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BODY AS CULTURE, BODY AS PROTEST, BODY AS POLITIC: AN ANALIZATION INTO THE USE OF THE BODY BY TERESA MARGOLLES

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ABSTRACT

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AN ANALIZATION INTO THE USE OF THE BODY

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Caution must be exercised before reading this research. This research will include images of slain children, women, and men and also includes blood, body fat, wash water from morgues, and many other human substances. My research will analyze the artist Teresa Margolles and how her use of the dead body is influenced by culture, protest, and politics. She uses dead bodies in her pieces in order to create a dialogue between viewer and artist. The artist wants viewers to begin a conversation about Mexico, and how the Mexican drug cartels have plagued the country with death. She uses such shocking tactics of creation because of the silence towards Mexican violence and death. Margolles tries to share the struggle of Mexicans worldwide. This research will conduct a survey of three exhibitions by Teresa Margolles as well as investigate sociological concepts of Mexican realities in order to explain Margolles' use of dead bodies.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Teresa Margolles uses the body as art to display Mexican sociological concepts, to protest against Mexican drug trafficking, and to speak about the politics surrounding Mexican life. Her inspiration comes from a place that some people would label as darkness. Yet, her work sheds light on the darkest part of human life, death. Many who first view Margolles' art go through stages of realization of her work: curiosity, shock, and lastly understanding. These three stages are common because Margolles produces work using unconventional materials, work that initially does not portray the materials used. Yet, once the materials are recognized, shock ensues. After shock, a viewer must wonder and attempt to understand Margolles' methods of creation.

In her work, Margolles uses materials that are taken from the morgue, these materials being from dead bodies. Margolles does not use materials from any type of dead body, however; only those that end up in the morgue under violent circumstances. Violence is a subject that most people want to sweep under the rug, ignore, and never truly dissect. Yet Margolles does not give viewers the ability to pick and choose their reality of violence and death; she forces them to confront it head on. Being a Mexican, Margolles has experienced life in Mexico before and after the drug cartels took control of the country. Drug trafficking has taken such a toll on Mexico, that to see a dead body in the streets would most likely be just like any other day. Margolles does not take this reality lightly, however; she in fact despises it. By using dead bodies in her art, she is able to bring a

Mexican reality to those who choose to ignore or have communities that ignore this perception of violence happening in a country that Margolles loves.

The body, in Margolles' work, becomes a medium for comment on culture, protest, and politics. Margolles' art takes inspiration from violence, Mexican culture, creation; yet she mostly produces her art to display uses of the body. Her own body creates the art, and the bodies she uses supply the material for the art. In the past Margolles has used blood, fat, wash water, skin, tongues, and whole bodies as materials in her pieces. In a way, Margolles gives a new life to a body after the person passes on. Margolles' work surpasses any attempt to put her frustration about the drug cartel into words. In fact, her work says much more than could be said in one sentence. By using the body, Margolles is sending a message that should be heard around the world; stop ignoring violence in Mexico. My research will provide an overview of three exhibitions by the artist, which will each explain the sociology, philosophy, and importance of the body in Margolles' work throughout the years.

CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHING A CULTURAL BASIS

2.1 Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO, and Mexico

Teresa Margolles is determined to find life after death. Museum, gallery, public performance. Any place that Margolles can display her art is a place where the dead lives on. Since beginning her career in 1990, Margolles decided to create protest art, subsequently during a time at the height of the Mexican drug cartels. Margolles, one of the founders of SEMEFO, has degrees in art and forensic medicine.[1] For many years the artist even housed her studio in a morgue to better situate herself with corpses. SEMEFO, an acronym for Mexico City's *Servicio Medico Forense*, started as a heavy metal band that later switched its focus to forensic art.[2] The artists named the group after the *Servicio Medico Forense,* a service that collects dead bodies around Mexico City and deposits them at morgues. Subsequently one of those morgues happened to be where Margolles worked.[3]

SEMEFO in the early 1990s, which included Margolles and other contemporary Mexican artists, was focused on an aesthetic of anti-humanism, in which all of SEMEFO's work focused on not the human, but the human's remains.[4] The focus on anti-humanism was a way for SEMEFO to exhibit art that focused on "art of the crisis." This concentration focuses on "conveying the contact with repellent or abject things in an ecstatic register,

[1] Heartney, 207.
[2] Banwell, 1-2.
[3] Ibid.,2.
[4] Medina,17.

vilifying modernity with the object expulsed by historical putrefaction."[5] Drawing from this concentration, SEMEFO was not focused on displaying their own anti-humanistic ideals; rather, the group was determined to show viewers "the way the capitalist party would entrench cyclical instability, in Mexico as in practically all southern economies,"[6] so that SEMEFO was merely preparing the Mexican public for an economy and society that was going to become darker and more eroded by violence.

What SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles were concerned with were Mexican realities of death and how they led to silence about violence. Octavio Paz stated in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that "the respect for life of which Western civilization is so proud is either incomplete or hypocritical."[7] Regarding death, Paz also describes the use of the word "death," stating:

> The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it…True, there is perhaps as much fear in this attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away; he looks at it face to face, with impatience, distain or irony. 'If they were going to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me right away.[8]

What SEMEFO and Margolles achieved is to let their concerns be heard, not through speech but through art.

2.2 The Mexican Reality of Death

When confronted with Margolles' work, boasting the images and parts of the dead, often viewers who are not Mexican are taken aback. If Margolles' work is displayed in

[5] Ibid., 17.
[6] Ibid., 17.
[7] Paz, 51.
[8] Paz, 49.

America, it would have a completely different reaction and understanding than if it was displayed in Mexico. Americans find death taboo, up to a point where sometimes the word "death" or "dead" is replaced by "passing" or "passed." Americans have chosen not to focus so much on death and the body after life leaves, but instead ignore it. For Americans, a body after it is no longer living does not deserve to be seen, as if without a soul a body is worth nothing. Some Americans choose to have closed casket burials and even have places where bodies are stored so that the families do not have to deal with the body once it is no longer living. It may seem like a right to have a place to take your dead once your loved once becomes deceased, yet in other countries, especially Mexico, this is not a right many have. Americans have a privileged view of death, which may be a reason why Margolles' work has produced so much controversy in its time.

On the other hand, Mexicans have a different view of death. Their social, political, and economic culture contributes to an obsessively unemotional view of death. In her study of the Mexican views of death, Patricia Fernandez Kelly states that "death is a permanent concern, a daily presence, especially in a country like Mexico in which problems ranging from difficulty of providing medical services to the persistence of ignorance and oppression accentuate its meaning."[9] Death is a common sight on any given day for a Mexican. Living in a place ravaged by a drug war that cannot provide accurate healthcare for its women and children provides a realization of death that is accompanied by repetition. From the hands of drug cartels over and over people are dragged from the street dead or found in execution sites after mass executions. Yet, the Mexican government provides no solace in this habit of death in Mexico and neither does any of its more

[9] Kelly, 531.

economically well-off allies. The worldwide reluctance to help Mexico in its internal conflict of death is part of the reason Margolles has used such shocking images and pieces in her art. Margolles creates a dialogue of death and from this allows a chance to talk about how much we as humans ignore Mexico.

Teresa Margolles finds inspiration for her work using exactly what Mexicans are comfortable with, death. Returning to Patricia Fernandez Kelly's writing on Mexico, Kelly recalls the customs of Mexicans regarding the dead. Kelly states, "In many parts of Mexico it is the custom to wash the dead body with water which is later used in the preparation of the meal."[10] Margolles uses water often in her work, especially the water used form the washing of dead bodies in the morgue in pieces like *En el Aire* (2003) [Figure 1, See Appendix A], *El agua en la ciudad* (2004) [Figure 2, See Appendix A] and *Aire* (2003) [Figure 3, See Appendix A]. All of these pieces recall the use of wash water as a Mexican tradition. Community reaction of these pieces provides an example of the character of Mexican ideas of death. If a Mexican with deep-rooted traditions walked into a Margolles exhibition they would possibly not be as shocked or appalled. However most of the viewers at Margolles' shows are those that are not as experienced in the traditions of Mexican culture. Therefore, we can assume that Margolles is using her art as a teaching experience to allow a chance for conversation about Mexican realities.

Another example of Margolles using Mexican perceptions of death in her work has to do with a piece that will be later discussed in this research entitled *Entierro* (1999)[11] [Figure 4, See Appendix A]. *Entierro* is made of an encased fetus inside of a cement block

[10] Ibid. 531
[11] Görner, 43.

which is displayed in an empty room and allowed to be gazed upon by viewers. Those with European traditions might have been shocked by this inclusion of death in a gallery space, yet Margolles and many Mexicans view a child's death in a positive view. Patricia Fernandez Kelly states that "in the case of the dead being a young child, there are variations which deserve mention. The burial of a child is rarely accompanied by expressions of pain or sadness. On the contrary, there must be joy and happiness in the view of the fact that the child, not having sinned, will immediately join God."[12] Margolles uses this fetus to capture the reaction of those who encounter the piece and forces an inward reflection. Mexicans would most likely rejoice that this fetus did not have trouble leading itself into the afterlife, while other viewers might have had a more melancholic approach to the work.

Margolles' art was made to carry the voice of Mexico, yet its purpose was not to be only understood by Mexicans. Margolles' work is intended to be understood by anyone willing to learn. By using art that shocks, educates, and transcends borders; Margolles has created a form of art that will never leave people's minds. It is important to understand the cultural implications of Margolles' art because most of its meaning relies on the fact that the deceased are seen on a daily basis by the likes of the artist and Mexicans. Margolles' work makes a statement, and that statement is entirely for the wellbeing of Mexico. Margolles want to erase the silence that follows violence by using bodies to tell her story.

2.3 How Margolles Obtains Bodies and the Reasons for Their Use

Margolles has had many critics and many fans of her art, yet all viewers have the same question: Where does Teresa Margolles get these cadavers? Although most of the bodies Margolles uses in her art are anonymous, a question of how her large supply of

[12] Kelly, 532.

bodies is obtained arises.[13] As stated before, Margolles used to work in Mexico City morgues and proceeded to have her art studio inside of one.[14] Margolles is supplied with bodies because of two facets of life as a Mexican. First, these bodies are taken to the morgue often unnamed, unclaimed, and unidentifiable because of the violence inflicted upon them.[15] Second, Mexican visual culture has a long history of using body parts for spiritual art and religious practices, which is not culturally seen as illegal because Mexican tradition and society is shaped by these past influenced practices.[16] The use of body parts or dead bodies relates directly to the Mexican perception of death which is familiar and accepting of visual death and dying.

Extending the deep rooted Mexican familiarity with death in Margolles' art lies in the rampage of the drug war that is currently plaguing Mexico. *Tarjetas para picar cocaina* (*Cards to cut cocaine with*, 2009) [Figure 5 & 6, See Appendix A], a work that will later be more extensively reviewed and explained, directly aims to ironically protest drug cartels in Mexico. *Tarjetas* is a piece comprised of several cards that show a picture of a child badly beaten and burned at the hands of a drug cartel, yet this same card asks for a person to cut cocaine.[17] With this card, *Tarjetas* asks those who consume cocaine to cut their drugs with the image of a child killed for the same substance. *Tarjetas* makes the addict an accomplice in the death of this child and also gives the important explanation for the need of vulgar visuals that Margolles shares. In "Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death," Julia Banwell describes the importance of *Tarjetas* as being "a meditation on the way in

[13] Banwell, 14.
[14] Heartney, 207.
[15] Banwell, 81.
[16] Ibid, 81.
[17] Ibid, 78-79.

which violence associated with the narcotics trade has "'altered our [Mexicans'] relationship with the corpse and death.'"[18] Mexicans' view of the corpse and death are altered because of the violence that disrupts the streets daily and because of the drug cartel and the government that sometimes seems to work alongside it. Margolles' use of the body seems to ask the question: *Why do you all get to ignore that my people are killed every day? Do you not see this death? Do you not see this body?*

Although many of Margolles' works do not offer explanation as to how she obtains the bodies she uses, the explanations she does provide are always legal. In the case of the work *Lengua* (2000) [Figure 7], Margolles provides a direct account of how she obtains a heroin addict's tongue:

> Hable con la madre y quise pedir que me diera el pene, pero cuando iba a pronunciar la palabra pene me salió lengua. La madre, por supuesto, reacciono indignada, algo completamente normal, mi trabajo fue convencerla para que el cuerpo de su hijo hable sobre las miles de muertes anónimas que la gente no quiere tener en cuenta. Finalmente me la dio y la llevamos a Bellas Artes que es, además, el lugar de los velorios de personajes célebres en México.[19]

Lengua prompts ethical, emotional, and sanitary concerns on behalf of the viewer. Beginning with ethical concerns, many begin to question Margolles' tactics of obtaining the tongue. By offering money in exchange for a tongue to a family that cannot afford to bury their son, Margolles makes many people feel as if she is using the opportunity of poverty for her own gain. Yet, in this same instance Margolles is providing money to a

[18] Ibid., 82.
[19] Banwell, 47. "I talked to the mother and wanted to ask her to give me the penis, but when I was going to pronounce the word penis, I got a tongue. The mother, of course, reacted indignantly, something completely normal, my job was to convince her to have her son's body talk about the thousands of anonymous deaths that people do not want to take into account. She finally gave it to me and we took it to Bellas Artes, which is also the place of celebrated people's celebrations in Mexico."

family in need as well as using the tongue to comment on the deceased's own addiction. Emotionally, seeing a human tongue spread out on a pedestal is something that would make many uncomfortable. Yet, this tongue provides the loud message that Margolles is working towards: stop the silence of violence.

It is important to remember that these bodies are not given a name.[20] Margolles is not exploiting the identity of these people who passed; she is in fact sharing their suffering. By sharing these bodies and the visible scars that lead to their end, Margolles provides an important message regarding the body, mortality, vocalization, and many other aspects of daily life. In a way, Margolles allows these bodies to take on their own life. Margolles is allowing her cadavers to speak.

[20] Banwell, 14.

CHAPTER 3

EXHIBITIONS

3.1 *Muerte Sin Fin*

Taking its name from a poem by Jose Gorostiza, Teresa Margolles used an exhibition title meaning "death without end." *Muerte Sin Fin* relates to continuing the life of a deceased body past its expiration date. From this work comes the message of death, violence, and greed. Margolles uses her cadavers to tell a story which "marks the transition from one biography to another, or the continuation of a biography after a barely perceptible break."[21] Although Margolles' art can be considered biography, it is more focused on the act of death and less on the body's identity. In *Muerte Sin Fin,* Margolles uses body parts and fluids to portray a story of violence, also creating protest art in its wake.

Muerte Sin Fin was most widely seen in 2004 at the Museum Fur Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main. *Muerte Sin Fin* is a collection of work that gave Margolles her popularity not just in Mexico or the Modern art community, but the world. Upon entering a separate show that incorporated work from her *Muerte Sin Fin* collection, viewers had to sign a health waiver. This show, previously seen in New York in 2002 as part of P.S. 1's *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, gave out health waivers that stated "P.S. 1 renounces all responsibility for any physical, mental, or emotional damages caused to the undersigned once he/she enter the installation."[22] The

[21] Görner, 41.
[22]Carroll, 103.

substances involved in *Muerte Sin Fin* did not include traditional materials for producing art. Margolles used wash water, blood, fat, and the actual bodies of dead people in *Muerte Sin Fin*. Margolles' bodies came from victims of "violence or drug abuse, traffic casualties, unidentified corpses…most of them are the bodies of young people, among them children."[23] Margolles does not stop where death begins; in fact, she begins where death starts.

In her most controversial work at the exhibition, titled *En el Aire* (*In the Air,* 2003, See Appendix A), viewers were most likely be in concern for their own health.[24] Yet, the danger lies in hundreds, even thousands, of bubbles. For this piece Margolles placed a bubble machine in a stark white room, allowing it to run all day producing bubble after bubble. In the eyes of children, this piece would be a dream-like and interactive playtime. Yet, if you were to walk into these bubbles you would be covered in the cells of the dead. This work is the reason behind a health waiver being issued at a few exhibitions because the bubbles were formed from the wash water of dead people. These little bubbles carry the life and organic matter of what a living person used to inhabit from day to day life. Yet, Margolles was allowing these bubbles to pop on people's skin, in their eyes, maybe even near their mouths. Viewers became participants in crime and death by being exposed to these dead cells. Margolles did in fact disinfect the water before allowing it to be used in a gallery setting. Yet even today the disinfection remains irrelevant to viewers because of the material these bubbles were used with.[25] These bubbles would continue to uncontrollably pop on your skin, body, face, as you learned that these bubbles were made

[23] Görner , 41.
[24]Ibid., 42.
[25] Ibid., 42.

from the dead. Yet this shock factor, this uncomfortable state, is what Margolles strived toward.

The bubbles create an interesting juxtaposition between childhood and the end-of-times. While fun and playful, these bubbles carry the dead. *En el Aire* encapsulates two modes of subjective viewer participation and causes discomfort regarding the abject. Elizabeth Grosz defines abjection as "the underside of a stable subjective identity which forms a threat to the clearly defined boundaries that must exist between the clean (acceptable) and the unclean (unacceptable): "'proper' subjectivity and sociality require the expulsion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly."[26] Since *En el Aire* does not provide a solid level of distinction between clean and unclean, viewer participation is at a crossroads. Viewers could either choose to be disgusted, while subconsciously intrigued by the bubbles, or completely break societal boundaries and enjoy the bubbles even though they are filled with dead cells. In *En el Aire*, Margolles creates a situation that mimics the public discourse of Mexico, which is a fun place to vacation for the rich but a deadly place to live for the poor.

A second work from the exhibition at the MMK Frankfurt incorporates watercolor paper dipped in the blood and fat of deceased bodies. This work, entitled *Papeles* (2003)[27] [Figure 8, See Appendix A], involves single paper sheets dipped into different bodies' organic matter. Since each watercolor paper is dipped separately for each body, it creates a piece for each body to display on their own, almost as a grotesque self-portrait. Some pieces were completely stained with the blood of the victims, while others mirrored the

[26] Banwell, 45.
[27] Görner, 42.

yellowish red tint of fat-stained blood. For this work, body acts as pigment. The body, although not physically incorporated in the exhibition, was responsible for producing the art. The body, its material, and its being, was the producer for the deep red, light magenta, and yellow tinted pieces. The body still has use and meaning, even after it has been pronounced dead. With Margolles, the body continues on in its own sense, not as a person who died, but a body which remained.

The next work gets as close to encountering a dead body in a gallery show as it could possibly get. In the work *Catafalco* (Catafalque, 1997) [Figure 9 & 10, See Appendix A], Margolles displays the plastered impressions of two post-autopsy corpses.[28] The impressions are displayed vertically as if they are standing in the room waiting for the viewer, a modern exhibition of mummies. These impressions leave no detail to the imagination, fully displaying two faces, torsos, arms, legs, pubic area, and feet. A controversial aspect of these pieces is seen when encountering the plaster up close. Pieces of hair, skin, and any substance that would have been pulled off the body in the process of creation remains.[29] Margolles did not wash the plaster after removing the impression, almost creating a second skin. Using these impressions of the body, Margolles allows viewers to see every wrinkle, every scar, and especially the staples and stitches from being subjected to an autopsy. The body is used as a stamp. Margolles brings to the exhibition an impression of what the bodies actually are, or were. These sculptures are true references to the visuals of what someone like Margolles would see daily in the morgue: bodies that

[28] Ibid., 43.
[29] Ibid., 43.

were brutally slain from violence, the drug war, and drug abuse. Margolles displays sculptures of the body after death and allows a glimpse into what we look like after we die.

The last work is the only piece in the *Muerte Sin Fin* exhibition that physically includes a body. Entitled *Entierro* (Burial, 1999)[30], this piece incorporates the stillborn corpse of a child encased in a block of cement. The exhibition catalog for *Muerte Sin Fin* states that "stillbirths are not treated as corpses, but as medical waste. What is more, the child's mother could not afford the costs of a regular burial. Teresa Margolles gave the child a solid but transportable grave."[31] The corpse is not present visually; it is present physically. Although the body is not seen, once the viewer is aware of the materials of the cement block, the body is felt. Two forces are at play when examining this work. The first would be the treatment of stillbirths in the healthcare system, when pronounced a stillbirth they can be regarded as medical waste and exposed of as such. The second force is the presence of a body that never technically lived outside of the womb, and in some opinion this means the fetus never lived. Margolles uses the body to create internal conflict on behalf of the viewer. It is uncomfortable to think of a fetus trapped inside a cement block, but it is also uncomfortable to think about how healthcare treats stillborn fetuses. In another aspect, it also provides a glimpse into what a poor and unfruitful life sometimes results in, a mother who is forced to use unconventional methods to bury their children because they could not afford a proper burial on their own. What could be considered one of the more visually dull pieces Margolles has produced also becomes one of the most controversial. Yet, with this controversy comes Margolles main goal: to give a sense of representation

[30] Ibid., 43.
[31] Ibid., 43.

and attention to the many that are dying in Mexico yet their cries for help are being stamped out by silence.

Margolles wants to discontinue the habit of silence regarding violence in Mexico, where people silently disappear. By entitling her exhibition *Muerte Sin Fin*, Margolles allows death to come back to life. By awakening these dead bodies and these dead stories, Margolles is telling a story that has been shouted from the beginning of Mexican struggles yet this time; Margolles is making sure everyone listens.

3.2 *What Else Could We Talk About?*

Margolles' exhibition at the 53rd Venice biennial was an important step in the artist's career. Margolles continued her practice of culture-filled, protest-oriented, and politically driven art in this exhibition tenfold. In fact, Margolles took even more risks in her art by visiting Mexico City execution sites to soak up freshly spilled blood. Although Margolles used untraditional tactics to display her message, they surely have not been forgotten.

Cuauhtemoc Medina's essay entitled "Materialist Spectrality," from the exhibition catalog of *What Else Could We Talk About?* starts by proclaiming that "according to the Mexican press, more bullets were fired in 2008 than any other year of the country's recent history."[32] Ironically, and likely intentionally, the catalog's text is printed in blood red type. The writing continues to explain that in 2008 Mexican drug trafficking cost more than 5,000 people their lives, 2007 being a year that around 2800 people died from the same circumstances.[33] Medina equates the deaths of the victims of drug trafficking to the many

[32] Medina, 15.
[33] Ibid., 15.

foreign war zones that were occurring at the same time. Medina describes Margolles' work as "adventure on the outer limits" that "combines the heterogeneity of a point of view with individual, subcultural, negativity, and undertook the risk…that involving contact with, learning about and working on deceased matter"[34] or to better explain; pieces of art using the dead body.

Returning to the concept of Margolles using the dead body, the collective SEMEFO, which Margolles assisted in founding, established itself on the concept of "the art of the crisis" and the "life of the corpse."[35] Margolles' work is not focusing on the life before the body; she is focusing on the life of the body itself. Body as a body, not body as a body with soul. When it comes to Margolles' work in *What Else Can We Talk About?* viewers actually rarely saw an actual body at the biennial. In fact the exhibition focuses its message on what the body leaves behind, not what the body represents. The only piece of art that Margolles produced for this exhibition that included the image of a dead body were invitation cards passed out on the opening day of the Venice Biennial entitled *Cards to Cut Up Cocaine* or *Tarjetas para picar cocaina*.[36]

What Else Can We Talk About? focuses on blood, crime scene fluid, wash water, broken glass, and mud from places people were executed by the Mexican drug cartels. What makes the exhibition into one cohesive piece is the performance entitled *Cleaning* (2009) [Figure 11, See Appendix A]. This performance piece incorporates a mixture of water and "blood from murdered people in Mexico,"[37] which was then used to clean the

[34] Ibid., 16.
[35] Ibid., 17.
[36] Ibid., 68.
[37] Ibid., 39.

floors of the Mexican Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale. Attendants in black shirts, jeans, and worker boots dipped mops into the blood and water mixture and proceeded to mop the floor with the substance. No matter where the viewer walked in the Mexican Pavilion, they were stepping on the blood of slain Mexicans. No floor surface provided an escape from the trampling of the blood of a murdered victim, which was Margolles' goal. This performance piece not only involves the performance of the attendants on behalf of Margolles but also incorporates the inclusion of the viewer as an interactive piece within the work.

Another interpretation of the piece is noticing how the red color of the blood is not seen when diluted with water. This is because it is mixed with water and also spread out on the pavilion floor, but the resulting invisibility serves as a commentary on the history of spaces. If no one were told about the blood washed floors, no one would notice. The exact opposite takes place at crime scenes in Mexico, where bodies are being left and still not spoken about. A scene where an actual living person lost their life, the ground is stained with their blood. This scene of death still does not seem to create enough dialogue in Mexico.

In the exhibition juxtaposed against the blood-polished shiny floor hung blood-stained fabric that acted as both a physical piece and a performative piece. These large pieces of fabric were "impregnated with blood gathered from the places where murders took place" and were hung around the Mexican Pavilion, almost as if they were flags pronouncing their independence through death.[38] These flags collected blood from execution sites from the northern border of Mexico, execution sites that contributed to the

[38] Ibid., 48.

5,000-plus deaths of Mexicans during 2008.[39] These flags do not portray freedom or country, but segregated strife and violence. This is not art that is meant to be beautiful; this is art that is meant to contain your mind in the violence and aftermath of the Mexican drug war. During the extent of the biennial, there were public activities throughout the city of Venice using the blood-soaked cloths. In the performance entitled *Narcomessages* (2009) [Figure 12, See Appendix A], words using golden thread were embroidered into these cloths publicly; using phrases taken from "the messages that the organized crime uses in its executions,"[40] the cloths stated:

> SEE, HEAR AND SILENCE/UNTIL ALL YOUR CHILDREN FALL/THUS FINISH THE RATS/SO THAT THEY LEARN TO RESPECT[41]

When introduced into any type of exhibition, it is often the name of the collection that is conceptualized last. The name, although the first thing that is most likely seen, is the last impact the artist can make to the viewer. *What Else Can We Talk About?* asks a very important question, a question that focuses on the tyranny of Mexico and the violence of Mexican drug cartels, but also a question of hope for a better Mexico. Margolles is not creating art with intentions of pushing Mexican society further into a stereotypical hole of distraught and hurt. Margolles cares for her Mexican homeland, as many do, and her question asks the viewer: *Why aren't we talking about this? Why isn't Mexico and the preserving of the people the first thing people are speaking about? How could you speak of anything else when flags, floors, walls, and artifacts are stained with the blood and body*

[39]Ibid., 15.
[40]Ibid., 48.
[41] Ibid., 48.

of Mexican people? What else can we talk about? For Margolles, there is nothing else worth talking about.

3.3 *We Have a Common Thread*

Margolles' 2015 exhibition *We Have a Common Thread* involves the use of the bodies of those who are alive. *We Have a Common Thread* also uses more than country to vocalize and pictorialize violence towards women in areas such as Panama, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.[42] Margolles chose groups of embroiderers from each selected area to "create patterns on the fabric as a way to trigger a conversation about violence and social problems plaguing their respective communities."[43] The embroidering groups used "fabric that had been marked through contact with the body of a woman, or in some cases a man, who had suffered a violent death," staying true to Margolles undergoing habit of producing art under the indication of death.[44]

The use of the body in this work is still very important to the message of Margolles' production. The body is recalling stories of those who are dead by using the fabric that was in close proximity to the person who died. Yet, these bodies are at work to help the dead come back to life and to continue their story in a way that recreates their spirit into fabric. Margolles still wants to show violence, and death, and decay, but in a different mode. In a way Margolles is producing art that everyone may understand easier. Everyone can take extra time to stare at an embroidered piece, versus the pieces Margolles produced early in her career that were often hard to look at. Sadness remains soaked in Margolles' recent work, yet this sadness encapsulates an easier explanation.

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[42] Neuberger, n.p.
[43] Colby, n.p.
[44] Ibid., n.p.

In this fairly recent work, Margolles is focused less on Mexico and more on the collective occurrence of violence in the world. Margolles produced one of her works in honor of the slaying of Eric Garner, who died after being placed under arrest and suffocated from a chokehold by a New York police officer.[45] With this work, entitled *American Juju for the Tapestry of Truth* (2015) [Figure 13, See Appendix A], Margolles visited the place of Garner's death. At the site, she then took a large cloth and dragged it across where Garner died, "staining it using a technique she developed to absorb micro-substances."[46] With this piece, Margolles is not only grabbing particles of Garner but also capturing the particles of all who were involved in the incident and everyone who walks over that exact spot in the city from day to day. Margolles then took the cloth to the embroiderers at the Harlem Needle Arts and with instruction from Margolles created a piece that commented on Margolles' concerns regarding violence against the African-American community. Margolles stated "the textile is a microphone. It triggers conversation because of its power of having been in contact with the dead body. It shows the violence against black man. That's what we want to talk about…injustice."[47]

Yet, America was not the only area included. Margolles also included embroidered textiles from Panama, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Brazil, and of course Mexico. The Guatemalan piece recalls the strife and struggles of Mayan women from the shores of Lake Atitlan, while the work created in Brazil recalls a slain woman from Recife which shared "the fact that someone can die in total anonymity--as if she or he had never existed--due to

[45] Mandelker, n.p.
[46] Ibid., n.p.
[47] Ibid., n.p.

the inflexibility of a government bureaucracy that refuses to help its citizens."[48] Margolles continues to archive violence in her work today, which still involves the body, death, culture, protest, and politics. Yet, Margolles has branched out from Mexico and embraced society as a whole because violence and government corruption see no color. With *We Have a Common Thread*, Margolles is continuing her legacy of advocacy for the underprivileged deceased.

3.4 Public Reception and Critique

Teresa Margolles' use of the deceased has led to many viewers and critiques which label her art as shocking and unethical. In her book *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death*, Julia Banwell focuses parts of her research on the spectator. Banwell shares a very important perspective on Margolles' art and contemporary art as a whole. Banwell states that "it is dangerously reductive to ascribe a binary opposition between engagement and rejection on the part of spectators, and also to assume that art can only be valid if it causes pleasurable emotional reactions and physical sensations."[49] It is important to remember that Margolles is not trying to display her work for pleasure or any sort of beauty. In fact, Margolles wants to confront the viewer with exactly what they choose to ignore and void out with silence. With Margolles' work, she is yelling her aesthetic and mission at each set of eyes that gaze on her pieces. In Margolles' eyes, her art is culture, protest, and politic, not beauty.

Another aspect of Margolles' art is the use of upfront participation on behalf of the viewer. Banwell introduces the concept of aesthetic distance in her research, which

[48] Neuberger, n.p.
[49]Banwell, 46.

constitutes the realization that most art is seen from a distance both physically and psychologically. Take a painting, for instance. The scene might be something that the viewer does not understand or has not seen in the past, so in this instance they can be psychologically disconnected from the piece while still being physically disconnected because of museum policy. Margolles' work differs from a painting, however, because it is made of our familiar flesh and blood. When looking at a piece made of fat, blood, and wash water, it is harder to disassociate from that piece than it is a regular painting because it is part human. Banwell states that "Margolles' artworks are focused and the raw materials from which they are produced, challenge spectators to engage actively…forcing the contemplation of uncomfortable realities."[50] These uncomfortable realities being those of dying children, women, and men at the hands of a drug war that in part is continued by their own country but also retained because of the silence of other countries, because of this everyone is involved. Banwell continues: "Passive contemplation is rendered difficult, even impossible, by the intensity of the experience; reactions, in those who have them, have the potential to be strong and emotionally involving, and that is the point."[51] To continue the thoughts of Banwell, that entirely is the point, to make those silent about violent and innocent deaths uncomfortable. Margolles in her line of exhibitions asks the spectator many questions, regarding death, life, violence, government, and drugs. These questions get answered with the most final answer of all: these people's life ended indefinitely and they died under unfair circumstances. Unhappy, uncomfortable, and

[50]Banwell, 47.
[51]Banwell, 47.

unsatisfied viewers are often what Margolles wants because it leads to more informed citizens.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

4.1 Body as Culture, Body as Protest, Body as Politic

Teresa Margolles respects the importance of culture, which leads to her immense involvement in protest and politics. In a way, all the cadavers Margolles used in her pieces died for their country, just without a choice. Culture is an important aspect when considering Margolles' work, and it is important because it causes viewers from around the world to confront their feelings about death and violence head-on. Death translates differently for everyone, and Margolles tries to display her art in a language that everyone can understand. By displaying bodies that died from violent ends, Margolles allows a chance for these dead people to speak for themselves.

In all three of the exhibitions covered in this thesis, we have been able to see Margolles at her finest and at her most real. The one thing Margolles provides that many artists like to avoid is the factor of reality. Margolles is not using these bodies and materials in a way that exaggerates the death of these individuals. In fact, Margolles uses these bodies as she gets them and strives to show things she used to encounter from day to day while she was employed by a morgue. The drug cartel continued to keep Margolles and her fellow SEMEFO workers busy since they were on a non-stop rampage of killing. The cartel has yet to cease, however, and Margolles is still working towards educating the world of the strife of Mexico and the dangers of silence. Mexico is the overarching inspiration; it's for love of country that Margolles creates her art. For Margolles, Mexico is the largest entity

in her work. Margolles shows dead citizens of Mexico in hopes of not having to watch Mexico die as a whole. With her constant use of work that focuses on culture, protest, and politics, Margolles used the body to get her message across as loudly as she possibly could.

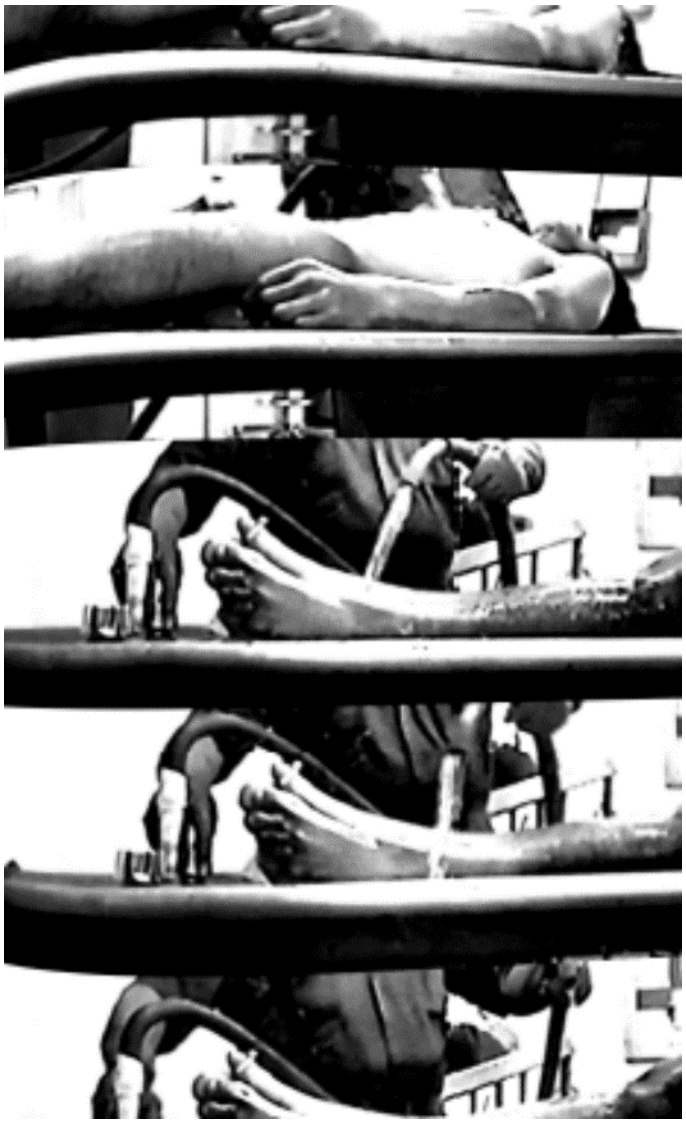
APPENDIX A

FIGURES

Figure 1

En el Aire, 2003. Bubbles made with water of the morgue that was used to wash corpses before the autopsy. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

Figure 2



El agua en la ciudad, 2004, video loop, 80 seconds. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

Figure 3

Aire, 2003, Humidified water, obtained from the morgue, that was used to wash the corpses before autopsy. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

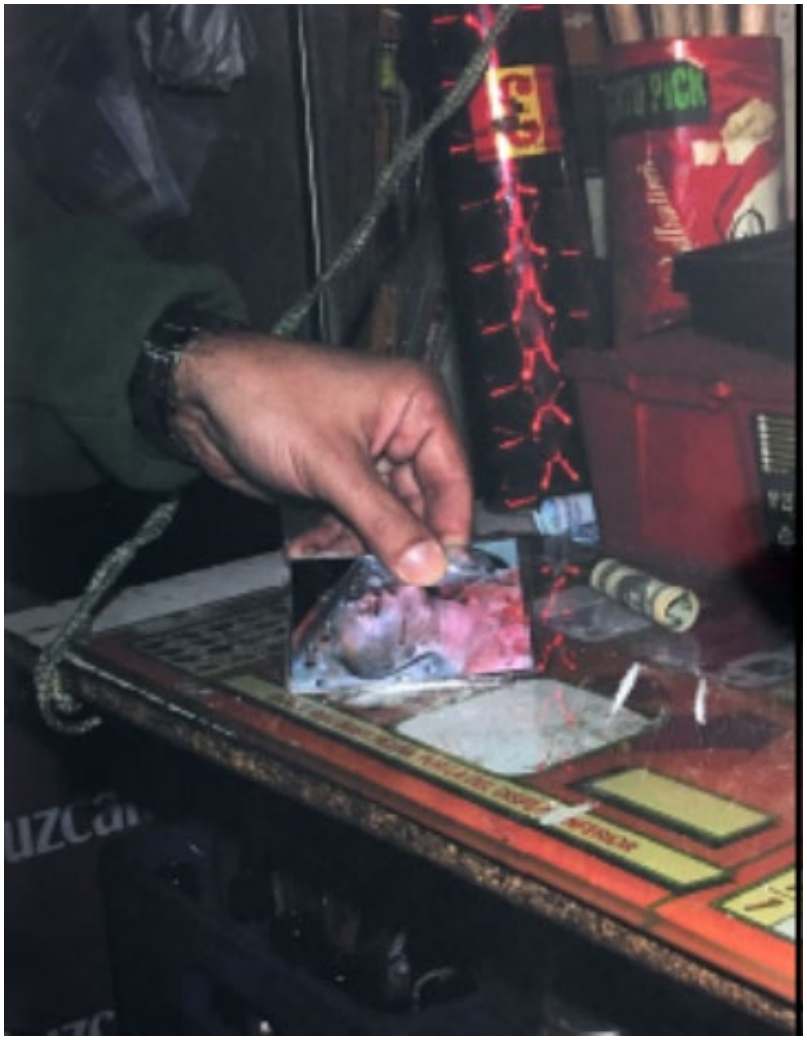
Figure 4

Entierro, 1999, Fetus in a block of cement. Work realized with the artists' group SEMEFO. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

Figure 5

Tarjeta para picar cocaina, 2009. Multiple of ten thousand copies to be distributed during the opening days of the Venice Biennial. Image and text provided by the Insituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Figure 6



Tarjeta para picar cocaina, 2009. Multiple of ten thousand copies to be distributed during the opening days of the Venice Biennial. Image and text provided by the Insituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Figure 7

Lengua, 2000. Severed tongue from a deceased heroin addict. Image on behalf of Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico DF.

Figure 8

Papeles, 2003, Fabriano soaked with water that was used to wash the corpses after autopsy. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

Figure 9

Catafalque, 1997, Adhesion of organic materials on gypsum. Work realized with the artists' group SEMEFO. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

Figure 10

Catafalque, 1997, Adhesion of organic materials on gypsum. Work realized with the artists' group SEMEFO. Image and text on behalf of MMK Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

Figure 11

Cleaning, 2009. Cleaning of the exhibition floors with a mixture of water and blood from murdered people in Mexico. The action will take place at least once a day during the extent of the Venice Biennial. Image and text provided by the Insituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Figure 12

Narcomessages, 2009. Fabric Impregnated with blood gathered from the places where murders took place embroidered with gold threads. The fabrics will be progressively embroidered during the Venice Biennial. Image and text provided by the Insituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Figure 13

American Juju for the Tapestry of Truth, 2015. Mixed media on a textile impregnated on the spot in Staten Island where Eric Garner died while being placed under arrest. Created by artists from the Harlem Needle Arts cultural arts institute: Sahara Briscoe, Laura R. Gadson, and Jerry Gant, under the direction of Michelle Bishop. Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann (Photo: Jim Frank)

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Wesley James Salazar is a future advocate for art concerning transactional, trade, and contract law on art products. Wesley plans to attend law school to further his career as an art advocate in hopes of becoming an arbitrator and litigator for intellectual property.