

# **Detachment and intimacy**

## **The corpse in the art of Teresa Margolles**

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In this paper we propose a brief analysis of Teresa Margolles' artistic work. She is a Mexican contemporary artist who through her work unveils one of the last taboos of society: the corpse and violent death. More than provocation, the artist aim is to bring up an emotional approach to her public. By introducing empathy and intimacy she breaks the usual apathy and indifference with which this issue is usually addressed.

The Mexican artist Teresa Margolles (1963), is also a forensic expert that combines providentially these two fields in her artistic proposals. Reflect and unveil the concept of death seems to be something very own of Mexican culture, a heritage that Margolles certainly embraces as an intrinsic issue: a culture of honouring the dead.

Founder of the SEMEFO (Forensic Medical Services) group, particularly active in the 1990s, she reveals an artistic journey of great coherence, evolving from an abject and aggressive aesthetic to a more conceptual artistic expression. We can identify a guiding thread that imposes itself: the identity of the corpse. The scope of her work is remarkable: from unauthorized underground exhibitions, she reaches the most prestigious artistic institutions in the world, such as Tate (2006) or the Venice Biennale (2009).

Margolles has been reducing the representative aspect and thus increasing the impact, the power and the paralyzing or suffocating effect

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of her work. Her language is unique: through art she shows the features of violent death in Mexico, but the effects she reaches goes far beyond what media or television channels can expose, when exposing pornographically parts of bodies and heads abandoned by the side of the road or in abandoned places.

By relating to death, when handling the bodies in their full materiality, creates a kind of memorial of the funeral patrimony. This memorial is in turn particularly associated with violence, namely the brutality of social experience in Mexico. Margolles works on issues such as inequality, injustice, violence, hypocrisy. This happens not only in the world of the living but also in the world of the dead: rather than reporting, rather than denouncing, the artist bears in mind a deeply human ethical reflection.

Her work, committed to the violence of Mexico and to the political and social issue that arises from the crimes of narco-trafficking, reveals a kind of art that denounces, that touches a raw nerve that seemed to have stopped dominating the agenda of contemporary art. The artist complained the unidentified bodies of the Mexican morgues and through art she gives them back their lost identity and dignity. These works are understood as relics. These artifacts become sacred and the victims, once anonymous and forgotten by society, achieve a kind of holiness and sacred aura.

Margolles uses her art with a conceptual tendency to denounce and confront, to shake banality and numbness. By using organic, physiological, corpse parts, she provokes in the public a sort of paradoxical reactions: repulsion and attraction, disgust and empathy, physicality and spirituality. Despite starting from a forensic culture, there is no clinical or sanitized approach to death. There is a sense of humanity. There is a funeral contact with the victims. The use of the corpse, forensically inspired, is far from the scientific intention of the artist-anatomist Gunther Von Hagens for instance. Her works, with a clear metonymic and symbolic intent, use fragments of the bodies<sup>2</sup> or objects that were in contact with the bodies, summoning the spirit of the sacred relic to a scene once violent and accursed.

The use of the body as raw material can even be shocking or outrageous, provoking a natural revulsion, but this kind of resources when they become essential supports of a work of art provoke a double response: detachment and desire, repulsion and curiosity, etc.

In the specific case of Margolles, the sense of intimacy that his works create is blatant. Her work goes far beyond provocation and relates to the inner process of each other in the face of the most intimate and uncomfortable existential questions that relate to the vision of

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2. See Figure 1

maximum abjection or the greater proof of our materiality as Kristeva would say. This author associates the corpse with the ultimate abjection because it is there that all sense of unity falls. The unity of body and mind falls, and inside and outside boundaries collapse. “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4) That experience can join an unlawful and paradoxical feeling of pleasure and pain which Kristeva associates with the Lacanian’s concept of *Juissance*, i.e., a type of transgressive and offender pleasure related with the suffering. The corpse as a totalizing experience: the human corpse, “one like me,” and not just the anonymous corpse, or a specifically Mexican corpse.

Her work, which highlights the presence of the absence of death, exposes the silence of the victims in a stark way, becoming a vehicle that tackles the dramatic and violent reality without taboos. The concentration of pain, which her art exposes, opens the way to an uncomfortable but genuine kind of reflection about Heidegger’s concept of “being-toward-death”. This philosopher argues that the authentic attitude towards death is “anxiety” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 310), a kind of courageous anxiety (which is truly different from the usual fear that constitutes the *Dasein*). This anxiety points out the freedom and the radical possibility of non- possibility. According to Heidegger, this mood will bring an “impassioned *freedom towards death*” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 311). Without morbidity or a religious expectation, this anxiety about death provides an awareness of human’s finitude. Heidegger’s point of view is that being-towards-death pulls *Dasein* out of its alienation on inauthentic everyday life and opens the possibility of coming authentically in contact with his own self, what is in fact exactly what some of this art works promote.

*Burial*<sup>3</sup>, work of 1999, is not only a work that refers to the dead body, the work itself, although discreet, contains inside it a dead body, a baby that was not born. It is a simple block of cement, a brick, something that brings us to the type of building material. When one can read in the neutral space of the museum or gallery the information that is provided, we will take contact with the idea of what this block has inside. There occurs a transfiguration of the object, similar to the concept of transfiguration of the commonplace of which Arthur C. Danto spoke about. At a glance the block of cement goes from banal to unbearably tearing ... In Mexico fetuses that are born dead are not treated as corpses but rather as waste or biological remains of medical interest. In addition, since the mother of this dead baby could not pay for a decent burial, Margolles chooses to give him a tomb, although with the possibility of locomotion. In closing the fetus in a small block,

3. See Figure 2

Margolles gives it the dignity of a rude but eternal tomb, unlike oblivion before him socially for that symbolize concentrated and senseless pain of losing a baby who just met the intra uterine life.

*Burial* is an excellent example of the nobility of Margolles's purpose: to arouse empathy and discomfort towards something that didn't even seemed worthy of being noticed.

The trajectory of her artistic production indicates a gradual approach to the spectator, provided through the sensation of intimacy. From 2000 on, Margolles begins to manifest the tendency to contaminate the exhibition space with substances directly involved with the corpses. This approach to its public is sometimes silent as is the case of the impressive work "Vaporización"<sup>4</sup> realized in 2001. Here Margolles invites her public to contact the corpse through the very atmosphere that one breathes: She used water, previously disinfected, that served to clean corpses in the morgues, in a room with condensers that turned this water into steam. The artist refers to the sacred act of the last washing of the dead body, a ritual that anticipates the fatal disappearance of the body and alludes to a farewell. This installation threatens to contaminate the aseptic space of an art room, filling it with waste substances that tell us about death and even more about violent death. In these works, language plays a fundamental role, since it is through textual information that the viewer can access the source of the substances with which he is confronted, and thus re-signify the appearance of what is presented to them. This truly intimate experience is characterized by letting this steam, like an invisible death, "infest" the living body of the spectators, entering their lungs and creating a cycle where life and death are mixed. The public is led to an experience of physiological intimacy: the death of others is now inside their living body that walks through a dense steam that hinders visibility in the gallery. This water steam is a nebulous "bubble" of experimentation where only whoever is in there can immerse and understand.

Of the same kind Teresa Margolles develops another work two years later. "In the Air"<sup>5</sup> (2003): Bubbles made with water from the morgue. In the room of the museum exposes an artistic installation where soap balls are thrown to the air by machines. The purpose is the same: From an ethereal and vaguely childish and inconsequential beauty we suddenly experience an experience of repulsion and consternation, when one becomes aware of the origin of the water: although previously disinfected, it was used for cleaning the corpses before the autopsy. Soap bubbles are thus metaphors of "Memento Mori," which,

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4. See Figure 3

5. See Figure 4

upon bursting against the living body of the audience, recalls its own finitude. By contrast we are also reminded of the underlying idea of our own vitality.

“Under the appearance of minimal-conceptual, the artist made surreptitious operations with the cadaverous- material that involved exposing her audience to everything that George Bataille called as a ‘low materialism’: the unclassifiable or uncontrollable thing, (...) that remains ‘outside and strange’ to those of idealization and productive consumption. [...] In hwe contaminated works, Margolles reversed the contemplative relationship of modern aesthetics. Instead of the neutral and disinterested observation of “beauty”, Margolles exposed the affections and the spectator’s body to works-substance, profaning the distance of aesthetic appreciation to threaten and to infuse her idea into the flesh, breathing and bloodstream of its receiver “(MEDINA, 2009, p.19).

Still in a clear non-figurative tendency, despite maintaining militancy against narco-traffics, her art that has always being a witness of the barbarie, undergoes to a turnaround: she understands that it was no longer necessary to resort to morgues to obtain the traces of violence:

In 2012, “The Promise”<sup>6</sup> presented itself as a sculpture made from crushed remains of the building elements of an uninhabited house. The house was located on the street Puerto de Palos, the area of Ciudad Juárez, (border between Mexico and the United States) in an area where there are several abandoned houses.

The ruins of the abandoned house were crushed to obtain the material that constituted the installation. Its construction was carried out by participants who were taking the remains until occupied the whole of the room. The installation evokes the despair and anguish of all the inhabitants who, in a hurry and fear, had to leave everything behind. In choosing the house, Margolles finds again a radical and structuring concept that conveys great intimacy, insofar as the house is the place of interiority, protection, family. Seeing the house destroyed and revolving its wreckage is one of the hardest lessons of human frailty and vanity. The destruction of the house is also the mirror of our own death, of the permanent becoming and mutation of life, but it is also the opening to a new change, to a new opportunity which the audience is invited to perform.

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6. See Figure 5

## CONCLUSION:

Margolles's art is a platform of visibility and discussion for contemporary issues, which are too much troublesome to see. Her installations create a space of intimacy that our post-modern times are losing. Death, the most natural evidence of life, has become a business for professionals properly sanitized and accredited. Thus, our times removed from our intimacy the uncomfortable contact with the corpse. Margolles reveals the hypocrisy about death, violence and social differences. By showing the flesh and blood she creates a place of cruelty, intimacy, prayer and reflection which leads the audience to an emotional approach.

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Fig. 1. Teresa Margolles, Lengua, 2000



Fig. 2- Teresa Margolles, *Entierro*, 1999



Fig. 3- Teresa Margolles, *Vaporización*, 2001





Fig. 4- Teresa Margolles, *En el aire*, 2003



Fig. 5- Teresa Margolles, *La Promesa*,  
*MUAC, México, 2012.*