

artemundi 5

INTERNATIONAL VISUAL

ART EXHIBITION AND PRIZE

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GWOBRR¹⁶ ARDANGOSFA

WELEDOL RYNGWLADOL

SWEDEN / SWEDEN
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LLOER / ENGLAND
INDIA / INDIA
MEXICO / MEXICO
LITHUANIA / LITHUANIA
SLOVENIA / SLOVENIA

2012

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Luke 24:1-8

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-mourning 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 Technique, 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 18 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 implosion 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 certitude 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.² 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



Teresa Margolles *What Else Could We Talk About?* 2009

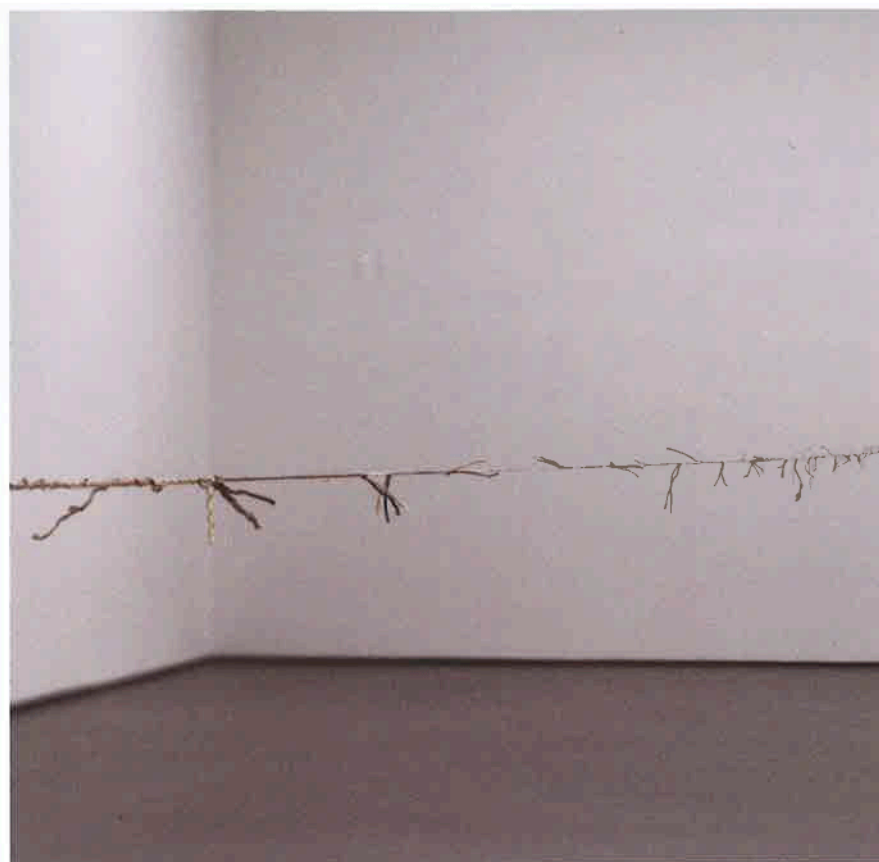
excuse us from events or ameliorate our consciences as we "experience" at a distance the tableau of a brutal death? These, and other questions, demand a more prolonged engagement but what is certain here is the sense that the socio-economics and politics of death — its causes and its effect on those who are left after the event — are inflected through an aesthetic of commemoration if not condemnation that squarely confronts and positions the viewer. It is, in short, very difficult to walk away from Margolles' work, nowhere more so than if the gallery floor you are walking on is, as in the case of *Common Grave*, made up of water used to wash the victims of violent crime. It is tempting, in light of the political, social and individual tragedy that is being played out in present-day Mexico to focus on the politics of these works and their undoubted concern with the sheer trauma that affects many of those who are and remain, for whatever reasons, marginalised in that country today. There is perhaps an inevitability to such forms of interpretation and it was notable that the blunt title of Margolles' exhibition for the 53rd International Venice Biennial — in which the relatives and friends of victims of violent crime in Mexico mopped the floors of the Rota Ivancich Palace with water mixed with the blood of their dead relatives — was a pertinent question rather than a declamation; namely, "What Else Could We Talk About?". What else, indeed, could we talk about when confronted by these installations? Nevertheless, it is important, perhaps even crucial if we are to fully understand the aesthetic impact of her work, that we acknowledge how Margolles draws upon an artistic lineage that includes minimalism, post-minimalism and performance art, to name but three. The severity of Margolles' sculptures and installations belies a formal process of embodiment that minimalism, for example, was often at pains to deny. Where the "high" minimalism of, say, Donald Judd or, to a lesser extent, Carl Andre, sought to de-personalise objects, Margolles' installations give a corporeal reality to each singular object, imbricating it with a history that speaks to political, social and economic realities.

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 specificities of a particular moment in time.

Margolles, I want to suggest by way of a provisional conclusion, reifies 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 after-life of the corpse (the visible phenomena of death itself), and the relative privacy of a gallery space (the inhabitable space of life), collapsed into one another. And in that vertiginous moment, we are confronted not so much by death but by the lives left 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 left in the wake of violence and indifference.

DR ANTHONY DOWNEY

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Teresa Margolles / 127
Cuerpos 2006

End Notes

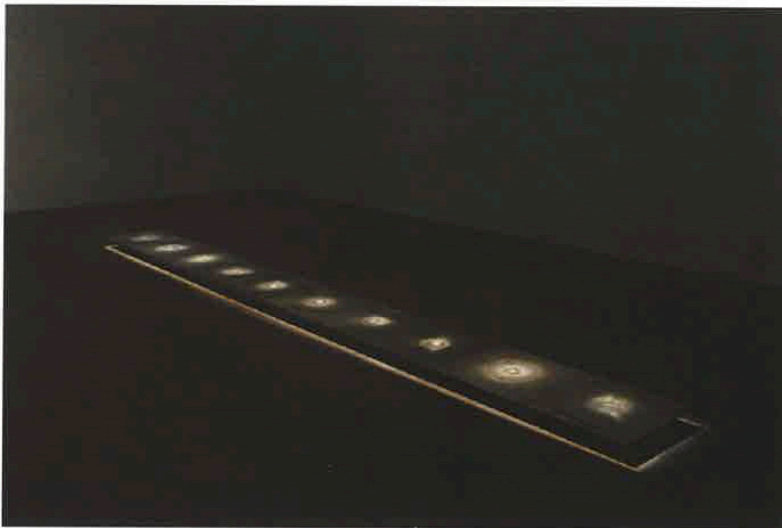
¹ One of the founding members of SEMEFO (Servicio Médico Forense, 1990–1999), it was the disregard that was shown to the unclaimed corpses in Mexico City that compelled Teresa Margolles to search out these abandoned bodies. Apart from Margolles, members of SEMEFO included Carlos López, Juan Manuel Pernás, Juan Luis García Zavaleta, Arturo Angulo, Arturo López, Victor Busurto and Antonio Macedo. The acronym SEMEFO is shared with the Servicio Médico Forense organisation which collects unclaimed corpses from the streets and environs of Mexico City and delivers them to morgues.

² 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, 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 metonyms 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 post-partum 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. 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 Margolles' work, notably in *Plancha*, 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 fizzling report of its demise on hot metal speaks of transience and passage; however, it also recalls the whistling 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 redolent. 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",



Teresa Margolles
Plancha 2010



Teresa Margolles 32 años
*Levantamiento y traslado
donde cayó el cuerpo
asesinado del artista
Luis Miguel Suro 2006*

32 years Lifting and
removal where the
murdered body of the artist
Luis Miguel Suro fell 2006

can suggest the support of life and, when breached, indicate an all-too-familiar predicate of death.

Formally, as in a significant amount of Margolles' work, *Plancha* also occupies and makes reference to the floor of the gallery. For *Common Grave*, installed at the Centre d'art Contemporain in Brétigny in 2005, Margolles 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 autopsy — from a morgue in Culiacán, a city in the state of Sinaloa. In another work, *On Sorrow*, which was produced in 2006 for the Liverpool Biennial, the artist relaid a passageway at a popular nightlife area in the city with glass from the windows of cars in which people had been assassinated. In *32 Años*, 2006, Margolles lifted and transported the tiles from a room in which a friend of hers was murdered. The 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, festering and widespread phenomenon. In transporting a portion of the floor from the ceramic factory where Suro was murdered, Margolles 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 Margolles 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