Why do you look for the living among the dead?  
Luke 24:1-6

This must be the end, thought Fate. But the show or this segment of the show, didn't end there.  
Roberto Bolaño, 2666, 2004

TERESA MARGOLLES

IN THE EVENT OF DEATH: TERESA MARGOLLES AND THE LIFE OF THE CORPSE

The means and circumstances of an individual's death can tell us a significant amount about the conditions under which they lived. A murdered and brutalised body left abandoned and unclaimed on the verges of a city — and sometimes on its streets and main avenues — speaks of a life lived on the margins of social orders. This may seem obvious at first, but the point can be extrapolated further: the economic, social, cultural and political standing that defined a person's place within a social order — or the lack thereof — can be often determined not only through the narrative and event of their death but also by virtue of what happens to their bodies after death. What, moreover, does the fact of a body left abandoned and un-mourned say about both the preceding life and a social and civic order where such events have become not only commonplace but increasingly banal?

It is with these questions in mind that Teresa Margolles, who holds a Diploma in Forensic Techniques, searches through the morgues of Mexico City — with the local authorities' permission — and visits the relatives of those who have died violent deaths. In doing so, she wants, in her words, to detail and examine the "life of the corpse" ("la vida del cadáver") and what the event of death can tell us about the value of a life. If we consider this pursuit within the present-day context of Mexico — with its homicide rate of 16 persons per 100,000 (the world average being 6.9 per 100,000), a veritable and ongoing battle between narco-traffickers and military personnel, the impunity of communities nation-wide, and an ill-fated, counter-productive and ruinous "war on drugs" that has left, to date, 60,000 dead and 20,000 disappeared — then the subject of death, and life, can never be far from anyone's mind.

Margolles' work, which uses the residue of death (in the form of fat, blood, and bodily fluids), can produce allusions to death and, crucially, life. If it was simply about death, in all its dull monotony, and, for most of her subjects, base forms of victimhood, then the discussion here would be not only macabre but weighed down with futility. However, death is an event that, as we see in her work, has a before and after-life associated with it. In 127 Cuerpos, a work she produced for the Düsseldorf Kunstverein in 2006, we see the umbilical relationship between death and life that defines her practice. For this work, the artist knotted together 127 pieces of cotton thread that had been previously used to sew up, post-autopsy, the bodies of victims of violent crime. The line created by this knotted thread traversed the length of the gallery and cordoned off a third of the space. Each of these threads was representative
What we have in Margolles’ work, in effect, is the irreducibly aesthetic dimension of all art practice refracted through the prism of the socio-political and cultural-historical specificity of a particular moment in time.

Margolles, I want to suggest by way of a provisional conclusion, refines the intangible silence and uncanny “imprint” of death—the stain of blood or bodily fluids—and makes it manifest in her installations where we find, in no particular order, the sphere of the invisible (the realm of death), the afterlife of the corpse (the visible phenomena of death itself), and the relative privacy of a gallery space (the inhuman space of life), collapsed into one another. And in that veritable moment, we are confronted not so much by death but by the lives lived behind and those who have been rendered expendable in a milieu where life has become increasingly telescoped into the fact and circumstances of violent death. In searching out the dead, Margolles calls upon the living to not only acknowledge these facts but to address, for whatever reasons and to whatever ends, the circumstances that preceded their untimely deaths and the lives lived in the wake of violence and indifference.

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**End Notes**

1. One of the founding members of SEMEDAR (Servicio Médico Forense, 1990–1999), it was the clandestine group that was shown to the uncrowned corpses in Mexico City that compiled Teresa Margolles to search out these abandoned bodies.

2. In Aztlan (1991) Jacques Derrida proposed that the notion of death is the radicalaporatunthe moment of radical doubt that reflects upon that which cannot be known and yet is, of necessity, known to all. Exemplified in the peremptory precision of the phrase “my death: can anyone know or wonder death?”, Derrida suggests that the aportatunnonpassage of thought that nevertheless disposes 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 a character of transitional movement or definitive closure, but remains an event nonetheless.
of individuals who, although not necessarily known to one another in life, had become fatally conjoined in death. Umbilically linked in a series of knots, these melenaums for a life once lived become a post-mortem chain of death by violent means. To use the term "umbilical" - which usually refers to birth - in relation to an object that registers death is to allude to a conundrum in this work: the simple knots in the thread recall not only a post-mortem but the parturium (stirthing of the umbilical cord) - and the emergence of the knot-like navels, or omphaloi - that ensured life; whilst the sinuous thread remembers the vera umbilicals (umbilical vein) that nourishes embryonic life. Post-mortem, in this instance, begets post-partum.

Each piece of thread, moreover, has been used to "conceal" the very moment of revealing the cause of death: the knife wound, the bullet, and the often blunt object of trauma. 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. These stains recur throughout Margolies' work, notably in Planche, 2010, where the artist arranged ten heated steel plates in a row across a gallery floor and spot-lit the centre of each of them. Water drips incessantly upon these metal plates, hissing as it hits the heat. The water eventually evaporates but not before leaving behind a lime-scale deposit that flowers into a suppurating stain that, with each drip, metastasizes and incrementally grows. In one respect, the whistle of the water dripping and the foaming report of its demise on hot metal speaks of transience and passage; however, it also recalls the whirring report of a gunshot, the stain of bodily fluids and the damage done. When, upon reading the accompanying text, we are informed that the water used here has been sourced from a morgue and was formerly used to wash the bodies of victims of violent crime, then the insidious violence of this otherwise unassuming work becomes all the more repellant. And yet, the regularity of the drip recalls something else: the intravenous drips that feed fluids into the body of persons during a blood transfusion. The term "intravenous", meaning simply "within a vein", can suggest the support of life and, when breached, indicate an all-too-familiar predicate of death.

Formally, as in a significant amount of Margolies' work, Planche also occupies and makes reference to the floor of the gallery. For Common Grave, installed at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Brègy in 2005, Margolies destroyed and subsequently reconstructed the gallery floor. The remaining floor was made of a mixture of cement and water - the latter having been used to wash bodies before autopsies - from a morgue in Culiacán, a city in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico. In another work, On Sorrow, which was produced in 2006 for the Liverpool Biennial, the artist relocated a passageway at a popular nightlife area in the city with glass from the windows of cars in which people had been assassinated. In 2007, Margolies lifted and transported the tiles from a room in which a friend of hers was murdered. This friend was Luis Miguel Suro (1972-2004), a promising young artist who was shot dead in a botched robbery at his family's ceramic factory in Guadalajara. Violence, it would seem, is endemic in Mexico today and has impacted upon an entire generation, be they marginalised or not. In this sense, violence is no longer the state of the dispossessed or those who have been cast out; it is a centralised, fostering and widespread phenomenon. In transporting a portion of the floor from the ceramic factory where Suro was murdered, Margolies exports the scene of the crime and the violence associated with it, extrapolating it, in turn, onto a global stage. This is no longer a localised affair and the segment of floor, which is in turn placed upon a gallery floor, becomes a tombstone-like remnant of an event that lies uncomfortably and perhaps in reproach to the fact of our living amongst the remnants of death.

In bringing us into proximity with the event of death Margolies nevertheless emphatically refers to life. Our being in the gallery, amongst the visceral remains of others and the forensic objects that lie in the wake of death, can only ever focus our minds on the fact of living. Does this in some way