about this ability to penetrate the system... One of our pieces is a collection of tattoos taken from cadavers. I would sneak into the morgue and spot the dead bodies that were about to be cremated. When the guards were distracted —and they often were— I would take out a knife and cut off the tattoos and hide them in my groin...We have only shown these tattoos a few times, and then only for a day at a time, because they are illegal art pieces, and we do not want to mess up our access to the morgue.¹⁷

This way of becoming part of the corrupted system while criticizing its institutions has a lot to do with what it meant to be Mexican in the ‘90s. It involved, as Margolles’s work attests, questioning the validity of the national institutions and the values they entailed.

Furthermore, the identitarian function of Margolles's art becomes even stronger when it reaches the international stage, since works like hers are crucial in reinventing the national identity. Interestingly, it was when the artist represented Mexico in the 53rd Venice Biennale that her work shocked international audiences. Her installation *¿De qué otra cosa podemos hablar?* (*What else could we talk about?*) did not win the prize, but it was one of the most talked-about pieces. To represent Mexico and its terrible reality, Margolles had the floors of the Palazzo Rota Ivancich mopped at least once a day with rehydrated blood and dirt she recovered from narco-trafficking related assassinations in northern Mexico (fig. 10.2). Her installation also replaced the Mexican flag with her *Ban-dera* (flag), which was a tripartite cloth that had

been soaked in the blood she recovered from those shooting scenes (fig. 10.3). In an interview at MoMA in 2009, the artist commented that back in the '90s she had to steal material from the morgue, but nowadays anyone can find death in the streets of Mexico.¹⁸ The fact that this installation showed the world such a realist representation of the country is enormously significant in the way Mexico sees itself; how not even the government can stop people from addressing an uncomfortable topic that can no longer be ignored. But Margolles's death does not pretend to be moralizing; it only aims to confront the viewer with the inevitability of death and with the tragic reality of Mexico.

FIGURE 10.2 Teresa Margolles, *¿De qué otra cosa podemos hablar?*



The French art critic Pascal Beausse suggests that her installations offer contemporary viewers the unique opportunity to experience “a situation of co-presence with death without the company of religiosity.”¹⁹ Margolles’s pieces are not about religion. They are rather an example of protest art that reflects what Pastor Mellado has called: “a wounded sense of civic belonging”²⁰ that prevails in contemporary Mexican society. One of the most important aspects of Margolles’s treatment of death is the way in which she continues a national tradition, while radically altering it. Her work maintains the essential functions of the *memento*

FIGURE 10.3 Teresa Margolles, *Bandera (flag)*



mori, but it breaks away from the literal skeletal tradition, representing, therefore, a radical turn in the long narrative of death representations within Mexican art. Ramirez’s idea of the re-materialization of art has a strong presence in the artist’s work since she adapts conceptual art to the specific circumstances of her environment. In her work, the literal symbolism of the skull is transmuted into abstract representations, processes, and actions that employ the idea of absence as a metaphor for death. In *El agua de la ciudad de México (The Water of Mexico City)*, Margolles poignantly makes the audience receive the concept of death through their senses. Operating humidifiers fed with the water used to wash the corpses at the Mexico City morgue, she poetically filled the white space of the Kilchman Gallery with death. This installation literally made the public absorb Mexican death. In a review of a similar Vaporization, Hans Rudolph Reust wrote: “Margolles’s works function as an infective agent. Long after a visit to the gallery, breathing remains difficult, one’s skin remembering again and again.”²¹ In a way, the whole room was filled with an absence, what the viewers of *El agua de la ciudad de México* ultimately embodied was not death, but the absence it entails.

The significance of Margolles’s artistic proposal is a lot deeper than the immediate environment it denounces. While the historical and socio-political context of the artist’s work may contribute to its better understanding, it also attests to its complexity. Even though the goriness of Margolles’s work provides it with an initial shocking value, it gives way to the reflection on the viewer’s own existence. Out of her questioning of the Mexican reality, and her rethinking of the national symbol of death, the distinct qualities of Margolles’s work are born. The crudeness of her choice of materials and the embodiment of absence that characterizes her installations, mark a significant departure within traditional Mexican representations of death.

Notes

¹ Rubén Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 117 (hereafter cited as *New Tendencies*).

² Preston Thayer and Margorie Och, "Report from la Biennale di Veneza - day 6," *Art ltd* (June 2009), http://www.artltdmag.com/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1245085032&archive=&start_from=&ucat=39&page=reports

³ Daniel Hernandez, "Temple of blood: Teresa Margolles at the Venice Biennale," *Intersections* (May 28, 2009), http://danielhernandez.typepad.com/daniel_hernandez/2009/05/temple-of-blood-teresa-margolles-at-the-venice-biennale.html

⁴ Preston Thayer and Margorie Och, "Report from la Biennale di Veneza - day 6," *Art ltd* (June 2009), http://www.artltdmag.com/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1245085032&archive=&start_from=&ucat=39&page=reports

⁵ *New Tendencies*, 119.

⁶ Mari Carmen Ramírez. "Re-materialization," in *Universalis: 23 Bienal Internacional de Sao Paulo* (1996), 180.

⁷ Justo Pastor Mellado, "Teresa Margolles and the Boundaries of the Artistic Intuition," *Art nexus* 9, no. 77 (Jun./Aug. 2010), 55 (hereafter cited as "Margolles and the Boundaries").

⁸ Cuahutémoc Medina, "Zones de Tolérance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO et (l')au-delà," *Parachute* 104, 34 (hereafter cited as "Zones de Tolérance").

⁹ "Zones de Tolérance," 36.

¹⁰ "Zones de Tolérance," 37.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 277.

¹² "Margolles and the Boundaries," 58.

¹³ "Extremely Poignant Works of Art by Teresa Margolles at Kunstahalle Fridericianum." *All Art News* (December 7, 2010), <http://www.allartnews.com/extremely-poignant-works-of-art-by-teresa-margolles-at-kunstahalle-fridericianum/>

¹⁴ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Postdata, Vuelta al Laberinto de la Soledad* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), 59.

¹⁵ Medina. "Zones de Tolérance," 48.

¹⁶ *New Tendencies*, Chapter Five: Institutionalism, 135-159.

¹⁷ Rubén Gallo, "Citiscap Mexico City," *Flash Art* (Nov./Dec. 1997), 62.

¹⁸ MoMA. "Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Teresa Margolles." <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/events/6831>

¹⁹ Pascal Beause, "Teresa Margolles: Primordial Substances," *Flash Art* (Jul./Sept. 2005), 108.

²⁰ "Margolles and the Boundaries," 58.

²¹ Hans Rudolph Reust. "Teresa Margolles: Galerie Peter Kilchmann," *ArtForum International* 42, no.3 (Nov. 2003), 200.

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