Oriana Baddeley

***Last Rites: From Frida Kahlo to Teresa Margolles, Mexicanness and Visualizing the Politics of Victimhood***

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-19 produced a generation of artists fascinated with the particularities of their own changing world. In the art of the period shared narratives emerged which focused audiences on the injustices of the colonial past and the marginalization felt in what was perceived to be a Eurocentric present. The visual manifestations of that revolutionary present became the stage on which artists could act out the cultural politics of a nation in conflict. Within this context, definitions of national culture ranged from simplistic stereotypes to complicated attempts at reconciling the political tensions of a racially divided post-colonial society.

Depending on the particularities and contingency of an artist’s work, different constituencies were cast as oppressed or oppressor and successive, often gendered, narratives were developed to explain the historical traumas of Mexican history. Within this accepted language of representation the image of the victim took on a particularly important role in articulating a new secular narrative of martyrdom. The tradition of church murals that had served as a precedent for the new ‘peoples art’ had to be stripped of its literal relationship to Christian teaching but the tropes of sacrifice and punishment surfaced again and again within the mythologizing of the key themes of the revolution. Even in the arena of documentation the tendency to evoke the traditions of religious iconography remained evident. In phenomena such as the postmortem photographs of the fallen and executed of the Cristero Rebellion/War (1926-29) victims are shown flanked by family members and collaged images of the killed with religious slogans for public consumption[[1]](#endnote-2). However, there was no clear consensus in terms of interpretation of the iconic images of the Mexican past, and the biographies of artists from this period are often dominated by the partisan arguments over the balance of political meaning and aesthetic credibility. However, from whichever perspective they emerged, the visual manifestations of these processes of definition frequently drew on a shared heritage of symbolic representations and commonly accepted visual embodiments of stereotypes of the country’s complex identity politics.

Prominent amongst these shared narratives of identity are the cluster of symbolic references to martyrdom and victimhood that occur so regularly in the work of the early twentieth century artists who now dominate public understanding of revolutionary art, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Their work supplies a pictorial narrative that serves to easily encapsulate a category of ‘Mexicanness’ for external audiences that smoothes over the particular and offers an easily digested shortcut to understanding a relation between the work of ‘art’, in terms of an accepted art history, and its geo-political context. It is widely accepted that a work such as Rivera’s *Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth* (fig. 1)*,* from his cycle of murals at the Chapingo Agricultural College[[2]](#endnote-3) can be used to discuss both the relationship of Rivera to the agrarian politics of Mexico and to the aesthetic legacy of the Italian renaissance. The entire mural cycle is often referred to as Rivera’s ‘hymn to the earth’ and it deliberately transposes the traditions of religious mural painting to his portrait of the land of Mexico symbolically transformed by agrarian revolution. The bodies of Emiliano Zapata and Otilio Montano lie toe-to-toe fertilising the soil of Mexico, literally becoming the land for which they fought. From them grows maize, the life force of indigenous Mexico and the stuff from which man was formed in pre-Hispanic legend. The symbolism is clear, from the blood of the fight for *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Freedom), the land of Mexico will be free not just from the rich landowners but from the inherited yoke of colonial oppression. The panel contains a typically Riveraesque ambiguity by burying Zapata and Montano together despite the latter’s execution by the followers of the former[[3]](#endnote-4). The ‘Fertilized Earth’ becomes a homogenising factor smoothing over the internecine conflicts of actual events. The representative language evokes the images of martyred saints and links the historically specific with the allegorically eternal. Mexico and its martyrs become fused into the natural order of things, the earth and man united.

On the other hand, Kahlo’s metaphorical representation (Fig 2) of a non-subservient Mexico incorporates a greater level of ambivalence. Her literal adoption of Indian clothing, that of the often fictionalised matriarchal society of Tehuantepec in the south of Mexico,[[4]](#endnote-5) has in many ways become the accepted signifier of an authentic Mexico. In the post-revolutionary period the phenomenon of the *Tehuana* became an accepted signifier of a strong unbowed Mexico an oppositional image to the figure of the mistreated Malinche, Hernán Cortes’ discarded Indian mistress. A work such as *‘Self-Portrait as a Tehuana’* also known as ‘*Diego on my Mind’* (1943) has appeared in a multitude of formats, from jewellery, bags and t-shirts to exhibition posters[[5]](#endnote-6) a marketing not just of an artist’s work but of the culture she has come to represent. Over the last few decades images such as these of Kahlo, like a post-revolutionary re-incarnation of that other iconic gendering of identity, the Virgin of Guadalupe, have become representative of Mexico itself. Injured and in pain, struggling yet defiant, a victim given apotheosis via her adoption of the clothing of the unconquerable.

Kahlo herself frequently used her body and experiences metaphorically to debate wider issues that were central to Mexican cultural politics. This is perhaps most famously represented in *The Two Fridas* (Fig 3) originally painted in 1939, and exhibited at the International Exhibition of Surrealism held in Mexico City in 1940.[[6]](#endnote-7) Both Fridas sit staring out at the audience with that mix of pride and despair usually contained within the expressive language of her self-portraits. On the viewer’s left is the colonial Frida, her demure white lace dress decorated with spots of blood dripping from the vein held closed by the surgical scissors in her right hand. Her left hand is clasped over the hand of her other self, the Tehuana-clothed Mexican Frida. Made for a public audience and dealing more directly than usual with the interaction of Kahlo’s private pains and a political ideology, it has none of the intimacy of her smaller works.It is often used to refer to the pain experienced by the artist during her separation from Rivera, as the arrival of the divorce papers and the completion of the work coincided.[[7]](#endnote-8) In the painting we are shown two almost life-size seated figures. In constructing this very public work, Kahlo chose to refer to powerful mythologies of Mexican identity. Within the iconography of both her own art and that of post-revolutionary Mexican art in general, the cluster of meanings symbolised by the Tehuana woman represents not just a Mexico refusing to bow to colonisation but the new positive future of a postcolonial state. In the use of the analogy between the self and the nation, Kahlo frequently characterises her own physical and emotional problems as symptomatic of the post-colonial condition. Mexico and her own body become merged, just as ideology and history are woven into the clothing within her paintings. In this sense the European-style wedding gown and the Tehuana dress of *The Two Fridas* reflect ideological positions as much as the historical realities of Mexico’s past. The twin Fridas are the embodiment of the conflict implicit in a *mestizo* culture, never truly European but never truly Indian. It is the Tehuana Frida that Diego purportedly loved, the colonial Frida his rejected wife so the balance of meaning has frequently shifted through too literal a link to the subjective. Even within her own personal projection, however, the artist is not one or other of these two identities but both, making the point that there is maybe no more one true Frida than there is one true Mexico. Victim and oppressor caught in a perpetual symbiosis.

This recognition of complicity and blurred cultural boundaries in Kahlo’s work is at odds with the more idealized rhetoric of Rivera’s and reveals an identity politics closer in spirit to that later generation of the 20th century who were to propel Kahlo to her status as the icon of multi-culturalism. The representative body in Kahlo’s work is never un-equivocal, it is frequently both victim and compliant in its own victimhood. History does not determine as it does with the purer Marxist vision of her husband, within Kahlo’s iconographic vocabulary there is always an element of choice. The individual can take up or reject the role of the oppressed.

While a visual rhetoric of colonized victimhood carries its own constraints in a society attempting to see itself anew, it is also evident that for contemporary artists working within 21st Century Mexico, the insatiable external appetite for debates as to the nature of post-colonial culture are often treated with suspicion. For much of the later twentieth century the aesthetics and politics that characterized the early twentieth century art movements in Mexico were some distance from the concerns of a contemporary art world. In fact in the art practice of later twentieth century Mexico there emerged an antagonism to the strong narratives and overt didacticism of the Mural Movement, with its often apologist rhetoric of nationalism and its complex relationship to the politics of the 1910 revolution. The political co-option and institutionalization of established early twentieth century artists such as Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and as the century progressed, Kahlo, was not an attractive model for younger artists from the 1950s on. With a greater scepticism as to their relationship to the state and a burning desire to escape the confines of a national school of art, this new generation rebelled against the tropes and passions of their post-revolutionary counterparts.

The perceived collusion of the artists of the revolutionary period with the state’s illusory rhetoric of transformation and the ease of absorption of their work into the visual manifestation of nationhood also soured the vision of the artist as possible conduit of national hopes and aspirations, a role that had been so central to the work of the mural movement.

By the end of the twentieth century, a greater disaffection characterised the work of many of the key figures of the Mexican art world, with the knowing irony of Julio Galan or the bitter cynicism of Alejandro Colunga emerging as characteristic of a ‘new’ Mexican art[[8]](#endnote-9). The saleroom success of artists such as Kahlo and Rivera became for the later generation a restrictive model of the ‘authentically’ Mexican, which had begun to form a determining criteria of cultural specificity required by the international dealers and critics.[[9]](#endnote-10)[[10]](#endnote-11) The enormous popularity and commercialisation of Kahlo and Rivera’s work, with its frequent glorification of a mythic, strong, Indian Mexico juxtaposed to the world of the eternally victimized and guilt ridden colonized subject, was seen as irrelevant to the realities of contemporary urban existence, even one underpinned by violence and complex social inequalities. Iconic images such as Rivera’s constantly returned to Zapatista peasant or Kahlo’s repeated references to the unbowed *Tehuana* conveyed an appearance of idealised social cohesion at odds with Mexico’s economic crises and drug-related violence.

Is there any way then that these ghostly apparitions can be seen to be still imprinted on the work of contemporary artists operating in a 21st century of networked culture and global communication? While *neo-mexicanismo* had revisited Kahlo’s legacy and impact on contemporary art[[11]](#endnote-12) and Mexican artist’s such as Nahum Zenil and Julio Galan had made her physical presence something of a Queer icon[[12]](#endnote-13), in what sense can the themes explored by her work be seen to have left their trace? Is it even possible to explore how Mexican traditions of interpretation and historical expectations of meaning, such as the post revolutionary construction of the politics of victimhood as a signifier of authenticity, impose themselves on the work of contemporary transnational artists and their audiences?

At the Venice Biennale of 2009 the Mexican Pavilion was occupied by a critically acclaimed performance and installation by Teresa Margolles. It was a work designed to question not just the context of ‘Mexicanness’ but how the particularities of the past and the specifics of geography are made to relate to the production of contemporary art.

Margolles’s “*What Else could we talk about?”* curated by the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina, formed the Mexican contribution to the Biennale in the Palazzo Rota Ivancich. l[[13]](#endnote-14) It is interesting to note that this was only the second time that Mexico has had a pavilion, at this spiritual home of the ‘national’ in art. Through the vagaries of history Mexico had previously not engaged directly with the Biennale’s problematic of national representation, ironic considering how central a subject the ‘national’ was to the work of that earlier post revolutionary generation. Margolles’ work for the national pavilion took as its subject what was, in the accompanying catalogue, called *‘Mexico’s elephant in the room*,’ - the country’s drug wars*.[[14]](#endnote-15)* Medina introduces the nature of the work in the accompanying publication:” *Margolles’s procedures lure her audience into a house of phantoms. A space which, as Freud said about the uncanny-unheimlich- is at once familiar and estranged, intimate and alien, modest and obscene”[[15]](#endnote-16)* The installation and its associated activities, which included a variety of interactions and events, confronted head on the Biennale’s normal expectations of a positively projected national culture, the “*the expectation of the Mexican elites that for the sake of the national image, or to safeguard the illusions of tourism, we should maintain a contrite silence about the indiscretion of a society bent on slaughter….”[[16]](#endnote-17)*

Within the decaying Venice palazzo, Margolles intricately entwined her processes of working into the fabric of the location. Her *Narcomessages,* cloths soaked in blood collected at the sites of distant violence and embroidered with texts used in gangland executions, hung from the walls (Fig 4) blending with the faded opulence of the silk coverings, silent and powerful reminders of worlds outside the boundaries of the art fair. A safe embedded in the Palazzo walls was used to position, *Score Settling,* jewelry made from gold encased fragments of windscreens shattered by drive by shootings in Culiacàn. Another blood soaked cloth hung waving slowly in the breeze over the canal on the exterior of the Palazzo, a reproof to the optimism of the national flags identifying the pavilions of other participants. The empty rooms remained impregnated with a sense of both threat and regret. Their visual idiom, despite the drama of the content remaining sparse, more whispering dark secrets than issuing didactic statements.

On the ground floor of the otherwise empty and dark space hung *Recovered Mud* an enormous mural of canvas impregnated with mud (fig 5). Dug from sites where the murdered victims of drug violence had been discovered the mud clung to the cloth, never being allowed to dry as it was sprayed from behind with water. The subsequently contaminated liquids dripped slowly into a gulley below to be collected and re-used and with every passing day of the biennial was used to layer the floors of the palazzo with the traces of this distant violence. Each day volunteers used cleaner’s mops to coat yet more strata of meaning to this complex and literally multilayered work (fig 6). Even the cast concrete reception desk at the entrance was formed by being mixed with the ‘contaminated’ fluid, its appearance of urban banality denying the moral complexity of its material reality.

It was a work of startlingly minimalist power with a subtlety that appeared a world away from the rhetoric of the art of the Mexican Revolution and popular expectations of ‘Mexicanness’ and yet to some extent it remains entangled in the web of expected meanings inherited from that formative moment in history. Many countries have been defined by stereotypes of cultural production of limited historical meaning but tenacious shelf life, but few more so than Mexico. The flora and fauna of Mexico has been explained and described, its inhabitants caricatured and stereotyped for both internal and external audiences. In reality, the visual culture of Mexico has been laden with the weight of representational meaning since the first contact of Europe and the Americas in the fifteenth century but with the revolution those traditions of visualized ‘identities’ became a self-conscious thematic. In the work of many artists, Mexican identity became a commodity to be packaged, sold and resold. A containment of its meaning that has been granted a virtual copyright which by the end of the 20th century allowed for the Mexican themed fast food restaurant or the decoration of European suburban homes in a ‘Mexican style’.

While not the sole characteristic of this commodified Mexico and not the only recognized stereotype of ‘Mexicanness’, a key theme within this accepted vocabulary has been the reference to ‘death‘ and ‘sacrifice’ as intrinsic components of Mexican culture. From the fascination with Aztec deities and rites, through to the popularity of the ‘day of the dead’ phenomenon, for many audiences and museum curators alike, *death* remains a keyword in the evocation of what can be seen as an authentic Mexican culture. This is certainly not a recent phenomenon and has its roots in long established expectations. As the surrealist poet Andre Breton described it in 1939 in the special edition of the magazine *Minotaure*, Mexico was the….“Terre rouge, terre vierge tout imprégnée du plus généreux sang, terre où la vie de l’homme est sans prix……” This imagined location was aplace metaphorically forever south of the border, a place of danger, of difference and of the unknown. It was a place where life and death existed in stark opposition and where death was always lurking in the shadows. The violence of the revolution and the rhetoric of struggle and martyrdom merely added to this more essentialist construction of a world oppositional to that of a rationalist Europe and a concept of the ‘civilized’. The use of Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s image of *Striking Worker Assassinated* of 1934 (fig 7) to accompany Breton’s text is interesting in the way it takes the specific and makes it the general. The political realities of the image become subsidiary to the idea of a land of Mexico impregnated by the blood of its victims, again that borderline between life and death where the ultimate terrors of the unconscious are revealed. For the readers of *Minotaur* who the man was, or the reason for the worker’s killing is not of import as his blood seeps into the dry earth, he becomes a symbol of the eternal existence of death in life.

This set of meanings continues to be seen by many to be exemplified by the iconographies of ‘Mexicanness’. Descending from the propagandist polemics of the Spanish conquest and given new impetus by the complex debates of post revolutionary Mexico, the role of death, and its imagery, became a constituent part of constructions of both internal and external perceptions of the ‘authentic‘ Mexico. This cultural space is not a world of the spiritual afterlife but the purgatory of the decomposing body, the horrid fascination of the defiled corpse, a skeletal reminder of the transitory nature of life. A Mexico described by colonizing Spaniards and made the stuff of European fantasies of otherness. It is the Mexico loved by Surrealists such as Breton and also the Mexico that beckoned and became an obvious second home to outsiders such as the British artist Damian Hirst.[[17]](#endnote-18)

 It is this Mexico, the place of accepted cultural stereotypes that on a superficial reading, Margolles’s art can be seen as fitting perfectly with or even literally embodying.

A fascination with the forensics of death is not in itself an unusual focus of interest for artists and curators but the work of Teresa Margolles has attracted the attention of an increasingly large audience. While knowledge of her work has been growing since the 1990s, based on her work as a founder member of the Mexico City based collective SEMEFO (an acronym derived from *Servicio Médico Forense* /Forensic Medical Service)[[18]](#endnote-19), in the last decade she has become established outside of Mexico and her reputation has expanded from dedicated followers of her work to encompass a more general art world interest. Her intervention at Venice has received wide-scale critical acclaim. While deeply political, the themes of Margolles’s art grow out of her fascination with what she has called ‘*the life of corpses’*[[19]](#endnote-20), and the ways that even in death, social hierarchies and injustices remain. The materials that she uses in her art break taboos of realism even in the reality-addicted societies we inhabit. The re-use in her art of human remains, body parts and fluids contaminated with the ‘real’ processes of the afterlife, what Medina calls “ *a process of symbolic pollution*”[[20]](#endnote-21) repel and frighten many, but nonetheless force her audiences to encounter those aspects of the passage of death usually hidden from conscious thought.

The 2004 solo show *Muerte sin Fin* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, in Frankfurt[[21]](#endnote-22) helped establish her as a major player on the international art scene. Her work frequently explores the relationship of artwork to audience blurring the distance between spectatorship and complicity. In Frankfurt, she used the transmutability of materials to break from the confines of the art object. The exhibition was framed by two related works *Air/ En el Aire* (2003) and Air, Tears/ *Aire, Llorado* (2004): in both, water, used to wash the bodies of the dead in the morgue of Mexico City, was transformed first into bubbles, then into humidified air. Despite the sanitization of the water the idea of its derivation is enough to create an emotionally charged sense of interwoven responses; fear, disgust, sadness and anger. The gallery audience has been contaminated by the work with or without its permission. The very idea of breaking the taboo of distance surrounding the afterlife of the body is powerful enough to cause audiences to recoil, despite the irrationality of the response. Water and death remain in a complex opposition of meaning.

It is of course not possible to discuss Margolles work as an artist without recognizing that it is interwoven with her training as a forensic technician and her role within the morgue in Mexico City. It is an aspect of her biography that appears to have both fascinated the art world and tied her work into the widespread obsession with the materiality of death. It is this biographical detail that somehow imparts the works with credibility, their ‘contamination’ made believable by the artist’s own experiences. However, an interesting question in relation to Margolles is how important in that fascination is the juxtaposition of geography and theme? Of death and Mexico? Is the combination of gender, geographical location and iconographic tradition of relevance in understanding responses to her work? Would any morgue do or does that of Mexico City carry its own dimension of meaning?

Margolles’ first big impact was arguably through her involvement with the early collective work *Lavatio Corpori*s[[22]](#endnote-23) of 1994, produced by SEMEFO at the Museo Carillo Gil. Embalmed and sectioned parts of horses were displayed encased in strange metal cages. The installed works shocked visitors with the use of dead animals and odours of decay appearing to cross the line between art and reality in the stark evocation of pain, cruelty and suffering. Appearing relatively soon after the exhibition of Damien Hirst’s *Mother & Child Divided* (1993) the Mexico City exhibition was seen by some critics as a manifestation of the same tendencies. In discussing *Lavatio Corpori*s, however, Coco Fusco makes a key point on the distinction between the work of Hirst and the underlying aesthetic of SEMEFO/and by extension, Margolles, *“ Whereas Hirst’s composition evokes the hyper-rationalist world of the laboratory, SEMEFO’s theatre of death invokes Catholicism’s embrace of suffering as the performative imitation of Christ”[[23]](#endnote-24)*

Fusco describes and analyses the works in detail, drawing out the post-colonial themes underpinning the more sensational aspects of the play on the spirit of the abattoir. In this set of works the relationship with metaphors of Mexicanness were very self-consciously explored through the aesthetic (and to some extent even the more literal) dissection of thematic elements of the work of the iconic Mexican artist, José Clemente Orozco. A work by Orozco was used to contextualise the thematics of the installation and point to the unpicking of national myth that formed the primary focus of the overall exhibition. The bodies of dead horses symbolically imprisoned and tortured within the exhibition drew on the elision of meaning in Mexico between the Spanish conquerors and the alien creatures they brought with them. The expectation of the barbaric, the terrifying and the dangerous all evoked the expected characteristics of Mexican Art but by taking them to the extreme forced recognition of the limitations of the cultural space of such stereotypes.

The performative and the ritualistic noted by Fusco remained an important element of Margolles’ work. The work *Entierro/Burial* (1999, fig 8), produced while the artist was part of SEMEFO was exhibited in Cuahtémoc Medina’s exhibition *20 Million Mexicans Can’t be Wrong* [[24]](#endnote-25)at the South London Gallery. Unlike the drama of *Lavatio Corpori*s, the work used the language of minimalism to present its audience with a seemingly banal concrete oblong resting like abandoned building material on the floor of the gallery, a forerunner of the reception desk at Venice. It is hard to attend to in its everydayness, and yet it’s meaning, once grasped, becomes impossible to ignore. The concrete block encases forever a stillborn foetus, at least that is what we are told. It is interesting that while Margolles’ work frequently depends on trust and narrative power, her account of the derivation of her works is readily accepted. In this simple and unadorned manner the gallery is transformed into the mausoleum, sculpture into sepulchre. In the curation of the exhibition Medina attempted to confront the notion of an authentic national culture, exploring instead the specificity of context of Mexico City as a transnational location and looking at the ways in which relocating the artwork transforms meaning. However, while the formal language of the concrete block denied the expectation of authentic ‘Mexicanness’, the theme of death remained unquestioned. It can be seen as a direct relation to the concrete desk at the entrance to the Venice installation, a reminder of the difficulties of transposing meaning across borders. The bodily fluids here have not seeped into the ground to return to nature but been forever encased in the manmade. There is no re-investment of the blood of martyrs in the definition of nationhood rather the presentation of the contained alienation of the global. In a combination of Catholic imagery and political revelation Margolles exhibited in 2000 the embalmed, pierced tongue of a dead drug addict (fig 9). This work, *Lengue/Tongue[[25]](#endnote-26)*, explores as Medina puts it, that “*despite popular wisdom, death is not egalitarian. Social taxonomies are re-inscribed not only in the causes of death but also in the fate of our remains”[[26]](#endnote-27).*  The work has both a horror and immediacy that easily distinguishes it from the more measured physicality of the BritArt of Hirst or Gavin Turk.[[27]](#endnote-28) The embalmed tongue, bought from the family of the victim is but part of the overall work which gains its meaning from the process of its making and exhibiting. The very fact that the family was willing to agree to the creation of the work in exchange for the cost of the dead man’s burial adds to the implicit social critique of the work. Its exhibition in Los Angeles was a poignant reminder of the impossibility of its live owner to escape the circumstances of his own poverty. In some ways it is reminiscent of the emptiness of Kahlo’s Tehuana costume hanging dis-embodied in New York in her painting ‘My Dress Hangs There’ of 1933, a work exploring alienation and the impossibility of transposing the contextual frameworks of identity. Margolles’ tongue is there to speak for the silent, to impact, in death as it could not in life, a fragment of the everyday reality of death statistics on the streets of any big city, forcing its way into the safe spaces of the gallery.

The performances that surrounded the installed work in Venice in 2009 grouped under the title *Extramural Actions* picked up the theme of transposition and debated what can and cannot be re-located. The physical remains of distant violence and fear were introduced into the peripheral spaces of the Biennale, the Lido beaches or the streets of Venice only to reveal the impossibility of escaping from context. The blood soaked flags washed by the lagoon or embroidered with gold thread by volunteers sitting in the Mediterranean sun left a trace of something known but not experienced. The Mexico of Margolles was equally intangible to the audiences in Venice as that of Breton in Paris in 1939, however, few can question the reality of her frame of reference or the tangibility of her engagement with the historical moment.

The enduring hold of such imagery of violence and death on expectations of ‘authentic Mexicanness’ can be seen as both a constriction on creative engagement with such themes, or, as can be argued in the case of Margolles, a fertile ground for inversion of expectations. As a ‘Mexican’ artist the international expectations of conformity to an *authentic identity* has had to be confronted or at least recognized in order to escape ghettoisation. As a tactic, however, a denial of cultural authenticity soon becomes of itself restrictive.

The iconography of death and Mexico can come with different sets of associated characteristics. It can be José Guadalupe Posada’s mocking *calavera* or *Coatlicue* the threatening Aztec goddess, melancholic or reassuringly life affirming but it is most commonly feminised. In this sense Margolles’ active interaction with the bodies of the dead as mourner and translator of collective trauma inverts the traditional iconography of Mexico, death and otherness as embodied in the feminine. Her transformatory interventions, and her incorporation of the audience into her actions, forces us to recognize the female artist as directly involved in changing the world rather than, as in the case of Kahlo, metaphorically representing the wounded body of Mexico’s colonial history[[28]](#endnote-29).

This is more eloquently done in her works on the theme of the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez [[29]](#endnote-30) that return to the long recognized theme of the border. In these works, Margolles explores the ignoring of the so-called *maquiladora* murders, named after the factories that sprung up following 1992 when the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed. Since 1993, approximately 400 girls and women are known to have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, and a further 100 have disappeared without a trace. The mysterious circumstances under which the murders have been committed have given rise to many speculations and are as yet unsolved. Many of the hundreds of young women killed worked in the factories of North American companies that switched production to south of the border in order to benefit from lower wage costs. Again as with *Lengua* the victims are the poor and unrepresented and the sheer enormity of the tragedy is difficult for an artist to engage with. Margolles’ somehow manages through her installation/video/sound piece *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro* (fig 10) that combines a seemingly endless car journey around the sites of the murders with the sounds of the desert night. The scale and loneliness of the piece is reinforced by the related sculptural installation of handmade bricks. In a strategy reworked in Venice, the sand for the bricks was collected by the artist at points in Ciudad Juárez where the bodies of victims had been found. As with *Entierro* and her earlier water pieces, the sense of deathly contamination imparts a poignancy and evocative power to seemingly abstract forms. In this work it is even more evident that Margolles’ practice is not aimed at a sensationalizing of death but rather a politicizing of attitudes towards the repressed horrors of the everyday.

If comparisons to Kahlo can be made then one would have to look to the callous cruelty encapsulated in Kahlo’s *Unos cuantos piquetitos/A few Small Nips* of 1935 (fig 11).

The blood spattered frame and poignant juxtaposition of title and subject, point to the impossibility of understanding the inhumanity of sexual violence. The banality of evil created by the simplicity of the imagery strikes a cord with the un-sensational exploration of the Ciudad Juarez atrocities by Margolles. For Kahlo though the violence of the crime reflects both the callousness of a masculine dominated world where people habitually hurt one another without recognizing the pain they cause while also drawing on the voyeuristic thrill of *nota roja* gutter press or tabloid imagery predicated on the gruesome as eye-catching spectacle.[[30]](#endnote-31) For Margolles the violence she explores reflects a far more complex and historically interwoven imbalance of economic power emerging, like the tip of an iceberg, as casual sexual violence.

In *“What Else Could we talk about”* as with *Lote Bravo* the social injustices evoked by Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s *Striking Worker, Assassinated* are given physical form. This is an earth of Mexico, impregnated with a more literal and politicized blood than that evoked by the Breton quote earlier, but closer in spirit to the original context of the Álvarez Bravo photograph. Breton, on re-printing the work on the pages of his *Souvenir du Mexique* chose to disconnect the photograph from its social context to create an icon of otherness, using the image to denote a place of both unconscious terror and desire. Rivera chose to position himself as the observer of the inexorable march of history, knowingly feeding the myths of nationhood, Kahlo chose to embody the post-colonial trauma of Mexico through her own body, turning herself into an icon of victimhood. Margolles, in works such as *Lote Bravo* and *What Else Could We Talk About* chooses to give victimhood a voice and exorcise the ghosts of the past through the forensic analysis of the present.

1. Christero Martyrology [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Rivera painted his mural “*Tierra Fecundada*” (Fertile Land) between 1924 and 1927 at what is now the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. Craven (1997) makes the point that in these paintings Rivera “*interrelates ‘social revolution’ with ‘natural evolution’ within a process of uneven historical development”* p.110. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. According to Krauze (1997) following a supposed plot against Zapata, Montaño was executed and his corpse was hung from “*a cazahuate tree with a sign on his chest warning ’This is the fate met by traitors to the Patria”*p 301. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. The classic account of this narrative of identity is Octavio Paz’s chapter ‘The Sons of La Malinche’ in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* first published in *Cuadernos Americanos* in 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. As well as being used in tourist art and mass produced accessories this painting was used widely in the publicity and appeared as the cover of the touring exhibition *Imagen de Mexico:der Beitrag Mexikos zur Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts,* at the Shirn Kunsthalle, in Frankfurt in1987/88. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. In late 1939 and the first weeks of 1940 Frida Kahlo produced two paintings for the International Exhibition of Surrealism held at Inés Amor’s Galleria de Arte Mexícana, *The Wounded Table* now lost and the large double self portrait *The Two Fridas.* After its exhibition in Mexico City, *The Two Fridas* also featured in the show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* in1940. For an account of *The Wounded Table* see Ankori (2002) p 204. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Herrera 1983 p.277. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Galan Colunga [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. see: Mary Anne Martin’s article ‘Latin American Art Comes of Age’, in Theran 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Mari Carmen Ramirez ‘Beyond the Fantastic: Framing Identity in US Exhibitions of Latin American Art’ in Mosquera, 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. see *Pasión por Frida*, ed. by Blanca Garduño and José Antonio Rodríguez (Mexico City: Museo Estudio Diego Rivera, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. “*What Else could we talk about?”* 7 June - 22 November 2009. 53rd Venice Biennale. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Mostly based around the border towns of Northern Mexico, what Ed Vuillamy (2010) has termed *Amexia,* in the last three years the violence has claimed more than 23,000 lives. In 2009 Medina pointed out in his essay accompanying the installation in Venice ”*more bullets were fired in 2008 than in any year of the country’s recent history”* Medina 2009 p.015. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Medina 2009 p 029. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Damien Hirst show in Mexico, at the Hilario Galguera Gallery, called *The Death of God, Towards a Better Understanding of Life without God aboard The Ship of Fools*, opened in February 2006, . [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. for an account of the activities of SEMEFO see: *Semefo: 10 Years/diez Anos*, Perea & Barrios, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. See Görner & Kittelman *Teresa Margolles Muerte sin Fin,* 2004 p.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Medina 2009 p 019. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Teresa Margolles *Muerte sin fin* 24/04/04-15/08.04, Museum für Moderne Kunst,(MMK) Frankfurt am Main. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. *Semefo: Lavatio Corporis* , published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name held at Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Mexico, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Fusco ‘The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA’ in *The Bodies that Were Not Ours and Other Writings*. 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. *20 Million Mexicans Can't Be Wrong*, South London Gallery, 18/9/02 – 3/11/02, Group show curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, artists: Francis Alÿs, Carlos Amorales, Teresa Margolles, Vicente Razo, Pedro Reyes, Santiago Sierra, Melanie Smith. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. *Lengua* was also exhibited at *Public/Private: The 2nd Auckland Triennial,* 2004, New Zealand. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Medina, 2001,p.31-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. The meditations on mortality and explorations of the theme of death in the work of Hirst and others see Gallagher 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. *El cuerpo aludido:anatomías y construcciones, siglos XVI-XX* (1998) [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Since 1993, approximately 600 girls and women have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, and many others have disappeared without a trace. The mysterious circumstances under which the murders have been committed have given rise to many speculations but they are as yet unsolved. For more detail on what she terms Femicide see: Pineda-Madrid 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. See Harvey Bennett Stafford (ed.), Muerte!: Death in Mexican Popular Culture (Venice, CA: Feral House, 2000), with an essay by C. Medina on ‘Tabloid Crime’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)