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Teresa Margolles and the  
Pathology of Everyday Death

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**Teresa Margolles and the Pathology of Everyday Death**

Professorial Platform Lecture, University of the Arts London

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## Teresa Margolles and the Pathology of Everyday Death <sup>1</sup>



Figure 1

“Terre rouge, terre vierge tout imprégnée du plus généreux sang,  
terre où la vie de l’homme est sans prix...”

André Breton *Souvenir du Mexique* 1939<sup>2</sup>

Many countries have been defined by stereotypes of cultural production of limited historical meaning but tenacious shelf life, and few more so than Mexico. 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. The flora and fauna of Mexico has been explained and described, its inhabitants recognisably characterised for both internal and external audiences. Definitions of national culture have ranged from simplistic stereotypes to complex attempts at reconciling the political tensions of a racially divided post-colonial society but the visual manifestations of these processes of definition draw on a shared heritage of symbolic representations. For artists, Mexican identity has become a commodity to be packaged, sold and resold, containment of its meaning has applied a patent copyright that allows for the themed fast food restaurant or the decoration of European suburban homes in a ‘Mexican style’ purchased at the local superstore. A longstanding theme of this commodified Mexico, however, has been the association of ‘death’ and ‘Mexicanness’, from the fascination with Aztec deities through to the popularity of the ‘day of the dead’ phenomenon. For many audiences and curators alike *death* remains a keyword in the evocation of Mexican culture.

A fascination with the forensics of death is not in itself an unusual focus of interest for artists and curators but recently the work of Teresa Margolles has attracted the attention of an increasingly large audience. While her reputation 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)<sup>3</sup>, in recent years it has become established outside of Mexico and expanded from dedicated followers of her work to encompass

a more general critical interest, with her intervention at the Venice Biennial 2009 receiving 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'<sup>4</sup>, 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, repel and frighten many, but nonetheless force her audiences to encounter those aspects of the passage of death usually hidden from conscious thought.

On one level, it is possible to link the interest in work such as Margolles's to our desire to find within the increasingly virtual world that surrounds us, some form of absolute reality. At a time when everything appears

reproducible and ultimately deceptive, truth can at least be found in the certainty of death. We often appear as a culture to require proof even of that, metaphorically poking fingers into the wounds, through our collective fascination with the bodies of the dead. Rembrandt's *Anatomy* is given new life as C.S.I. Miami. From television and popular novels to blockbuster spectacles such as Gunther von Hagens' *Bodyworlds*<sup>5</sup> the forensics of death have held a sway over enormous audiences. Within this context Margolles growing reputation could be seen to reflect a wider cultural trend but her work forces us to confront a world we usually ask art to help us forget. At the same time such difficult material can often overpower the intentions of the artist and impose a formal predictability, a danger that Margolles' work has skillfully avoided.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The 2004 solo show *Muerte sin Fin* at MMK in Frankfurt<sup>6</sup> helped establish her as a major player on the international art scene and more recent work such as her 'Untitled' exhibited in Tate Liverpool at the 2006 Biennale<sup>7</sup> has attracted widespread notice. In both locations her work explored 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 *En el Aire/Air* (2003) and *Aire, Llorado /Air, Tears* (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. In Liverpool, water with similar characteristics falling onto a heating element created both sound and vapour, drawing even an involuntary audience into the work. 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 aforementioned 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

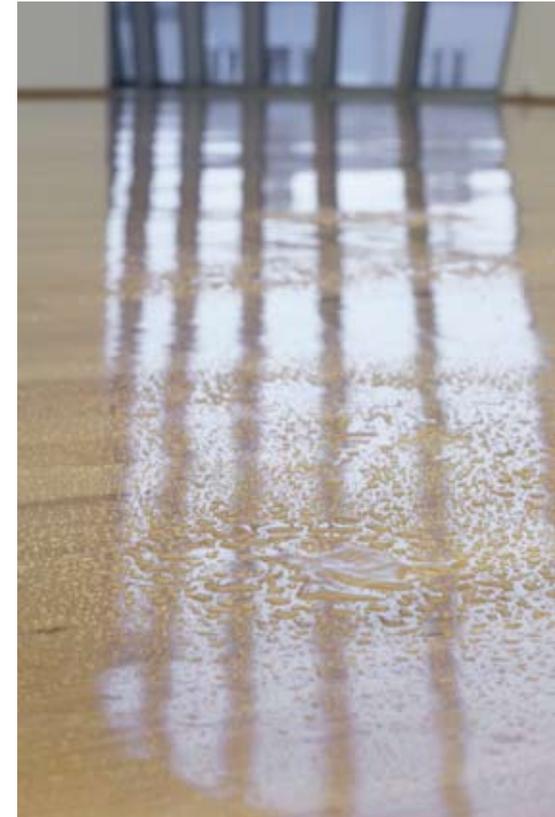


Figure 5

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?



Figure 6

For an artist whose work frequently challenges and surprises, it may seem contradictory to commence an analysis via a discussion of cultural cliché but I believe it is through recognition of a wider context of cultural stereotyping that the real power of Margolles's work can be appreciated. In many ways the association of art and death is so accepted a signifier of 'Mexicanness' it has become for international audiences one of the demanded characteristics of authentic cultural expression and geographically determined meaning. It can be seen

in the popularity of José Guadalupe Posada's skeletal caricatures on T-shirts and accessories, to the visions of barbarism underpinning Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*. In fact, obsession with the physicality of death and Mexico are frequently constructed as synonymous. 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, has long been a constituent part of constructions of 'Mexicanness'.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 7

This cultural space is no 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. It is 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, that described and evoked by his special edition of the surrealist magazine

*Minotaur*, his 'Souvenir du Mexique' produced after his visit in 1938. It is also the Mexico that beckoned and became the obvious second home to the British artist Damian Hirst, resonating with his ability to trespass on the territory of the embalmer. It is the Mexico of accepted cultural stereotypes that on a superficial reading, Margolles's art can be seen as fitting perfectly with, and in fact conforming to.

Margolles' first big impact was arguably through her involvement with the early collective work *Lavatio Corporis*<sup>9</sup> of 1994, produced by SEMEFO at the Museo Carillo Gil. 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 Corporis*, 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."<sup>10</sup>

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 iconically Mexican artist, José Clemente Orozco. A work by Orozco was used to contextualise the



Figure 8

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, produced while part of SEMEFO), exhibited in Cuauhtémoc Medina's exhibition *20 Million Mexicans Can't Be Wrong*<sup>11</sup> at the South London Gallery, is an interesting example. Unlike the drama of *Lavatio Corporis*,

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. It is hard to attend to in its everydayness, and yet its 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.

The enduring hold of such imagery on expectations of 'authentic Mexicanness' can be seen as both a constriction on creative engagement with such themes, or, as I would argue is the case with Margolles, a fertile ground for inversion of expectations. As a 'Mexican' artist the international expectations of conformity to an *authentic identity* has to be confronted or at least recognized if one wishes to escape ghettoisation. As a tactic, however, a denial of cultural authenticity soon becomes in itself restrictive. In subsequent work, Margolles has played on such expectations with subtlety and great skill.

In a combination of Catholic imagery and political revelation Margolles exhibited in 2000 the embalmed, pierced tongue of a dead drug



Figure 9

addict. This work, *Lengue/Tongue*<sup>12</sup>, 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”<sup>13</sup>. The work has both a horror and immediacy that easily distinguishes it from the more measured physicality of Britart. 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 were 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. 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 iconography of death and Mexico can come with different sets of associated characteristics. It can be the mocking *calavera* or the threatening Aztec goddess, melancholic or reassuringly life affirming but it is most commonly feminised. In this sense Margolles’ interaction with the bodies of the dead as mourner and inheritor of collective trauma inverts the traditional iconography of death and otherness. Her active intervention, and her incorporation of the audience into her actions, forces us to remember what we want to forget. This is eloquently done in her more recent works on the theme of the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez<sup>14</sup> In this work, Margolles explores the ignoring of the so-called *maquilladora* murders, (named after the factories that have sprung up since 1992 when the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed).

Many of the hundreds of young women killed worked in the factories for companies who switched production south of the border to benefit from lower costs. Again as with *Lengue* the victims are the poor and unrepresented, in this instance the sheer enormity of the tragedy is difficult for an artist to engage with. Margolles’ somehow manages through her video/sound piece *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro* which 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. The sand for the bricks having been collected by the artist at points within Ciudad Juárez where the bodies of victims have been found. As with *Entierro* and the 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 the Margolles’ work is not aimed at a sensationalising of death but rather a politicising of attitudes towards the repressed horrors of the everyday.



Figure 10

In *Lote Bravo*<sup>15</sup> the social injustices evoked by Manuel Alvarez Bravo's *Striking Worker, Murdered* (1934) are given physical form. This is an earth of Mexico, impregnated with a more literal and politicised blood than that evoked by the Breton quote at the start of this essay, but closer in spirit to the original context of the Alvarez 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. His Mexico was a place removed from the repercussions of the violence he reified, that of Margolles is a place where the everyday violence of the forgotten is forced upon our unwilling attention. As Santiago Sierra has stated: "Margolles' work puts the assassins on constant trial by placing the corpses of those victims on society's table. It opposes the general indifference towards crimes always committed on another skin, in another society on the other side of the Atlantic or on global television, and is a constant reminder of the fact that this Mexican who got killed could be any one of us"<sup>16</sup>



Figure 11

## Endnotes

- 1 Thanks to Institute of American Studies, University of London where I first tried out the ideas within this lecture and to *Dardo Magazine* who originally published my work on this subject.
- 2 André Breton *Souvenir du Mexique, Minotaure*, May, 1939, Paris
- 3 for an account of the activities of SEMEFO see: *Semefo: 10 Years/diez Anos*, by David Perea & Jose Luis Barrios, 2007, DAP (Distributed Art Publishers) New York.
- 4 See Klause Görner& Udo Kittelman *Teresa Margolles Muerte sin Fin*, Museum für Moderne Kunst,(MMK) Frankfurt am Main, 2004 p.41
- 5 Worldwide, some twenty million people have visited Gunther von Hagens' blockbuster shows of 'plastinised'(sic) human remains. see: <[http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/exhibitions/past\\_exhibitions.html](http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/exhibitions/past_exhibitions.html)>
- 6 Teresa Margolles *Muerte sin fin* 24/04/04-15/08.04, Museum für Moderne Kunst,(MMK) Frankfurt am Main
- 7 Tate Liverpool 16/9/06-26/11/06 < [www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/liverpoolbiennial06/artists/margolles.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/liverpoolbiennial06/artists/margolles.shtm)>
- 8 for a more detailed discussion of this issue see my essay, 'The Death of History or a History of Death' in *History Painting Reassessed*, ed. David Green & Peter Seddon, Manchester University Press, 2000
- 9 *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.
- 10 Fusco, Coco. 'The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA' in *The Bodies that Were Not Ours and Other Writings*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

- 11 *20 Million Mexicans Can't Be Wrong*, South London Gallery, 18/9/02 – 3/11/02, Group show by curated Cuauhtémoc Medina, artists: Francis Alÿs, Carlos Amorales, Teresa Margolles, Vicente Razo, Pedro Reyes, Santiago Sierra, Melanie Smith.
- 12 *Lengue* was also exhibited at *Public/Private: The 2nd Auckland Triennial*, 2004, New Zealand.
- 13 Medina, Cuauhtémoc 'Zones Of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, Semefo And Beyond', *Parachute* no: 104 31 – 52, 2001
- 14 Since 1993, approximately 400 girls and women 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 but they are as yet unsolved. Recently interest in this issue has been raised by the Hollywood film *Bordertown* (dir. Gregory Nava 2006)
- 15 Teresa Margolles *Lote Bravo*, *Lomas de Poleo*, *Anapra y Cristo Negro* (video/sound piece 2005), sculptural installation, *Lote Bravo*, 2005, 50 handmade bricks, Dimensions variable, Courtesy Peter Kilchman Gallery, Zurich also exhibited in *Indelible Images (trafficking between life and death)*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, November 5 to April 23, 2006.
- 16 Santiago Sierra, p214 in *Teresa Margolles Muerte sin fin*, Museum für Moderne Kunst,(MMK) Frankfurt am Main 2004.



Figure 12

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MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO

*Striking Worker Assassinated* 1934

Silverprint (from first page of *Minotaur :Souvenir du Mexique* 1939)

Courtesy National Gallery of Canada

### Figure 2, page 8

TERESA MARGOLLES

*Narcomensajes / Narcomessages*, 2009

joint activity during "What Else Could We Talk About?"

The Venice Biennale, Mexican Pavilion, Venice, 2009

Photograph: Teresa Margolles

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*En el aire / In the Air*, 2003

Installation

exhibition view MMK, Frankfurt, 2004

Photograph: Axel Schneider

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Cleaning*, 2009

exhibition view "What Else Could We Talk About?"

The Venice Biennale, Mexican Pavilion, Venice, 2009

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Llorado/Tears*, 2004

installation, tap water, dripping out of valves from ceiling

exhibition view MMK, Frankfurt, 2004

Photograph: Axel Schneider

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*El agua en la Ciudad de México / Mexico City's water*, 2004

Single channel video, 58 sec., no sound, looped film still

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Vaporización / Vaporization*, 2001

Installation with 1-2 smoking machines, dimensions variable

installation view

Photograph: Teresa Margolles

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Entierro / Burial*, 1999

exhibition view MMK, Frankfurt, 2004

Photograph: Axel Schneider

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Lengua / Tongue*, 2002

exhibition view Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, 2004

Photograph: Teresa Margolles

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Lote Bravo*, 2005

Installation

installation view Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich, 2005

Photograph: A. Burger

Courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro*, 2005

Single channel video, no sound film still

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

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TERESA MARGOLLES

*Catafalco* (© SEMEFO), 1997

Sculpture

exhibition view MMK, Frankfurt, 2004

Photograph: Axel Schneider

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich

