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127 Cuerpos: Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Commemoration

*Death is most frightening,
since it is a boundary.*

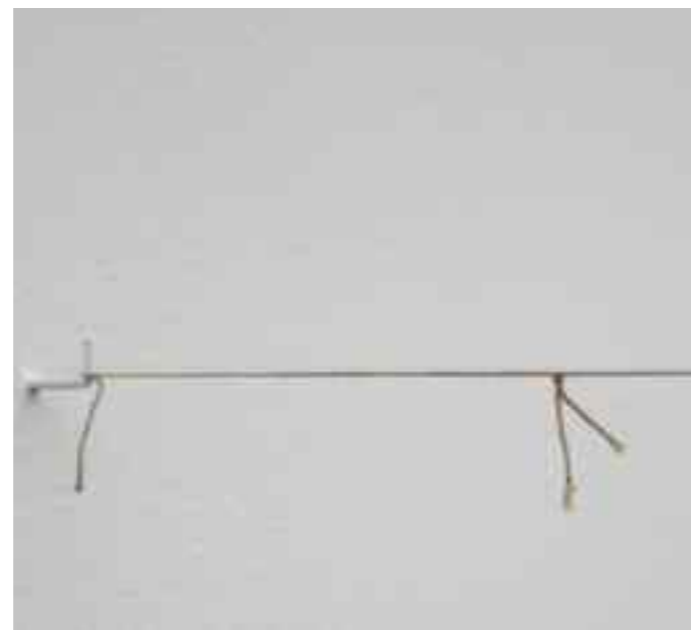
ARISTOTLE

A length of thread, stretched tight from one wall to another, spans the wide, corridor-like gallery space of the Düsseldorf Kunstverein (fig.46). At more or less waist height, it cuts off one third of the gallery along its longitudinal axis, leaving the viewer with the majority of the space in which to walk and examine the thread. On closer inspection, this turns out to be 127 separate pieces of cotton thread that have been tied together using a basic knot. On each of these threads there are uneven stains; mottled, reddish-brown traces that call to mind the colour of red wine dried on a white tablecloth. And that is it. Apart from this enigmatic installation by the Mexican-born artist Teresa Margolles (b.1963), there is nothing else to look at in the Kunstverein on this day in 2006. Whilst this may appear ‘minimalist’ in the extreme, and Margolles’ work does draw upon a minimalist aesthetic in its display, the sheer, if not vertiginous, ‘emptiness’ of the room encourages us to look more closely at this length of thread. There is, after all, nothing else to look at – nothing else in which to take visual refuge.

Our first encounter with Margolles’ *127 Cuerpos* (2006) is first and foremost an aesthetic experience; we sense the work through our eyes and therefore experience thought through our eyes, so to speak. Our physical reaction to it, alongside its impact on our senses, is crucial insofar as we tend to ‘walk the line’ and perceive it in our act of movement rather than static contemplation. Eventually we spot on the wall, mid-way down the gallery and facing the work, a placard with a disconcertingly pragmatic text on it. A casual viewer might overlook this, were it not for the fact that with apparently so little to see we go in search of more information – and more context within which to formulate a response. The text reads thus:

Remnants of thread used after the autopsy to sew up bodies of persons who have suffered a violent death. Each thread represents a body.

A little research, a quick glance at the press release for example, and we discover that Margolles not only lives and works in Mexico City, but that her subjects, with few exceptions, are invariably the victims of violent crime. This textual element undoubtedly changes our relationship to *127 Cuerpos* and, as a consequence, our interpretation of it. We move away from what is effectively an aesthetic response to an extra-visual interpretation of words: a two-sentence statement of fact that engages another realm, that of the socio-politics and economics of death itself. This is to observe the extent to which an individual’s place within a social order – their economic, social, cultural and political standing – will undoubtedly have a bearing not only on the circumstances of their death



Opposite above, left and right:

46. Teresa Margolles, *127 Cuerpos* (127 Threads), 2006 (and details) as installed in Kunstverein für die Rhein, Lande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf

Photo: Achim Kukulies

but the treatment of their bodies thereafter. It is with this knowledge and empathic understanding that Margolles, who holds a Diploma in Forensic Technique, searches through the morgues of Mexico City – with the local authorities’ explicit permission – and details what she refers to as the ‘life of the corpse’. And it is in this apparently contradictory statement – the ‘life of the corpse’ – that we find much of what makes Margolles’ work both provocative and, dare I say, necessary.

With the above points in mind, this essay will engage in a relatively basic inquiry: how are we to approach this work as an aesthetic object and, coextensively, how are we to interpret it in a cultural-historical and socio-political context? How can we still experience this *aesthetically* after reading that text? And how can we stop a theoretical reading from making the act of seeing it incidental rather than central to our experience? The task here is to render the aesthetic responsive to the socio-cultural realm without prescribing the work as (and thus reducing it to) a series of abbreviated critical and theoretical paradigms. This, I would argue, is the heuristic (if not ethical) imperative placed upon contemporary art criticism and, to further such an approach, I will begin again with the actuality of the work before contextualising it further with other aspects of Margolles’ *oeuvre*. It is crucial here that I also observe the long lineage of art forms that have taken death as their subject, and the various historical antecedents that precede and inform works such as *127 Cuerpos*. By way of a conclusion I will propose – as I will have argued from the outset – that *127 Cuerpos* does not represent death as such, but both death and the reciprocal symmetry of forgetting (absence) and remembering (presence) associated with the act of dying.

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I earlier noted that the length of thread first encountered in the Düsseldorf Kunstverein effectively blocked off, along the longitudinal axis, one third of the space. To use the word ‘block’, however, would suggest that there was a physical impediment whereas the division seemed more symbolic. You are on one side of the space, the inhabited, larger side – the side of the sentient ‘viewer’ – and all else, the uninhabited, is on the other side. In dividing the space in such a way, Margolles is not only drawing attention to the structural design and architecture of the elongated corridor-like gallery, she is also presenting the viewer with a boundary: a border-line that proscribes space and our transit within and across it. The prohibition against entering the other side of the gallery, more emblematic than physical, seems somehow caught up with the prohibition against entering the realm (or touching the body) of the dead. This is not to second-guess Margolles’ reasons for placing the string where she has; on the contrary, it is to extend the conceptual possibilities associated with *127 Cuerpos*. Life and death are often divided, sometimes in the most arbitrary manner imaginable, along similar lines of division: the fine line, that

is, between the living and the dead; the inside and the outside; this world and the ‘next’; between the act of exhalation and the moment of expiration.

And what of the actual string itself? I have already noted that it is effectively an aggregate of 127 pieces of cotton thread previously used to sew up the bodies of victims of violent crime after autopsy. This extra-visual fact produces a more profound interpretation: in life these individuals would not necessarily have been known to one another, but in death they are umbilically linked in a series of knots. To use the term ‘umbilical’, which usually refers to birth, in relation to an object that registers death is to allude to further conundrums in this work: the simple knots in the thread recall the *postpartum* staunching of the umbilical cord (and the emergence of the knot-like navel, or *omphalos*) that ensured life; whilst the sinuous thread connotes the *vena umbilicalis* (umbilical vein) that nourishes embryonic life. Each piece of thread has been used to ‘conceal’ the very moment of revealing the cause of death: the knife wound, the bullet, and the damage done. The act of concealment, in the use of the thread, is here ‘revealed’ or laid bare, just as the trace of life – blood – and its corporeal significance is also revealed in the actual blood and bodily fluids that stain the thread. The thread is both testament to life (blood) and its ultimate termination (the staunching of post-autopsy blood and fluids). And each piece of thread is an actual, rather than symbolic, testament to a life once lived: this is not, in essence, an abstraction of death but its manifestation in a perceptible object. The brutish and yet distanced detail of a violent death has been reified into the literal fact of the dividing line – an umbilical length of thread – between life and death, between the space within which you physically stand (the space of the gallery) and the other space in which you cannot: the liminal space of the dead or, less metaphorically, the other side of the thread. Life and death are, of course, umbilically conjoined; the former is often described in terms of presence, the latter in terms of absence – and both, in turn, garner meaning through *not* being the other. Moreover, the substitution, if that is the right word, of a piece of thread for a body, is an act of *re-membering* (*em-bodying*), a bringing back together and recuperation of the forsaken body. *Postmortem*, in this instant, begets *postpartum*.

In bringing us into proximity with death (or the visceral remains of others), Margolles refers to life too. Our being in the gallery and the umbilical/autopsy resonances of the thread itself – our proximity to both life and death – plays upon our realisation of being alive as opposed to being dead. We may ask to what extent does this work resemble a seventeenth-century *vanitas* or *memento mori* still-life painting? Such paintings would depict ‘beautiful’ and desirable objects, but invariably include a reference to mortality in the form of a human skull, a burning candle, flowers on the cusp of decay, or sometimes a sprightly bubble about to burst. The allegorical message of a *vanitas* painting was



47. Teresa Margolles, *En el Aire (In the Air)*, 2003
Installation with bubble machines producing bubbles with water that has been used to wash dead bodies after autopsy, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich, photo: Axel Schneider

a relatively simple one: in life we are everywhere surrounded by death, and life itself is brief.

I do not want to reduce *127 Cuerpos* to just a *memento mori* or a modern-day re-enactment of a *vanitas* painting, but it is significant that Margolles has also used actual bubbles in previous work. Employing a machine for making bubbles, *En el Aire (In the Air)*, 2003) used real rather than reproduced (painted/ drawn) bubbles that filled the entire gallery (fig.47). Upon entering this space the viewer was greeted with an air of enchantment, the transient playfulness of bubbles being a reminder, perhaps, of childhood pursuits. The bubbles floated, descended and burst against the walls, floor and, on occasion, the viewer. The effect was beguiling and not without pleasure. Again, however, the accompanying text brought us up short:

Bubbles made from water from the morgue that was used to wash corpses before autopsy.

The dead, as in *127 Cuerpos*, are here present in the very water that cleansed their bodies before autopsy, the very same morgue water that now (albeit after disinfection) bursts against our skin. In blurring the distinction between the living and the dead – they both inhabit and to some degree interact in the same time/space continuum – Margolles repeatedly draws our attention to the pervasiveness of death in life and their oppositional symmetry: the fact of life in the face of death. In *Vaporización* (2004) a similar but more invasive event occurs. In a dimly lit room we enter into what first appears to be a sort of sauna; we breathe in vaporised air and it soaks into our skin and clothing like a fine mist of imperturbable rain (fig.48). This air, however, is ‘vaporized water from the



Right, below left and right:
48. Teresa Margolles, *Vaporización*, 2001
Installation with 1–2 smoking machines, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich



morgue that was used to wash the bodies of murder victims after autopsy'. We are not only in the presence of death here; we are literally inhaling and absorbing it. The water may have been disinfected but a slight odour remains: is it the formaldehyde used to slow down the process of putrefaction – or is our imagination playing with the possibilities of what is contained within, and contaminated by, this water?

In two earlier works, *The Cloth of the Dead* (2003) and *Dermis* (1996), Margolles used fabric imprinted with the fluids of dead bodies.¹ As with *127 Cuerpos*, this practice of utilising the visceral traces and bodily fluids of the body recalls the sudarium of St Veronica. The sudarium, the eponymous Veronica's veil, was the cloth purportedly used by her to wipe the face of Jesus as he made his way to Calvary along the Via Dolorosa. The mixture of sweat (*suda* being Latin for sweat) and blood on Jesus' face left an imprint on the veil – an event depicted in the Stations of the Cross and revisited in the controversies surrounding the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium of Oviedo.² There have been a number of investigations into these items and several hypotheses put forward that suggest that they both at one time covered the same body. However, I am not necessarily interested here in the veracity or otherwise of these theories (nor am I interested in drawing upon their status as religious artefacts *per se*); rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that the sudarium is not a representative image of the dead, an image mimetically reproduced by hand as a likeness, but a likeness *not made* by the human hand. The tradition of the sudarium finds its counterpart in the term *acheiropoieta*, from the Greek meaning 'not made by hand', and includes not only Veronica's veil but the 'Image of Edessa', a rectangle of cloth upon which a miraculous image of the face of Jesus was imprinted – marked, that is, on a surface by bodily pressure, and not drawn or painted as such. Likewise the stains on *127 Cuerpos*, *Dermis* and *The Cloth of the Dead* are not drawings or representations of the dead. They are the *re-presentation* of death itself, the actual mark of the dead *impressed* by the pressure exerted by the weight of their body. It is notable in this context that the sudarium, or the *acheiropoietai*, reflected a desire on behalf of the viewer not so much to see Jesus as he might have been – that is, depicted or mimetically represented – but as he really was: his imprint and the actual, incontrovertible impression of his presence rather than symbolic absence.

The story of Veronica's veil, although derived from a New Testament episode (Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–8) is apocryphal, having been given further attention and elaborated upon by Syriac and Greek texts written in Asia Minor in the first Christian centuries; it has also been the inspiration for many subsequent paintings. In the strictest sense it differs from Margolles' practice insofar as the former is an imprint of an individual about to die rather than the imprint of someone already dead. Having said as much, however, both are concerned with memory, the act (as I noted above)

of *re-membering* the body. Writing in *Veronica and her Cloth*, Ewa Kuryluk has noted not only the religious significance and lineage of the sudarium in Christianity, but its 'mobility' as an object of remembrance:

A blank fabric is a texture; a textile with woven, embroidered, painted or written words ...; a cloth with images as icon. Each is created by a different procedure and inspires a different symbolism, but each can be used to visualize the inner dimension of remembrance and fantasy, thinking and dreaming, imagery and language. Light, portable, and flexible, cloth is ideal for picturing the flow and ruptures of inner life. Cloth as it is folded and unfolded, stored away and unrolled, seems suitable for representing memory, both as a texture woven in a laborious process, and as a sequence of images and words impregnating the fabric with mercurial speed.³

As a description of Margolles' work, specifically her works that use cloth, this goes some way to conveying how these installations are imbricated with the presence (memory) of death. In a passage that resonates with the way in which various stains and traces mark the cloth used in works such as *127 Cuerpos*, Kuryluk notes that '[t]he divine production of the *acheiropoietai* involved excretion and/or emanation. Water and other fluids, light, fire and spiritual energy played the role of agents and were applied to different types of matter (textiles, wood, stone, etc.) and were marked by them.'⁴ Kuryluk continues: '[i]n order to establish Christ, masses of potential converts had to be convinced of the existence of a unique Man-God. Material proofs of his presence on earth were highly desirable; *photographs would have been extremely helpful*. Thus were *acheiropoietai* invented – traces, relics, and likenesses of the one and only "true" God.'⁵ Although not necessarily countering Kuryluk's insight here, it is nevertheless questionable – in our so-called postmodern, digital age – that photographs would give us access to some 'reality'; or, indeed, whether they would be taken as substantive proof of the existence or non-existence of an individual. And that is why the sudarium was seen as the true relic of the 'real' rather than the reproduction or *re-presentation* of the 'real'. But the sudarium was also the relic of the 'real' of life; how then, we may ask, do we re-present the 'real' of death itself?

To answer such a question, or even outline a response, we must return to Margolles' aesthetic practice and ask what exactly works such as *127 Cuerpos* want us to contemplate: is it the fact of death itself, the knowledge that we are alive and that others are dead; or is it the 'life of the corpse' in all its anonymity? Or are we being asked to contemplate something far less tangible: the 'real', that is, of death itself? To ask such questions is to enter into the realm of the *aporia*, the moment of fundamental doubt that cannot – like the experience of death itself – be either resolved or experienced. As the

ultimate site of trauma, death is that which cannot be re-enacted. In *Aporias* (1993) Jacques Derrida proposed that the nominal notion of death is the radical *aporia* that underwrites life: the moment of radical doubt that reflects upon that which cannot be known and yet is, of necessity, *known* to all. Exemplified in the precarious precision of the phrase ‘my death’ (can anyone know or *own* their death?), Derrida suggests that the *aporia* is a non-passage of thought that nevertheless discloses a passage, ‘the event of a coming or future event’ (*événement de venue ou d’avenir*); an event, moreover, that does not necessarily take on the character of transitional movement or definitive closure.⁶ It is with this in mind that Derrida asks ‘where do we situate the syntagm “my death” as possibility/or impossibility of passage?’⁷ The question, in its most basic form, can be put thus: ‘Is my death possible?’⁸

If in *127 Cuerpos* we are indeed being asked to contemplate the ‘real’ of death, then we can only ever do so in aporetic terms: in the syntax of profound doubt and ultimate unknowability. Margolles, I would suggest, reifies the ‘real’ of death, its intangible silence and uncanny ‘imprint’, and makes it manifest in the aesthetic object (the stain of blood on the sudarium-like thread; the phenomena of a bubble bursting against your skin; or the humidified air being inhaled into your lungs). The sphere of the invisible (the realm of death), the after-life of the corpse (the visible phenomena of death itself), the *aporia* associated with the contemplation of death, and the relative privacy of a gallery space (the inhabitable space of life), are all elided here and collapsed into one another. The trauma associated with death – that which we can never re-enact – can only ever exist as the *re-membering* of the event into a *memento mori*, or the icon-fetish. *127 Cuerpos* is not about the physical horror of a violent death – brutal as that may be – or the taboo of death itself; rather, it commemorates the silence – the absolute ‘real’ – with which we *re-member* the impossibility of our deaths.

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Writing in the catalogue for Margolles’ 2004 solo show at the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK), Udo Kittelman and Klaus Görner observed that ‘death is not the romantic equalisation of all inequality, but merely marks the transition from one “biography” to another.’⁹ These victims of violent deaths, for Kittelman and Görner, ‘hover at the very limits of the depictable, at the limits of art, precisely there where death – beyond any and all symbolization – just manages to remain visible as the dissolution of form’.¹⁰ We return here to the issues raised in the introduction: can a contemporary art practice based upon an aesthetic of ‘beauty’, ‘horror’, ‘terror’ and ‘trauma’ generate an ethico-political critique of the milieu in which we live? As Kittelman and Görner themselves note: ‘[c]ircumstances such as cause of death and age at death and the chosen forms of burial and commemoration are all directly contingent on social,

economic, and political conditions’.¹¹ The individuals, so carefully archived by Margolles in works such as *127 Cuerpos* and *The Cloth of the Dead*, are representative of an underclass – prostitutes, drug-dealers, pimps and the unfortunates caught in the cross-fire of drug-related and domestic violence – who not only occupy the margins of a social order but whose lives, until now that is, went largely unnoticed beyond their immediate environments.

The socio-economics and politics of death, its causes, and its effect on those who are left after the event, are inflected here through an aesthetic of commemoration. What we have in Margolles’ work is the irreducibly aesthetic dimension of all art practice seen through the prism of the socio-political and cultural-historical specificities of a particular moment in time. In contemplating the death of others we are confronted with the *aporia* that surrounds our deaths: that is, the fundamental *impasse* of thought itself when it comes to a representative of death itself rather than its representation. The ‘real’ of death in Margolles’ work, crucially, is also a counter-modern gesture: modernity itself has increasingly disavowed the fact of death in life. We ‘pass away’ out of sight now in hospices. We do not see real dead bodies, only their gothic representations in the excessive violence of cartoons and TV police dramas. We have disclaimed knowledge of death in a series of visually and verbally euphemistic gestures, and wrapped it up in a form of consumerism that does exactly that: consumes, that is, the ‘real’ of death. And this is perhaps indicative of the ultimate commodity fetish: the quest for eternal life. Works such as *127 Cuerpos* refuse to mediate death as a comforting euphemism and, in doing so, offer a counterpart to the elision of death as a subject in our comfortably disassociated (Western) world. In Margolles’ work, finally, we find a confirming, and no doubt disconcerting, aesthetics of commemoration that clearly places it both within a sculptural, formal tradition of art-making, and an ethics of direct socio-political and cultural engagement.

NOTES

1. *Dermis* (1996) was a collaboration with SEMEFO (Servicio Médico Forense; 1990–9). Its members, apart from Margolles, included Carlos López, Juan Manuel Pernás, Juan Luis García Zavaleta, Arturo Angulo, Arturo López, Victor Busurto and Antonio Macedo.
2. The Sudarium of Oviedo is a bloodstained cloth kept in the cathedral of Oviedo in Spain and considered by some to be the actual cloth

- that was wrapped around the head of Jesus when he was entombed. The Shroud of Turin is not, strictly speaking, a sudarium insofar as it covered the body rather than the face.
3. Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and her Cloth: History, Symbolism and Structure of a “True” Image* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p.180.
4. *ibid.*, p.30.
5. *ibid.*, p.143; emphasis added.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.8.
7. *ibid.*, p.23.
8. *ibid.*, p.21.
9. Udo Kittelman and Klaus Görner, ‘Meurte Sin Fin’, in *Meurte Sin Fin* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004), pp 41–7 (p.41).
10. *ibid.*, p.41.
11. *ibid.*, p.41.