

Teresa Margolles' Aesthetic of Death

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The artist Teresa Margolles, Mexico's foremost proponent of corpse art, is based in Mexico City and exhibits her work across the world. Her central obsessions are death, the dead body, and violence, themes which are manifested in her exploration of 'la vida del cadáver' ('the life of the corpse'). For the early part of her career during the 1990s, Margolles worked as part of the SEMEFO collective, and she has subsequently maintained her artistic career on a solo basis. She works with the bodies of individuals who were socially and economically disadvantaged during life, and has used body parts and residues such as blood and fat in her works, as well as objects from the morgue that have come into contact with corpses. The corpse itself, however, is not often revealed; rather its presence is suggested by raw materials such as air and water. The artist employs deceptively subtle means of representation that operate on multiple sensory planes in order to draw the spectator into contemplation of the unsettling realities of social inequality and violence in her native Mexico, which sometimes occurs through direct physical contact between the viewer and the raw materials used by Margolles in her art works. The boundaries between life and death, and the inside and the outside of the body, are transgressed. A selection of works taken from different points in the artist's career will be explored from a range of theoretical perspectives including the sociology of the body, the sociology of death, philosophical approaches to the experience of contemplating death and the corpse, and the history of the exploration of these themes in visual culture. In this way, the artist uses an artistic language that may be interpreted across borders, to address a specifically local set of circumstances.

Key words: Margolles, muerte, México, cadáver, violencia, cuerpo

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Foreword and Author's Note

Teresa Margolles is Mexico's foremost proponent of corpse art. Her work meditates upon her obsessions with the dead body and the processes that occur after death, and shows death as a direct result of violence. The centrality of these troubling themes thrusts into view the issues upon which she comments, namely the persistence of social inequality and the increase in violent crime in Mexico from the 1990s onwards, particularly since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. Employing a range of techniques of representation, Margolles confronts the viewer and implicates him or her into potentially uncomfortably close contemplation of the artwork, sometimes through direct physical contact with the raw materials used in its creation. She transgresses the boundaries between the interior and the exterior of the body, and between life and death, occupying an artistic space where the minimal and internationally accessible language of conceptual art interacts with her method of commenting upon a specifically Mexican set of circumstances,¹ at times disguising unsettling realities behind deceptively subtle artistic techniques of representation. A selection of art works by Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO will be explored from a range of theoretical perspectives including the sociology of the body, the sociology of death, philosophical approaches to the experience of contemplating death and the corpse, and the history of the exploration of these themes in visual culture. The phenomenology of the body, although this approach theorises in great depth the notion of how we may formulate a language to talk about the experience of other people, will not be included because it is heavily focused on the individual. For the

¹ As I will show, the vast majority of Margolles' art works have been produced within Mexico, but she has also produced pieces in other countries inside and outside Latin America (for example, Cuba, Colombia and the UK), sometimes using materials transported from Mexico and sometimes producing works with materials originating from the sites she has visited.

purpose of my study, I have chosen theoretical approaches that explore the nexus between individual and societal experience, as these are more relevant to the aspects of Teresa Margolles' work that receive attention in this thesis. Postcolonial theory (particularly Spivak's seminal 1988 essay 'Can the subaltern speak?') provides valuable consideration of the problem of whether the marginalised can speak, but this is not entirely appropriate to the context of Margolles' work with the corpses of marginalised people: she focuses primarily on the processes that occur after death, and although the problem of the subjects' 'speaking' may be interpreted metaphorically, I considered other theoretical approaches more fitting.

It has not been possible to include a fully exhaustive retrospective of works for various reasons. Firstly, some works, especially those produced early in the artist's career and exhibited in non-official spaces, were shown only for brief periods of time and, in these examples, photographs of them are not available. More recent works that have been reviewed in the art press (in publications such as *Flash Art International*, for example), are often accompanied by only a small photograph and a short descriptive text as opposed to a more substantial essay. I have not included these because I considered the information in these sources insufficient to write a fair and detailed analysis of the work. A complete biography of Margolles' solo and group exhibitions, and a selected bibliography on the artist, are available on the Peter Kilchmann Gallery web site.² The other major restrictive factor has been the practical and financial impossibilities of viewing works in person: Margolles exhibits all over the world (most recently China, Spain, Austria, and the U.S., and she has recently had an exhibition at the Peter Kilchmann gallery in Zürich during January and February

² This Zürich-based gallery represents the artist. The web site is located at: <http://www.peterkilchmann.com>

2009), which makes viewing every work she produces extremely difficult.

Furthermore, if only one work is shown in a particular location (as with the recent Zürich exhibition), it is hard to financially justify the cost of travelling to view it in person. As a result of this I have attended only two exhibitions of Margolles' work in person (*127 cuerpos* at the Düsseldorf Quadriennial in 2006, and *Sobre el dolor* and *Sin título [fluidos]* at the Liverpool Biennial, also in 2006). Many reviews of Margolles' works are fairly limited in size and scope, so my analysis has been based on sources that devote detailed and critical attention to the works. I made several attempts to contact the artist to arrange an interview, which, unfortunately, were unsuccessful. Taking these limitations into account, this study will devote attention to a selection of works from throughout Margolles' career and provide a balanced examination of the themes they address, within theoretical and historical contexts. Chapter One will establish a theoretical framework for looking at the social element of Margolles' work, through an examination of relevant aspects of the sociology of the body, the sociology of death, and enquiries around the 'Mexican cultural attitude towards death'. Chapter Two will explore the aesthetics of death. Margolles' work will be situated within a long tradition of representing death and the corpse in visual culture, which is not specific to Mexico, as this chapter will show. Chapter Three will examine a selection of works that Margolles has produced outside the setting of the gallery (although they are later displayed in exhibition spaces), and Chapter Four will look at works that Margolles has produced in the more restricted, private spaces of the morgue and the studio. Chapter Five will broaden in perspective to place Margolles within the wider contexts of the globalisation of contemporary art, the international art market, and political events in Mexico during the late twentieth century. Chapter Six will draw together and briefly meditate upon the principal themes that have arisen

in my exploration of Margolles' art works, such as the apparent absence of the body, individual and social bodies, theoretical perspectives, Margolles' relationship to the international art scene, and the tension between the social message and the aesthetics of death as strong forces within her work.

There is, to date, no large-scale academic study on Margolles. Critical material on the artist comes in the form of essays included in exhibition catalogues of her solo exhibitions (*Muerte sin fin*, Frankfurt, 2004, and *127 cuerpos*, Düsseldorf, in 2006), reviews of exhibitions in art journals such as *Flash Art International* (which are often very short), and entries in catalogues for group exhibitions (such as *Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, in New York, 2002, and later Berlin and Mexico City). The most useful critical essays on Margolles have been written by the Mexican cultural critic, Cuauhtémoc Medina (please refer to bibliography for publication details).

I have used US spellings when quoting titles (e.g. the exhibition 'Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries', which first opened in the US) and in citations; the rest of the document uses British spellings. The author-date system of citation and referencing is used throughout.

Chapter One

From Social Corpus to Social Corpse: Social Issues in Teresa Margolles' artwork

Teresa Margolles (b. 1963) began her career as one of the founding members of the SEMEFO collective in 1990 (Sierra 2004: 205) and has been working as a solo artist since 1998.¹ The group started as a heavy metal band that staged highly confrontational performances. Later, the creative focus changed, and Margolles and the group's other members (Arturo Angulo, Carlos López and Mónica Salcido) channelled their energy into producing art installations that meditated upon the post mortem disintegration of the physical body, an interest that Margolles has continued to explore in her solo career. The name SEMEFO is also the acronym of *Servicio Médico Forense* (Forensic Medical Service), the name of the organisation that collects unclaimed corpses in Mexico City and delivers them to the morgue. According to Margolles, this name gives rise to two potential layers of interpretation:

Phonetically, the word sounds strong and dry – it is a bureaucratic acronym like many others in Mexico City. Conceptually, however, the name SEMEFO represents this city, the largest in the world, which – like the morgue – is a great funnel through which hundreds of bodies fall into a very small space. (Gallo 1997: 62)

The name of the collective connects their work with the contexts in which they operate: the morgue, and Mexico City, which they link explicitly. The physical space of the morgue itself thus becomes a microcosm of the sprawling megalopolis that provides its social backdrop, and Teresa Margolles has used human corpses to focus the viewer's attention on the central themes that concern her, one of which is social injustice as manifested by the persistence of the uneven distribution of wealth and

¹ I will be using the term SEMEFO throughout to refer to the collective of artists to which Margolles belonged, and the acronym SeMeFo to refer to the organisation in Mexico City that collects corpses and delivers them to the morgue.

resources in Mexico despite the promises of successive governments to address the country's deepening economic and social problems. These themes are present in many of her art works.

Mexico in the 1990s: the backdrop to Margolles' artistic production

The reign of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) party, that had held power since the end of the Mexican Revolution some 70 years before, was brought to a close in 2000 with the election of PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional) candidate Vicente Fox, who took office in December of that year (Gallo 2004: 6). This event marked the end of a long period of monopoly rule, which had begun in 1934 with the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, and it was hoped that the new political era would resolve the discontent of many Mexicans with the country's economic and social problems, and the failure of successive governments to remedy them.

Upon his election into office in 1988, President Carlos Salinas' PRI government had promised to deliver economic stability for Mexico. One of the major components of this policy was to be the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), unveiled by Salinas in 1992 (Skidmore & Smith 1997: 258). This agreement, which Mexico was to enter into in collaboration with Canada and the United States, was to implement measures such as reducing trade barriers and tariffs in order to facilitate free trade, and the Mexican government promised that this would improve both Mexico's economic situation and her position in the global economy. The intention was to 'forge one of the largest trading blocs in the world – with a population of 370 million and combined economic production of approximately \$6 trillion' (Skidmore & Smith 1997: 258), by opening Mexico up in a reversal of the import-substituting industrialisation policies which had been designed in order to protect Mexican

agriculture and industry from being weakened by an influx of foreign goods. The promised economic stability initially failed to materialise. Indeed, as Gibler points out, 'the prime distinguishing characteristic of the Mexican economy is inequality' (Gibler 2009: 94). The financial crisis of December 1994 resulted in a devaluation of the peso, which, according to Brian Hamnett, 'deepened the already widespread disillusion throughout the country' (Hamnett 1999: 291). Mexico had attracted foreign investments worth a total of \$70 billion between 1989 and 1994, but only a meagre '10 percent of this actually made its way into the economy' (Fusco 2001: 63). Early in 1995, Mexico received bank loans totalling \$50 billion and a rescue package from the US under President Clinton, and implemented economic stabilisation policies (Hamnett 1999: 192). The negative impact of free trade on Mexico in both economic and human terms has been noted: Immigration from Mexico to the United States has, according to Lida, 'more than doubled' (Lida 2008: 122) since the implementation of NAFTA, and continues to increase. He reports that in 2003, 'Mexican migrants sent home over \$13 billion' (Lida 2008: 122), and explains that:

NAFTA creates incentive for big business to relocate to Mexico, where labor and environmental protections are lax and seldom enforced. It also uproots Mexico's small farmers and manufacturing workers and carries them off to the maquilas and the United States, where they labor without the documentary sanction of the state – thus becoming "illegal aliens". NAFTA creates a transnational underclass of economically destitute people, in many cases indigenous, who become second-class citizens both in their own country and in the United States. (Lida 2008: 123)

Gibler affirms this view, describing Salinas' principal economic plans as 'actions designed to create poverty' (Gibler 2009: 96). The signing of NAFTA created the opportunity for the privatisation of communal lands, which had the effect of 'cull[ing] from the Mexican countryside a mobile harvest of migrant day labourers and maquila workers' (Gibler 2009: 96), thereby creating a new super-rich elite (this is also noted

by Fusco [2001], see p. 11 of this chapter). The effect has been extreme. According to Gibler:

By the time the benefits of Salinas's economic design had time to trickle down, two million farmers had left their land, poverty had risen from 45 to 50 percent of the entire population, and some 3,300,000 children under the age of 14 had been forced to work. (Gibler 2009: 97)

A large number of *maquiladoras* – huge industrial plants manufacturing technological goods such as computer parts - were constructed in cities such as Ciudad Juárez, situated along the Mexico-US border, and the country saw an increase in investment in the border region. Many Mexican workers migrate to the northern cities in search of work in the *maquiladoras*, and often live in poor accommodation in the shantytowns that have appeared to house this growing population. These areas lack facilities such as street lighting and are unsafe, especially when we consider that a relatively high proportion of *maquiladora* workers are female (supposedly favoured because their slender fingers are more suited to working with the types of machinery used in these factories). The disappearances and murders of hundreds of young women in this region have received attention worldwide, and this phenomenon has become inextricably associated with the *maquiladora* towns. Teresa Margolles travelled to this region to produce a work entitled *Lote Bravo* (2005) in order to draw attention to the *desaparecidas*, who continue to increase in number, often with little hope of the crimes being solved or the perpetrators brought to justice, a phenomenon that John Gibler has called 'an epidemic of brutality that goes unchallenged and unpublished' (Gibler 2009: 82). Melissa Wright states in her 2005 study that:

Hundreds of women and girls [...] have died violent and brutal deaths in Northern Mexico and [...] several hundreds more [...] have disappeared over the last ten years. Many of the victims reveal patterns of ritualistic torture and serial murders. Others appear to be victims of domestic violence, drug-related violence, random sexual violence and the like. (Wright 2005: 277)

Wright points out that the true numbers of murders and disappearances are unknown, with official statistics differing from figures estimated by scholars and protest groups. Gibler (2009) reports that hundreds of women have been murdered in the state of Chihuahua alone, with hundreds more disappeared, and some other Mexican states not even attempting to count the number of unsolved murders of women (Gibler 2009: 82). Protests have aimed to draw attention to the 'political disregard and lack of accountability, at all levels of government, in relation to this surging violence against women' (Wright 2005: 277-8). This thrusts into the spotlight entrenched social problems in Mexico, such as widespread violence against women and the persistence of cultural norms that tolerate it; and widespread corruption in the political sphere. Wright reports that it took until 2004 – 11 years after the disappearances began – for attention to be received from those in power:

They have [...] finally provoked a response from the current President, Vicente Fox, who at International Women's Day celebrations in Mexico City, on March 8, 2004, declared that he would use all of the power of his office to punish the criminals while calling upon the Chihuahua governor to correct the incompetence of the state's juridical system. (Wright 2005: 282)

Vargas points out in a 2004 report of this event, however, that there was a notable lack of high-profile figures from politics, art, sport and science, with dozens of chairs being removed from the hall minutes before the meeting began (Vargas 2004).² This perhaps indicates that Vicente Fox's initiative was not being taken entirely seriously. An Amnesty International report published in 2003 lists a catalogue of examples of incompetence and negligence on the part of the authorities responsible for investigating the murders, including cases of falsified evidence, ignored leads, harassment of victims' relatives and intimidation of human rights defenders (Amnesty

² Vargas, Rosa (2004) 'Toda la fuerza del Estado para aclarar los crímenes de Juárez', available at <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/03/09/017n1pol.php?origen=index.html&fly=1> last accessed 07/08/08

International 2003). A significant factor that has no doubt contributed to the inadequacy of official statistics on the Ciudad Juárez murders, is that:

Any examination of violence against women as a human rights violation needs to be based on data that is broken down by sex, something which was not done for almost ten years, and to follow a methodology that includes looking at the reality of women's human rights, the justice system, gender and the victims. (Amnesty International 2003: 81)

Amnesty International developed its own database using information from several sources including official figures, legal and academic documents and the testimonies of the victims' families (Amnesty International 2003: 81). The report identifies correlations in factors such as age and occupation of the victims - they tend to be in their late teens and early twenties, with the majority being students or *maquila* workers (Amnesty International 2003: 83). In some cases the type of violence inflicted on the bodies (often sexual) is similar between individual cases (Amnesty International 2003: 83-4). Another major obstacle to solving these crimes, is the apparent 'lack of rigour in the procedures for recording when a woman has been located' (Amnesty International 2003: 85), which has given rise to uncertainty as to the true number of women who remain unfound. This is further compounded by the fact that:

For ten years, the authorities refrained from making public a full list of women who had been reported missing. An important gap in the data received is the fact that age is missing from many of the records. (Amnesty International 2003: 86)

This clearly makes it difficult to link cases of missing women with unidentified corpses and remains. As noted earlier, Margolles has travelled to Ciudad Juárez to produce a work entitled *Lote Bravo*. This is the name of one of the locations where

bodies have been found (Amnesty International 2003: 20). This work will receive further attention in Chapter Three.

The 1990s saw many economic problems for Mexico. Rubén Gallo asserts that the decade ‘was the most tumultuous in Mexican history since the Revolution ended in 1920’ (Gallo 2004: 1). This period also saw an increase in crime and violence, much of which was connected to the narcotics trade. Corruption was endemic among both high and lower level officials, among them Jorge Salinas de Gortari (older brother of the 1988-94 Mexican President Carlos Salinas), who was imprisoned after being charged with corruption (Skidmore & Smith 1997: 261). The majority of foreign investment during the presidency of Salinas had gone into stocks and bonds, instead of being used to strengthen the country’s ailing economy. A chain of events then unfolded which led to economic collapse during the mid-1990s. According to Coco Fusco:

Twenty-four billionaires emerged in Mexico during this period [Salinas’ presidency], and around them a new technocratic elite [...] At the end of the Salinas presidency, after the assassination of favored candidate Luis Donaldo Colossio and revelations of corruption that linked the president to the drug trade, the Mexican stock market collapsed, the peso suffered its third devaluation since 1982, and the country’s middle class and poor were decimated. (Fusco 2001: 63)

Therefore social and economic inequalities have remained entrenched in the country, despite the promises of successive governments to address these and other problems. The persistence of the gulf between rich and poor has drawn many immigrants from rural areas into the cities in search of employment. In Fusco’s words, a reaction to this has been that ‘the more the poor occupy public space, the more the rich barricade themselves behind gates, elaborate alarms systems, and private security forces’ (Fusco 2001: 63). In the exhibition of Teresa Margolles’ art works we see the artist’s

intention to relocate the poor within one facet of the public arena (i.e. the gallery space), thereby attempting to transcend the divide between rich and poor which is entrenched in the overcrowded milieu of Mexico City.

It is extremely difficult to find accurate crime statistics for the Mexican capital, and it has been pointed out in one study that, in any case, much crime remains unreported.³ David Lida asserts that homicide is better documented than other types of crime such as robbery, giving a figure of 710 homicides in Mexico City for the year 2004 (Lida 2008: 208). It is, however, worth mentioning his comparison of the Mexican capital with the US city of Washington DC, in which 218 homicides were documented in the same year: 'there are close to twenty million people in Mexico City and only 572,000 in the U.S. capital. Therefore, your likelihood to get murdered in D.C. is far greater than it is [in Mexico City]' (Lida 2008: 208). In the light of this information, therefore, it is debatable whether statistics would be a true representation of the number of crimes committed. It is, however, widely acknowledged that crime became a greater problem during the 1990s, especially in Mexico City. Krause states that:

Without question, the city's most serious problem is the general breakdown of law and order: assaults, bank robberies, car-jackings, taxi-jackings, kidnappings - and policemen on the take - make living here, and traveling from one part of the city to another an often dangerous and terrifying experience. (Krause 1999: 1)

Mexico City's then Mayor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (who held office from 1997 to 1999), was elected on the back of promises to tackle the city's high crime rates. According to Krause, though, his policies failed to increase security and residents of Mexico City become dissatisfied with his administration. He reported in 1999 that: 'opinion polls show that fully 55 percent of those polled now disapprove of the way

³ <http://www.lubbockonline.com/news/121597/LA0654.html> last accessed 06/08/08

Cárdenas is running the city' (Krause 1999: 1). Furthermore, it would appear that even despite a lack of accurate crime statistics, it is agreed by several camps that crime increased during the decade:

There are no good crime statistics in Mexico City. But there's general agreement that serious crime has at least doubled over the past three to four years. Indeed, crime has become so much a part of daily life that one recent poll found that an alarming 18 per cent of the city's residents have been the victim of a crime in the last three months alone. Today, no one - not even Mayor Cárdenas - disputes the awful fear that accompanies most of the city's law-abiding citizens when they venture onto the city's streets. (Krause 1999: 1)

The potential explanations for this are many. Krause asserts that:

Some blame Mexico's powerful drug Mafia for creating a climate of lawlessness and violence that's now infected the whole society. Others say it's the juxtaposition of great wealth and great poverty in Mexico City and the desperation of the hundreds of thousands of impoverished city residents thrown out of work during the peso crisis of 1994-95. Still others say that as in Russia, the breakdown of one-party rule in Mexico has led to more freedom but also more crime and a breakdown of day to day authority and control. (Krause 1999: 1)

Clearly, the problem of crime is complex and is an intimidating one to address in practice. In 2002, ex New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani's consultancy firm The Giuliani Group was asked by Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador to advise Mexico City police on how to tackle crime, following the success of his zero-tolerance anti-crime policies in New York City and his handling of the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.⁴ Hanrath states that Giuliani was confident at this time, but corruption (which is very high among the police), a lack of faith in the crime-fighting ability of the police force, and cultural differences will form an enormous obstacle to the reduction of crime:

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2659301.stm> last accessed 06/08/08

With little prospect of justice being done, only 7 percent of assault victims bother to report the crime to the police. Still, even a flawed system of accountability could be crucial to free the Mexican police force from the grip of a tightly knit group of officers known as the 'brotherhood' [...] which for the past 20 years has stood in the way of modern crime fighting. It controls most of the department's operations and takes a cut of policemen's bribes. Ordinary policemen [...] pay to avoid dangerous assignments and bear expenses for uniforms, weapons, vehicle repairs, and even for official paperwork. (Hanrath 2002: 1)

However, as David Lida indicates, Giuliani's report, which was produced in August 2003, was not well received. In fact, he states, it was 'roundly ridiculed by the press, which pounced on two or three of the document's recommendations that perhaps made sense in New York, but were tone-deaf to local realities' (Lida 2008: 212). This perceived inappropriacy of some of Giuliani's recommendations could be explained by the fact that the ex-mayor had made only one public appearance, in January 2003, shielded by his bodyguards as he toured some of the more dangerous areas of the city (Lida 2008: 212). However, Lida points out that most of the suggestions in Giuliani's report were useful: 'three-quarters of its suggestions had to do with updating and reforming the police department, and most of these were spot-on, [such as] the establishment of an independent Internal Affairs division to combat corruption' (Lida 2008: 213). Despite this, though, Lida states that 'five years later there is little evidence that much has been implemented' (Lida 2008: 213).

As we have seen, one of the principal factors that caused the increase in crime and violence in the 1990s was connected to the trade in narcotics, which in Mexico has been a growth area as regards both consumption and trafficking since the 1980s. According to one source, Mexico is 'both a producer and a transshipment point for drugs produced in other countries' (Canak & Swanson 1998: 159). Mexico, although not a major producer of cocaine (it is, however, quite a large marijuana growing

region), is a key link in the chain of distribution from more southerly Latin American producers such as Colombia to the United States, which is by far the world's hungriest consumer of the drug. Gibler asserts that 'Mexico is the largest foreign supplier of marijuana and methamphetamines to the United States and is responsible for 70 to 90 percent of all the cocaine that enters the country' (Gibler 2009: 55). A 1989 statistic produced by the US State Department estimated that during that year, the United States was responsible for consuming '60 percent of the world's illegal drug supply' (Canak & Swanson 1998: 160). Mexico also experiences drug consumption problems. It is reported that 'despite a lack of official statistics, Mexican government spokespeople estimate that there are between 10,000 and 100,000 *drogadicotos* in Mexico' (Canak & Swanson 1998: 161), although they assert that alcohol, glue and solvents are the most heavily used substances (as opposed to cocaine or heroin). Cuauhtémoc Medina claims in an article written a few years later in 2001, however, that this is changing, referring to heroin as 'la droga que en los últimos años ha sustituido a otras sustancias en las preferencias de los bajos fondos mexicanos' (Medina 2005: 341). According a recent United Nations study on global drug trafficking and its effects on crime, drug trafficking 'is undermining national security' in several key geographical areas including Mexico and Central America, and furthermore, 'drug money is used as a lubricant for corruption, and a source of terrorist financing: in turn, corrupt officials and terrorists make drug production and trafficking easier' (United Nations 2008: 1). Gibler examines the problem, stating that 'of all the threats to the state in Mexico, there is really nothing so demonized, so dreaded and despised in the public discourse of politicians, as drug trafficking' (Gibler 2009: 56). He also points out, however, that the transit of such high quantities of drugs through Mexico is in fact facilitated by a certain permissiveness of officials:

Drug trafficking in its present state is only made possible through the active participation of government employees, elected politicians, army generals and commandos, police chiefs and patrol officers, prison guards, and local and federal judges by protecting one set of drug traffickers from another and, importantly, from incarceration [...] government employees protect the most wanted criminals from the law while at the same time carrying out a war against these criminals. (Gibler 2009: 56)

Such widespread involvement from state officials at all levels, aside from making the problem of drug trafficking an extremely difficult one to address effectively, complicates the use of the term 'corruption'. According to Gibler, corruption as an idea

implies an aberration – someone breaking the rules to feed their own private greed. When activities thought of as corrupt become so prevalent in a government that it is impossible to speak of an institution free of them, when corruption ceases to be an aberration and becomes an integral part of the system, it is then no longer accurate to speak of corruption as such. (Gibler 2009: 54)⁵

Cocaine seizures reportedly fell in Mexico in 2006, but according to the 2008 UN Report, this reflects a 'regional trend of seizures being made increasingly closer to source' (United Nations 2008: 74). Clearly, though, drug trafficking continues to cause significant problems in Mexico, and the apparent entrenchment of corrupt activity at all levels of government suggests that change is not yet on the horizon. Currently, kidnapping in Mexico is attracting attention from the international news media. For example, a report by Sky News published on October 21st, 2008, under the headline 'Heads Delivered to Mexican Police', states that:

More people have been killed this year than in all of 2007 with Mexico overtaking Colombia and Iraq with its kidnapping record. However, numbers could be much higher as many rights groups say two or three more kidnappings are committed for each one reported. (Sky News, 21st October 2008)⁶

⁵ For a fuller discussion of the applicability of the notion of corruption to the tolerance of officials towards the drug trade in Mexico, see Gibler (2009), pp. 54-56.

⁶ <http://www.uk.news.yahoo.com/5/20081021/twl-heads-delivered-to-mexican-police-3fd0ae> accessed 21/10/2008

It seems that violent crime continues to be a significant problem for Mexico and shows no sign of abating. According to a recent report by the BBC, the US recently gave an aid package worth \$197 million to help the country combat violent crime and strengthen its justice system.⁷ The persistence of the problem of crime is headline news in Mexico and has caused public outcry. This has been voiced in mass rallies across the whole of Mexico in which hundreds of thousands of people participated in a silent protest against the high crime rates and the perceived inaction and inefficiency of the authorities in dealing with the violence. It is estimated that some '2,700 people have been killed and 306 kidnapped so far this year, mostly in drugs-related violence.'⁸ The case that attracted the most news coverage, though, was not the result of a feud between organised criminals. Businessman Alejandro Marti's fourteen-year-old son Fernando was kidnapped, and later murdered despite his family reportedly having paid a ransom to his kidnappers. In an interview with the BBC,⁹ Alejandro Marti makes reference to the anti-crime rally mentioned above. The disapproval of the population is also happening on a smaller, individual scale. A recent news report followed the story of Mexican truck driver Jesús Martínez, who when stopped by police after driving through a red light in Monterrey, reportedly refused to pay a bribe of 8,000 pesos (the equivalent of about £400) instead of the relatively modest official fine which is about twenty times smaller, equating to approximately £20. Martínez then staged a 14-hour protest in his truck, during which 'relatives and friends blocked one of Monterrey's main avenues for about 90 minutes to protest at rising police corruption in Mexico.'¹⁰ The Mexican Congress has recently agreed to consult on the issue of whether or not to re-introduce the death penalty to Mexico. This is in

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/americas/7764054.stm> accessed 04/12/2008

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/americas/7590272.stm> accessed 04/12/2008

⁹ At <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7868841.stm> accessed 14/02/2009

¹⁰ <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/22/20081204/tod-uk-mexico-police-6d5fb3c.html> accessed 07/12/2008

response to a campaign by the country's Green party, co-ordinated by party deputy Gloria Lavara, who has stated in a report published in early February of 2009 that 'children are being murdered and kidnapped, the current policy is not working.'¹¹

Billboards appeared, bearing the slogan 'Porque nos interesa tu vida – pena de muerte para asesinos y secuestradores' ('Because we care about your life – death penalty for murderers and kidnappers'). Clearly, violence continues to be a thorn deeply embedded in Mexico's side, which, if we take recent events as representative of the scale of the problem, shows little sign of diminishing.

The inevitable result of the increase in the cocaine trade during the 1990s and the consequent increase in violent crime, has been an increase in the number of corpses arriving at Mexico City's central morgue. This is a connection made explicit in art works by SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles, which reveal, using sometimes brutal tactics, the correlation between crime, urban violence, and an increase in violent deaths. Sometimes, bodies cannot be given a proper burial because the deceased's next of kin do not possess the financial means to pay for it, and in other cases corpses may even remain unclaimed and therefore anonymous. Some of these unclaimed corpses have provided the raw materials for Teresa Margolles' art works. Among the catalogue of materials the artist has used are: skin, bodily fluids, artefacts from the morgue such as water that has been used to wash corpses and metal drums used for boiling bones to clean them, and, in one case, a whole human foetus.

Margolles draws the viewer's attention to Mexico City's social problems by using bodies. This has two effects. Firstly, it highlights the persistence of social inequality and uneven distribution of wealth post-NAFTA, and secondly, it draws attention to the increase in crime and violence from the 1990s onwards, showing the members of

¹¹ At <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7866811.stm> accessed 14/02/2009

society who are most affected by it by placing these dead bodies firmly within the sphere of public exhibition. It must be noted here, however, that the majority of Margolles' art works are exhibited in galleries, which limits their viewing to a specific sphere. Gallery-goers make up a relatively small proportion of the population. The artist shows that death is not the great leveller it is often presumed to be, erasing the inequalities and differences between people who occupied different social strata in life. In fact, as her work reveals, social and economic inequalities persist after death as the reality of bodies that cannot be buried due to lack of economic resources, and their fate in mass graves which are filled with the remains of Mexico City's anonymous poor. As stated by the Mexican cultural critic Cuauhtémoc Medina:

A pesar de lo que pretende la sabiduría popular, todos sabemos que la muerte no nos iguala. Las taxonomías sociales vuelven a mostrarse no sólo en las causas de la muerte, sino en el destino de nuestros despojos, la calidad de los ritos funerarios y la atención pública que despierta nuestra ausencia. (Medina 2005: 341)

Teresa Margolles' works are so effectively confrontational because they show directly that which is usually hidden away from mainstream society: the death and disintegration of the body. The artist directly confronts the viewer with images of corpses and, in some examples, actual body parts, and the imprints they leave behind after death. It is partly for this reason that some of her art works contain clear elements of social commentary.

In modern industrialised societies, members of the public (with the exception of individuals in certain professions such as medicine, nursing or funeral direction) do not generally come into direct contact with corpses. Death and sickness tend to be managed in institutions such as the hospital, the hospice and the morgue. This phenomenon has been examined by a number of writers.

The sociology of the body and death

There is a large body of sociological literature around the subject of death and its perception in Europe and the US, which examine specifically the ways in which death and dying are dealt with in modern industrialised societies. Claudio Lomnitz notes that:

The denial of death and the isolation of the dying have been identified by historians of death as core characteristics of Euro-American society of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The premium of preserving the life of the citizen above all else has been a guiding principle not only of medicine but also of the modern state. (Lomnitz 2005: 36)

Anthony Giddens argues that 'the orientation of modernity towards control' leads to what he calls the 'sequestration of experience [which is] directly bound up with the internally referential character of social life and the self. With the maturation of modernity, abstract systems play an increasingly pervasive role in coordinating the various contexts of day-to-day life' (Giddens 1991: 149). The author asserts that death

remains the great extrinsic factor of human existence; it cannot as such be brought within the internally referential systems of modernity. However, all types of event leading up to and involved with the process of dying can be so incorporated. Death becomes a point zero: it is nothing more or less than the moment at which human control over human existence finds an outer limit. (Giddens 1991: 162)

Death defies any structure established by human beings which would attempt to regulate human lived experience, because it is the point at which it is impossible to exert control, arguably rendering human endeavours at social and self-regulation ultimately fruitless, at least in the view of a belief system whose central tenet is the preservation of life. It is this inevitable end to life, embodied existence and subjective consciousness which is so terrifying and gives rise to the obsession with the control

and regulation of death and illness, which is discussed by Giddens. He connects the development of the modern-day hospital with the development of the medical profession, a space where medical skills and technology may be practised and improved. He argues that 'like prisons and asylums, the hospital is also a place where those who are disqualified from participating in orthodox social activities are sequestered, and it has similar consequences in terms of the concealment from general view of certain crucial life experiences – sickness and death' (Giddens 1991: 61). In this way, the sick are kept separate from the rest of the population, and trained medical professionals most often care for them within designated spaces, which effectively place a boundary between the safe realm of the healthy, and the realm of the sick, where the threat of contagion is present. The author observes that 'in pre-modern societies chronic sickness was part of many people's lives and contact with death was a more or less commonplace feature of everyone's experience' (Giddens 1991: 161). It is argued that in modern societies, by contrast, death is 'routinely hidden from view' (Giddens 1991: 161); shifted from the public into the private sphere.¹² Furthermore, Giddens claims that death itself

has become a technical matter, its assessment removed into the hands of the medical profession; what death is becomes a matter of deciding at what point a person should be treated as having died, in respect of the cessation of various types of bodily function. (Giddens 1991: 161-2)

Conversely, it would seem that a shift has occurred recently in industrialised societies, towards the opening up of discussion around the areas of death and illness. This trend is noted by Giddens, and also by Strauss, who asserts that attitudes towards death in industrialised societies are paradoxical:

¹² The privatisation of death is also discussed by Shilling (2003: 164). See pp. 20-21 of this chapter for an examination of his ideas.

Journalists, clinicians and scholars tend to describe death and dying as tabooed subjects; yet there is an increasing literature about these topics [...] one can hardly pick up a newspaper without being plunged into a debate about issues involving some aspect of dying [...] genocide, warfare or just plain one-to-one killing. (Strauss 1993: ix)

The examples given here focus on violent death, but deaths under other circumstances are also receiving closer attention. Giddens states that:

There are various institutional manifestations of such a trend: one is the development of hospices as environments in which death can be discussed and confronted, rather than merely shunted away from general view. (Giddens 1991: 203-4)

Mellor notes the 'apparent contradiction between the *absence* and the *presence* of death in contemporary society' (Mellor 1993: 11). He neatly describes death as 'an unavoidable biological constraint upon various attempts at its cultural containment' (Mellor 1993: 19), a phrase which encompasses the reason for our discomfort at the prospect of our own mortality and perhaps the consequent prevalence of literature surrounding the subject. Chris Shilling has also observed this contradiction, which on one hand contrasts the removal of the sickness and death of bodies away from communities into private spaces such as hospitals and funeral homes, with the 'growing demand for representations of death' (Shilling 2003: 165) in film and television. He also posits that the notion that body projects aimed at health and youthfulness may be seen as a survival mechanism in denial of death, and have taken over the role of religion which had previously provided a way to 'deny the finality of death' (Shilling 2003: 166) through its doctrines on the immortality of the soul. Kate Berridge, whose 2001 study will receive attention later in this chapter, explores this in greater detail.

This assertion that death is inescapable and therefore may trouble individuals who

seek to alter their bodies in search of self-improvement or to delay the onset of ageing, ties in directly with many forms of body modification, for example cosmetic surgery or fitness regimes undertaken with the aim of improving the look of the body in accordance with internalised cultural codes of physical attractiveness. Shilling assesses Peter Berger's discussion of the interplay between 'shared meaning systems' and individual identities, which is central to religious practice:

People must invest their embodied selves with meaning, but these meanings must assume the appearance of an objective reality [...] In this context, *shared meaning systems* become essential for human beings as a way of hiding them from the contingency of their world-building actions and the uncertainty and fragility of their embodied self-identities. (Shilling 2003: 154)

Death thus threatens to disrupt and render meaningless the routines around which we structure our daily lives, and has the potential to challenge people's beliefs about the meanings contained within their embodied selves and their surroundings. Shilling goes on to examine the work of Anthony Giddens, discussing his ideas on the disappearance of the traditional social order as a result of modernity. This, he argues, led to increased reflexivity about death and self-identity:

The self is no longer seen as a homogenous, stable core which resides within the individual [...] Instead, identities are formed reflexively through the asking of questions and the continual reordering of self-narratives which have at their centre a concern with the body [...] Self-identity and the body have become "reflexively-organized projects" which have to be sculpted from the complex plurality of choices offered by high modernity without moral guidance as to which should be selected. (Shilling 2003: 157)

Lifestyle, according to the author, has become central to the concept of embodied identity through a focus on body projects. It is suggested that the body is a work in progress, something that needs to be 'finished':

We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over our

bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into doubt our certainty of what bodies are and how we should control them [...] In the conditions of high modernity, our notion of the body is regularly re-examined and reformed in light of new and incoming information that is gained about the body and its changing limits and boundaries. (Shilling 2003: 159)

In this way, the body is closely tied in with notions of the affirmation of life in defiance of death, attempts to deny its inevitability. This, clearly, makes the contemplation of diseased or dead bodies a disturbing reminder of realities that ultimately cannot be ignored. Death is inescapable, as is the materiality of the body, but the positioning of death as the end of the self is a concept rooted in late twentieth-century Western notions of the primacy of striving for physical perfection through modifications that aim at improving one's bodily condition. Margolles shows that the death of the body cannot be reduced to an end, through her exploration of 'la vida del cadáver', the various processes that come afterwards: post mortem rituals (such as autopsy and washing of the body), decay, and disintegration.

Philippe Ariès' *The Hour of Our Death*, first published in 1977,¹³ chronicles the history of death in Western cultures from the early Middle Ages to the late twentieth century. It is an extensive study of Western attitudes towards dying, death and their associated rituals (such as burial and mourning), and explores the ways in which these cultural attitudes have changed over time with reference to specific literary and anecdotal examples. With regard to the twentieth century, the author looks at the processes of change in attitude which have led to the relocation of illness and death into the hospital and the hospice, that is to say, away from the community, the family environment and into the hands of the medical profession. He states that:

¹³ It was first published in French. I am referring to and citing the English translation published in 1983.

The dying man's bedroom has passed from the home to the hospital [...] The hospital is the only place where death is sure of escaping a visibility – or what remains of it – that is hereafter regarded as unsuitable and morbid. The hospital has become the place of the solitary death. (Ariès 1983: 571)

Kate Berridge (2001) examines the treatment of death in the twentieth century. She, like the commentators mentioned previously, comments on its removal from the community and family environment, into spaces run by professionals, in this case the funeral home, noting the distancing of death from daily life:

A curious anomaly of an age that prides itself on information technology is our basic unfamiliarity with the dead. Where once bodies of our loved ones stayed at home, laid out on trestles in open coffins, visible and visited, now they are spirited away to the fake domesticity of the funeral home. (Berridge 2001: 21)

This is a symptom of a cultural attitude of 'death kept at a safe distance by denial and silence' (Berridge 2001: 5). It must be pointed out that this study is focused specifically on British and North American culture. Nevertheless, it is very useful as an examination of attitudinal shifts, particularly during the late twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first century. Berridge provides some insight into a shift in cultural attitudes that may partially explain Margolles' success outside Mexico. She goes on to discuss twentieth century funerary practices, primarily in the United States, observing a diminishing of the centrality of ritual, which has given ground to a desire for convenience: 'Today death is done by rote, not rites, and in some respects looking back is a depressing reminder of what has been lost. The fast funeral that is cremation suits a society crippled by fear of death, and turns death into waste disposal rather than a rite of passage' (Berridge 2001: 21). The deaths on which Margolles' art works are focused confront the viewer with the reality of what happens to Mexico City's unclaimed corpses. The nameless, forgotten dead are effectively 'waste', both in the

sense that their bodies must be disposed of, which is done by cremation (the 1997 work *Fosa Común* comments upon this), or burial in a mass grave. These bodies may also be considered 'waste' in the social sense, as they tend to belong to individuals who are socially other, who have fallen through the gaps in the social fabric and disappeared from view. Margolles counters this by making both these individuals, and therefore death, visible again. However, it is not the individuals themselves and their individual consciousness – they remain anonymous. In Margolles' earlier work, it is the bodies they once inhabited which are shown. Later in her artistic career, the body itself is apparently absent from view, suggested only by physical traces.

It is telling that we are so offended by the thought of anonymous death and being forgotten by the living. This reveals just how strongly the body and identity are connected in human perception. The thought that our bodies may not be treated as sacred after death through an 'honourable' burial and post mortem rituals and rites of passing such as a respectful funeral as opposed to the anonymity of the mass grave, deeply disturbs us. We are afraid of death not only because it signals the termination of our individual consciousness of self, but also because it heralds the inevitable decay and disappearance of our physical body.

Many of the bodies featured in Teresa Margolles' art works suffered untimely, often violent deaths. The artist removes these deaths from the usually closed domain of the morgue, and places them in view of her audience. Margolles exposes the facts of death, and the dead body. Death is the time when 'embodied persons disappear from view' (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 4), a view of direct relevance to the bodies used by the artist. As indicated earlier, many of the corpses in the Mexico City morgue are anonymous, and some are never claimed by their next of kin. Hallam and Hockey's assertion that 'in contemporary contexts, the threat of death is very much bound up

with the possibility of oblivion' (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 4) is particularly pertinent in this context. According to the authors, this threat brings with it 'the possibility of social erasure and the annihilation of identities' (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 4), effectively, the disintegration of the self as a socially interactive being.

This view is elaborated by Görner and Kittelman (2004), who argue that Margolles effectively de-anonymises the corpses which form the focus of her work. The authors explain the way in which this is achieved: 'Con su intervención artística Teresa Margolles le da vida a lo muerto y lo transporta hacia nuestra percepción, es así como logra salvar a "sus muertos" del anonimato' (Görner & Kittelman 2004: 29).

However, this de-anonymisation only works up to a certain point. The problem with Görner and Kittelman's line of argument is that the corpses are not, as they posit, saved from anonymity, because the only name associated with them is that of Margolles. Their use of the phrase 'sus muertos' only serves to bolster the notion that the bodies' identities are afforded only by the artistic project, that they remain unnamed - literally 'anonymous' - and we only see them because they are being used in Margolles' art works. However, the fact that we are never told the names of the individuals whose bodies are used by the artist, is a statement in itself in that it reiterates the point that, as Medina (2005: 341) has appositely stated, death is not the great leveller it is often perceived to be. The artist effectively appropriates not just the bodies but also the identities of the deceased into her artistic persona, and their continued namelessness reinforces the dehumanising effect of the bodies' unclaimed, unidentified status. Consequently, they remain in fact as anonymous in death as they were in life.

Margolles and the modified body

The term 'body modification', as Featherstone (1999) explains, encompasses a wide range of practices. These range from direct interventions in the flesh such as tattooing, body piercing, scarification, cosmetic surgery, to altering the physical form through eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, to less extreme forms of modification, for example, working out at a gym. Also covered by this term are practices that employ prostheses or garments to alter the shape of the body, such as the wearing of corsets to train the waist, and technology used in modern surgical medicine to improve the body and prolong life, for example, 'pacemaker' devices that regulate the heartbeat by emitting small pulses of electricity. In addition, developments in virtual reality technology and cyberspace are also enabling us to inhabit new spaces and expand bodily horizons. The sociological theorists Anthony Giddens and Chris Shilling both discuss the concept of the body as a project, modified by the individual consciously in accordance with their perception of how it needs to be improved. Featherstone links this phenomenon with consumer culture. Here, Mike Featherstone devotes attention to the ways in which

consumer culture latches on to the prevalent self-preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay [...] and combines it with the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression. Images of the body beautiful, openly sexual and associated with hedonism, leisure and display, emphasises the importance of appearance and the 'look.' (Featherstone 1982: 170)

The author posits that we may employ two categories, the 'inner body' (health) and the 'outer body' (appearance; successful social functioning) (Featherstone 1982: 171) when examining the position of the physical form within consumer culture. It is then proposed that within the sphere of consumer culture, 'the inner and the outer body become conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes

the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body' (Featherstone 1982: 171). The modification of the body also plays a role:

While the body incorporates fixed capacities such as height and bone structure, the tendency within consumer culture is for ascribed bodily qualities to become regarded as plastic – *with effort and 'body work' individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance.* (Featherstone 1982: 177-78, emphasis mine)

All of the forms of body modification mentioned above are practised upon the living body. We can assume that with the majority of these practices, individual agency is central – for example, an individual will make an active decision to get a tattoo or a piercing. There may be input from other people in terms of opinions on which piercing to get, or the design of a tattoo, but the final decision, and therefore the control over the way in which the body is modified, will rest with the individual. Medical body modifications are slightly more complicated in terms of agency, because the advice of a doctor or surgeon is crucial in the decision making process. An individual may be afraid of the risks of undergoing an intrusive surgical procedure, and therefore reluctant to be subjected to it, but will have to weigh up the risks versus the benefits based on medical professional advice.

Teresa Margolles uses bodies that had been modified during life (as opposed to post mortem) in two of her art works: *Tatuajes* (1996), and *Lengua* (2000). *Tatuajes* is a collection of pieces of tattooed skin cut from dead prisoners. According to Demello (1993):

If tattoos make the body culturally visible [...] then prison tattoos, and particularly those on the face, neck and hands, make the body especially obvious, and more importantly, express, to the convict, other prisoners, and the outside world, the social position which that body occupies. (Demello 1993: 10)

Tattooing has been practiced in many cultures across the world, and has a long and complex history. For the purpose of this study I will focus only on tattooing done in prison (as opposed to 'punitive' tattooing done to mark or brand criminals). Demello explores the phenomenon of prison tattooing and its relation to mainstream tattooing culture. She identifies stylistic characteristics that set prison tattoos apart, for example, the use of black ink only (although monochromatic tattoos have to some extent become appropriated by mainstream tattooing culture). This study focuses on male prisoners based in the US; I have so far been unsuccessful in finding any studies relating specifically to Mexican prisoners in the US or Mexico, but Demello's study gives some useful attention to Chicano tattooing. Regarding the kinds of imagery found most commonly in this kind of tattooing, she states that:

One of the most popular prison tattoos is the *loca*, which gives the name of the convict's neighbourhood of origin, or else his gang affiliation. These tattoos are extremely important in prison, as they serve as a reminder of the community to which the displaced convict belongs. They also identify him as a member of a certain group which has important social ramifications when he encounters members of rival groups [...] Christian imagery is also extremely popular in prison, due to the influence of Chicano prisoners who favour such imagery both in prison and on the street, and includes the Passion of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, praying hands, and crosses (such as the 'Pachuco cross', tattooed on the hand between thumb and forefinger). (Demello 1993: 10-11)

Although I have been unable to find documentary evidence of what the subject matter of the prison tattoos exhibited by Margolles was, Demello's study gives useful indications of the most likely kinds of imagery, and also the significance of the prison tattoo as a marker of social and subcultural identity.

The corpse that provided the tongue used by Margolles for *Lengua*, was also reportedly tattooed, but in this case too there is no evidence of what the young man's tattoos were of as only his tongue is displayed. A feature of the organ that grabs the

viewer's attention is the fact that it is pierced. Body piercing is a widespread and highly popular form of body modification, practiced across the social spectrum, although certain piercings are more commonly found than others (the ear lobe being perhaps one of the most popular places on the body). Tongue piercing tends to be practiced more by members of subcultures as a marker of belonging outside the mainstream (the young man to whom the tongue belonged was a punk).

Body modification is not restricted to the living body; the dead body may also be modified. Death is the ultimate modifier of the physical body, because it defies agency.¹⁴ I would suggest that this threat to the concept of agency is a reason why death is both so terrifying and so fascinating. The decomposition of the physical body by the processes of decay that occur naturally after death is symbolic of the disintegration of the self and of our consciousness. Post mortem body modifications may be divided into three categories. The first, as mentioned above, is the natural process of decay. Secondly, processes such as autopsy may be carried out upon the body. This includes the washing of the corpse, a ritual Margolles has shown in some of her artwork, for example *El agua en la ciudad* (2004). Both of these categories of modification of the corpse are carried out without the consent of the individual. There are, however, forms of modification of the dead body that may be done with the agency of the individual. One example of this is plastination, a process that preserves the corpse for thousands of years, thus offsetting the natural decay of the body. The plastinated body provokes no horror at the destruction of the physical form, although the plastinate is rendered unrecognisable by the techniques used to prepare it, which remove external individual identifying characteristics. Embalming is another process that is used to offset physical decay. Berridge observes that this practice is currently

¹⁴ The exception to this is suicide, but it is undocumented to my knowledge whether any of the corpses that feature in Margolles' works belonged to individuals who committed suicide.

popular in the United States (Berridge 2001: 215). The preservation of the body may also occur naturally. This, as stated by von Hagens, happens in environments where the corpse may lie for an extended period of time, for example, 'in an air-tight sarcophagus or in a crypt ventilated with dry air. The same is true for bodies buried in moors where they are preserved by the humic acid found there' (von Hagens 2002: 17). The 'mummies' of the city of Guanajuato, in central Mexico, were preserved by the extremely dry atmospheric conditions and the mineral content of the soil in which they were buried. They were discovered when the bodies were disinterred with the intention of moving them to create more space in the cramped graveyard. The best-preserved bodies (including a male mummy whose 19th-century clothing is intact, and a pregnant mummy) are displayed in a museum in Guanajuato, which is a popular tourist destination.

Is there a 'Mexican cultural attitude towards death'?

Octavio Paz believes that death lacks meaning in modern societies, stating that: 'no posee ninguna significación que la trascienda o refiera a otros valores [...] En un mundo de hechos, la muerte es un hecho más' (Paz 1993: 192). He posits that an uncomfortable relationship with death is maintained, which results in attempted denial:

En el mundo moderno todo funciona como si la muerte no existiera. Todo la suprime: las prédicas de los políticos, los anuncios de los comerciantes, la moral pública, las costumbres, la alegría a bajo precio y la salud al alcance de todos que nos ofrecen hospitales, farmacias y campos deportivos. (Paz 1993: 192-3)

He goes on to show how, in his view, this is unsuccessful:

Pero la muerte, ya no como tránsito, sino como gran boca vacía que nada sacia, habita todo lo que emprendemos. El siglo de la salud, la higiene, los anticonceptivos, las drogas milagrosas y los alimentos sintéticos, es también el siglo de los campos de concentración, del Estado policiaco, de la exterminación atómica y del *murder story*. (Paz 1993: 193)¹⁵

Paz employs this juxtaposition here to illustrate that whilst the advances in technology during the twentieth century have brought new, creative ways to save human life, they have also increased the capacity for its destruction. Both Paz and Giddens identify an attempt to deny or remove death, thereby sequestering it away from public life. Teresa Margolles' work sets out to confront the viewer with the realities of death and decay, and also the effects of social inequality which affect society after the deaths of individuals, things that he or she may prefer to ignore.

Octavio Paz explores his versions of the defining characteristics of Mexican culture, one of those being the Mexican cultural attitude towards death. He presents his view of this cultural characteristic in a chapter entitled 'Todos santos día de muertos'. This view of death, however, is not the one we see in Teresa Margolles' work. An interview with Margolles in an exhibition catalogue refers to SEMEFO's representations of death by comparing them to the traditional view advanced by Paz: 'Ya habíamos estado en la morgue. La idea de la muerte no era al modo florido, místico y heroico de la tradición mexicana, sino como transgresión...' (*Eco: arte contemporáneo mexicano*, 2005: 114). Here, the artist distances her work from this view of Mexican death as cheerful or playful. The *fiesta* is viewed by Paz as a highly important component of Mexican culture, in which the community (as opposed to the individual) is central. This may be contrasted against the centrality of the individual in contemporary Western societies, which Giddens (1991) and Shilling (2003) discuss.

¹⁵ This comment was made by Paz during the late 1940s, which may seem surprising given its subject matter (*El laberinto de la soledad* was written during 1948-49 and first published in 1950. As with Ariès' study, I am referring to the English translation). Clearly, it remains extremely pertinent in today's climate.

Directly comparing these two cultural perspectives is not appropriate, however, firstly because since the earliest publication of *El laberinto de la soledad* Mexico has undergone great economic, social and cultural change, and secondly because to accept Paz's view as representative of Mexican cultural attitudes would be to foster a somewhat homogenising view of Mexican culture. Furthermore, historical events unique to Mexico, and economic and social factors such as the rise in violent crime during the 1990s, globalisation and the growth of information technologies, all undoubtedly contribute to cultural change.

Paz states of the Mexican cultural attitude towards death that: 'Nuestra muerte ilumina nuestra vida. Si nuestra muerte carece de sentido, tampoco lo tuvo nuestra vida' (Paz 1993: 189). This point is further advanced in a comment about violent death, a subject which is dealt with explicitly by Teresa Margolles: 'Por eso cuando alguien muere de muerte violenta, solemos decir: "se la buscó"' (Paz 1993: 189). According to this view, the nature of one's death should reflect one's behaviour during life, as a punishment or a reward depending on the conduct of the individual. It is necessary to ask whether this notion is valid or relevant within the context of recent events such as the increase in violence (and violent deaths) in Mexico during the 1990s, and also to enquire as to whether Paz's assertions are indeed a true representation of contemporary Mexican cultural attitudes. Paz gives his view that death lacks meaning in modern society and for the modern Mexican, but goes on to point out a cultural difference between Mexican, and European / North American cultural attitudes towards death:

Para el habitante de Nueva York, París o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio [...] la contempla con desdén o ironía: "si me han de matar mañana, que me maten de una vez." (Paz 1993: 193)

He identifies indifference both towards death and life as the key differentiating characteristics of the Mexican cultural attitude. Certainly, the lack of scandal caused in Mexico by Margolles' works could be taken to evidence such an attitude, but we must acknowledge that only a relatively small proportion of the population would be aware of or have the opportunity to view them, therefore we cannot assume that the attitudes of the art-viewing public may be extrapolated to the entire Mexican population.

Paz refers to the *Día de muertos* (Day of the Dead) festival, the aspect of Mexican culture which is perhaps the most familiar to non-Mexicans and which may give rise to the perception that Mexican culture is characterised by an affinity with death.¹⁶ He states that objects related to the Day of the Dead celebrations such as sugar skulls and grinning skeleton figurines make fun of death and of life and serve as an 'afirmación de la nadería e insignificancia de la humana existencia' (Paz 1993: 194), thus stripping us of our pretensions. He goes on to argue, however, that 'toda esa fanfarrona familiaridad no nos dispensa de la pregunta que todos nos hacemos: ¿Qué es la muerte? No hemos inventado una nueva respuesta' (Paz 1993: 194). Paz makes a statement that supports the stereotypical assumption of Mexican culture's particular affinity with death:

Nuestras relaciones con la muerte son íntimas – más íntimas, acaso, que las de cualquier otro pueblo – pero desnudas de significación y desprovistas de erotismo. La muerte mexicana es estéril. (Paz 1993: 195)

In relation to Paz's affirmation that eroticism is not a component of the fabled Mexican attitude towards death, it is worth noting Margolles' interest in theorists such as Georges Bataille. Bataille's 1957 work *L'Erotisme* ('Eroticism') strongly relates

¹⁶ Juanita Garciagodoy (1998) also explores this.

the experience of viewing or being in the presence of a corpse, to the erotic realm. The following chapter contains an in-depth exploration of Bataille's ideas on this subject. Margolles adapts these ideas to the social context of her art works, so that they embody facets of both her social and aesthetic concerns.

Paz criticises North American and European cultural attitudes towards death as a 'noción incompleta e hipócrita' (Paz 1993: 195), and links the fascination of the press and the public for graphic descriptions and images of violence with his view that these cultures do not share the Mexican 'relaciones íntimas' (Paz 1993: 195) with death, i.e. a supposed 'closeness' to death based on assumptions from outside Mexico about the cultural attitude towards death, and observations of festivals rooted in pre-Hispanic traditions such as the Day of the Dead. It could be argued, though, that Paz is reinforcing this stereotyping of Mexican culture. I would posit that this aspect of Paz's discussion of Mexican culture has become outdated as a result of more recent social circumstances such as the increase in violent crime. For example, the highly popular tabloid crime magazine *Alarma!*, published since 1963, presents page after page of unrelentingly gory images that challenge the view of Mexican death as playful or light-hearted. The Mexican photographer Enrique Metinides famously photographed car crashes and murder victims. These images are explicit depictions of violence that contradict and outdate Paz's earlier assertion. This and the lack of scandal surrounding Teresa Margolles' exhibitions in Mexico City may suggest a desensitisation to violent images, which could be situated alongside Paz's pinpointing of a cultural attitude of indifference towards death. I would suggest that, rather than Mexicans being de-sensitised to images of death, it is we in the West who are *over-sensitised* (Ariès and Giddens both devote a lot of attention to the 'sequestration' of death in Western cultures). Claudio Lomnitz argues that Mexican cultural attitudes

towards death are most often understood as a symptom of the combination of the dual influences of pre-Hispanic tradition, and Catholicism:

Mexico's adoption of Death as its national sign stands apart from the models of fascist Japan, revolutionary Iran, early-modern Spain, or contemporary Palestine in that bravado in the face of death is not geared to a project of imperial expansion or national liberation, to religious sacrifice or the qualities of a disciplined nobility. It is instead meant to be a *popular* characteristic deployed in everyday life. Moreover, Mexican attitudes toward death are generally understood as peculiarly powerful instances of cultural hybridity or *mestizaje*, an area of life in which indigenous and popular culture has enveloped and transformed the culture of the colonizer. In this respect, Death occupies a peculiar, if not a unique, position. (Lomnitz 2005: 40)

However, he attributes the current prominence of death as a national symbol with greater proximity to a more recent period in Mexican history: the Mexican Revolution, which he describes as 'a bloodbath' which was 'displayed by a foreign press in portrayals of "Mexican" violence as an inbred national flaw that came straight down from the Aztecs' (Lomnitz 2005: 43). This would seem to suggest that the perception of a direct link between Mexico's pre-Hispanic cultural traditions, with more recent events, by observers from outside Mexico, has existed as a stereotype for some time. Following the end of the Revolution in 1920, death was embraced as a national cultural symbol, and images from the Aztec past were appropriated into its promotion by, as Lomnitz puts it, 'a generation of revolutionary intellectuals [who] found in them, and in their ritual elaboration during the Days of the Dead, a source of pride and a blueprint for Mexico's modernist revolution' (Lomnitz 2005: 43). Lomnitz points out that the prominence of death, though not unique to Mexico, occupies a slightly different position in cultural representation as a symptom of Mexico's mixed indigenous and Hispanic cultural heritage, and historical political events that have occurred in the country. These influences (although it must be pointed out that Mesoamerican attitudes towards death, the afterlife and treatment of

the dead were certainly not homogeneous) have produced not only racial but cultural hybridity. As Bätzner states on the influence of the Catholic religion in the country:

Catholicism shaped Mexico together with colonialism and wars of liberation. It finds expression in the popular belief in miracles and in saints venerated, where indigenous, pre-Hispanic rituals have also survived. (Bätzner 2006: 175)

This popular cultural and religious syncretism is best exemplified by the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who 'not only replaced Tonantzin, the Aztec mother earth goddess, but literally supplanted her site and feast day' (Bätzner 2006: 175). This brown-skinned figure has become an iconic image in Mexican Catholic practices. Another aspect of Catholicism that deserves particular attention is the worship of saints and relics. This custom, which dates back to the 2nd century (Bätzner 2005: 175), revolves around the removal and preservation of a part of a saint's body, so that it may be displayed at a religious site (such as a cathedral) and viewed by worshippers. There is an obvious parallel here with some of Teresa Margolles' artwork, most notably *Lengua* (2000), a pierced tongue displayed in a case on a small metal stand. The symbolic power of the relic is not diminished by the fact that Margolles has never professed any religious or spiritual inclinations. Her displays of disembodied fragments are thus a physical, secular life after death, not a spiritual one. The mediaeval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) rejected the Cartesian notion that the body and the soul are separate, which assumes that the soul can exist without the body although they are connected. Aquinas believed that the soul and the body are inextricable and cannot exist independently of each other. Most important, though, is Aquinas' view on the afterlife, according to which the human being disintegrates after death due to the physically grounded nature of the soul. Stump explains that:

Since Aquinas thinks of a human being as a composite of matter and soul and since he recognizes that dead human bodies decay, he does in fact believe that a human being falls apart at death. The disembodied soul which persists is not the complete human being who was the composite but only a part of that human being. (Stump 2003: 211)

Margolles is interested not in the soul, but the body. Her 'life of the corpse' is a physical afterlife grounded in the inescapable materiality of the body. Margolles' relics do not venerate the bodies of saints, however; we do not find out whom these bodily remains once belonged to, they are anonymous, collectively symbolic of Mexico City's forgotten dead.

Pre-Hispanic cultural notions on the body have continued to influence Mexican culture despite conquest by the Spanish and the advent of Catholicism. Heriberto Yépez theorises the way in which Mexican concepts of the body throughout history continue to inform cultural production, especially in the realm of visual culture. He asserts that 'Mexican culture is closely associated with the skeletal, lost, half-dead, concealed and decomposed body' (Yépez 2006: 192), and explores the concept of the 'Remains', namely:

The post-mortem body (or rather, the transformation of the body). We could also view it as the 'residual body' or even the 'post-body', since it has become a no-man's-land, a nowhere or a wasteland where it is neither a living body nor strictly a cadaver. The Remains are a profane relic and a piece of counter-flesh. (Yépez 2006: 192)

The author's use of the word 'relic' here stands as both a reminder of, and a counterpoint to the Catholic tradition of saint worship; it is strongly suggested that these Remains are not holy. He connects the Remains to Antonin Artaud's notion of the 'body without organs'. This is a re-working of the notion of bodily identity and mortality, in which the subject breaks down and re-composes itself. This clearly

echoes the Nagualistic integration and re-integration of the essence of the shaman into different bodies, although he does not transform his own body. Following this line of thought is the notion that eventually, in death and the subsequent breakdown of the body, ‘the effects of gravity are seen [...] as the propelling impulses of the creative process, precipitating happy transitions from one phase to another’ (Artioli 2004: 145-6). Here are evidenced the interlinked concepts of ‘body without organs’, Nagualism, and Margolles’ ‘life of the corpse’. Yépez traces the development of the concept of the Remains from pre-Hispanic sources, citing as one example the myth of the fall of the shaman Quetzalcóatl, in which the young god Tezcatlipoca encourages him to look into a mirror whilst drunk and subsequently descends into bestiality, causing his eventual flight in shame at his actions.¹⁷ The author establishes the Judaeo-Christian interpretation of this myth, and its pre-Hispanic cultural origin, at opposing philosophical poles. The Judaeo-Christian view of the soul and the body as separate, that carries with it notions of the purity and virtue of the spiritual life as opposed to the sinful associations of the flesh and base, instinct-driven corporeality, is thus challenged by this myth, in which the fall is not a descent into sin but a caution against distancing oneself from the interconnectedness of body and soul. As Yépez puts it, Quetzalcóatl has been taught a valuable lesson, that ‘the fundamental truth is the body and its loss’ (Yépez 2006: 196). This concept is at the heart of all Teresa Margolles’ artwork. Her notion of ‘the life of the corpse’ indicates her obsession with physicality, a bodily afterlife that reveals the post-mortem phenomena of decay and the residues left behind when the body is fragmented. The other originator of Mexican cultural attitudes towards death, according to Yépez, is the concept of Nagualism, which he describes as ‘the ability to exist simultaneously or intermittently in two

¹⁷ For a more detailed recounting of this story, see Yépez (2006) pp.195-6.

bodies' (Yépez 2006: 196). This is tied in with shamanic practices in which, for example, 'in a dream, a shaman has an animal double' (Yépez 2006: 196) although the shaman may not actually transform his physical body into that of an animal. Instead, there is a 'Co-Body', with the use of secretions such as 'ihíyotl', which Yépez describes as 'a secretion of the spirit and the body that enters into another being or which is received by this other being's body' acting as a conduit between the two (Yépez 2006: 196). The author also explicitly links the work of Teresa Margolles with this pre-Hispanic cultural tradition, relating the concept of the 'Co-Body' to the artist's examination of 'whether the posthumous part can speak on the Bio-Whole' (Yépez 2006: 197). Yépez is in no doubt of the principal influence on Margolles' artwork: '[it] emerges to a large extent from the subconscious substratum of ancient Mexican concepts of death and the body' (Yépez 2006: 197). The artist's work with body parts and residues thus forms, in his view, part of a tradition that extends back through hundreds of years of Mexican cultural history, re-working them within the context of Mexico during the 1990s and beyond, in the shadow of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the social problem of murders and violence associated with the trade in narcotics. The author asserts that:

Another of her [Margolles'] great achievements has been to show how drug trafficking has altered our relationship with the corpse and death, since drugs are not only responsible for placing those executed the day before – according to their various categories: those found in boxes and in shelters, beheaded etc. – on our television screens and in the pages of our newspapers, but also stirred up renewed popular debate on death, an obvious manifestation of which is the recent dramatic rise in interest in 'Santa Muerte', Saint Death. (Yépez 2006: 199)

This influence from recent Mexican history thus becomes part of the culture of representation of death in Mexico through Margolles' artwork. The two combine most explicitly in *Tarjetas para cortar cocaína* (1998), which will receive further attention

in Chapter Three. This could be interpreted as a symptom of the ever-shifting nature of cultural concepts, which are transcreated within new sociohistorical contexts. As Yépez puts it, 'Mexico does not have a series of unchanging traits [...] Mexico is metamorphous, as is to be expected of a culture with deep shamanic roots' (Yépez 2006: 199). The visual exploration of the recent change in attitudes towards death and the body brought about by the brutality of the narcotics trade is a new, if intensely problematic, element that has been incorporated by Margolles into the long history of representation of the dead body in Mexico.

Gallo holds a similar view, claiming that 'Margolles's work can be read as an effort to draw attention to the breakdown of the taboo against corpses in Mexican society and to its dehumanizing effects' (Gallo 2004: 126). In addition, the magazine *Alarma!*, discussed by Medina (2000) could be seen to reflect the disintegration of this taboo.

However, the assumption that such a taboo has existed in Mexico is problematic.

Yépez argues that such magazines are, in fact, part of Mexican popular culture's 'long tradition of displaying corpses' (Yépez 2006: 199). Arguably Gallo's view is tied in with the mythification of the Mexican cultural attitude towards death as seen from outside Mexico. Gallo is Mexican but based in the US, therefore it is appropriate to ponder the question of whom he is writing for. Is his audience more likely to be predominantly US based or Western, as opposed to Mexican? Is he rooting his argument in a cultural stereotype, a rather homogeneous view of Mexican culture? I would argue that to a certain extent, Gallo's vision of a 'peculiar fascination with death' (Gallo 2003: 212) in Mexican culture might be viewed in this way. Could Gallo be unconsciously writing with the stereotypical perceptions of a Western audience in mind and essentialising Mexican culture? Furthermore, although the context for Margolles' work is Mexican, as Yépez points out, she speaks with a

universal language by using the ‘human fundament, the body’ (Yépez 2006: 199). The body is common to all humanity, as is death. Margolles’ work operates on these multiple levels, as a stark reminder of our inescapable physicality and mortality, and a window into the human fallout of the Mexican drugs trade and the injustice of social inequality.

Paz’s text has also been accused of essentialising Mexican culture. Juanita Garciagodoy’s 1998 book on the Mexican *Días de muertos* aims, in the author’s words, to explore ‘its place as an integral part of the Mexican popular imaginary’ (Garciagodoy 1998: 51). Garciagodoy discusses various texts that deal with the Day of the Dead, including Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad*, which she accuses of ‘essentializ[ing] “el mexicano”’ (Garciagodoy 1998: 51). She later draws attention to Paz’s comments on the Mexican cultural attitude towards death, for example that ‘el mexicano is indifferent to death because he is indifferent to life’ (Garciagodoy 1998:52), and sharply criticises the author’s position:

Paz inserts some defensible generalizations and theories based on research and personal experience, but they are so thoroughly surrounded by unfounded platitudes and unflattering stereotypes that I warn the reader who has had little contact with members of Mexican popular classes that the portrait is not entirely reliable. (Garciagodoy 1998: 52)

Clearly, the author is advancing a highly personal viewpoint on this matter, but Garciagodoy’s rejection of representation of ‘la muerte típica’ may be viewed in alignment with the possibility of reading Margolles’ work also as a rejection of the stereotypical, mythologising view of the Mexican cultural attitude towards death. Garciagodoy usefully summarises this attitude of rejection in the following way, quoting Carlos Navarrete

as deliberately and responsibly refusing to feed ‘the long list of generalisations which have been written on the theme of Death in Mexico [that fuel] the myth of Death and the Mexican being. [...] It is necessary to take in hand the task of demystifying the myth, to question it, and demonstrate the fragility as a component of a premeditated national prototype. (Garciagoday 1998: 52)

Medina provides a broader explanation. He posits that there is more than one factor to consider here, and warns against attributing this to the Mexican cultural stereotype of an assumed or supposed affinity with death or a difference in attitude towards human remains. He states, as an explanation for why the work of SEMEFO and Margolles has provoked a relative lack of controversy in Mexico:

[...] sería ingenuo explicar con alguna clase de relativismo cultural, del tipo de “las diferencias de actitud de la cultura mexicana hacia la santidad de los restos humanos”. Por un lado, las terribles imágenes de Margolles no resultan tan intolerables en una sociedad por demás habituada a una sobredosis de historias de crímenes verdaderos y revistas policiales extremadamente gráficas. Del mismo modo, sería también equivocado ver a SEMEFO como un fenómeno marginal en el mundo artístico local [...] a lo largo de su historia, el grupo gozó de una notable aceptación entre las instituciones, público, curadores y críticos de la ciudad de México. (Medina 2005: 352)

Margolles’ work is a product partly of the artist’s aesthetic sensibilities, and partly a result of its specific historical context as exemplified by phenomena such as the Mexican Revolution and, more recently, the increase in violent crime. The artist, when asked in an interview about how her work relates to the view of Mexican culture being somehow more connected to death, states that:

En términos de la tradición mexicana hacia la muerte, como te había comentado yo soy del norte del país [Culiacán], y eso no es una tradición allá. Nosotros festejábamos más bien Halloween que el Día de los Muertos. Para mí la tradición del Día de los Muertos me parecía ajena, muy poco creíble. En vez de eso, yo creía en el cadáver, el fulano al que le habían dado un balazo, tirado ahí en la mesa. Eso era en lo que yo creía: había un tipo que estaba vivo y que le había dado un tiro a otro tipo. Lo demás era casi como una fantasía, más que acerca de mi cultura norteña. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 92)

According to this explanation, the artist does not see her work as aligned with the traditional view of the Mexican cultural relationship with death. There is nothing stylised about her presentation of the subject. The artist's challenge to the boundary between living and dead bodies confronts the viewer with the brutal physical violence that ended their lives, and the violent social reality these corpses experienced during life. Margolles transgresses this boundary in order to present these bodies to the spectator as symbolic of the persisting socioeconomic inequities which continue to afflict her native country's capital city.

Representations of death and the corpse in Mexican visual culture

Some of the best-known representations of death in Mexican visual culture have been produced by the prolific nineteenth century engraver José Guadalupe Posada. His *calaveras* are his most famous works, but he also produced many engravings depicting murders, natural disasters and unfortunate incidents. Peter Wollen states that:

Above all, it was the *calaveras*, vivid and lively skeletons and skulls with grinning teeth, dancing, cycling, playing the guitar, plying their trades, drinking, masquerading, which seized the imagination of artists and writers. (Wollen 2000: 14-15).

The artists he mentioned here are the Muralists, especially Diego Rivera, who had a strong interest in Posada and considered the engraver's work an example of quintessentially Mexican visual culture, commenting that 'the production of Posada,

free even of a shadow of any imitation, has a pure Mexican quality'.¹⁸ The light-hearted images produced by Posada, however, provide somewhat of a contrast to the brutality of Teresa Margolles' art work, and also to other examples of Mexican visual cultural producers such as Enrique Metinides. The genre of crime journalism, though, stands as perhaps the most garish visual style depiction of death and the corpse in Mexico. Tabloid crime magazines are highly popular publications which may be found on the newsstands in cities across Mexico. Several titles are published, the longest running and most widely circulated example of which is *Alarma!* (other lesser known titles include *Alerta!* and *Enlace!*). *Alarma!* was first published in 1963 and, bar a period of government censorship from 1986 to 1991, has attracted a consistently large readership (Medina 2000: 39). The true crime magazines are filled cover to cover with vivid descriptions of shocking crimes, illustrated with gruesome photographs of unfortunate victims of abuse, mishap and murder. In Cuauhtémoc Medina's words, *Alarma!*

has dumped on its readers (and any curious passersby) an unimaginably fecund supply of rotting corpses, dried blood, open wounds and guilty, suffering or cynical faces. *Alarma!* is a money-making machine, to be sure, but it is also much more than that. It has stayed with us, bringing together pain, death, police work and the dizzying sensations of perverse self-recognition. Its cultural impact cannot be reduced to simple accusations of morbidity or sensationalism. (Medina 2000: 39)

There are several possible reasons for the popularity of true crime magazines, and critics have suggested various underlying cultural, historical or social phenomena which could be viewed as either forerunners or contributing factors to the public's evident taste for these publications.

¹⁸ Rivera, reprinted in Harvey Bennett Stafford (ed.) *¡Muerte!* (2000: 35).

One critic, in a text which explores one form of representation of death in Mexico, the *retratos de angelitos* (portraits of dead children) in Guanajuato from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, suggests a possible reason why images of death may be less likely to be perceived as shocking as they may be elsewhere: the Mexican Revolution. The author argues that the enormous death toll of the 1910-1920 Revolution meant that death and corpses became more commonplace and therefore more visible. Importantly, he reports that during this time, images of dead bodies began to be used in press reports (as opposed to as a family keepsake or *memento mori*). Could it be that the violence of the Revolution desensitised the Mexican public to real life images of gory, broken bodies? Claudio Lomnitz asserts that death 'emerged as a national totem in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution' (Lomnitz 2005: 43). Perhaps this bloody, decade-long conflict habituated Mexicans to the sight of death.

The Mexican cultural critic Cuauhtémoc Medina offers another explanation for the popularity of the true crime magazine in Mexico. He examines its subject matter and gives his view of the reasons for the enduring popularity of the magazine, whose pages are filled with portrayals of brutal deaths: '*Alarma!* views crime as the product of an individual's deviation, an attack of depraved instincts (the bestiality caused by alcohol, drugs, bad company and, especially, lust) against the bastion of Catholic morality' (Medina 2000: 51). Medina suggests that when searching for an explanation as to why these publications filled with gruesome depictions of victims of crime, accidents and misdemeanour remain so popular in the country; we need look no further than Catholicism. Catholic imagery is saturated with bloody images of the tortures and deaths of martyrs and saints, and of course, representations of the agony of Christ on the crucifix.

The *nota roja* crime journalism genre comes under scrutiny in the documentary *El Diablo y la nota roja* (2008). The film, directed by John Dickie, who is English but lives in Mexico, is set in Oaxaca, and follows a crime reporter nicknamed 'El Diablo' around the city. El Diablo works for Oaxaca broadsheet newspaper *El Imparcial*, which was established in 1951. The crime ('policíaca') section may be found in the centre pages of the newspaper, which can be easily removed by any reader whose sensibilities are offended by their content, or who wishes to ensure that the graphic images contained within them are not viewed by a child, for example, without damaging the pagination of the paper. The film examines the somewhat uneasy relationship between crime reporters, the authorities, and the public. The attitude of the paper's managing directors towards the crime pages is not an entirely positive one; the impression is given that *El Imparcial* is a well-respected, serious newspaper and that the sensationalist style of the crime reporting somewhat lowers the tone. However, as the documentary reports, the crime pages are a big seller (they had been removed in the past, and promptly reinstated after sales of the paper plummeted). A street vendor observes that 'cualquier cliente que te compra un periódico, primero que busca es la policíaca'. One reporter asks a question that neatly encapsulates the dilemmas associated with controversial kinds of journalism:

¿Qué es lo que ofrecen los periódicos? ¿Lo que pide el lector, o es el periódico el que está metiendo eso al lector, y lo está acostumbrando a eso?

The chicken-and-egg circularity of this argument makes it impossible to find a straightforward explanation for the popularity of the crime pages. Various reasons are given in the film for the consumption of the *nota roja*, and opinions vary as to whether it is a good thing. A girl who works on a newspaper stand says that 'tenemos que verla para informar a la gente', a comment that presents somewhat of a denial of

her responsibility for the act of her own looking, and others give the reason that they look at these pages to see if any relative or friend of theirs has befallen unfortunate circumstances. These comments from readers make no mention of whether or not they enjoy looking at the images; there seems to be a keenness to avoid accusations of any morbid pleasure to be taken from their consumption. Yet, many look. At the other end of the spectrum of opinion, a family friend of a teenage girl whose suicide with a rifle was reported in the *nota roja* alongside a large, lurid photograph of her body in the location where she was found, states that such a report displays ‘el lado oscuro del ser humano’. There is a strong sense throughout the film that many people disapprove of this genre of reporting and its sensationalising ‘amarillista’ approach, but this is tempered by resignation and a belief that nothing can be done about it. This attitude is also evident with regard to the police and crime investigation authorities. Another man, the death of whose uncle *in flagrante delicto* with a prostitute had been reported under the matter-of-fact headline ‘Buscó sexo, halló la muerte’, when asked his opinion on whether he thought the case should be reported publically, replied ‘mejor que no porque es mi tío’, also saying that ‘no es nada nuevo’. Another family friend of the girl who committed suicide is critical of the *nota roja*:

Aquí en nuestro país, cualquier noticia al periódico, si es buena o es mala, al periódico. Hacen negocio. Pues ¿qué le vamos a hacer? Son las leyes que tenemos.

A certain lack of care by the police and institutions regarding the handling and treatment of human remains is revealed at several moments during the film during which corpses are present, either in the morgue or at locations where they are found (for example, a man’s body is found in a river and the camera follows El Diablo to the scene as the corpse is being removed). The body is not covered up, and is therefore

plainly visible to anyone nearby. The man in the river is put onto a stretcher and placed into the back of a truck without being covered or put into a body bag, and, to refer to the case of the dead girl again, her neighbour states that ‘Al final llegaron las autoridades [...] Levantaron el cadáver y lo sacaron, casi lo exhibieron en la calle’. The visibility of the corpse continues in the morgue itself, where the camera is allowed to enter. The most striking thing about this scene, which is reminiscent of Margolles’ *Autorretratos en la morgue* series of photographs, is that there appear to be too many bodies to be comfortably stored in this space. An autopsy is being performed on one table, and two corpses share another, whilst at the back of the room is a table or platform with several bodies piled up on top of one another. In another scene, El Diablo enters the morgue to take a photograph for a report: a man has been killed in an explosion and his burnt body is displayed. Although access to the morgue itself is restricted, the readers of *El Imparcial*’s crime pages will soon share this privileged gaze. In other scenes, the location of a mass grave (fosa común) is visited. El Diablo describes this area, a piece of wasteland devoid of any markers or commemorative artefacts, as effectively a dumping ground for unwanted corpses that have been left in the morgue:

La fosa común no es un estanque ni nada, es algo directo que ... vienen, escarban en cualquier lado de esta area, escarban y entierran a las personas que dejan allí en el anfiteatro.

This location, a disregarded patch of land where corpses are disposed of, has in one corner a collection of items of clothing and other artefacts. El Diablo indicates that these are ‘pertenencias, a veces, de las personas que vienen enterradas acá en la fosa común’. This brutal reality of what happens to unclaimed corpses is exposed, presented to the viewer, as are all the stories in this film, without voiceover narration.

This allows the viewer to formulate their own opinion and react without suggestions of how this should be done. Here, a parallel may be drawn with Margolles. She, too, reveals the uncomfortable social and physical reality of the direct connection between violence and death, and the perceived carelessness of institutions regarding the handling of human remains.

Another journalist at *El Imparcial* states of the *nota roja* that ‘es el termómetro de lo que está pasando en esa ciudad’. This comment explicitly connects Oaxaca’s social problems with the style in which they are reported. Carlos Monsiváis has commented that this journalistic genre ‘generates a morbidity that is aimed at exorcizing urban violence’ (Monsiváis 1997: 148). Certainly, it may be read as a reaction to, or a way of dealing with the social problem of violence. *El Diablo* makes a revelatory comment:

Yo no me asusto de los muertos [...] a mí un muerto no me asusta ni le tengo miedo [...] Los que tengo miedo es a los vivos. Ellos te pueden robar, te pueden quitar la vida.

This attitude reflects the grim reality of urban violence and its effects. As *El Diablo* says, a dead body can’t cause you harm, but a living one can.

Other examples of representations of death and the dead body in Mexican visual culture are plentiful. César Federico Macías Cervantes (2004) chronicles the history of death imagery in the region of Guanajuato from the end of the 19th century to the mid 20th century, starting with the painted *retrato de angelito* and continuing with the invention and popularisation of photography, which made the *retrato* more widely accessible as a form of commemoration. A more recent example is the work of the photographer Enrique Metinides. Metinides would travel to the scenes of accidents and murders to shoot pictures of the locations and victims uncensored and undisturbed

before the arrival of ambulances and police (a more detailed analysis of his work can be found in the following chapter). In the cinematic sphere, Tommy Lee Jones' modern Western, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) follows the protagonist (played by Jones) as he endeavours to return the corpse of his dead friend, after whom the film is named, to his home to honour a promise. Estrada has been working on the ranch owned by Jones' character Pete Perkins. The film is set in southern Texas, where Estrada is killed whilst looking after his goats: he shoots at a coyote and a nearby border patrolman takes the shots as a threat and kills the man. The story unfolds from a central point, with one narrative moving back through time to explain the circumstances leading up to Estrada's death, and, the other moving forward, following the geographical journey of the corpse and its physical life after death manifested in the journey of decay. The film is unusual in that it shows the corpse at various stages during the process of decay, which Perkins tries to arrest using various techniques such as pouring anti-freeze into the mouth as an improvised embalming fluid. There is also an element of subtle humour, which is particularly evident in a scene at a late stage in the journey. Perkins and the patrolman (whom he has taken hostage to accompany himself and the corpse on the journey into Mexico, in order to right the wrong that was done to the dead man) have crossed the border and are staying overnight at a small settlement in the desert. Melquiades Estrada's corpse is being stored in an outhouse, wrapped up in blankets to avoid damage from the environment or hungry insects. Perkins goes to visit his friend, and unwraps the corpse. A close-up shows the dead man's face as the blankets are carefully removed. His hair is messy, and Perkins, in an act of affection, tries to brush it. Due to the advancing physical decay of the body, the hair comes out. The moment is both sad and darkly comic, and Perkins' attempt at the ritual of brushing the hair to maintain

Estrada's dignity shows that the friendship still exists after death. This corpse has not passed into oblivion, but only because Perkins has broken the law and defied the Texan authorities in order to return it to its rightful place – he has the patrolman exhume it, literally 'rob' the grave. The film contains several scenes of reactions of the living to the presence of the corpse. For example, the first time Perkins sees it (in the morgue, shortly after it has been found, by which time Estrada is estimated to have been dead for a week), he vomits. The patrolman, Mike Norton, reacts in the same way, but more violently as the corpse is more decomposed after having been buried by the Texas judicial authorities and subsequently exhumed. In a scene where Perkins, Norton and the dead man are sat around a campfire, remarks are made by the increasingly sickly-looking Norton about the way the putrefying Estrada smells, and it is pointed out that Melquiades' corpse is being eaten by ants. This direct showing of the processes of decay that occur after death, are the life of the corpse, and there is contact between the dead and the living at every stage of the journey until Melquiades is finally buried in the location he had described to Perkins, his house in a remote valley in the northern state of Coahuila. The dead body is not hidden, nor is it presented filmically in such a way as to exaggerate the shock of seeing it. The film shows the effect of death at an individual level upon the dead body, and upon the life of a person who has been left behind, in this example, a close friend.

Rubén Gallo has posited that the relative lack of controversy surrounding Margolles' work in her native city is a symptom of the much-celebrated Mexican cultural attitude towards death, asserting that 'perhaps Margolles' work [...] should be seen as a modern manifestation of the peculiar fascination with death that has defined Mexican culture and that remains firmly entrenched in Mexico' (Gallo 2003: 212). This view, although, positive, views Margolles not within the contexts of international art or the

long history of the artistic representation of death, but simply as another component of the essentialising interpretation of Mexican cultural production being defined by a supposed affinity with death. Furthermore, this view assumes that Mexican culture is homogeneous. As noted earlier, Margolles herself has stated her position regarding traditional representations of death in Mexico. It must be noted at this point, however, that the artist's interest in corpses pre-dates the creation of SEMEFO. The group's ancestor in terms of a strong interest in the post mortem body was another Mexican artist, Alejandro Montoya. Margolles was, in fact, an assistant to Montoya at some of his early installations (Debroise 2006: 336). Olivier Debroise explains that:

Montoya empezó a trabajar con cadáveres de animales y seres humanos a principios de la década de los ochenta, realizando series de dibujo en extremo violentas [...] En 1984, presentó en el Salón de Espacios Alternativos una instalación grotesca, que incluía perros disecados vestidos con uniformes militares de resonancias Nazis y sacos sangrientos colgados de vigas, la cual causó estupor. (Debroise 2006: 336)

The installation described above was entitled *Tasajos*.¹⁹ The similarities in subject matter between the two artists are clear, even though Montoya was largely focused on drawing, a style of artistic expression in which Margolles has never (at least, never publically) demonstrated an interest. Montoya's work is evidently also highly controversial. Furthermore, he, like Margolles, achieved high-profile recognition outside Mexico (Debroise 2006: 336), most notably in Germany, where Margolles has also staged major exhibitions of her work. Margolles' brief role as assistant to Montoya indicates the dual facets of her interest in working with corpses: a fascination with the aesthetic of death and decay, which is best described by her term *la vida del cadáver*; and the way in which the bodies she uses function as a barometer

¹⁹ This can be translated into English as 'dried / jerked meat', or 'pieces of meat'. The first definition given by the Real Academia Española is 'Pedazo de carne seco y salado o acecinado para que se conserve'.

of Mexico's social problems of increasing violent crime (especially related to the narcotics trade), institutionalised corruption across multiple levels of law enforcement and the judiciary, and seemingly irremediable economic instability.

The artist has commented upon the public nature and the reception of her work with SEMEFO and her later solo exhibitions:

He trabajado durante muchos años, por lo tanto las reacciones han sido diferentes en ciertos momentos de la obra. Hace doce años, en 1990, el tipo de obra que estábamos realizando era completamente agresiva, agresiones físicas directas, y por lo tanto eran muy obvias, justo lo que uno se podía esperar. El hecho que seguimos trabajando y seguimos exhibiendo también nos hizo purificar la obra [...] El público también se adaptó a la nueva obra y pidió más. De alguna u otra manera, siempre hemos sido muy públicos. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 92)

Both true crime publications such as *Alarma!*, and Teresa Margolles' art works, exhibit corpses, and therefore may both be seen to reflect a perceived breakdown in the social fabric. However, to infer anything more than a superficial connection between them would be misguided, as the subject matter is approached from clearly differing perspectives. As explained by Medina, *Alarma!* champions conservative Catholic values by showing, in an extremely graphic manner, what becomes of individuals who do not espouse traditional Catholic morality. Margolles, on the other hand, arguably aims to show this social reality as a forgotten or ignored injustice against those who fall prey to it and end up as anonymous bodies in the Mexico City morgue, becoming yet more additions to the crime statistics. Her work is a call to awareness of the persistence of socioeconomic inequity in post-NAFTA Mexico City, not a moralising sermon on a perceived breakdown of conservative moral values. The perceptible disregard for human remains which is displayed in the pages of the true crime magazines may be taken as symptomatic of a breakdown in the taboo against corpses, which in turn may be read as symptomatic of the social crisis of the

1990s, which witnessed an increase in violent crime. On the one hand, Teresa Margolles' work may be seen as a vehicle for social commentary on the shocking and uncomfortable social reality she thrusts into the public sphere, exposing the inequality and injustice to which the corpses she uses have been subjected. By this token she exposes also the social instability which has arguably resulted from an increase in their frequency as the knock-on effect of the increase in narcotics trafficking and the violent crime associated with it. On the other hand, Margolles may be seen to be taking advantage of this set of social circumstances. By this I mean that without the existence of these circumstances which have brought about the increased crime and murder rate and the increased influx of bodies – especially those of people belonging to less wealthy sectors of society – into the morgue, the artist may not have so easily gained access to the morgue and the raw materials she uses in her art works. Teresa Margolles has access to the activities of Mexico City's morgue because she has trained there and obtained a qualification that allows her to perform autopsies. This, then, means that her access to and entering of the morgue building itself is entirely legitimate. It is probable that Margolles' art would not be so radical in its method and content if it were not for the existence of these external factors. So, in this way, I would posit that we may partially attribute the radical nature of her art work to a reaction of the artist against these social circumstances.

The fact that reactions to Margolles' art works have not been universally positive, could be taken as indicative of a view that it is unnecessary to exhibit graphic or highly suggestive images, because they only serve to tantalise the darker side of the spectator's psyche. Negative reactions to the exhibition of body parts are exemplified by recent events in Venezuela. An exhibition in Caracas entitled 'Bodies Revealed', which consists of thirteen plastinated human corpses and over two hundred organs,

was closed down by the country's president Hugo Chavez, who stated that the exhibition was symptomatic of 'la inmensa descomposición moral que sacude el planeta'.²⁰ The official reason for the show's closure was given as having to do with a false declaration of the exhibits as being made of plastic. The exhibition's organisers were reported as standing by their assertions of the educational and scientific validity of the exhibition.

It has been argued that the purpose of shocking images is 'to awaken concern' (Berger 1991: 43) about situations usually hidden from public view, that people may rather ignore. Berger states in his essay *Photographs of Agony* that 'such photographs remind us of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins' (Berger 1991: 42). The author is referring here specifically to war photographs, but Berger's statement is equally applicable to the images exhibited by Margolles. The bodies that appear in Teresa Margolles' art works tend to belong to people who died violently, and they also tend to be members of less wealthy social strata (such as drug addicts, prisoners, and people involved in the drug trade). In this way, the artist draws the viewer's attention to the uncomfortable social reality of crime and violence, which she achieves using real bodies. In another essay on the photographer Paul Strand, Berger makes another point that is also relevant to Margolles' work. Strand focused much of his work on the city of New York, while Margolles concentrates on Mexico City. Berger discusses the element of social commentary in the photographer's images of people, stating that they reveal

visible evidence, not just of their presence, but of their *life*. At one level, such evidence of a life is social comment [...] but, at a different level, such

²⁰ Article 'Hugo Chávez prohíbe la exposición "Bodies Revealed"' accessible at http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Hugo/Chavez/prohibe/exposicion/Bodies/Revealed/elpepucul/20090314elpepucul_1/Tes

evidence serves to suggest visually the totality of another lived life, from within which we ourselves are no more than a sight. (Berger 1991: 45)

Margolles, instead of showing us glimpses of another life, presents the viewer with evidence of another *death*, and what happens to the body after this event. This death is also an Other death, that of an individual who belonged to an economically disadvantaged social stratum, who is doubly Other for non-Mexican viewers because he is also racially different. Her works are confrontational, urging the spectator to reflect upon the social milieu within which Mexico City's morgue is situated, as it is represented by the unclaimed corpses whose names we never learn. This serves to place the artist's subject matter within the public sphere, thus forcing viewers to contemplate a reality they may rather deny. Non-Mexican viewers may be unfamiliar with Mexico City itself and unaware of its social problems. In this case, Teresa Margolles' art works operate as social commentary on two levels: firstly, to raise awareness of a situation that exists within an environment with which they had previously had little or no contact, and secondly in the way mentioned above, as a direct confrontation of the viewer with an uncomfortable social reality. The effectiveness of this awareness-raising tactic to some extent depends on whether spectators read the information provided on the plaques, however. The impact of the injustice of the treatment of unclaimed corpses would still be strong, but for the element of social commentary to function on the multiple potential readings presented by the artist, the morgue must be viewed as a microcosm of society.

When asked about how she defends herself from public criticism, the artist says simply that 'No me gusta defenderme públicamente. La forma en la que me defiendo es por medio de mi obra' (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 93). I have made attempts to contact the artist to arrange an interview, which so far have been unsuccessful. Whilst

disappointing, this is concrete evidence of Margolles' avoidance of the spotlight and reluctance to answer direct questions on her work. I would suggest that this is due in part to the nature of the materials she uses in her art works. Margolles' employment of cadavers, body parts and bodily residues is potentially shocking, and causes strong reactions. This is the artist's intent – by encouraging the viewer to react, the artwork has a more immediate impact. It is possible, though, that this artistic strategy of hers could expose her to harsh criticism, and she, acutely aware of this, may not want to expose herself to such a reception face-to-face. It is plausible that the artist is afraid that she may not be able to adequately rationalise what she does, because this would greatly damage her credibility as an artist. It is certainly difficult to justify the use of human body parts in art works, because arguably this is an ultimately selfish act led by the artist's personal agenda. This is what drives Margolles to produce such works. Furthermore, her reluctance to answer questions leaves her work open to misinterpretation and criticism, which could be avoided if she were more open to defending herself more publicly. Conversely, though, stronger direction of potential responses to her work could lead to questions over how much the artist wants the audience to be involved in experiencing her works actively. At the heart of this issue is whether or not controversy may be seen to compromise the effectiveness of Margolles' denouncement of persisting social inequalities in post-NAFTA Mexico. This commentary, despite the ethical grey area in which the artist operates, is valid, but unassailably problematic.

Ethical issues

The artist shows the effects of violent crime on the physical body, and the remains left behind after death. This has been termed “la vida del cadáver”: las transformaciones

que experimenta el cuerpo exánime' (Medina 2005: 342), a series of processes which includes the washing of the body, autopsy, and cremation (all of which feature in Margolles' works). Through Margolles' work, we see a glimpse of this other death. Margolles' representations of these bodies, and the effects of violent crime that they display, offer a commentary on the social reality of Mexico City during the 1990s onwards: the Mexican capital's specific set of sociohistorical circumstances. Margolles confronts the viewer with this reality using real, material bodies. As she has stated, 'A lo largo de los años todas las obras han sido ubicadas dentro del momento histórico' (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 92).

In the artist's words, the central theme of her works with both SEMEFO and later as a solo artist has remained the same. In her more recent works, the body itself is not exhibited. Rather, its presence is suggested by its absence. Margolles explains that:

Bueno, pienso que desde que estaba con SEMEFO mi trabajo ha sido el mismo. He hecho lo mismo durante los últimos doce años: trabajar con la muerte, con cadáveres. [...] He trabajado con un solo tema. Y la obra ha crecido hacia adentro, hacia adentro, hacia adentro [...] Con la misma obsesión, la única cosa que ha cambiado ha sido la manera en la que lo expreso. Lo he expresado de manera física y obvia, de manera sutil, con formas del cuerpo periféricas, nunca mostrando el cadáver en sí mas mostrando sus periferias. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 91)

When considering the ethical implications of Teresa Margolles' work with human remains, the most obvious question to raise is whether her use of corpses, and the imprints and matter they leave behind in the morgue after death, is ethically justifiable. The artist has used as raw materials for her works human bodily fluids, body parts, and the imprints and residues left behind by the processes of autopsy and the cleansing of the corpse. She has also used artefacts from the morgue itself such as cylindrical metal drums, which are used to boil human bones in order to clean them in preparation for study. The highly sensitive nature of these raw materials leads us to

ask: how is it possible for an artist to gain access to them in order to later exhibit them in works of art?

Cuahtémoc Medina has argued that, while Margolles' use of human body parts in her art works, and the content of the images themselves, may appear shocking, what is in fact shocking to a far greater degree is that she was able to obtain them in the first place. He blames this on a culture of institutional laxity and a disregard for human remains, highlighting that the sheer fact that Margolles is able to obtain and show body parts in her exhibitions indicates, as he puts it, 'una administración enormemente tolerante' (Medina 2001: 355). He concludes that from this perspective, her work may be interpreted as 'menos una transgresión que un reflejo del estado deteriorado de la ley' (Medina 2001: 355). In the UK, a landmark legal ruling in 1998 saw the British artist Anthony Noel Kelly jailed for stealing body parts which he had used to make sculptures. According to a BBC news report, Kelly had obtained 'special permission' to sketch human remains at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Suspicion was aroused when the artist subsequently displayed these sculptures:

The government inspector who monitors the use of human remains in medical research brought the matter to the attention of police after seeing an exhibition of Kelly's work. Dr Laurence Martin told the BBC: "I was convinced that the pictures in the newspaper I saw in January of last year showed human material as a basis for what were called sculptures. I considered that these could not have been made except by casting or moulding of actual parts".²¹

Margolles has also used plaster casts as a representational technique, but she has displayed the casts themselves (*Catafalco*, 1997) rather than using them as moulds for the production of sculptures. It is mentioned in the report, in perhaps a slightly

²¹ 'Pair Jailed for Stealing Body Parts', accessible at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/73463.stm> accessed 29/10/2008.

sensationalist manner, that Kelly was a ‘former butcher’. This word carries connotations of an incompetent or unethical medical professional such as a surgeon who botches cosmetic surgery procedures. Allegedly, Kelly had removed human body parts from the College, which according to the report, were transported clandestinely ‘in black plastic bags on London Underground trains or by taxi to Kelly’s studio.’²² This is a little reminiscent of Margolles’ anecdote about how she managed to remove from the morgue skin she had cut from the bodies of dead prisoners, in order to exhibit it as *Tatuajes*. Both Kelly and Margolles had permission to enter the morgue (although it may be argued that Margolles obtained hers in a less than ‘above board’ manner), both have used body parts illicitly, but the Mexican artist has never been prosecuted. This difference between the legal response (or lack of it) to the ethically questionable activities of these two artists would seem to reinforce Cuauhtémoc Medina’s observations. Teresa Margolles arguably takes advantage of this perceived laxity of Mexico City institutions. When asked in an interview about how the SEMEFO collective to which she belonged, managed to incorporate the morgue into their artwork, she replied:

Very few people can enter the morgue, but thanks to the corruption of the Mexican political system, we are able to go in as often as we want. In many ways our work is about this ability to penetrate into the fissures of the system – we are always looking for interstices in which to situate our work. (Gallo 1997: 62)

Margolles’ use of the word ‘fissures’ here indicates that spaces that are usually closed, in this case the morgue, where the dead are sequestered away from the eyes of the public, are accessible if one knows how. The apparent permissiveness of the institutions in allowing and effectively enabling Teresa Margolles to access the

²² Ibid.

materials she needs raises the question of the necessity for, or relevance of consent for the artist's use of them. This is illustrated in the case of the piece *Lengua* (2000), which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Gallo compares Margolles with another artist, Santiago Sierra, who also uses bodies. Sierra, a Spanish artist living in Mexico City, highlights the instability of life for the less wealthy residents of the capital, which he has done by paying people to 'perform actions highlighting their precarious position in the world' (Gallo 2004: 111). For example, the artist 'once hired several hundred working class Mexicans to fill an exhibition room at the Museo Rufino Tamayo and stand, for several hours a day, as human sculptures' (Gallo 2004: 111). Gallo points out, though, that Sierra and Margolles' uses of bodies are different in one crucial way: 'Sierra uses people, while Margolles works with corpses and human remains. And if ethics demands that we treat living beings justly, there is no equivalent code of conduct for handling corpses' (Gallo 2004: 125). Hence the problematic ethical space occupied by Margolles when we consider, for example, her purchase of a pierced human tongue to use as an artwork. This was done with the consent of the man's family, but obtaining the consent of the man himself would clearly have been impossible. Furthermore, his family were influenced by their financial predicament, as the sale of the tongue was the only way for them to afford to bury him.

In a notable similarity to the ethical concerns surrounding some of Margolles' art works, there has been a certain degree of controversy over the question of permission regarding the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens' use of corpses in his famous exhibition *Körperwelten* (*Body Worlds*). Controversy arose after it was noticed at a *Body Worlds* exhibition in 2000 that one of the corpses displayed by von Hagens had a distinguishing feature. According to one report,

One particular case horrified many visitors: one of the bodies had characters tattooed on its arm, suggesting that the owner may have been a former prison camp inmate. Von Hagens denies this, saying the tattooed [sic] body belongs to a German citizen and a personal friend. Nevertheless, the connotations were appalling for many Germans [...] When his exhibition opened in Cologne, it was greeted by protestors.²³

By comparison, Margolles' exhibition of tattooed skin (*Tatuajes*, 1996) was reportedly shown only for a few days in a small, unofficial space, in contrast with von Hagens' bodies, which occupy vast and high profile locations and have been touring the globe since the beginning of this decade. It is well known that the anatomical study of cadavers has a shady history. This is best exemplified by the activities of the grave robbers during the nineteenth century, who would sell illegally exhumed bodies to anatomists for the advancement of medical knowledge. The interest in looking at corpses is countered, perhaps slightly contradictorily, by a palpable fear of their violation and that they will not be treated with respect and allowed to rest in dignity. Von Hagens now has a system whereby people may volunteer to be plastinated, but it is unclear how and from where he obtained corpses whilst developing the plastination technique, which undoubtedly must have taken some time to perfect. Berridge observes that:

Fears about mistreatment of the dead have not gone away. Even today there are still faint echoes of the bad old days of body violation and anxiety about anatomists with an interest in procuring corpses to harvest. The Alder Hey hospital case in Liverpool, in which it became clear that the organs of hundreds of children had been retained by the hospital without their parents' permission, highlighted the deficiencies of modern law, whereby body parts may be used for the advancement of medical science without the consent or even the knowledge of relatives. The law presumes consent. Although rationally we have no need to worry about actual corpse theft, the compulsion to protect the body remains strong. (Berridge 2001: 128)

²³ 'The Anatomists: Anatomy, ethics and the law', accessible at <http://www.channel4.com/science/microsites/A/anatomists/ethics1.html> accessed 29/10/2008

This is a possible reason why Margolles' art works cause discomfort. They cause even more because she does not arrest the process of decay, and the viewer is left potentially exposed to pollution from the corrupting flesh.

It can be argued that art that represents death and tragedy is immoral because this assumed separation of reality and art impedes the viewer from taking action, for example, to combat social injustice. Karen Hanson (1998), in an article examining the (im)morality of art, argues that the principle of aesthetic distance, according to which the spectator must be detached from the work of art in order to properly appreciate its aesthetic value, adversely affects the viewer's motivation to act as inspired by any moral message in the piece. Potentially, Hanson suggests:

The art itself may be immoral, because it puts the audience at a distance; the artist may be judged morally wrong, for producing an object that has this effect; the audience may be judged wrong or inhuman, for taking an aesthetic attitude or remaining still, at a distance, when there is an obligation to intervene. (Hanson 1998: 205)

Those who disapprove of Margolles' art works for being no more than gory spectacle, and without any purpose as vehicles for social commentary have levelled this kind of criticism at the artist. How can it be useful to show brutal images of human remains that the audience will view with perverse pleasure, with the aim of raising consciousness about social inequalities? Whilst this is a valid concern (a passive reaction from spectators would defeat one purpose of the images' confrontational nature), these critics have missed the point. Margolles' work is effective because in terms of social commentary, it allows no room for aesthetic distance. This is precisely why the images are so shocking. Margolles does not want to distance her art from the spectator, however. She in fact uses various tactics to bring the two into intimate contact, setting out to erase the supposed distance between art and reality. The

audience's potential *enjoyment* of these images, mingled with discomfort at the suggestion of the death and decay of the body, is a more likely reason for the accusations of immorality from their critics. One reason for this could be that they are presented in a setting which has traditionally been associated with leisure, which in turn is tied in with notions of pleasant, enjoyable activities.

Despite this awkward ethical situation, an element of social commentary is strongly present in *Lengua*. The artist's intention to use the man's sexual organs potentially symbolises the young man's emasculation by the social inequalities to which he was subjected in life. By the same token, the use of the tongue could be symbolic of his silenced, marginalised position, his capacity for speech literally removed. Conversely, the tongue may be considered from another perspective: it is present and has long outlived the rest of the man's body. This could be read positively in that he may be perceived to be speaking to Margolles' audience – but he is doing so in the artist's words.

We have already seen how Teresa Margolles' art works successfully highlight the persistence of social inequalities in Mexico City post-NAFTA, and, if her works are considered from this perspective, how they may be interpreted as vehicles for criticism of Mexico's persisting social and economic problems. This is achieved in two ways: by showing that violent death, often related to the trade in narcotics, tends to afflict less privileged sectors of society, and by illustrating also that this inequality persists even after death through what Margolles calls 'la vida del cadáver'. The artist uses this 'life of the corpse' to explore its sociocultural implications. If we are to accept this line of argument, art in this instance may be taken to represent a social reality with which the artist and the artwork confront the viewer. Gallo looks at Margolles within the context of Mexican art in the late twentieth century, and situates

her within what he identifies as a break with tradition that characterises Mexican artists working during the 1990s. He explains this break with tradition as a reaction to the social crisis (the increase in crime and violence) to which I devoted attention earlier in this chapter. Coco Fusco (2001) makes a similar point. She argues that SEMEFO's work contains a strong sociopolitical message that was at odds with the work of other Mexican artists in the immediate post-NAFTA period. She argues that the influence of art brokers grew during this period, and recounts one particular occasion:

One Mexican critic and curator who spoke on a panel with me in Madrid in 1997 suggested that Mexican artists were better off leaving politics to the comic talents of the artisans who each day devised new modes of caricaturing corrupt leaders. (Fusco 2001: 64)

Fusco asserts that very few artists (among them Teresa Margolles' collective) could be considered distinct from this category, however:

In the midst of an arts milieu such as the one I have described in Mexico City, SEMEFO and Santiago Sierra stand out as countervailing forces. These artists offer key critical visions of the social and political situation of the country. (Fusco 2001: 64)

SEMEFO's vision, according to Coco Fusco, is one that comments upon 'the culture of violence in the overblown metropolis' (Fusco 2001: 65). SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles offer their view of Mexico City's social problems: the increase in violent crime, corrupt officials, an ineffective and mistrusted police force, and the persistence of socioeconomic inequalities despite NAFTA's promise of stability. At the centre of this view is the organisation²⁴ from which SEMEFO takes its name. Here, we find the bodies upon which Margolles' work is focused. Through this medium, the artist draws

²⁴ The *Servicio Médico Forense*, which collects corpses and delivers them to the morgue.

the viewer's attention to the social injustices that surround the morgue; the uncomfortable reality of Mexico City's forgotten dead.

At this point, we must ask a crucial question. If Margolles' art works may be read as a reaction to the social crisis of the 1990s, does the perceived value of her work as social commentary come predominantly from its situation within a specific set of social circumstances? To put it another way, is it possible that an interpretation of Margolles' work as concerned with social injustice may be undermined? Is it inspired purely by circumstance? However, even if we accept that sociohistorical context plays a large role in determining the content of Margolles' work, this need not necessarily discount the validity of the artist's exploration of social issues affecting Mexico using her aesthetic of death and the corpse.

Chapter Two

The Aesthetics of Death

The nature of the themes upon which Teresa Margolles' art works are focused, and the raw materials from which they are produced, produce a tension between regarding them from a position of detachment, and the strong, conflicting emotional reactions provoked by the effectiveness of the artist's use of human remains and the traces they leave behind. The artist's tactic of presenting the viewer with the sight or the suggestion of a corpse produces both shock and fascination in the viewer, who is compelled to contemplate the inevitable decay of the body that occurs after death. Aesthetics is the philosophy of the evaluation of art. My main point of focus as regards the theoretical foundation for my analysis will consist primarily of theory around the themes of death, decay and the body; and theory of photography as background to my analysis of works by SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles. It must be noted that photographic images have historically often been considered direct representations of reality, hence the power of images of death and the corpse to shock. However, developments in technology have made increasingly possible the distortion and fabrication of images so that, in some cases, what appears to be shown cannot be assumed to be a faithful representation of the subject. I will later discuss the writings of Susan Sontag with reference to this question. According to aesthetic principles, art works may be considered as more or less aesthetically valuable – this is linked to the notion of beauty, which in turn raises the question of taste in terms of what may be considered works of art. This is a debate that in recent years has been focused on objects such as bisected cows, rotting horse carcasses and photographs of corpses in the morgue on display in art galleries. Some works have been criticised (often in the tabloid press) for not being 'proper' art. This illustrates one of the characteristics of

taste, which, according to Mary Anne Staniszewski, 'functions as a means of distinguishing class, and it is an emblem of the way cultural criteria are legitimized' (Staniszewski 1995: 121). So, according to this argument, having a taste for 'high' art bestows upon the viewer who appreciates it a high social (class) status. This view is undermined slightly by the fact that Damien Hirst is a household name, at least in the UK. How, then, can we reconcile this with art that deals with death and the dead body? Is it possible for art of this kind to be legitimate? Who is interested in looking at such images, and why? When we consider her art works, can Teresa Margolles be said to have an aesthetic of death and the corpse? I use the term 'aesthetic of death' to describe the artist's exploration of death as a central theme in her work, which manifests itself through her use of cadavers, body parts, and bodily fluids and residues (such as blood and fat).

Conventionally, the appreciation of fine art is regulated by the principles of aesthetics, one of which is the attitude of aesthetic distance that must be maintained by the viewer of art works. This stems from 'an assumption that art is removed, or removes us from life and thus from the strictures and obligations that properly bind us' (Hanson 1998: 204). Here, we immediately encounter a problem. On the one hand, there exists the assumption that we must maintain a certain level of detachment when viewing works of art. On the other, when looking at images such as those produced by Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO, strong emotional reactions are produced in the spectator. So, when faced with images of death and decay, the viewer experiences an internal conflict between detachment and the impulse to react. The ideas of Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva are particularly applicable to the feelings provoked by images of death and decay.

In *Eroticism (L'Érotisme)*, Bataille devotes detailed attention to the mingled attraction and repulsion felt by human beings towards corpses. He argues that this dual reaction stems from two factors: firstly, the perception of death as a threat to individual identity; and secondly, death and the corpse as taboo subjects. 'Corpse horror', that is, the feeling of revulsion that is produced in the viewer when looking at a dead body, comes from the perception that death poses a threat to us as individuals. It threatens our unique identities and our bodies with inevitable decay and disintegration by showing that which is usually hidden away from view. Death, then, signifies the end of the individual identity, a particularly shocking concept within the context of industrialised societies, where the notion of the individual is afforded a high value. Bataille describes this feeling of terror which comes from our confrontation with death:

The most violent thing for all of us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being. We blench [sic] at the thought that the separate individuality within us must suddenly be snuffed out. (Bataille 1962: 16)

The perception of death as a threat is one of the factors at the root of our strong emotional reactions towards it, and images of it. And, coupled with the feeling described above in the words of Bataille, the viewer of death or its image experiences another feeling: fascination.

The corpse poses a threat to the living because it reminds us of our mortality. It is a fact we cannot escape and one which is not often placed in public view. The dead body is a taboo object. According to Bataille, taboos 'appeared in response to the necessity of banishing violence from the course of everyday life' (Bataille 1962: 55). This strict prohibition of certain types of socially unacceptable behaviours has, of course, done nothing to change the fact that the (often violent) end of individual life,

and the death and decay of the body, are inevitable and natural. Death and decay signify not only the end of individual identity *per se*, but also the loss of our control over it. The notion of control over ourselves and the way in which we present ourselves, which consequently affords us control (or at least the belief that we have control) over the way in which we as individuals are perceived by others, is central to industrialised societies, where the importance of the individual has superceded that of the community. To combat the feeling of loss of control, the process of living itself may be seen as a denial of the fact of death: 'Mankind conspires to ignore the fact that death is also the life of things' (Bataille 1962: 59). This is necessary in order that individuals may live their lives untroubled (insofar as this is possible, because although we may deny death, we are all disturbed by the knowledge that we cannot escape it).

The taboo against the corpse exists to prohibit certain unacceptable behaviours which threaten the functioning of society, namely violence and murder. However, the taboo has two seemingly conflicting yet intertwined facets. Whilst it is in place to combat certain unsocial behaviours, it also creates a desire to transgress it. Bataille states that:

Taboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed. There is always another side to the matter. It is always a temptation to knock down a barrier; the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests it with an aura of excitement. (Bataille 1962: 48)

The taboo against the corpse is thus the origin of the feelings of mingled repulsion and fascination that are experienced by human beings in the presence of a corpse. These conflicting emotions are the essence of both our disgust and our curiosity towards death, especially violent death:

Violence, and death signifying violence, have a double meaning. On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an

element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly. (Bataille 1962: 45)

Although Bataille argues that death poses a threat to individual identity, he also views it as the continuity of being. In this way, he establishes a strong connection between death and another subject which, according to the author, 'like death was early on a subject of interest to man' (Bataille 1962: 49): sexuality. Reproduction is also, like death, a taboo subject. However, comparing the two is problematic because, as the author states, they are 'as diametrically opposed as negation and affirmation' (Bataille 1962: 55). He argues, however, that the two may be linked:

The death of the one being is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the decomposition of life. Life first pays its tribute to death which disappears, then to corruption following on death and bringing back into the cycle of change the matter necessary for the ceaseless arrival of new beings into the world. (Bataille 1962: 55)

In this way, life and death are cyclical in that new life springs from decay. Nowhere is this process more shockingly apparent than in the life that is generated by the decomposition of a corpse. For instance, the decay of a dead body provides a habitat for creatures such as bacteria and maggots that thrive on the remains, which sickens us because we hate to think that our bodies may also be broken down in this way. This is the origin of 'corpse horror' and what Bataille asserts is a fascination with the dead body, which exists in the human psyche. This horror is directed towards two processes connected with death. Firstly, death threatens to erase individual identity; and secondly, it leaves the body to rot, thereby destroying all the efforts of the individual to distinguish him/herself as such by taking control over their physical appearance through dress or body modification. All the statements made using the vehicle of the body in life are thus rendered ultimately futile, as the decaying corpse

symbolises the transitory (and fleeting) nature of human life. Hence our feelings of disgust towards the dead, decaying body:

That nauseous, rank and heaving matter, frightful to look upon, a ferment of life, teeming with worms, grubs and eggs, is at the bottom of the decisive reactions we call nausea, disgust or repugnance. (Bataille 1962: 56)

The reactions that Bataille identifies here are similar in that they may all be perceived as negative and uncomfortable sensations. They are, however, different from one another. For instance, nausea is a visceral reaction, which makes us feel physically sick. Disgust and repugnance, on the other hand, are emotional reactions. Therefore, when confronted with the decaying corpse, human beings feel a mixture of intense emotional and physical reactions, whose interconnectedness reveals the inseparability of mind and body. As well as the sensation of disgust at the prospect of death, Bataille also connects the corpse to the erotic. The writer affirms that there is ‘a connection between death and sexual excitement’ (Bataille 1962: 11). He attributes this to the recognition of the violence that is implied by both death and reproduction:

We cannot imagine the transition from one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity. Not only do we find in the uneasy transitions of organisms engaged in reproduction the same basic violence which in physical eroticism leaves us gasping, but we also catch the inner meaning of that violence. What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? - a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder? (Bataille 1962: 17)

In this way, death is inextricably linked to sexuality through the eroticism of flesh itself. SEMEFO have expressed their interest in the link between eroticism and death in their work with animal carcasses, stating that ‘el disfruto erótico de la carne’ (Sánchez 1998: 134) is the motivating force behind their work with these materials, rather than any symbolic objective. Bataille asserts that death actually serves as a

reminder of the very beginnings of life in the sense of rotting flesh becoming a source of nourishment for organisms that feed on it:

Spontaneous physical revulsion keeps alive in some indirect fashion at least the consciousness that the terrifying face of death, its stinking putrefaction, are to be identified with the sickening primary condition of life. (Bataille 1962: 56)

According to this view, existence continues after death as the generation of new life, even though the body itself is doomed to perish. But, undeniably, existence as an individual, in the way in which it is experienced whilst alive, must come to an end, and living human beings' experience of 'corpse horror' is not assuaged by the potentially consoling idea that existence will continue, although in a different form – my self will not be my self, and that is all that matters. This is because the 'transition from discontinuity to continuity' (Bataille 1962: 17), that is, the transition from being an individual with a finite period of existence, into a different kind of life which ensues after death, is so difficult for us to comprehend.

Coupled with this revulsion and the instinct to turn away, is the compulsion to look.

Disturbing events and images both disgust and fascinate the spectator. Sontag comments on the connection between death and the erotic:

All images that show the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome. Calling such wishes 'morbid' suggests a rare aberration, but the attraction to such sights is not rare, and is a perennial source of inner torment. (Sontag 2003: 85)

This 'despised impulse' (Sontag 2003: 86), as she calls it, is a part of human nature from which we wish to disassociate ourselves, yet it is one that we cannot deny. The author describes Georges Bataille's obsession with a photo of a Chinese prisoner

being subjected to the 'death of a hundred cuts' (Sontag 2003: 87), which he would look at every day:

To contemplate this image, according to Bataille, is both a mortification of the feelings and a liberation of tabooed erotic knowledge – a complex response that many people must find hard to credit. (Sontag 2003: 87-8)

Sontag aligns Bataille's view with religious thinking:

It is a view of suffering, of the pain of religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation – a view that could not be more alien to modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. (Sontag 2003: 88)

There is a long history of representing pain and suffering in Christian art, the most obvious and widespread example of which is the bleeding figure of Christ on the crucifix, his face displaying a dual expression of agony and ecstasy. These two sensations are simultaneous and intertwined in religious art, embodying the tension between repulsion and desire, arguably visually evidencing the entrenchment of these emotions in the human psyche. Sontag observes that 'it seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked' (Sontag 2003: 36).

The corpse as abjection

Another writer who explores the notion of horror is French theorist Julia Kristeva. Her essay *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* was published in its original French in 1980, and translated into English in 1982 as *Powers of Horror* (I will be referring to the English translation). The concept which is central to Kristeva's ideas on horror is abjection, which is rooted in the sense of the inescapable and undeniable materiality of the body.

Abjection is a complex idea, but in its simplest sense may be understood as the feeling of profound discomfort that may be experienced by an individual when confronted with something that causes distress. But the concept of the abject encapsulates far deeper and darker sensations than simple discomfort; it describes that which lurks at our emotional and physical boundaries and threatens our security both as individuals and as members of a society. Kristeva summarises abjection in the following way:

A threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously [...] that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly [...] a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (Kristeva 1982: 1)

Kristeva states that the abject ‘has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *P*’ (Kristeva 1982: 1). This suggests that the abject is something rejected by the individual, and not allowed to form a part of the subject. The author explains that the abject ‘lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the [...] rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging his master’ (Kristeva 1982: 2). Although rejected, then, the abject cannot be ignored because it is inextricably linked to the individual’s material body and therefore also to the sense of self, despite the fact that it produces disgust. As stated by the author above, the abject arouses an interest and ‘fascinates desire’ as well as arousing repulsion. So, the abject is that which provokes both disgust and fascination in the individual. These ideas are similar to those explored by Georges Bataille in his contemplations of eroticism and death, in that both theorists claim that there exists a conflict between, on the one hand, a visceral rejection of images of the dead and

decaying body, which produces a desire to turn away; and on the other, a dark compulsion to carry on looking.

According to Elizabeth Grosz's analysis of Kristeva's text, abjection is 'the underside of a stable subjective identity' (Grosz 1989: 72) which forms a threat to the clearly defined boundaries which 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' (Grosz 1989: 71). This process is undergone in order that society should not become dysfunctional; in other words, so that order may be maintained to prevent society from disintegrating into violent chaos.

Abjection in this sense – the expulsion from society of 'unclean' elements - is a kind of regulatory force which operates by upholding the notion of what is acceptable behaviour by expelling certain (inescapable) elements of physicality which provoke feelings of disgust in the individual. It 'attests to the impossibility of clear borders, lines of demarcation or divisions between the proper and the improper, the clean and the unclean, order and disorder, as required by the symbolic' (Grosz 1989: 73), and therefore implies a rejection or refusal of the unclean or impure results of a subject's material existence; a denial of the fact they are of and belong to our bodies and, by extension, our identities. A subject may express abjection through physical disgust at the breaking of those boundaries – in particular, the transgression of the boundaries which mark where the inside and the outside of the body begin and end. This concept, when applied to some of the work of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles, helps to explain the viewer's mixed emotional reactions to the images and objects on display. The notion of abjection may be applied to various 'unclean' things, such as food. Kristeva uses the example of the skin which forms on the surface of milk as an

example of the knot of conflicting emotions which are embodied by the abject as a source of both desire and disgust:

Nausea makes me balk at that milk cream [...] “I” want none of that element [...] “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for me [...] I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. (Kristeva 1982: 3)

Here, Kristeva argues that tied to our repulsion towards elements that are abject, rooted in feelings of disgust towards them, is a rejection of our selves. In this way, the process of expulsion of the ‘unclean’ and unpleasant which we carry out as a means of reinforcing our self identities through the establishment of clearly marked boundaries, also has the effect of expelling part of these identities, because the abject cannot be completely dissociated from the material body. This is true also of the example of bodily waste. It is in and of our own living bodies but we are disgusted by it and reject it, although we will never be able to rid ourselves of it.

The element that provokes the strongest sense of abjection in the individual, is the corpse. This, according to Kristeva, is because dead bodies directly show us what is to become of us – they literally confront us with our own mortality and the inevitable, messy, stinking decomposition of our physical bodies as well as our passing from consciousness as we experience it during our lives as individual subjects. Corpses show us the opposite side of the boundary between life and death, which we contemplate from our position, knowing that we will not be able to understand it until we ourselves are dead, unconscious and no longer existing as individuals, our bodies consumed by the processes of decay. Kristeva asserts that:

The corpse [...] is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 1982: 4)

The notion of 'death infecting life' carries two meanings which explain why the corpse is so effective an example of the abject. If taken literally, the phrase denotes the risk of infection from a decaying corpse. As pointed out by Bataille, the idea that corpses carry a threat of contagion of dangerous organisms which may harm the living, is one facet of the horror which is felt in the presence of a human cadaver: 'The corpse will rot; this biological disorder, like the newly dead body a symbol of destiny, is threatening in itself' (Bataille 1962: 46). Biological contagion is the seeping of infectious organisms across the bodily boundaries, i.e. from dead to living tissue, from infected tissue to healthy tissue. The corpse also embodies another boundary transgression - from life into death. It is this transgression that makes the corpse so dangerous. As stated by Kristeva: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva 1982: 4). So, it is possible to view this as a two-way transgression – the threat of death infecting life, and also the threat of life infecting death.

The corpse is the ultimate in abjection, because it breaks the barrier between life and death and confronts the individual with their eventual fate; that which is denied and rejected from everyday life:

Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva 1982: 3)

She later asserts that 'the death that "I" am provokes horror, there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely' (Kristeva 1982: 25). Kristeva's notion of abjection is at the centre

of the horror of the corpse (to which both she and Bataille have devoted detailed attention). The dead body provokes feelings of fascination and repulsion in the viewer, who is confronted with the demise of both their identity as a conscious being, and their physical body, which will inevitably decay. The mingled feelings of discomfort and attraction that arise when in the presence of a corpse, in turn produce discomfort directed towards oneself. This arises from the status of the corpse as abject, a fact usually excluded from daily life because it is disturbing to contemplate. An attempt to wholly reject the corpse will result in failure because the corpse is tied to all humans and cannot be excluded; hence the abjection of one's *self* that follows the attempt to deny the corpse. The realisation of mortality produces distress, yet also inspires a fascination, and a natural morbid curiosity, which brings yet more discomfort.

The notions advanced by Bataille and Kristeva directly challenge the assumption that aesthetic distance must be maintained when looking at death and the corpse. In fact, they render the guarantee for one's emotions to be protected by this distance ultimately impossible. However, whereas Bataille and Kristeva talk about the corpse itself, that is, experienced 'first hand', Margolles does not often display the bodies themselves. She provides, along with sculpture, sound and visual installations, photographic images of death. It is necessary to ask, does the art of death and the corpse, as practised by Margolles, have a different effect?

Certainly, the notion of aesthetic distance comes into play when viewing works of art that depict corpses and the theme of death. The display of death and the dead body in the art gallery, a space that is located within the public sphere, has the potential effect of making it more acceptable precisely because the act of exhibiting such things is a challenge to social taboos, effectively demystifying that which is usually hidden from

view. A possible reason for this is the high cultural status of exhibited art. An exception to this, which must be acknowledged, is street art (particularly graffiti). Traditionally, this form of artistic representation has not enjoyed the acclaim afforded to other art forms (such as sculpture, or watercolour painting, to name but two examples). However, this has changed in recent years, with some street artists achieving recognition, and publishing books of their art works. The highly acclaimed British artist Banksy's *Wall and Piece* (2005) is the most prominent example of this. Many of Banksy's works are overtly political and contain biting cultural and social commentary. One piece, for example, shows the entrance to the Tate Britain gallery in London, onto one of the steps of which the artist spray-painted the slogan 'Mind the Crap' in 2002, using his characteristic stencilling technique (Banksy 2005: 73). This upfront criticism of established art institutions, is also a pun around the famous London Underground safety warning to 'Mind the Gap' at stations. He states as part of the introduction to *Wall and Piece*, that 'Graffiti is not the lowest form of art [...] There is no elitism or hype, it exhibits on some of the best walls a town has to offer, and nobody is put off by the price of admission' (Banksy 2005: 8). Banksy's works tend to be created at unofficial locations in the public realm. The artist is originally from Bristol, in the south west of England, and examples of his works are visible on walls around the city. However, the majority of people who view them do not do so *in situ*, rather, they see photographs taken at the site and then exhibited elsewhere. Some of Teresa Margolles' art works share this characteristic of geographical displacement. However, the crucial difference between her work and Banksy's is that the latter artist creates his works entirely in the public realm, in potentially accessible spaces. Most of his paintings are viewed second hand only because of the distance between locations and because some are temporary and therefore inherently transitory in nature.

Margolles, on the other hand, rather than working entirely in the public sphere, transcends the boundary between private and public to reveal in the interior of the morgue a space that is not physically accessible to the viewer, forbidden to all except medical professionals. A notable example is *Autorretratos en la morgue* (1998), a series of five photographs taken inside the morgue, self-portraits taken in various settings in which corpses share the photographic frame with the artist. Some of Margolles' works share the transitory nature of Banksy's, for example, *Tatuajes* (1996) which was briefly displayed in an independent (i.e. not state-owned) exhibition space, and *Grupos sobre la piel* (2001), an installation lasting a few minutes which is exhibited as a DVD recording. All of these works will receive further attention in Chapters Three and Four.

One way of looking at art is founded on the principle of aesthetic detachment, which assumes that art and life are separate. This brings with it the aforementioned belief that the viewer of art works must maintain a certain detachment from the viewed, in this case creating a barrier between spectator and object which enables the viewing of potentially disturbing and the shocking art works from a safe psychological distance, even though they are right in front of us. The viewer is thus placed in a position of defamiliarisation from the content of the artwork on display, which lessens the emotional impact of the image. Within the light of this line of argument, where can Margolles' works be said to stand in terms of upholding this distance?

For Teresa Margolles, art and reality are not separate. The first chapter explored the ways in which Margolles' works raise the viewer's awareness of the uncomfortable social reality which leaves unclaimed and unidentified corpses in Mexico City's central morgue. So, I would posit that in fact, Margolles' art works in this way bring the viewer *closer* to a very real social problem that exists in the Mexican capital. They

show that which is usually hidden from public view, revealing death itself and the dead bodies of the individuals whose economically disadvantaged status proves that even after death certain sectors of the population of Mexico City are subject to the social gulf between those who have money and those who do not. Furthermore, through their status as art works, the pieces produced by Margolles legitimate the act of looking at the taboo subject of death. This does not, however, erase the discomfort experienced by the spectator, who is being unforgivingly confronted with death through the work of art on display. The other facet of Margolles' work is the contemplation of death which the viewer experiences. Margolles places death in public view, thus confronting those who look upon it with their own inevitable fate. Two sets of conflicts may be identified as being at work within the mind and body of the viewer of Teresa Margolles' art works. Firstly, the assumption of aesthetic distance from the work of art is dislodged by the force of the emotional impact of the pieces; and secondly, the viewer undergoes a violent internal conflict between their own disgust and fascination toward the content of these images. For example, *Lengua* (2000), which has been briefly discussed in Chapter One, produces an emotional shock on two levels. On the one hand, the viewer is made brutally aware of the social inequalities which currently exist in Mexico City and prevent those with insufficient economic resources from being able to afford a burial or even a coffin for their loved ones (a text accompanying the piece explains the circumstances under which the artist came into possession of the organ). The knowledge of *Lengua's* origins thus erodes the assumed distance between the viewer and the viewed, because the viewer is not allowed to be completely detached from the artwork. On the other hand, the spectator is disgusted and fascinated because the piece consists of a body part (a pierced tongue) that has been taken from a human corpse and placed on a small stand for

public viewing. This piece effectively embodies the two conflicts: detachment versus empathy, and disgust versus fascination. This work will receive more detailed attention in Chapter Four.

Photographing death

The representation of the subjects of death and the dead body, has received much critical attention in the field of photography theory. Since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, these subjects have been frequent foci for attention in diverse yet often overlapping photographic genres such as war photography, photojournalism, and artistic representation. I will concentrate primarily on the ideas of theorists whose work is of relevance to the visual representation of death and the dead body. The first of these is Susan Sontag, whose influential text *On Photography* was published in book form in 1977 in the USA and Canada, and the following year in Britain.¹

Susan Sontag explores our love affair with the camera and our obsession with taking photographs – as many photographs as possible. In explaining the social and cultural function of this insatiable appetite for images, she states that:

Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images. (Sontag 1978: 178-9)

Sontag asserts here that the rapid production and voracious consumption of photographic images are central to the functioning of capitalist society. She attributes the popularity of the photograph as a medium of representation to the fact that

¹ Its chapters had been published prior to this date as separate essays in *the New York Review of Books*.

photographs appropriate reality by appropriating the subject of the photographic act. Because of this connection between the photograph and reality, Sontag argues that taking a photograph ‘means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power’ (Sontag 1978: 4). This feeling of knowledge acquired about reality from looking at a photograph leads to the belief that the images themselves are reality. This differs fundamentally from the viewer’s attitude towards other forms of expression. As Sontag indicates:

What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. (Sontag 1978: 4)

Photography is thus, according to Sontag, considered a more faithful (indeed, a direct) representation of reality than other forms of representation, because photographs are touched by human hand to a lesser degree than paintings or verbal texts, which means that the journey from object to viewer is uninterrupted by the interpretative influence of an author. As the popular saying goes, ‘the camera never lies’.

However, the assumption that photographs can be equated with reality is highly problematic, and the above statement is inaccurate. A photograph may be modified, either by using technology in the darkroom (ranging from simple techniques such as cropping the image, to digital modifications of its content) or simply by the photographer taking the shot from a certain angle in order to place certain things within (or exclude them from) the shot. Whilst digital imaging is a relatively recent (and rapidly evolving) technological development, the photograph has always been a subjective medium, and furthermore to some extent subject to manipulation by virtue of the fact that the camera tends to be pointed towards its subject deliberately by the photographer, with the aim of capturing the image that is viewed through the lens.

The viewer of the photograph is therefore just as vulnerable to manipulation as the viewer of other types of visual image; perhaps even more so because photographs are approached with less scepticism due to their supposed power to capture reality accurately.

There are, of course, many different photographic genres. Liz Wells points out that 'photography lies at the cusp of the scientific, the social scientific and the humanities' (Wells 1997: 38). This is a crucial factor when considering whether photographic images are accurate representations of reality, because some are clearly not intended to be. Medical images, at one end of the spectrum, are documents intended to capture reality for the purpose of enhancing and increasing scientific knowledge. Photographs taken for police investigations also possess this characteristic as documents – these are witnesses who offer evidence that speaks in images rather than words. Journalistic images are, in the present day, potentially ambiguous. Technology has given the photographer the power to modify images to the extent that whole objects or people may be added or removed from the scene, or certain elements emphasised to draw the viewer's attention. Photography as art is the most ambiguous (and versatile) of these genres. The photographer who produces images as art may work in a studio or in the street, compose the images using models and set pieces, or take a photograph without intervening in the scene, although no photograph may be understood as entirely accidental because the decision of precisely where and upon what to focus the camera's lens, and when to click the shutter release, ultimately rests with the photographer who operates it. The photographic gaze may, hypothetically, be turned toward anything or anyone. As Sontag points out, photography has changed the rules of looking:

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar, and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. (Sontag 1978: 3)

The idea of what we as viewers have a right to look at, is a particularly difficult issue with regard to images of death and the corpse. This comes partly from their taboo status, and partly because we feel potentially, on the one hand, that we are imposing our gaze on something that should not be seen, and on the other, that they are infecting our living world. However, the photographic gaze, in the words of Sontag, ‘creates another habit of seeing: both intense and cool, solicitous and detached’ (Sontag 1978: 99) which allows for the possibility of experiencing conflicting emotions towards certain images. The author goes on to state that ‘photographic seeing has to be constantly renewed with new shocks, whether of subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision’ (Sontag 1978: 99). Shock can be produced by images of horror. This, unfortunately, necessitates the constant escalation of the level of horror in order that the image retains the power to shock the viewer: ‘the ante keeps getting raised – partly through the proliferation of such images of horror’ (Sontag 1978: 19), which leads us to ask whether any good can come from looking at shocking images. Antonio Espinoza has accused Margolles of resorting to the base level of voyeurism and shock tactics, at the expense of her artistic project: ‘su estética macabra [...] termina por ser un espectáculo más del mundo de escándalo y perversión en el que vivimos’ (Espinoza 2003: 1). Whilst it is true that the camera turns the focus of its gaze into spectacle and, by extension, viewers of the image into voyeurs, Espinoza is missing the point. His discomfort is the same as that of any other viewer of Margolles’ art, because her works break the boundaries between bodies, and between the private and the public in order to

confront the spectator with the abject. He is not necessarily supposed to *like* what he is seeing: the production of discomfort in the spectator is intentional.

Another theorist who has written on the subject of looking at disturbing images is John Berger. In *About Looking*, originally published in 1980, Berger also discusses the notion of the shocking. He proposes two possible reasons for the increase in shocking images being printed in newspapers, using the example of war photography:

One might explain this development by arguing that these newspapers have come to realise that [...] their readers are now aware of the horrors of war and want to be shown the truth. Alternatively, one might argue that these newspapers believe that their readers have become inured to violent images and so now compete in terms of ever more violent sensationalism. (Berger 1991: 41-2)

Berger agrees with neither of these two opposing poles of argument, dismissing the first as idealistic and the second as cynical. He comes to the same conclusion as Sontag, that publishing shocking images diminishes their power to shock:

‘Newspapers now carry violent war photographs because their effect, except in rare cases, is not what it was once presumed to be’ (Berger 1991: 42). Hence the need to publish ever more shocking images in order to convey their message to the public.

This message may not be simply an informative one: war and journalistic photography which represents death, as well as death photographs used as art, can cause the viewer to meditate upon his or her mortality through this observation of the tragic elements of the human condition.

Sontag also comments on this phenomenon in her 2003 study of the photography of war and atrocities. She asserts the centrality of attracting attention to the image, which has led to the production of ever more shocking photographs:

The hunt for more dramatic (as they’re described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which

shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value.
(Sontag 2003: 20)

Berger discusses Sontag's ideas on the dual purpose of the camera as a tool which both subjectivises and objectifies reality – the viewer is both separated from, and brought closer to that which is viewed, by the camera lens. He draws a distinction between the uses of photography for private and public purposes, stating that:

In the private use of photography, the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity [...] The public photograph, by contrast, is torn from its context, and becomes a dead object which, exactly because it is dead, lends itself to any arbitrary use.
(Berger 1991: 60)

Images of the dead occupy a particularly interesting space in relation to these uses of photography. In these photographs, the individual is both remembered in the image as a memorial, and objectified by the camera, becoming literally a dead object. These photographs bridge the gap between private and public, and, as acknowledged by Berger, 'the private use of photographs can be exemplary for their public use' (Berger 1991: 61). This is evident in, for example, exhibitions of memorial photographs such as those shown as part of the 1993 exhibition *The Dead* at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford. These images were produced because of the significance of the deceased person in the private setting of the family and community, and have now been displayed in public to a different audience from the one that was originally intended.

Photography, as shown above, occupies multiple positions. On the one hand, it is art, which if we accept Hanson's (1998) definition is removed from reality; and on the other hand, a conveyor of truths. According to this view, 'a photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show' (Sontag 2003: 42). The tension between photography's

'artistic' and 'documentary' functions thus leads to ambiguity around both how the viewer is supposed to react, and also the role of the photographer. For example, how can a photograph of an atrocity be considered 'beautiful'? And, by the same token, how can a photograph displayed as art have a social message? These questions lead to further queries around the purpose of photographs themselves. Sontag summarises this debate in the following way:

Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticised if it seems 'aesthetic'; that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography – to generate documents and to create works of visual art – have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do. Lately, the most common exaggeration is one that regards these powers as opposites. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the photograph's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. (Sontag 2003: 68)

Here, the author questions the assumption that the dual functions of photography must be considered as necessarily opposing poles. This tension is at the heart of Teresa Margolles' work. Potential criticisms are that her position as an artist, whose work aesthetically meditates upon death, compromises or cheapens the element of social commentary. We may also claim that this social aspect distracts the viewer from formal contemplation of the art works. The mixed feelings that this tension produces, add to the sensations of attraction and repulsion inspired by the artist's subject matter. She plays upon the discomfort of the spectator when confronted with disturbing images that depict real events, exposing the sensation that 'it seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people's pain in an art gallery' (Sontag 2003: 107). The art gallery is a social setting, a public space. Margolles' images of the dead transcend the barrier between private and public, to show the audience something

which is usually not accessible. She is one of many who have approached the subjects of death and the corpse.

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, first published in French in 1980 and later in English translation in 1981 (I will be referring to the edition of the English translation published in 2000), is a meditation on photographs and photography. The author uses the example of a photograph he found of his mother as a child, as a lens through which to explore the relationship between the photograph, what or whom it depicts, and the viewer who contemplates it later. In his example, he is looking at an image depicting his mother as a young girl, before he knew her, but he is seeing it after the fact of her death (Barthes' search for old photographs took place shortly after this event). Barthes uses two terms to define the effect upon the viewer of looking at a photograph: *studium*, and *punctum*. Concisely, the first may be explained as what is interesting in a photograph, such as historical details like dress or old-fashioned modes of transport, or details of the unfamiliar such as the daily routines of someone in a far away country. The second is, literally, what affects the viewer in such a way as to wound, to puncture; in other words, that which is disturbing in an image. In exploring his perception of the difference between these two terms, both of which are hard to pin down with words, Barthes refers to various photographic examples in order to illustrate them. He states that 'the *studium* is always coded, the *punctum* is not' (Barthes 2000: 51). In other words, the *studium* is something that can be named, whereas the *punctum* cannot. The author argues that 'the incapacity to name is a symptom of disturbance' (Barthes 2000: 51). The *punctum* is thus something hard to define, which lurks at the boundaries of language and troubles the mind of the viewer. Barthes explicitly links the photographic image to death. He notes the contemporaneity of the development and growth in popularity of photographic

technology during the late nineteenth century, with the decline in importance of religion:

Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. *Life / Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print. (Barthes 2000: 92)

The photograph is thus a kind of life-after-death of the moment it captures; a two-dimensional encapsulation of an instant now lost but which continues to exist in photographic form, notwithstanding damage to, or loss of the image. The photograph of Barthes' mother is death on two levels: first, in that it documents a moment long past (it pre-dates the author's existence by many years as it shows his mother as a child), and second, because it shows a person who is now dead. The term *punctum* may be employed to describe the shock of death in a photograph, but Barthes does not see it as necessary to view a corpse in order to experience this feeling. He explains this in the following way:

This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die [...] At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated. (Barthes 2000: 96-97)

A photograph of a corpse taken recently lacks the immediate sense of history of a photograph taken long ago, and so must shock in order to exaggerate the sense of defeat by time that other images possess as a consequence of their longevity, i.e. their ability to survive decay by fading or being damaged coupled with their representation of a moment long past. In the light of his views on the relationship between photography and death, then, where does Barthes stand in relation to photographs of

the dead body? The shock of looking at a photograph of a corpse, for Barthes, comes from the photograph's ability to bring something back to life in the instant during which it is viewed. In the case of the dead body, this engenders a horrified confusion on the part of the viewer, because 'if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing' (Barthes 2000: 78-79). The photograph of the corpse is death visually infecting life, the representation of the abject: it is a life of the corpse.

Looking at death: visual depictions and representations of death and the corpse

The production of visual depictions of death and the dead body in art and other arenas of representation has a long and rich history, of which Teresa Margolles and SEMEFO form a part. These images have been produced within many different cultural contexts, for multiple purposes and in numerous settings. Berridge (2001) has commented upon what she sees as a decline in the representation of death in art during most of the twentieth century, a period during which, she argues:

Apart from official war artists, death disappeared from the sphere of art for public consumption and the market for morbid works of art designed for private consumption also died out. The post-mortem postcards to friends, the marble death-masks, the photographs of graves, which were such a source of solace, these jar with contemporary sensibility. (Berridge 2001: 22)

It could be argued that the disappearance of death from view was partly a backlash against the trauma of the First and Second World Wars – with so much horror in reality, perhaps people did not want to be reminded of it. The author argues that this period also influenced the advent and rise of cremation as a popular means of disposal of the dead. It must be reiterated at this point that Berridge's study relates to British and North American culture, and as such does not purport to make totalising

statements about attitudes towards death in other countries. However, as the phenomenon of globalisation, impelled by technologies such as the Internet, arguably affects us all, her observations provide a useful examination of wide trends. The most pertinent of these is, Berridge asserts, an observable cultural shift in attitudes towards death that has occurred since the 1980s, which places doubt on whether we may claim that death is still a taboo subject. The author attributes this to the appearance of HIV/AIDS in the news headlines:

After nearly seventy years of taboo and crisis management, we were jolted into an awareness of our own mortality [...] The reverberations are still being felt in many different ways: discount coffins on the World Wide Web, crematoria open days, designer shrouds, DIY funerals, posthumous e-mail services, glossy magazine coverage of celebrity funerals, body part art, fashion shows in funeral homes and death as a theme in advertisements. By moving from the margins of society to the mainstream, and hence becoming social not anti-social, public not private, fashionable not fearful, death is the focus of the new permissiveness. Death is in. (Berridge 2001: 26)

One of the most popular exhibitions of the last few years is Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds*. Von Hagens' plastinated corpses have travelled the world and brought an enormous number of people into the space of the art gallery. Its impressive popularity begs the question, why does it attract so many people? I would suggest that this is partly due to the scientific angle from which the exhibits are presented. Traditionally, science views its subjects objectively, that is to say, from a distance. Naturally, this makes the experience of being confronted with dead bodies easier for the viewer to digest. If von Hagens was not an anatomist by profession but called himself an artist, *Body Worlds* would probably cause a scandal. Also, the bodies are anonymous, and devoid of individually recognisable characteristics other than the anatomical signs of biological sex. This too makes viewing from a distance possible, and safe, as the spectator is not threatened with emotional engagement and may

therefore remain detached. Physical engagement with the bodies is also impossible. They are dead, yet not decaying; therefore they remain intact (as opposed to being broken and fragmented by decay) and produce no odour. Plastination arrests the onset of putrefaction, so that the bodies are preserved. Stefan Hirschauer examines von Hagen's claim in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition that *Body Worlds* affords its audience a gaze previously available only to medical professionals (Hirschauer 2006: 31). This seemingly empowering language, which sets the exhibition up as something of medical interest, is misleading. As Hirschauer points out, the plastinated corpses do not really reveal as much as one might think at first glance:

Not only for dermatologists, for instance, would the exhibition be of rather limited interest. A physiological perspective too might easily establish that many vital functions of the body are inaccurately shown in a 'lethal medium' as certain organs shrink in the absence of air, nourishment, blood and tonus. Moreover, the visibility of the body is limited to the macro anatomy that can be perceived by the naked eye, whereas for decades anatomical research has been concentrated on the microstructures. (Hirschauer 2006: 31)

Another factor that counts against reading *Body Worlds* as a scientific exhibition is, Hirschauer argues, its focus on 'the mundane existence of the body' (Hirschauer 2006: 31), its reduction to 'an anatomical machine' (Hirschauer 2006: 32). The plastinated bodies show no signs of post mortem decay. They have effectively been tidied up, made safe for the purpose of viewing; made into aestheticised, inoffensive exhibits, bloodless and free of nausea-inducing odours of corruption. The viewer thus experiences visual contact with the dead body in an unthreatening, enjoyable way, finding him or her self able to look at the interior of the human body thrown open wide for excruciatingly close inspection by spectators without feeling compelled to turn away in horror. The interest in this exhibition is that it is not just about the bodies of other people out on display, but that fundamentally it is about death:

What to the anatomist is a simple road of access to the body (a licence to cut), becomes for many lay observers [...] a topic in two ways: as the biographical past of the exhibits and as one's own biographical future. (Hirschauer 2006: 32)

In my view, the absence of the direct threat of decay effected by the anonymising and cleaning up of these corpses, is crucial in understanding the popularity of the exhibition, because the spectator is maintained at a safe distance from death, at least as it is manifested in this case by the dead body, and is therefore happily immune to the threat of pollution from the corpse. Could Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* be a symptom of the cultural shift identified by Berridge? The exhibition has arguably re-introduced death into the mainstream, but it is a bloodless, odourless, sanitised version. Death is no longer being denied (although in this example, arguably, decay is). Or is it? Many people have volunteered to have their bodies turned into plastinates after death – plastination in this way may be seen as a kind of bodily immortality. Despite its exposure in the *Body Worlds* exhibition, however, the dead body is still an object of fear. The plastinate, though dead, is a denial of death, a body preserved intact, escaping the violation of physical disintegration through decay.

Fictional representations of death and the dead body in visual culture are hugely popular, such as prime-time television crime and forensic investigation dramas (such as *Cracker*, *Silent Witness*, *CSI*, *NCIS* and the BBC series *Waking the Dead*, to name but a few of the many examples which spring to mind), not to mention the countless number of box office hit feature films such as *Seven* (released in 1996), *Hostel* (2006), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (first released in 1974). *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is famously based around events that actually occurred, and is a notorious example of a horror film made even more shocking by its origins in reality. The 2003 re-release of the original film (not its much criticised remake) bears a quote from the

UK newspaper the *Daily Mail* on the reverse of the packaging: 'If ever a film should be banned this is it'. This statement, although probably meant to discourage viewing (the *Daily Mail* is a staunchly conservative newspaper), has been appropriated to serve as publicity by tantalising potential viewers with the suggestion of its gruesome content and controversial status. In the literary sphere, crime novels are also highly popular, Kathy Reichs and Patricia Cornwell being two of the most successful authors in recent years.

The images in the programmes and films above, not to mention countless others, provide simulacra and fantasies of the horrors present in everyday life. These are horrors which, perhaps in reality, we would rather ignore, and some argue, to which we have become desensitised (hence the viewing public's seemingly insatiable appetite for fictionalised gore and our ability to sit through news reports about terrible atrocities without, as Estrella de Diego affirms, being put off our food). Berridge comments upon the role of one particular, highly influential visual medium:

Television is the main medium which delivers this paradoxical perception of seeing things up close from a distance [...] This interplay between private and public experience confers a false sense that we are sharing the drama of death in other people's lives, while in reality we are completely insulated from it. The zoom lens focusing in on relatives visiting the scene of the rail crash, interviews with body recovery teams [...] imparts illusory intimacy. Proximity to impersonal experiences of death co-exists with distance from personal experience. (Berridge 2001: 5)

Berridge identifies another contemporary manifestation of this fear in the funerary practice of embalming, which temporarily preserves the corpse so that it may be viewed by relatives prior to burial. She states that:

Embalming taps into arguably the most potent aspect of the modern death taboo, namely our fear of physical deterioration. The twin terrors of the contemporary psyche are age and flesh, and these concerns inform our behaviour towards the dead. Embalming [...] is an elaborate psychological

defence system designed to prevent the dead body from becoming a mirror of our own mortality. The justification for carrying out the invasive procedure, which involves the body being drained of blood and pumped with preservatives with arterial injection, owes far more to psychology than healthcare. (Berridge 2001: 215-16)

The chance for the deceased's family to view the corpse physically intact and as though the individual is merely sleeping, as opposed to dead, provides reassurance. The dead body, although close by, does not appear dead. The foregrounding of the physical appearance of the dead has been interpreted by Berridge as a symptom of a late twentieth century obsession with looks:

The synthetic illusion of continuity embalming achieves, whereby the dead conform to a certain physical standard, is not dissimilar to the illusions achieved with cosmetic surgery. Our use of silicone as the chemical of sex appeal parallels our use of formaldehyde as the chemical of death appeal – both are symptomatic of the tyranny of lookism. A sad sign of human vanity is the fact that in crematoria in California there is a problem with the gloopy residue from silicon breast implants accumulating on the floors of furnaces. (Berridge 2001: 216)

Margolles' corpses are not idealised, romanticised depictions of a peaceful death, where the corpse appears intact and relatively easy to contemplate. These bodies, on the other hand, are naked or only partially covered, and many bear the marks of violent death and aggressive post-mortem interventions indicated by bloodstains, wounds and large autopsy stitches in the head, chest and abdomen. Margolles does not often exhibit the corpse itself, though, instead showing body parts, images of corpses and the physical residues and traces they leave behind. The apparent absence of the body itself from most of her work reflects the disappearance from social life of the individuals who end up as unclaimed corpses at the morgue, often unclaimed by relatives, and forgotten by society. Despite the fact that the dead body is not often directly shown, it is by no means absent from Margolles' art works. The artist's use of

materials that have come directly from the corpse, such as fat, bodily fluids, skin, and occasionally body parts, is emblematic of the disintegration and fragmentation of the body that occurs either naturally or unnaturally after death through processes such as decay, autopsy and the dismantling of the body for medical studies. Margolles also uses materials that have come into contact with corpses, such as water, hospital sheets, and objects taken from the morgue. Although materials such as these ostensibly place the corpse and the viewer at a greater distance from one another, the contact between living and dead bodies is still direct; it is just achieved by subtler means on the part of the artist. Margolles involves all of the viewers' physical senses, as opposed to just the visual (as is usually the case with gallery exhibits), in order to immerse them more fully in the experience. In this way, she makes passive contemplation of her art works difficult, and in some cases, for example where the senses of smell and hearing are involved, impossible. The body's apparent distance lulls the viewer into a false sense of security, which is then shattered. At first seemingly absent, the corpse, the ultimate in abjection, invades the living body of the spectator through the medium of the artwork, with Margolles as the facilitator.

The photographed corpse

Death is the ultimate modifier of the body. After the physical body dies, a variety of things may occur. For example, it may be slowly deconstructed by the natural process of decay. Or, the natural decaying process may be arrested by the use of techniques of preservation of the corpse through embalming (which as Berridge asserts is currently a common practice in the US), or interrupted by interventions such as autopsy, or greatly accelerated by cremation. All of these processes, whether or not they are a

result of post mortem human intervention, greatly modify the body, in some cases so much that it is broken down altogether and effectively disappears from view.

Images of death and the corpse encompass several fields of representation which I will look at here: memorial; medico-scientific (such as autopsies and the documenting of medical anomalies, conditions and treatment); journalistic; the documenting of crime and accident scenes by the police; and artistic representations (among them paintings, photography, sculpture, and sound and visual installations). There are many instances where the boundaries between the genres of death photography have become blurred, which make exploring these genres independently of one another somewhat difficult. Many photographic images of death are ambiguous and may be viewed from multiple perspectives. For instance, some of Margolles' photographs of corpses in the Mexico City Morgue, though we view them as art because of the location in which they are displayed (a gallery; a book; an article in an art or cultural studies journal), closely resemble the style of photography used by the police in criminal investigations. We perceive them as art because they are presented as such. There are a significant number of other examples of an overlap between police, journalistic and medico-scientific photography, and art, which I will examine in more detail before looking more closely at some of the works of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles.

The history of photographing death and the corpse can be traced back to the mid nineteenth century and the invention of the daguerreotype (Norfleet 1993: 11). Throughout this period, the purposes of taking photographs of the dead have been many, and, as Norfleet points out, 'the use of these pictures has changed as attitudes toward death have changed' (Norfleet 1993: 11). Photographic representations of the dead are thus varied not only according to the many reasons for which the images

have been produced, but also as a result of changes in cultural attitudes around death and the corpse. As Sontag (2003) points out, ‘ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death’ (Sontag 2003: 21). According to Barbara Norfleet, during the mid nineteenth century Western societies were ‘preoccupied with death’ (Norfleet 1993: 11) and its depiction in various forms of cultural expression, among them the photograph. Prior to the invention of photography, it had been traditional in Western countries to paint portraits of the dead as mementoes of deceased family members. The daguerreotype and the photograph overtook the portrait and became popular methods of visually representing the dead. These forms of representation, as well as being less time-consuming than painting, were also less costly, which made them accessible to a broader cross-section of society than previously – hence the popularity of these new media. This phenomenon also occurred in Mexico, as documented by Macías Cervantes (2004) in his article on the *retratos de angelitos* (memorial photographs of dead children) in the Guanajuato region from the mid nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, which was discussed in detail in Chapter One. The majority of studies published on the subject of photographing death deal with memorial photography (i.e. images of dead family members and loved ones, which are kept as mementoes by surviving relatives). The photographing of dead bodies does not occur only to provide individual or family keepsakes, however.

SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles are not the only artists whose work deals with death and the dead body as strong thematic elements, nor are these artistic interests that are confined to Mexico. Before looking specifically at their work, it is useful to look briefly at some examples by other artists of their work with these themes, in order to situate SEMEFO and Margolles within the context of the long tradition of death and

the dead body in artistic representation. This is by no means an exhaustive examination of other artists; it is intended solely to provide firstly a context within which to situate Margolles and SEMEFO, and secondly to pose the question of whether, indeed, their work should be regarded from the same perspective or considered comparable.

The corpse photograph as document

Estrella de Diego accurately points out that the media bombard us daily with often gruesome and shocking images of real-life crime, war and violence. She states:

El horror está ahí, ha estado ahí siempre [...] La televisión y los periódicos exhiben a diario en sus noticias cadáveres, violencia, violaciones de primera mano allí, cuando ocurren, y las presentan a la hora de las comidas, además, como una nueva propuesta de lo horrible. (de Diego 1998: 56)

An image may appear or be presented in different ways in different countries. For example, the news press is more heavily censored in the UK than in Europe. A news image of the aftermath of the terrorist train bombing in Madrid on 11 March, 2004, was shown in the UK with the severed arm of one of the victims which lay in the foreground, shown in news reports in other countries, airbrushed out in order to shield the British public from the potential horror and offence of looking at it. Gómez-Peña (2001) attributes the preponderance of violent images in the media to voyeurism, arguing that viewing such images provides people with ‘the illusion of experiencing (vicariously) all the sharp edges and strong emotions that their superficial lives lack’ (Gómez-Peña 2001: 13). The framing of ‘true crime’ as spectacle in this way may be read as a symptom of the current appetite for viewing death that Kate Berridge has observed.

Arthur Fellig (1899-1968) is one of the most celebrated and influential photographers of death (he is reportedly the hero of controversial photographic artist Joel-Peter Witkin). Over the course of his long and prolific career, Fellig, who became known as Weegee, shot thousands of images of corpses. The photographer would use a two-way radio to listen to the calls made by the city police, and then arrive 'on the scene of a disaster separately but simultaneously with the police' (Talmey 1978: 6). From this apparently supernatural talent for knowing where to find the scene of the accident or crime, the nickname 'Weegee' emerged (taken from 'Ouija board'). One of his best-known photographs, *Victim of Auto Accident* (1939) depicts a man who has been killed in a car accident, his body lying covered by a sheet in the foreground while cars are visible in the background as they pass him. The photographer has placed the car steering wheel in the dead man's right hand to maximise the emotional impact of the image. This image is a good example of how a photograph may be shot in a certain way in order to influence the viewer's perception, although here the intention is not malicious but seeks to provoke thought about the dangers of cars.

Weegee had no interest in the art or the theory of photography; his objective was, as stated by Talmey, to provide 'snapshots of unabashed emotions, either brutal or anguished, out in the open' (Talmey 1978: 9). The photographer's intent to expose the nocturnal dramas of city life and death captivated his audience, the readership of the New York newspaper *PM Daily*, for which he worked from 1940 as a contributing photographer (Purcell 2004). He had no use for what he saw as the unnecessary embellishments of complex photographic techniques or theoretical references. The directness of Weegee's images provides the possibility for an unobstructed understanding of what they mean, which clearly makes their impact even greater. This impact resulted in intense and mixed emotions experienced by viewers of the

photographs, who were ‘shocked, appalled and fascinated’ (Purcell 2004) by Weegee’s work as a visual reporter of New York’s daily horrors. These contrasting emotions of shock and fascination are common to viewers of images of death and the dead, including those produced by Margolles. It must be noted that although Weegee’s press photographs were not originally intended to be appreciated as works of art (the photographer cared little for it), a book he published in 1945, *Naked City*, established the genre of journalistic photography ‘as an aesthetic form worthy of attention in itself’ (Purcell 2004). Margolles’ works have always been driven by an artistic project. Weegee, on the other hand, ‘saw no symbols in his subjects’ (Talmey 1978: 5). It has been affirmed by more than one critic, that Weegee’s photographs needed no captions (Talmey, 1978; Purcell, 2004). This reinforces the notion that the directness of the images alone was sufficient to convey their message to the viewer. The message was one of social commentary through which, as summarised in one text, the photographer ‘illuminated dramatic scenes inhabited by individuals who signified a city dweller’s deepest fears (aching loneliness, random violence and destitution)’ (Purcell 2004).

The Mexican documentary photographer Enrique Metinides has published journalistic reportage-style shots of accident sites and crime scenes in Mexico City. Born in 1934, Metinides began taking photographs of car crash scenes as an adolescent, and went on to work as a crime photographer for the newspaper *La Prensa*, a post he held until 1997. He was instrumental in the creation of the *nota roja* genre which, according to Gabriel Kuri:

appeals to the reader’s basest instincts. These papers peer at the incomprehensible: violent death, catastrophe and suffering, almost always of regular, average people [...] A chronicle of disasters, the *nota roja* has been to journalism what the *corrido* is to popular music. (Kuri 2003: 10)

This statement situates the *nota roja* firmly within a specifically Mexican popular cultural context. Mexican cultural commentator Carlos Monsiváis summarises the cultural importance of the ‘red news’ in the following way:

Like it or not, the ‘red news’ constitutes one of Mexico’s greatest novels, from which everyone may retain a fragmentary memory that typifies for them an idea of crime, corruption, and plain bad luck. (Monsiváis 1997: 149)

Metinides’ work has also become well known internationally, as evidenced by the 2003 *Enrique Metinides* exhibition at London’s Photographer’s Gallery. His photographs are now viewed by not only the *La Prensa* readership; they have expanded their sphere of influence to incorporate a new audience of museum and gallery goers. This high level of recognition of the photographer’s work both inside and outside his native Mexico, is a testament to his status as a pioneer in this field of journalism and his ability to document brutal, uncomfortable realities. The key to the effectiveness of Metinides’ carefully composed images is his photographic technique.

He cites his influences as:

Películas de acción en blanco y negro, policíacas y de gangsters. Me gustaba cómo los directores tomaban en cuenta las reacciones de la gente. En una película que fue definitiva, hay una escena de una vendetta en la que incendian un edificio, que sólo se ve al reflejarse las llamas sobre las caras de los testigos. (Kuri 2003: 11)

The inclusion of bystanders and witnesses in his photographs undoubtedly gives an element of empathic humanity to the images, with which the viewer may identify. For example, in the image entitled *Adela Legarreta Rivas es atropellada por un automóvil Datsun blanco en la Avenida Chapultepec, México D.F., 29 de abril de 1979*, the camera’s gaze is fixed on the broken body of the victim in the foreground, and the car is visible in the background. A handful of onlookers observe the vehicle

and the dead woman, but the ability of this photograph to move the viewer emotionally comes from a single witness who is about to cover the shattered body of the victim with a jacket.

Metinides has taken many photographs of corpses. Given the nature of the content of the images (not only those featuring dead bodies, but also photographs of the aftermath of accidents and disasters which show the twisted carcasses of buses, planes and various other types of wreckage), it is pertinent to enquire as to whether Metinides may be encouraging or nourishing a sense of morbid fascination in the viewer. It is certainly appropriate to pose the question that when there are so many horrors and injustices in the world already, why display them so gratuitously? By extension, can the photographer be held responsible for awakening a voyeuristic desire to observe these daily horrors? Carlos Monsiváis claims that the display of such events is necessary, and these stories 'generate a morbidity that is aimed at exorcising urban violence' (Monsiváis 1997: 148). So, if we follow this argument, images such as those produced by the acclaimed photographer provide an outlet for the darker side of the population's psyche by supplying viewers with the consequences of accidents, catastrophes and the unleashed raw power of previously repressed urges. This is coupled with the photographer's ability to make his images evocative. Metinides, when asked about the perceptible element of morbid fascination in looking at images of a certain nature, points out to the interviewer that:

Fotografié miles y miles de muertos, pero fui también pionero de que se publicara la foto del difunto en vida. Yo hablaba personalmente con los familiares y les pedía una foto en vida, y les prometía que no se iba a publicar la del cadáver. (Kuri 2003: 14)

Again, we see the photographer's humanity revealed in his desire to document not only events but also the people affected by them. In this way Metinides both gives

photographic testimonies of unfortunate occurrences, but also memorials to those who were adversely affected, reminders that they are individuals as well as additions to the crime statistics. In this way, his work is comparable to that of Teresa Margolles, who, by way of displaying the bodies of people who would otherwise be forgotten, raises awareness of their lack of social status (although unlike Metinides, Margolles never names the bodies that appear in her art works). One photograph in particular may be compared directly to Margolles' work. It shows a woman walking away from the camera down a Mexico City street holding a tiny white coffin under her arm. The caption reads *Una señora de bajos recursos económicos sale de la morgue luego de haber sido realizada la autopsia de su hija de dos años. Dos horas antes había pedido limosna para comprarle el ataúd. México, D.F., marzo de 1966*. This image is reminiscent of the circumstances under which Margolles' piece *Lengua* was produced, the artist paying for a young man's burial because his family lacked the economic means to do so. However, in this case, it was done in exchange for a part of his body, so arguably the act of helping his family with the funeral costs was not an act of charity akin to that received by the woman in Metinides' photograph, because there was a clear benefit for Margolles which was probably a motive behind her offer of financial assistance. Nevertheless, it is true that both pieces reveal a reality within which some members of society cannot afford proper burials for their deceased loved ones. In both the examples mentioned above, though, the relatives managed to obtain coffins. Other bodies, featured in works by Margolles, are not so lucky. They may never even be claimed or identified, and are consequently laid to rest unrecognised in mass graves.

Enrique Metinides aims simply to reveal: 'Hay fotografías que hablan solas. Pero lo primero que tienes que explicar es que son reales, dónde se tomaron y qué es lo que

retratan [...] La nota al pié de la fotografía, como la de los periódicos, da sentido al contenido' (Kuri 2003: 14). There is nothing abstract about Metinides' work; his project is documentary rather than conceptual.

The Burns Archive is a collection of over 700,000 images² based in New York. The collection consists of photographs on a number of themes including war, crime and death, along with a medical collection of over 40,000 photographs.³ This collection is made up of many sub-sections covering every imaginable medical practice from 'Bloodletting' to 'Drugs', 'Plastic Surgery' to 'Vaccinations'. Joel-Peter Witkin states of this fascinating collection of photographs, that:

It is only in our epoch that we possess the permanent mirror of memory we call photography [...] Yet we continue to fear its darker images of ourselves, even from the past [...] The camera has given us the means to see ourselves in others, ourselves harmed, un-lived, deformed, even dead. These images are triumphant contributions in the evolution of the quest to eradicate all disease, both social and pathological. (Witkin 1987: 1)

Witkin celebrates the display of damaged bodies which viewers of these images may find disturbing. Rather than reject them as examples of an 'other' with whom the viewer cannot connect, he suggests that within the photographs lies the possibility of empathising with their subjects because they reveal sickness and death as undeniable facets of human existence.

The corpse in religious imagery

There is a long tradition both inside and outside Mexico of looking at representations of death in a religious setting, which in Mexico stretches back to the pre Hispanic era and continues to the present day in the iconography of Catholicism. Religious art has

² <http://www.burnsarchive.com> accessed 10/8/2006

³ <http://www.burnsarchive.com/archive/medical.html> accessed 10/8/2006

long been suffused with representations of death through the suffering of martyrs, saints and other religious icons. The most frequently depicted and significant of these for the Catholic faith is Jesus Christ, who is traditionally shown nailed to the cross, with blood trickling from the wounds in his side, hands and feet and an agonised expression on his face, which is turned upwards towards heaven. In some religious art, suffering is presented as a glorious, spiritual experience, and individuals who have experienced the most terrible suffering are posthumously awarded the titles of martyr or saint in recognition of the hardships they endured during life in the name of God. In Mexico, the foremost carrier of symbolic meaning in terms of Catholic iconography is the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the *virgen morena* to whom Claudio Lomnitz refers as ‘Mexico’s first national totem’ (Lomnitz 2005: 41). Guadalupe has been a powerful symbol for hundreds of years, and became associated with the country’s creation. According to Lomnitz:

This image [...] had been taken as a sign of Mexico’s spiritual autonomy by the late eighteenth century, and it was raised as the standard of the rebel armies at independence. At that point, many Mexicans thought of themselves collectively as the children of Guadalupe. (Lomnitz 2005: 41)

A more recent addition to Mexican religious iconography receives attention from Lomnitz, who draws attention to a ‘burgeoning new cult’ (Lomnitz 2005: 486) devoted to the image of Santa Muerte. As the author explains, the origins of this cult are mysterious, with one theory tracing its inception back to a secret sect in the eighteenth century in central Mexico, although no more recent evidence of this has been uncovered (Lomnitz 2005: 486). In its contemporary incarnation, the Santa Muerte cult has spread across Mexico and even into the southern states of the U.S. (Lomnitz 2005: 490). Visual representations of Santa Muerte combine features

familiar to Catholic iconography, but mingling them in seemingly contradictory fashion:

Sickle in hand, it is the image of Death the leveller. However, La Santísima Muerte also has attributes of the Virgin Mary: the globe, the scapular, and the virginal entailments of the white bridal gown. (Lomnitz 2005: 490)

As Lomnitz points out, the representation of death robed in white is at odds with the traditional Catholic depictions of Death, which present the figure as ‘a child of sin and as a messenger rather than as a redeemer’ (Lomnitz 2005: 490). It has been suggested that this notion of death as a forgiving saviour is at the centre of the cult’s appeal to its followers, and it is also a symptom of the decline in appeal of the traditional Catholic Church for many Mexicans. A BBC documentary series entitled *Around the World in 80 Faiths* is a series that sees the presenter, Anglican vicar Pete Owen Jones, travel around the globe to meet devotees of religions ranging from ancient Tibetan Buddhism to more recently established faiths. The seventh programme in the series focuses on Latin America, and has a section that explores the recent growth in popularity of the Santa Muerte cult. Jones travels to the neighbourhood of Tepito, where the shrine is housed. According to Lomnitz, Tepito is ‘a neighbourhood known for crime, drugs and contraband’ (Lomnitz 2005: 492). The programme follows a female devotee as she goes to a tattoo studio to have an image of a skull and a rose tattooed above her right breast, in homage to La Santa Muerte for the answering of a prayer. The tattooist is interviewed, and states his opinion on the subject of Santa Muerte’s popularity in the following way: ‘En mi opinión [...] la iglesia ha perdido credibilidad, la iglesia católica. Entonces, digamos que la muerte está al alcance de

cualquier persona, ¿no?’⁴ A devotee at the shrine itself, who cites La Santa Muerte’s relative tolerance as her reason for abandoning traditional Catholicism, whose doctrines are staunchly conservative, echoes this view. She is shown blowing cigar smoke onto the shrine ‘para que se vayan todas las malas vibras, todo lo malo.’⁵ These views connect faith intrinsically with the reality of everyday experience, and reject traditional Catholic icons in favour of something perceived as more accessible, with which followers are able to identify closely: a male follower refers to Santa Muerte affectionately as ‘mi flaquita’, saying that ‘tiene un lugar especial en mi corazón.’⁶ The cult in its present incarnation, according to Lomnitz, ‘seems to have begun on the fringes of the state – among the criminal element and the police’ (Lomnitz 2005: 492) from where it has spread gradually into mainstream society in recent years. Its popularity is perhaps a symptom of the state’s failure to improve the quality of life for millions of Mexicans who are forced to operate within the ‘unofficial’ economy in order to make a living, such as the *ambulantes* (street vendors) whose day-to-day experiences are documented by Mexico City-based Belgian artist Francis Alÿs (who will receive further attention in Chapter Five).

Lomnitz asserts that globalisation is also a factor:

Globalization in these vast “fringes” of Mexico has disassociated the power of death from the power of the state. The state today is no longer the absolute symbol of sovereignty, at least not in the imagination of many. God, too, is a bit too remote for the drug lord, and for intensely hybridized groups that must live on the fringes of legality. (Lomnitz 2005: 496)

⁴ Tattooist (unnamed), interviewed in *Around the World in 80 Faiths: Latin America*. BBC2, broadcast 13/02/2009

⁵ Unnamed female interviewee, in *Around the World in 80 Faiths: Latin America*. BBC2, broadcast 13/02/2009

⁶ Unnamed male interviewee, in *Around the World in 80 Faiths: Latin America*. BBC2, broadcast 13/02/2009

This sense of dislocation has arguably distanced the state, and the traditional Church, from their formerly powerful positions as arbiters of daily life and chastisers of bad behaviour, and now, as described above, people are looking for reassurance elsewhere.

Cuauhtémoc Medina (2000) has perceived a link between Catholicism's aesthetic of death, and the popularity of true crime magazines such as *Alarma!*, which are filled with photographs of dead bodies whose deaths were, in many cases, shockingly violent. He proposes that because of the graphic depictions of death and dying which may be found within the Catholic artistic canon, and the imagery of the true crime genre and the *nota roja*, the Mexican public are accustomed to looking at images of death, and cites this as an explanation for the relative lack of controversy caused by SEMEFO and Margolles' art works in Mexico:

Las terribles imágenes de Margolles no resultan tan intolerables en una sociedad por demás habituada a una sobredosis de historias de crímenes verdaderos y revistas policiales extremadamente gráficas. (Medina 2005: 352)

The images of violent death splattered across the pages of the true crime magazines are not as idealised as the representations of saints and martyrs – religious icons are portrayed as glorious (though bloody) homages to passionate spirituality, whilst the accident and murder victims in the magazines serve as gory examples to the public of the consequences of living a less than morally wholesome life. The bodies which form Margolles' art works are neither spiritually romanticised nor condemned, they are simply displayed so that viewers are forced to contemplate their own mortality, and they are confronted by the feelings provoked by the realisation that their bodies will disintegrate after death. This is because the artist shows through her art works inevitable realities which affect us all.

Representations of different bodies

To what can the interest in the grotesque and the unusual be attributed? Is it akin to the period of pre-Millennial tension during the late Victorian period, when feelings of disquiet at the turn of the century engendered a fascination with looking at different, that is to say, non-mainstream bodies? Estrella de Diego has observed that ‘están pasando cosas que muestran, incluso de forma descarada, territorios que parecían privados, excluidos, apartados de la vista’ (de Diego 1998: 47). The author identifies a phenomenon that has been appearing, in her opinion, since the early 1980s (de Diego 1998: 48), whereby art seems to have taken on a strong element of the gruesome in order to rewrite the canon:

Locas, monstruos de cuerpos, ovejas, cerdos, reproducciones de vísceras humanas, entresijos de animales, ropa sucia, fotos de cadáveres, fotos de niños metidas en recipientes como en un laboratorio y una señora que se llama Orlan y que se empeña en someterse a innumerables operaciones de cirugía estética para ponerse cada vez más fea. Qué bochornoso espectáculo. No es posible. Qué manera de airearlo todo, de hacerlo todo público, de mostrar estas cosas de tan mal gusto. (de Diego 1998: 48)

The author traces this aesthetic back to the seventeenth century. It can, of course, be traced back further through the traditions of death iconography in religious settings, such as the ‘transi tombs’ of the Middle Ages, and ancient statues of Aztec deities, to name but two of many possible examples. De Diego also mentions the display of bodies in the didactic medical arena of the public autopsy as the field of anatomical studies emerged: reference is made by the author to the Dutch anatomist Frederick Ruysch, who produced accurate and finely detailed illustrations of the complex workings of the human body. Ruysch possessed a large collection of anatomical specimens which, according to the author, are ‘muestras todas de una estética preilustrada que invade ciertos sectores del arte actual, enfrentando éste de forma

clara no sólo a la muerte y lo terrorífico [...] sino mostrando un peculiar interés por lo singular' (de Diego 1998:50). The author identifies a period in history when difference became the subject of fear and suspicion, segregated from mainstream society and moved away from being part of the many facets of daily life into the realm of tabooed 'other', capable of producing an emotional shock in the viewer. It was, however, she claims, still very much present in cultural production, occupying a space in literary fiction and the darkest desires of the human imagination. De Diego attributes this to the nature of the eighteenth century Enlightenment's drive for improvement and to 'expulsar los "errores"' (de Diego 1998: 49), claiming that 'es imposible vivir en el mundo homogéneo e incompleto que propugnaba la Ilustración' (de Diego 1998: 50). Herein lies the author's crucial argument – difference cannot be erased simply by denial of its existence, even though the spectators of difference (for example, members of the public who attended the extremely popular nineteenth century 'Freak Shows') may be horrified and shocked by its contemplation. This particular example encapsulates the conflict between the irrepressible desire to look, and the emotional shock of doing so, that is, the feeling of repulsion when the viewer is confronted with the body or the image or the artefact that is being viewed. It is interesting that the most famous 'exhibits' in Victorian Freak Shows were human beings whose *bodies* were different, such as bearded ladies or Siamese twins. De Diego calls these bodies 'los cuerpos del otro canón' (de Diego 1998: 53). She perceives a recently increased openness in their cultural representation in various arenas. For example:

Los cuerpos del otro canón se muestran en la televisión – cualquier cosa, de verdad, por salir en la televisión - y los artistas retratan mujeres gordas y hombres negros con brazos amputados, bellos como estatuas clásicas. (de Diego 1998: 53)

An early cinematic celebration of difference, Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, was widely banned. The 60-minute film is a morality tale set in a circus, starring real-life sideshow professionals, including conjoined twins, a 'human skeleton' and an intersexual named Josephine Joseph. The plot exposes the injustice of the performers' mistreatment by 'normals' and ends with their revenge upon the worst perpetrator, a female trapeze artist who has attempted to cheat one of the performers out of his inherited fortune by marrying him under false pretences. Throughout the film, the reactions of 'normal' people vary between laughter and horror, and they are frequently described as 'monstrosities'. Eventually, *Freaks* shows the real 'freaks' to be those who have mocked the performers, and this injustice is resolved. *Freaks* was banned in the UK for 30 years, and is even now described as a 'horror film', reportedly ranking 15th on Bravo TV's top 100 scariest moments.⁷ This kind of body horror, the shock of difference, clearly still provokes extreme reactions.

In September 2005, a new, and controversial, statue was unveiled in London's Trafalgar Square. *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, a work by Marc Quinn, was to remain there for eighteen months and formed part of a series of art works which will be displayed temporarily on the Square's Fourth Plinth. An article on the BBC's *Ouch!* web site states that 'The fact that the sculpture portrays someone who is disabled has caused a lot of controversy in the art world. It's been dismissed as an example of political correctness, and even called ugly.'⁸ An email from a member of the public says 'we don't normally think of a disabled person's body as being beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. It's an interesting coming together of an aesthetic art form with a body that you wouldn't normally look at it in that way.'⁹ Here, notions of beauty and aesthetics in the traditional sense, understood as that which is pleasing to the eye in

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freaks> accessed 7/12/2008

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/news/btn/lapper/> accessed 11/07/2006

⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/news/btn/lapper/> accessed 11/07/2006

the same way that classical sculpture may be considered pleasing to the eye, are challenged by the setting of a non-traditional body upon a plinth as a piece of art. Another commentator looks at the statue of Alison Lapper within the context of contemporary art, and comes to a disapproving conclusion:

I think the lady who the sculpture is of is a brilliant lady, and they should probably make a film of her. But as a work of art, I don't think it sits well in Trafalgar Square; it's another piece of modern art like an Anthony Gormley or a Tracy Emin. It's just not art; the way things are going in England today, I could put a false leg up there and they'd call it art.¹⁰

This statement embodies two key issues. The first is the discrepancy between the relative acceptance of the *Alison Lapper Pregnant* statue as a work of art and the recognition of its status as such by the sheer fact of its being displayed in a setting far more public than an art gallery (despite the obvious controversy caused by its high visibility), versus the continuing stigmatisation of, and prejudice against disabled people in Britain. The second and more relevant of these issues to my research is the questioning of whether *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is art. The above statement reveals a perception that the work of contemporary artists is not really art. The two mentioned here, Anthony Gormley, author of the enormous – and, of course, controversial – *Angel of the North* statue which occupies a space atop a hill beside the A1 motorway just outside Gateshead, in the North East of England, and Tracy Emin, who infamously displayed her unmade bed in a London gallery, belong to the same generation of British artists as the even more infamous Damien Hirst, whose notoriety has earned him the status of household name in Britain.

Perhaps this view that contemporary art is not really art comes precisely from the speed of the cultural shift identified by Estrella de Diego, so that in recent times a re-

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/news/btn/lapper/> accessed 11/07/2006

writing of the traditional artistic canon has been occurring relatively rapidly. This is a process which is not unique to the last few years, in fact occurring periodically throughout the history of art. The Dada and Surrealist movements during the early twentieth century are good examples of this phenomenon. This would explain why opinions are so divided, and also why some images are so profoundly shocking:

Es como si el viejo canón se tambaleara, como si todo aquello expulsado primero del mundo en el XVIII y recuperado luego como curiosidad en el XIX, en las ferias y los gabinetes médicos, donde la línea divisoria entre diversión y ciencia es sutil y compleja, fuera demasiado fuerte, demasiado tenaz en su persistencia para dejarlo a un lado. (de Diego 1998: 53)

One of the main features of this re-writing is encapsulated in changes in the representation of the human body. The bodies in this 'other canon' are not portrayed following the tradition of faithful simulacra of the human form as it is when we look at ourselves in a mirror, or when our gaze is fixed upon the study of a life drawing model in a studio or classroom; other forces are represented which effect changes on the human anatomy. We need only to look at the works of Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon, to name but two examples, to see bodies distorted, fragmented and twisted by the force of emotions. These are physical representations of emotional states that challenge traditional assumptions around what constitutes aesthetic beauty, and rewrite the rules of artistic representation of the human form.

The concept of an aesthetic of the broken body takes on a different and far more problematic aspect when it is applied to the art works of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles. The display of bodily difference and its capacity for producing shock, and feelings of mingled fascination and disgust in the viewer, thus applies not only to living persons who deviate from the norm, but also to dead bodies, especially those who suffered violent deaths.

Joel-Peter Witkin is a photographer 'obsessed with seeing' (Witkin 1998) whose work contains strong elements of symbolism (unlike that of his hero, Weegee) and references sources such as 'history, art, a person or a thought' (Witkin 1998). Witkin expresses his obsession through his use of various objects in his work: 'severed heads and masks; concerns with violence, pain and death; of things extravagant, emotional and deserving adoration' (Witkin 1998). His photographs are produced with the intention of producing strong emotional reactions – in Witkin's words, a 'visceral impact' (Witkin 1998). These reactions are produced first in the photographer as he captures the image, then in the viewer who sees the image after it has undergone a process of treatment in preparation for exhibition so that the resulting photograph embodies 'an esthetic language which engages profound emotional dichotomies within the viewer' (Witkin 1998). The aims of Witkin's project are both personal, and public. His photographic career sprung out of his fixation with seeing (he claims that his obsession began when, as a child, he witnessed a car accident following which the decapitated head of the victim, a young girl, rolled towards him on the pavement where he stood); and public. He intends that his images function as historical documents which inspire strong emotional reactions in the viewer: 'my hope is not only to show the insanity of our lives, but also that this work will be seen as part of the history of diverse and desperate times' (Witkin 1998). However, the photographs are highly symbolic, and as Eugenia Parry states, should not be taken literally (Parry 1998: 181). She points out that 'this has presented a problem for those who expect from photography seamless documentary truth' (Parry 1998: 181). Witkin's works thus occupy an apparently paradoxical space between, on the one hand, the artist's desire for his work to be seen as an agent in recording 'the confusion of the Now' (Parry 1998: 187), and on the other, his use of the (living and dead) bodies of the

actors in his photographic scenes as symbolic artefacts through which Witkin seeks to occupy a place within a long tradition of art. In this way, Witkin, although very much of the contemporary era, may be situated within a canon to which artists such as Picasso and Goya belong.

Witkin's interest in death and the corpse is evident in many of his photographs, and culminated in his 1990 visit to a Mexico City morgue. This situates him within the physical territory of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles. Both Margolles and Witkin use human and animal bodies as 'the province of philosophical reflection' (Parry 1998: 178), that is, to confront the viewer with questions of death and decay as a catalyst to the contemplation of the inescapable truths of the materiality of the body, its inevitable death and the process of bodily decomposition that happens afterwards, the phenomenon termed by SEMEFO 'la vida del cadáver' (Sánchez 1998: 137). Both artists' work arguably displays an interest in Georges Bataille's theory, which establishes a clear link between eroticism, death, and decay, which in turn is evidenced by the viewer's emotional reactions of mingled shock and fascination toward the images. Kristeva's notion of the abject is also applicable to both artists. Witkin and Margolles use their work as a means of bearing witness to socially turbulent times, as well as vehicles for the contemplation of theories around the desire and disgust provoked by images of death and the dead.

Damien Hirst (b.1965) is notorious for his interest in themes surrounding death and the corpse, most notably (and famously) displayed in his works using animal carcasses preserved in tanks of formaldehyde, for example, *Mother and Child, Divided* (1993), the bisected corpses of a cow and her calf displayed in four tanks set a few feet apart from one another, which was shortlisted for the 1993 Turner Prize.¹¹

¹¹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/hirst.htm>, accessed 11/07/2006

Another piece, *A Thousand Years* (1990) consists of a rotting cow's head in a glass case, along with fly eggs and a fly zapper. It has been termed 'a veritable momento [sic] mori in the "Vanitas" tradition.'¹² Both of these pieces brutally confront the viewer with the inevitable realities of death and decay. Hirst is quoted as saying 'I am going to die and I want to live forever. I can't escape the fact, and I can't let go of the desire.'¹³

On 23 February 2006, a Hirst exhibition entitled *The Death of God* opened in Mexico (O'Hagan 2006: 19). This show displays death as a strong thematic element, and the artist uses artefacts such as human skulls in a number of the exhibited pieces, for example, *The Inescapable Truth*, which consists of a human skull in a formaldehyde-filled tank. Another piece, *Adam and Eve Under Table*, consists of two grubby human skeletons dressed as a bride and groom, the bride holding a bouquet of flowers, lying with one arm around each other underneath a table covered with the detritus of a late night drinking session: the table is cluttered with empty beer and wine bottles and glasses, overflowing ashtrays and, in the foreground, a small but not inconspicuous heap of white powder. Hirst's signature theme of dead animals is also strongly present here, in the form of sheep (as in one of Hirst's most well known pieces, *Away From the Flock* (1995), a single sheep in a tank of formaldehyde). In this example, as described by Sean O'Hagan:

There are two, skinned and bent grotesquely out of shape, kneeling upright in their formaldehyde tanks, each draped in rosary beads, and holding an open bible in their hooves. One is called, *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*; the other, *Hail Mary Full of Grace*. They have the shock of the profane about them. (O'Hagan 2006: 19)

¹² http://www.whitecube.com/html/artists/dah/dah_frset.html accessed 11/07/2006

¹³ *ibid.*

The work of Damien Hirst has been the subject of debate and controversy among both art critics and the public. Despite, or perhaps because of this (and a keen and shrewdly-advised head for business), he is the world's wealthiest living artist, and has estimated his own value at around £100 million (O'Hagan 2006: 21). The reason for this is that Hirst's pieces are shocking. The same is arguably true of the works of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles, which also focus heavily upon the themes of death and the corpse. However, the similarities end there.

In conceptual terms, certainly, death is at the centre of both the artistic project and the subject matter employed by the artists: Hirst's dead sheep and cows; and SEMEFO's horse carcasses (as in *Lavatio Corporis*, exhibited at the Museo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, in 1994). However, although dead animals are used in both examples, there is a fundamental difference between the works which reveals the way in which the intentions behind them are dissimilar: Hirst's animal bodies are preserved in formaldehyde; therefore they will not rot. Their decomposition is maintained in a state of arrested development, and they will never (at least, not while they are being exhibited and remain in the formaldehyde tank), be allowed to undergo the destruction which is the end of all living things. SEMEFO's animal bodies, on the other hand, are not preserved. This leaves them susceptible to the natural decaying process through which the physical body decomposes after death, a process which Hirst's animals are never allowed to undergo in the exhibition space. Although Hirst's works ostensibly deal with the theme of death, their chemical stasis in glass tanks is a denial of the decay that follows death, whereas the animals used by SEMEFO experience the whole process. SEMEFO and Hirst are mentioned alongside one another in an essay by Coco Fusco, who compares the ways in which the two use

animals in their works. The author describes the aforementioned SEMEFO piece

Lavatio Corporis, which consisted partly of

[...] a rusted carousel with three preserved colts chained and suspended above a bed of spikes. Next to the carousel were three metal rings set above eye level, each containing a preserved horse fetus that was visibly desiccating. Further into the gallery were six lucite blocks arranged in a descending row, each holding a sliced section of a horse's head. Finally, at the rear of the gallery were two older dead horses, each shackled to metal constructions reminiscent of torture paraphernalia. One horse was splayed out on all fours, while the other was held up with his head thrown backward and his rear legs chained wide apart. (Fusco 2001: 61)

Fusco has also noticed this fundamental difference between them:

Hirst's animals are exhibited under glass, like specimens in a science display. SEMEFO's horses, on the other hand, were exposed to the elements in the museum, their poses suggest scenarios of pleasure and pain, and their oxidizing frames recalled the instruments of the Inquisition. (Fusco 2001: 62)

Fusco's use of the words 'pleasure' and 'pain' in the same sentence here is revealing. It affirms both the contradictory nature of the viewer's reaction (the emotional shock produced by the mixture of attraction and repulsion), and the sense of the potentially erotic nature of the flesh itself, which further reinforces both of these reactions. Thus the irresistible compulsion to look is both arousing and disturbing – this is the paradox which, according to Georges Bataille, is at the very heart of the way in which some humans view two of their most passionate obsessions: sex, and death. *Lavatio Corporis* plays upon both.

Both Hirst and SEMEFO have been accused by critics and the press of using shock tactics to draw attention to their work. In Hirst's case, this is evidenced in texts where his work is lambasted for being no more than a series of publicity stunts designed to maintain his status as a celebrity artist whose works are commodities for sale at astronomical prices on the art market (Charles Saatchi famously paid £1 million for

one of Hirst's sculptures). Hirst has been criticised by other artists, who accuse his work of lacking meaning. The following passage is taken from the *Stuckist Critique of Damien Hirst*:

Hirst's best-known work is a tiger shark in a tank of formaldehyde. It is titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. This purports to address a profound issue but renders its author not an artist but a cumbersome poet with a rather excessive visual aid. A major current critical fallacy is to assume that the display of an object, which is an intrinsic part of an experience, in any way interprets a theme or deals with the issue of that experience. A dead shark displayed as an art work does not tell us anything about death (or for that matter about sharks) that we would not know through the ordinary experience of seeing a dead shark, completely regardless of its art context. A dead shark in a tank of formaldehyde does not address the issue of death: it is just dead. The only possible comment that it makes is that to be dead is like being in a contemporary art gallery.¹⁴

This critique addresses Hirst's use of a dead shark as a tool through which to conceptualise a philosophical statement on death. This is a crucial point. Does sticking a dead animal in a tank in an art gallery and giving the object a title, validate it conceptually as a profound piece of commentary? Indeed, should art have a purpose at all? It is worth noting that if we are to take a post modern stance, it could be reasonably argued that meaning is irrelevant, and a work of art can be either meaningful or meaningless depending on the perspective from which it is viewed, and this meaning is all a matter of individual attribution and perception. Following this line of thought, Hirst may be celebrated as an artist who has captured the *zeitgeist* – 'utterly of and about his time; the conceptual artist as pop star, business tycoon, maverick and icon' (O'Hagan 2006: 20). However, if we accept the view advanced by the Stuckists, that for art to be art, it must *mean* something, the critics of Damien Hirst may have a valid argument. Certainly, the idea that the meaning (or lack thereof) of an artwork is subject to the perspective of the viewer, may allow the artist to avoid

¹⁴ <http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/H/hirst/against.html> accessed 12/07/2006

responsibility for creating an artwork that ‘means something’. In the case of Damien Hirst, the use of a seemingly profound title to describe what is really no more than an unfortunate dead animal in a tank, is an indicator of nothing more than the artist’s wealth and desire to shock.

So, what is to stop us levelling criticisms similar to the ones received by Damien Hirst at the work of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles? This has in fact been done, for example by Antonio Espinoza, whose view is that she strips the dead body of the poetic element displayed by some kinds of corpse art (such as the lovingly-constructed memorial photograph), in order to reveal the brutal reality of what happens to Mexico City’s forgotten dead. However, Espinoza identifies a problem with the use of art as a consciousness-raising device in this way:

El problema es que su estética macabra, que busca motivar en el espectador la reflexión existencialista y el respeto a la vida, termina por ser un espectáculo más del mundo de escándalo y perversión en el que vivimos. Negar la dimensión voyeurista y morbosa que provoca la obra de Margolles es verdaderamente absurdo. La gente contempla su arte con el mismo placer perverso con que alguna vez leyó *Alarma!*, una publicación sangrienta de triste memoria. (Espinoza 2003: 2)

Espinoza criticises Margolles for awakening the spectator’s voyeuristic compulsion to look, which, in his view, lowers the tone of her work to the base level of a true-crime magazine – i.e., the use of such images in art is not the way to go about raising people’s awareness of the horrible social reality, because it merely appeals to the viewer’s morbid fascination. This view displays a certain degree of snobbery about the role of art, and perhaps a belief that art should always represent beauty. ‘Beauty’ here is being understood as that which is aesthetically pleasing in the traditional sense. There is of course the possibility of understanding another, opposing concept of the ‘beauty’ which may be found in looking at images which are potentially disturbing

and that go against the traditional canon. For example, the most memorable works of the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya, such as his depiction of Saturn devouring his own son, are disturbing to look at, and do not present a pretty, easily digestible view of their subject matter. His series of etchings *Los desastres de la guerra*, published in 1863, provide a catalogue of images of terrible scenes of death and dismembered corpses, a powerful commentary on the human capacity for violence. Espinoza's conservative view is also a denial of that very natural desire to look that lies at the heart of the spectator's emotional reaction to the images, to produce the mingled feelings of fascination and disgust to which Georges Bataille dedicated some of his writings.

There is, in fact, a long artistic tradition that celebrates and revels in the dirty side of the human condition, which SEMEFO and Margolles certainly tap into. Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), a collection of poetry first published as a complete collection in 1857 (Culler 1993: xiii). Within this collection is a poem entitled *Une charogne* (*A Carcass*), which clearly demonstrates pleasure on the part of the writer, who is reminiscing about the sight of a decaying woman's corpse (in French, followed by the English translation):

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un soufflé vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

Remember, my love, the object we saw
That beautiful morning in June:
By a bend in the path a carcass reclined
On a bed sown with pebbles and stones;

Her legs were spread out like a lecherous whore,
Sweating out poisonous fumes,
Who opened in slick invitational style
Her stinking and festering womb.

The sun on this rotteness focused its rays
To cook the cadaver till done,
And render to nature a hundredfold gift
Of all she'd united in one.

And the sky cast an eye on this marvellous meat
As over the flowers in bloom.
The stench was so wretched that there on the grass
You nearly collapsed in a swoon.

The flies buzzed and droned on these bowels of filth
Where an army of maggots arose,
Which flowed with a liquid and thickening stream
On the animate rags of her clothes.

And it rose and fell, and pulsed like a wave,
Rushing and bubbling with health.
One could say that this carcass, blown with vague breath,
Lived in increasing itself.¹⁵

¹⁵ Baudelaire, Charles (1993[1857]) *The Flowers of Evil* (translated by James McGowan; introduction by Jonathan Culler), pp. 58-61. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press

In this section of the poem (the first six stanzas out of a total of twelve), Baudelaire treats the corpse in three ways that are worthy of comment. Firstly, it is described here as beautiful. The poet is reminiscing to a lover about their shared experience of seeing the corpse, which is described in evocative language such as ‘marvellous meat’ and likened to a blossoming flower exposed to the sun’s rays. Secondly, the corpse is highly eroticised. The poet makes several references in the second verse to the dead woman’s physicality and sexuality, which have not been diminished by her death (‘lecherous... sweating... invitational... womb’).

SEMEFO have professed an interest in the ideas of Bataille, and an interest in the link between eroticism and death is perceptible in their early work with animal carcasses. They assert in an interview that ‘Casi siempre utilizamos animales. Y no por nada simbólico, sino por *el disfrute erótico de la carne, de la glándula*’ (Sánchez 1998:134, emphasis mine). The third method by which Baudelaire revels in the dirty side of human nature, is that he, like SEMEFO, celebrates the life of the corpse. The poet’s references to the sun, Nature, and flowers place the body within the realm of living things. The corpse supports a miniature ecosystem of flies and maggots which impart a kind of life into the dead flesh which is now ‘Rushing and bubbling with health’ (*The Carcass*, stanza 6, line 2). The notion of the life of the corpse, a life that occurs after death; and the life engendered by the dead body itself in the form of bacteria and creatures that break down the material body, is one at the heart of SEMEFO’s work. They aim to show that life continues after death in this form: ‘Mostrar esta pervivencia, este proceso de continuidad, aunque tan reducido, tan mínimo, es nuestra obra’ (Sánchez 1998: 135). The concept of continuity is also at the heart of Georges Bataille’s ideas on death and eroticism. It is, in fact, something that links the two: the erotic is in one way an affirmation of life, and from the corpse springs new life, a fact

we find repulsive because it reminds us of death (the corpse itself) and the erotic (life). Another characteristic of the corpse identified by the French poet and the Mexican artists is the smell. In Baudelaire's poem, the corpse's odour is so strong that his lover 'nearly collapsed in a swoon' (*The Carcass*, stanza 4, line 4). The power of the dead body's smell is also a focussing point for SEMEFO, who say of one of their exhibition pieces that 'fue un pleito, por el olor... Había olor a muerte' (Sánchez 1998: 137). This point of interest is discussed at greater length later in this chapter with reference to specific examples of SEMEFO's work. The activity of revelling in filth, which Baudelaire does through poetry, has been experienced physically by SEMEFO. For example, they talk about a video, *Paredón*, which they shot in an abandoned building:

Fue sin público, a no ser un cura que nos vio y avisó a la policía que se estaba cometiendo un crimen. Llegó la policía y todo estaba lleno de vísceras y nadie creía que eran de animales. Fue un rollo. Habíamos hecho de todo con los animales, masturbarnos, metérsenos por dónde nos cabían. Era muy erótico, de contacto profundo. (Sanchez 1998: 134)

SEMEFO are not the only art collective to celebrate the uncomfortable, dirty facets of humanity. During the 1960s, the *Aktionismus* group, based in Vienna, used various methods of creative expression such as action painting, poetry and performances, and are now considered 'the only movement in post-war Austria that influenced the development of contemporary art internationally.'¹⁶ The two groups have been explicitly linked to one another in an article on the web site of Art & Idea, an independent gallery in Mexico City which was founded by the Austrian diplomat Robert Punkenhofer (Gallo 2004: 8), and Teresa Margolles is reported as having confirmed the influence of the Austrian group in previous interviews. There is a clear

¹⁶ See <http://www.art-idea.com/global/semefo/semefo01.html>

similarity between the Actionists and the early work of SEMEFO, where the human body literally becomes the work of art and the work employs highly confrontational tactics. The common theme between the two groups is the foregrounding of this link between reality and art. The Actionists exploited this in many ways including by doing things to their own bodies. SEMEFO also did this in their earlier works, whereas their later pieces (and Teresa Margolles' solo pieces) show realities acted out upon other bodies, which are then displayed as art in the gallery space.

Another contemporary artist to use the dead human body and comment on the taboo status of death in his work is American photographer Andrés Serrano (b.1950), author of the controversial piece *Piss Christ* (1987).¹⁷ He has commented that the subject of death is 'very difficult for me to understand', and that, like sex, 'consciously and unconsciously affects your life.'¹⁸ Serrano produced the *Morgue* series (first shown in 1992), which consists of photographs of corpses.¹⁹ These photographs show the bodies of people who died due to various, often violent causes, such as *Rat Poison Suicide*, *Bottle Murder*, and *Jane Doe Killed by Police*. The matter-of-fact captions simply explain the cause of death. Because the corpses are anonymous ('Jane Doe' is the feminine version of 'John Doe', the name given in the US to unidentified corpses), their mode of death is their only distinguishing feature. Signs of their identity in life are absent (for ethical and legal reasons), and this doubly reinforces their anonymity. In a 1998 interview for a British TV documentary, Serrano states that he had wanted to get into a morgue to take photographs for about 10 years but found that 'it wasn't that easy' to gain access. The image *Rat Poison Suicide* shows a woman, her face covered with a white shroud (as in a lot of the images in order to protect the identity

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andres_Serrano accessed 11/07/2006

¹⁸ Serrano interview broadcast in 1998, as part of the Channel Four documentary *Vile Bodies: The Dead*

¹⁹ A selection of images from this series may be viewed at http://www.art-forum.org/z_Serrano/gallery.htm - accessed 11/07/2006

of the deceased) her hands claw-like due to muscle contraction. The documentary reports that this image was displayed on a billboard in the centre of New York and passersby were asked what they thought of it. The artist stated that in this setting (unlike in the art gallery, where a choice has to be made before entering the space) people are exposed to the work whether or not they want to be. He says that the rights of people who may be offended, have to be considered, but that the role of the artist is to challenge people and show them things some may find uncomfortable. Many people perceive death as 'creepy, scary, eerie', and Serrano asserts that this piece is indicative of how people feel about death: 'they fear it, and sometimes they don't understand what they fear' (see footnote 17 on the previous page for attribution of quotes from the artist).

The subject of death also receives a huge amount of attention in other cultural media, such as the World Wide Web. The Internet provides a service whereby its users can access information on any subject. This is a cause for the celebration of its status as, arguably, the only cultural medium which allows true freedom of speech, and, conversely, a source of controversy: what happens when information gets into the wrong hands or reaches individuals for whom it was not intended? As regards the art viewing public, the Internet enables art to reach a potential audience far wider than the relatively small contingent of gallery-goers. The majority of death-related web sites are focused around several main subject areas. Fictional genres such as horror films and literary fiction (books and comics) receive a lot of attention. There are also a large number of sites dedicated to the lives and deaths of notorious serial killers or the re-telling of famous true crime stories. Another type of web site deals with death-related art works, but these tend to be focused on cemetery art such as elaborately

carved headstones. The most notable feature of this kind of site is that although centred on the theme of death, the corpse is not visible.

The themes of death and the corpse are not new to visual culture, nor are they restricted to the cultural production of Mexico. Margolles' exploration of her subject matter may be seen as one example among many of artists who tackle the uncomfortable reality of the inevitability of human mortality and decay. Artistic meditations on death and the corpse also highlight the fragility of life by showing its fleeting nature as a state of being that is often prematurely ended. Margolles does this by revealing the persisting social inequalities affecting Mexico from the 1990s onwards. Her aesthetic of death thus integrates a concern with the social into its visual meditation on the human.

Chapter Three

Street Art

The previous two chapters have been dedicated to establishing some theoretical and sociocultural contexts within which the works of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles can be analysed. Chapter One focused on sociological theory and examined the cultural and historical contexts that provide the backdrop for Teresa Margolles' work. It sought to explore the element of social commentary in Margolles' art works, also drawing attention to other related factors such as the potentially difficult ethical issues involved in obtaining human body parts to be used in artistic works intended for public exhibition. Chapter Two aimed to explore from an aesthetic perspective the complex reactions which occur in the viewer when confronted with images of death and the dead body, and the ways in which this relationship has been explored in visual culture. This chapter drew on the ideas of two French theorists: Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva, within which contexts some examples of visual representations of death and the corpse were highlighted.

The following two chapters will examine the ways in which these ideas are evidenced in Teresa Margolles' art works, and consider whether they may be seen to act in conflict with one another, e.g. whether or not the status of the pieces as works of art may be seen to act against their potential reading as socio-political commentary. Do the tensions between different facets of the art works compromise the effectiveness of Margolles' artistic project, or enrich it? This chapter will examine street art, and Chapter Four will deal with gallery art. The individual works will be sub-divided into categories according to the raw materials they use, such as air, water, human fat, body parts or artefacts from the morgue. Within each group, pieces will receive attention in

chronological order. In some cases where individual works share characteristics, one or two works will receive closer attention than others.

Despite the fact that only a relatively small proportion of Margolles' art works fall into the category of street art, it is necessary to examine them separately because some important differences between them and the gallery-based pieces must be highlighted. Also, the location of these actions outside the gallery setting has allowed the artist a wider range of means by which to communicate the central themes of her works. Margolles' works may effectively be seen to convey an element of social commentary around the socioeconomic inequities that have persisted in Mexico despite the promises of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was implemented on 1 January 1994 (Hamnett 1999: 295). A factor that potentially counts against a reading of Margolles' art works as effective communications of commentary around Mexico's social problems, however, is their audience. The fact that the majority of the artist's work is shown within art galleries, means that only a small proportion of the population will have access to it, therefore the potential for social commentary to reach the general population is restricted. Traditionally, art galleries have tended to be frequented more by the middle and upper classes than the working classes, meaning that the viewing population for Margolles' work is a disproportionate representation of the wider population. However, this need not necessarily be considered particularly detrimental to Margolles' aim to raise awareness of social problems. In fact, the placing of these thought-provoking and sometimes unsettling works of art within the traditionally bourgeois setting of the art gallery is a highly appropriate way for Margolles to strike at the sectors of the population who possess the means to effect social change. In addition, Margolles has shown her work in a variety of spaces ranging from highbrow galleries to 'alternative'

independent locations. Of course, Margolles herself has no power to guarantee that the social message contained within her work will have an effect, but the nature of her art works can at least challenge the spectator to meditate upon the uncomfortable social reality of Mexico City's forgotten dead, which is the artist's aim.

As I mentioned above, Teresa Margolles has exhibited in a range of gallery spaces, from independent, relatively small ones like La Panadería in Mexico City to larger, more official institutions like Tate Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial in 2006. In the light of this it is interesting to consider two issues: firstly, whether the ethical issue of exhibiting human body parts (and the controversy over their use in art works) impacts upon which works may be included in an exhibition; and secondly, whether the type of space in which the work is exhibited alters the artist's audience and reception. *Tatuajes* (1996) was shown at Art & Idea in Mexico City (Medina 2005: 345). The informal nature of this space made it possible for the piece to be exhibited, because the raw materials (pieces of tattooed skin reportedly cut from dead prisoners) had not been acquired with official permission. This piece will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter. The public showing of *Tatuajes* was, therefore, complicated by its illegality (in fact, the exhibition was interrupted by the arrival of the police), and the artist was undoubtedly aware of the risk of exhibiting such a work. However, Margolles also indicates that the exhibition of potentially controversial works has occurred across the spectrum of locations at which they have been shown, that is to say, she has not (perhaps a little surprisingly) encountered problems when exhibiting her work outside Mexico. She states that

No lo sé, dado que en otros países he trabajado principalmente en espacios independientes de alguna manera similares a ACE. Pero, en la Bienal de León, el cual era un asunto muy formal, mandé el feto en el bloque de cemento [...] El carrusel (de los caballos muertos) estaba ahí junto con el

bloque (con el feto), y los niños se sentaban en el bloque a ver el carrusel.
(High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 96)

It would seem, therefore, that Margolles' work is shown at both formal and informal gallery spaces, but notably in the examples provided above, the raw materials have been obtained legitimately in technical terms - the human foetus which is entombed inside *Entierro* was reportedly donated to the artist – though the ethical dimension to this kind of exchange is rather more complex. Perhaps the artist would have had more difficulty exhibiting a work like *Tatuajes* at a formal gallery. Regarding the issue of reception, it is unsurprising that Margolles has inspired a variety of reactions. This is due in part to the visually confrontational nature of some works, especially those that were produced early in the artist's career. The artist has always focused on the same themes, i.e. death and the dead body, but stylistically her work has become visually subtler throughout the course of her career. She asserts that

Con la misma obsesión, la única cosa que ha cambiado ha sido la manera en la que lo expreso. Lo he expresado de manera física y obvia, de manera sutil, con formas del cuerpo periféricas, nunca mostrando el cadáver en sí mas mostrando sus periferias. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 91)

Naturally, pieces such as *Tatuajes* and *Entierro* that employ human body parts, are more likely to provoke controversy than the artist's more subtle tactics of insinuation into the viewer's body through pieces such as *Vaporización*, because the latter does not directly use human body parts, which makes the corpse seem more distant, less threatening (even though in reality the spectator is allowing his or her body to be invaded by the vapourised water which has come into direct contact with the dead body). It is difficult, though, to provide conclusive evidence of any generalised differences in reaction between audiences at different types of exhibition space. I would suggest that it is not the location at which the art works are shown so much as

their individual characteristics, which are the key factor in the range of reactions which may be displayed by the viewing public and by art critics and academics.

Tarjetas para cortar/picar cocaína (1997-99) is a series of 'large-format documentary photos, show[ing] drug consumers getting their materials ready' (Reust 2003:199).

For this they used cards distributed by the artist, the *Tarjetas* themselves, which are credit card sized, and bear on one side photographs of the corpses of people who died violently as a result of the narcotics trade (addicts, dealers, and traffickers). Rubén

Gallo explains that the artist went into art world parties with the intention that the *tarjetas* would subsequently be used by cocaine consumers to cut lines of the drug. In

this environment, according to Gallo, 'cocaine use was rampant. She would approach a would-be snorter and leave a card, lying face down, close by. Upon taking the card

to "cut" a line, the user would discover the photograph' (Gallo 2004: 121-22). This act, in connecting the recreational cocaine user with the uncomfortable reality of

violent crime associated with the distribution of the drug, has two possible readings.

Firstly, the images on the cards directly confront both the drug user and the viewer of the card as a piece of art, with a social reality which provokes a sense of discomfort at

the realisation of the violent nature of narcotics-related crime and also at the sight of the dead, broken bodies themselves. As an extension of the latter, it has been

suggested by Gallo that cocaine consumers who used one of the *Tarjetas* to cut their lines would be symbolically partaking in the bodies of the deceased represented on

the cards' surface, thereby accepting their share of social responsibility for the

creation of demand for cocaine. In this way, as stated by Reust, 'the image carrier

thus becomes a gruesome informer against itself, and the image of death becomes deadly equipment' (Reust 2003: 199).

This piece exemplifies the aesthetic objective of much of Margolles' earlier work, in that it directly confronts the viewer with the abject in order to provoke a strong, visceral reaction. The purpose of this may be read dually as a method of raising awareness of social problems, or a way for the artist to inspire meditation on her obsession with 'la vida del cadáver', the processes of decay and rituals (such as washing, autopsy, burial and cremation) that happen after death.

The *Tarjetas* illustrate very well how many art works by Margolles occupy an uneasy space in relation to ethical issues. There are two facets to this question. The first is the controversial issue of permission to use human corpses and body parts to produce works of art. As these bodies are the unclaimed and unidentified cadavers that end up in the Mexico City morgue, it is impossible to ask for the permission of the deceased's next of kin (except in the cases of *Lengua* and *Entierro*, where permission was given, although not entirely honourably in ethical terms, one might argue). So, the agency rests entirely with the artist, which may lead to fears that Margolles is exploiting these bodies, and that they merely serve to equip her with raw materials that allow her to explore her macabre obsessions and shock her audience. The second area of ethical difficulty, is the fact that the artist is able to obtain and employ these raw materials at all. In fact, her work has been read by Medina (2001) as a commentary on the lax and disrespectful attitude of the morgue's employees towards the cadavers entrusted to them.

In the light of these ethical complications, and the unpredictable outcome of involving the audience in the action, it is worth asking whether this symbolic act has any positive effects. Certainly, this is an uncompromisingly direct method of raising awareness. It is, however, impossible to be certain of whether the cards made cocaine consumers reconsider their choice of drug, or whether their participation in the act

provoked a sense of social responsibility regarding violent crime as an arguably knock-on effect of the demand for, and consumption of the substance (i.e. that the cocaine trade is a violent, and to some, a lethal one). It has been reported by the artist (Gallo 2004: 122) that upon seeing the images borne on the cards, users discarded them in disgust. It is impossible to determine the true reasons behind this response (indeed, we can be sure that reactions varied from person to person), but this act of rejection may be seen as a coming to awareness, and conversely we may also read it as a denial. Furthermore, to what was this disgust a reaction? Was it provoked by the social reality of the dark side of the trade in recreational drugs, or horror at the image of a bloody, broken corpse? Whatever we decide to conclude on this matter, the images may still be read as a direct confrontation of the viewer with a social reality, through the artist's use of real bodies. As a result of this potential debate, this piece neatly encapsulates the tension between the social and the aesthetic in Teresa Margolles' work. Its importance, according to Yépez, lies in its social message. He views *Tarjetas...* as a meditation on the way in which the violence associated with the narcotics trade has 'altered our [Mexicans'] relationship with the corpse and death' (Yépez 2006: 199), opening new debate around the subject. Arguably, Margolles' artwork is a part of this new debate as well as Mexico's long tradition of visually presenting and representing corpses.

In 1999, Margolles travelled to Cali, Colombia, to do an action entitled *Andén: Escultura colectiva por la paz*, with the aim of directly addressing the issues of violence and its victims. During the 1990s, this city experienced increased levels of social inequality and violence, and had at that time a reputation as one of the most violent cities in one of the most violent countries in Latin America. In this setting, Margolles undertook a collective artistic project that involved local people. According

to González, she travelled to the country with the aid of a scholarship as a guest of the 'La Tertulia' Museum of Modern Art in Cali, accompanied by Arturo Angulo, another member of SEMEFO. González describes how the project came about:

On behalf of SEMEFO, they designed a work that reflected gestures and objects and performed an example of "citizen's action" within an urban framework. The work, entitled *Pavement*, was rather secretive in nature: in a central and busy district of the city, a piece of pavement was demolished and a wide hole excavated. Throughout the day people were able to deposit objects [...] related to persons and situations connected with violent events. These offerings were thrown in, and after a time workmen came and poured a mixture of stone and cement to bury the evidence. (González 2000: 38)

As both González and Roca state, once the pavement section, which measured over a hundred feet (Reust 2003: 199), had been re-laid it was as if the action had never taken place. The act of burial had therefore left no visible evidence behind at the location for those who had not witnessed it taking place. The action was, according to González, widely announced in the media at the time, and was 'recorded in photographs and video, capturing the passing of time and all the various process [sic] which led up to the termination of the work' (González 2000: 38).

The idea of absence is central in much of Margolles' work, and in this example we see these personal objects of remembrance being used to create a memorial in a public place, which is then hidden. We know of its existence only because we have been informed of it by the documentary visual and written recordings of the events; we cannot see the objects themselves as they have been deliberately obscured from view beneath the stones and concrete. The act of burial that created this work can be read as a commentary on Colombia's history of violence and disappearances, symbolic of the way that the memory of the disappeared has been buried by the state and institutions. It speaks also of the disintegration of the social fabric, families and communities ripped apart by violence, and the persistence of social and economic inequalities. This

act of disappearing the objects, distancing them from view, exposes the relationship between violence and absence. The individuals have died violently and are now absent from the social world, and they are also deliberately absent from the artwork. In this case, the dead body is distanced still further because it has been replaced by objects. Margolles' approach to the exploration of the relationship between violence and absence is particularly fitting in Colombia, where with this work the trauma caused by political and social violence is revealed, as are its consequences for individuals and the communities to which they once belonged.

The artist also plays with absence and invisibility in the 1999 piece *Entierro*, in which a human foetus is entombed in a concrete block. The viewer is informed of this but obviously the object itself cannot be seen. This creates a curiosity to view that which is hidden, mingled with shock at learning the block's contents, but it is impossible to satisfy this curiosity in reality: desire is thus frustrated by the artist's hiding of the object. *Andén* produces a similar curiosity to see, and perhaps touch the objects left behind by these individuals who suffered violent deaths, but again the desire is frustrated. Roca has termed this tactic of representation an 'estrategia de negación' (Roca 2003: 6), a means by which the artist incites the desire to view the object by complicating its exposure. The author says of Margolles' recent works that 'involucran estrategias en las cuales la imagen es escondida, retirada o dispersada para dificultar su aprehensión, forzando al espectador a evidenciar su deseo de ver' (Roca 2003: 6). The horror of looking at the corpse itself is thus denied to the viewer, who, rather than being confronted with the abject, is encouraged to meditate on the violence in Colombia and its victims' absence, caused by their violent deaths. Unlike the artist's other works, the collective nature of this project creates a shared agency between the artist and the families of the deceased, who are far more active in

the creation of the art work than in any of the other projects undertaken by Margolles which necessitated permission for materials to be used (i.e. *Lengua* and *Entierro*). The artist is central to this act of public mourning; the unity of the affected families giving added poignancy to the commemorative event.

This case is unusual in that the materials used to create the piece are not body parts themselves, or physical residues, rather the remains of the individual and social lives of the dead. The deceased to whom the objects belonged are thus doubly absent: their violent deaths removed them from visibility in the social world, and the artist makes them absent from the art work by burying the objects where the viewer will never be able to see them, deliberately sequestering them from public view. Despite their absence from view, however, these objects are not forgotten. The rituals of collection and burial of the objects unite the dead, their loved ones and the place they inhabit in an act of collective remembering, negating the absence imposed by their violent deaths. The deceased are connected to each other through death and to the living through memory. Hallam and Hockey (2001) discuss the ideas of social death and remembrance. After an individual has died physically and their active participation in the social world has ended, they may live on in the memories of those close to them and the legacies of their personal and professional roles in social life. In this way, Margolles, by exposing the relationship between violence and absence, brings the dead back into the collective consciousness. The element of social commentary in this work is very strong, and is reinforced by two factors. First is the collective nature of the project, which situates the piece firmly within a social environment in which people interact day to day as opposed to the regulated space of the art gallery. The second is the invisibility of the artwork, which complicates (if not makes impossible for those who did not witness its creation) the aesthetic appreciation of the objects

which were used to produce it. In this piece, then, the artist symbolically ‘disappears’ the victims of Colombia’s notoriously violent recent history for a second time by burying their personal belongings, as a comment on their removal from active participation in the social world. This collaborative project links them and their loved ones to each other in an act of collective remembering, and the eventual viewer in the art gallery is provided with an account of the work’s production. The spectator is not permitted to see the buried objects; the act of looking has been deliberately sabotaged by Margolles, who explores the relationship between violence and this double absence of the dead.

Ciudad en espera (2000) is a work that Margolles created in the Cuban capital, Havana. Rubén Gallo describes it as ‘a coat of human fat (retrieved from a medical school) applied like paint on the façades of various government buildings in Havana.’ (Gallo 2004: 117). It was part of the *Extramuros* exhibition at the 7th Havana Biennial. Michael Nungesser reports that the purpose of this action was to ‘restore’ the buildings (Nungesser 2003: 1).¹ The catalogue for Margolles’ *127 cuerpos* exhibition contains two photographs of this action taken by the artist. One shows a building, the other a close-up of a man applying fat onto its exterior. The caption reads ‘Intervención en el muro exterior de la Secundaria Guido Fuentes, La Habana, Cuba. Restauración de los orificios causados por la erosión con grasa humana’ (*127 cuerpos* 2006:206). Using fat, a residue of the corpse, which is itself absent from view, the artist places the dead body into a public space. In this way, she brings to the attention of the viewer the forgotten corpses to whom the raw material once belonged, re-surfacing the building with an act of placing the absent dead into the social consciousness. Furthermore, the material is used with the purpose of restoring –

¹ Nungesser, Michael (2003) *Via the Dead to Life*. <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1013>, accessed 13/07/07

improving – the surfaces onto which it is applied. Here, Margolles employs her minimalist aesthetic to convey a blunt social message. Her choice of government buildings leaves the viewer in little doubt as to what this message is: the covering of the facades with something that is usually hidden from view suggests that the artist is commenting on the responsibility of state institutions to protect their citizens from ending their social lives as anonymous cadavers, and their failure to do so. One need only remember the undisputedly high (despite a lack of accurate statistics) rate of violent crime in Margolles' native country, evidence perhaps of the failure of Mexico's much-publicised struggle with drug related crime.

If this is the case, the question must be asked as to why Margolles chose to carry out this action in Havana as opposed to Mexico City. The most obvious reason is simply that Havana, not Mexico City, was the location for the exhibition. This piece thus evidences a tension between the social and the aesthetic in Margolles' work: it is a social commentary within the boundaries of an art show. However, her reported choice of government buildings is highly significant. This type of structure stands as an emblem of the body of the state. Margolles smears the fat from one body (or rather, many more than one) onto another kind of body.

Grumos sobre la piel (2001) also involved the smearing of human fat, but this time it was onto a human body rather than a building. In early 2001, Margolles had been invited to participate in an exhibition in Barcelona and took the raw materials for this piece with her with the intention of using them for an 'in situ work' whilst in the city (Margolles in *Felix* 2:3 2003: 182). *Grumos sobre la piel* uses human fat collected by the artist from drums inside which human body parts had been boiled to separate the flesh from the bones, in order for the bones to be cleaned and studied by medical students in Mexico City. The bodies they use are unclaimed, unidentified corpses of

people who have died in violent circumstances. The artist had originally planned to put the fat near the exit from the gallery at which her work would be exhibited, 'so the public would take it all over the streets of Barcelona' (Margolles in *Felix* 2003: 182). However, once Margolles had had a chance to acquaint herself with the city and some of its inhabitants, her idea changed. She explains that:

It was in that nocturnal world that I met Mohamed, a Moroccan drug dealer. I asked him to help me do my work. He was fully aware of the origin of the material that I would use. I went to a small, somewhat empty square with him and two friends. I put on a pair of surgical gloves, and I smeared the fat on Mohamed. I spread toxins on his naked torso, remains of human beings that had been murdered, forgotten, recycled. I smeared remains of my misery onto his misery, our human misery. (Margolles in *Felix* 2003: 182)

Grumos sobre la piel is a two and a half minute visual recording of this action, in DVD format. In it, we see Mohamed take off his shirt, and then the fat being applied to his arms, shoulders, back, chest and stomach by a pair of surgical glove-clad hands. We see no more of the artist than her hands and arms as she smears the substance onto the man's naked torso.

The most notable thing about *Grumos sobre la piel* is that, extremely unusually among Margolles' art works, it features a living human body, and that we know the individual's name. This is significant for several reasons. The first is that one of the ethical difficulties that complicate some other works does not apply here. The human fat smeared onto Mohamed's body by the artist was obtained from the morgue. The question of permission for the use of body parts is relevant here, but fat is a residue rather than an actual body part or corpse, so its use is less likely to cause outrage. In addition, this fat was collected from the bottom of a drum in which many body parts, presumably belonging to many different bodies, had been contained. Clearly, this makes impossible any potential endeavour to gain permission from next of kin. The

process by which the fat was separated from the body parts it once inhabited has also had the result of erasing any individual distinction between the people to whom it once belonged. This is another factor in why the shock value of using a residual substance such as fat is lower: the combined fat from many corpses cannot be a unique identifying characteristic or marker in the same way that a tattoo or a distinguishing physical feature such as a birth mark can be, and consequently seems somehow one step removed from individual meaning. Furthermore, gaining permission for the use of human body fat would be a more or less impossible feat. More importantly, the artist carried out this action with the full and informed consent of her living subject. It is worth pointing out that the artist does not give any indication of whether Mohamed was paid to participate in the action, although Margolles does reveal in the interview that she bought illegal drugs (ecstasy) from him that later made her ill. She also paid for a plane ticket for Mohamed, using the money the ACE gallery had given her, so that he could travel back to Morocco and receive medical treatment:

Posteriormente, el tipo estaba tan mal que lo llevé conmigo a comprarle el boleto de avión de regreso a su país [...] Si lo hizo o no, no lo sé. Mas esa es la carga y el riesgo de trabajar con seres humanos. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 94)

It is interesting that the artist comments on the 'risk' of working with human beings. Her sense of responsibility towards this man with whom she had worked, an illegal immigrant from a Muslim country, living in Europe post-9/11, her sympathy for him even though he sold her bad drugs, suggests that Mohamed was not simply being used by the artist as a means by which to further her artistic goal. Margolles states in the same interview, that

Pienso que si estás trabajando con seres humanos y estás realizando obra artística, si quieres hacer comentarios acerca de ellos, entonces tienes que retribuir algo, que no todo sea para mí, tienes que dar algo a cambio. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 94-95)

The risk mentioned above is higher because in this case, she is working with a living person. Margolles took several risks: buying illegal drugs from an illegal immigrant, which, it then turned out, were contaminated. It is impossible to interact with a corpse in this way. There is, however, a power relationship at play between Margolles and Mohamed in the way that *Grumos* is framed: we see only the man's torso, in close-up, as the artist smears a substance onto his body. The domination implicit in this action somewhat complicates the notion of equality and exchange between the two people. To work inside the morgue, a space to which only professionals have access, is to work within a more controlled environment. In this way, it involves far less risk in terms of the unpredictability of events than working with the living:

Tengo autorización para estar ahí, no me van a meter a la cárcel, ni me voy a enfermar porque todo está bajo mi control. [...] El riesgo realmente es el trabajar en situaciones al límite, al límite de ver si se me va a pasar el efecto de la pastilla, si el tipo me va a matar. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 95)

In this work, the artist applies a residue left behind by dead bodies, onto a living body (this was the first time Margolles had used a living body in her work). As in so much of Margolles' work, we do not see the dead bodies, only the traces left behind. In *Grumos sobre la piel*, the absent (the fat as a signifier of the invisible corpse) is smeared onto the present (the living body). This act symbolically connects death to life through the physical contact between the fat and the skin, and serves to bring the corpses of individuals who had been murdered, forgotten, and ended up as fragmented bodies for use in medical studies, back into the social consciousness. It is perhaps significant that Margolles chose to use Mohamed in *Grumos sobre la piel*, rather than,

for example, a student, a gallery curator, or a member of the public chosen at random. Her choice of a drug dealer is meaningful. It is fairly safe to assume that this occupation is a comparatively risky one and that the murder rate among drug dealers is proportionally higher than in the population as a whole. This work not only connects death to life in a wider sense, but also physically connects the individual, living bodies of Margolles and Mohamed using a substance taken from dead bodies. The artist recounts the effect that this experience had upon her:

Cuando terminé de embarrarlo, me di cuenta de cómo él verdaderamente se estaba transformado por las toxinas que le se [sic] estaba poniendo encima a él y que yo también me había envenenado a mí misma. Es como un tipo de unión del envenenamiento – mas no vengativo porque todo fue muy tranquilo. (High & Nicolayevsky 2003: 94)

The artist and the man had thus become irreversibly linked to one another through the act of poisoning, a result of her working in an insecure space with a living human being (as opposed to working in a more tightly controlled environment with corpses): the artist's investment in terms of actively taking risks was greater, so she became involved more closely with the living body at the centre of this particular work, although she maintains a more powerful position than her subject throughout. The use of the word 'envenenamiento', which refers to the substance she smeared onto Mohamed's body, also carries connotations of pollution by physical contact with the corpse.

As Kristeva states in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1987), the corpse is an expression of the abject. It is inextricably linked to our living bodies, and reminds us as individuals of our own mortality, provoking reactions of both disgust and fascination. The immigrant drug dealer represents the social abject; a reality which most of society shuns because of the unsettling association of illegal drugs with crime and urban

decay. He is also racially other, occupying a marginalised position not only in terms of his choice of profession whose illegality is indisputable but as a member of a racial minority. The issue of immigration is one of the most polemical issues currently being debated in European countries. If Mohamed is an illegal immigrant, he occupies a doubly marginalised position, representing the threat of the racial abject and playing on fears of pollution and decay of the nation, while the fat smeared on to his skin awakens our fear of corpse pollution, the actual *touching* of the living by the dead. In this piece, Margolles unites the two abjects, using her aesthetic of the corpse to combine these rejected elements of humanity. Corporeal and social waste are placed together.

This piece and the one previously examined (*Ciudad en espera*) both involve the artist smearing human fat onto a surface as the focus of the action. She has also done this in the gallery piece *Secreciones en el muro* (2002), where a wall has been covered with it. As with all of her works, a plaque explains the origin of the raw material the artist uses. With *Grumos sobre la piel* and *Ciudad*, though, there is direct contact between the fat and the living body, be it the living body of Mohamed, or the building symbolic of the body of the Cuban state. These surfaces are more than just the walls of the gallery, whose purpose changes with each exhibition, and this gives immediacy to the element of social commentary in the work.

The other issue raised by *Grumos sobre la piel* is that of gender in Margolles' work. The artist tends to use male bodies. The most notable exception to this is *Autorretratos en la morgue* (1998), a series of photographs taken inside the morgues, one of which shows the body of a young girl. *Lote Bravo* (2005) speaks about murdered women in northern Mexico, but the bodies themselves are not used at all. The city of Ciudad Juárez, situated on the US-Mexico border, has attracted attention

during and since the 1990s as the site of multiple disappearances and brutal murders of young women. Most of the bodies are never found, but some turn up in the desert where they have been dumped. They are often difficult to identify because they are incomplete or severely mutilated, and are sometimes wearing clothes belonging to another *desaparecida*. Cases are estimated to number in the hundreds: according to Gibler, in Chihuahua state ‘more than 400 women have been murdered and hundreds more disappeared’ (Gibler 2009: 82) over a 15 year period where murders have gone unsolved. Furthermore, investigation of unsolved cases is made extremely difficult by the fact that, as Gibler asserts, ‘the very letter of the law shelters the killers: the statute of limitations for murders in Mexico is fourteen years. The first of these virtual killings, which took place between 1989 and 1993, no longer constitute punishable crimes’ (Gibler 2009: 81). Margolles explains in an interview published in *Semana* how the pieces she produced to speak about the Juárez murders were the result of a long-running interest in the disappearances: ‘Durante dos años estuve investigando lo que pasaba con las mujeres de Juárez’ (Ortega 2006: 1). After receiving a grant, Margolles travelled to the city with the aim of researching the cases in greater depth: ‘Estuve 5 meses en esa ciudad de gente noble que busca el progreso’ (Ortega 2006: 1). During this time, the artist produced two pieces which were then shown as part of the “Indelible Images: Trafficking Between Life and Death” exhibition in Houston, alongside works by other Latin American artists including Colombian Oscar Muñoz, all of which explore the relationship between life and death.

Margolles travelled to locations where bodies have been found, and collected earth which she used to make the piece *Lote bravo* (2005). This consists of 500 bricks, which according to the artist ‘están puestos aquí como una barricada de dolor, que interrumpe el paso por la galería, para que no se te olvide lo que está sucediendo’

(Ortega 2006: 2). The bricks serve to raise public awareness of these violent, ongoing and unsolved crimes, and also as a *memento mori* standing in place of the absent corpses, most of which have not been found. The unresolved nature of these cases makes the absence of the bodies from the artwork doubly poignant as this mirrors their absence from the social world and the impossibility for their families of being able to say goodbye to them through the traditional ritual of burial. The feeling of unease that this provokes in the spectator is crucial: it is what Margolles relies upon to convey the work's element of social commentary with the greatest impact and the greatest chance of being remembered.



Figure 1: *Lote bravo* (2005) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

Lote bravo places the *desaparecidas* into the public sphere and the collective memory, as the artist stated 'para que no se te olvide lo que está sucediendo' (Ortega 2006: 2). The other piece, whose title is not mentioned, consists of two benches made

from cement, one of whose ingredients is water that was used to wash a corpse. The body in this case is that of a murdered nine-year-old girl. The artist describes how she told the dead girl's family about her work and subsequently produced this piece: 'me entregaron su cuerpo, la limpié con un trapo con agua y con esa agua mezclé el cemento y fue cuando hice las sillitas.' (Ortega 2006: 2) This tactic of representation was also employed by Margolles in her other concrete pieces *Banco* (2004) and *Mesa y dos bancos* (2003). In some other pieces such as *Entierro*, the gender of the body is not revealed. It is possible that the high proportion of male bodies in Margolles' art works simply reflects the typical demographic of violent crime victims: drug traffickers, drug dealers, and participants in street fights. However, prostitutes are conspicuously absent: they often live and die on the streets, and many are drug addicts, yet they do not feature in Margolles' work. Perhaps Margolles is deliberately avoiding the use of using female corpses in her work. As has been pointed out by Bätzner (2006), Margolles belongs to a long tradition of artistic interest in the body and the abject, but her interest is 'not her own existence but the social body' (Bätzner 2006: 170), the socially taboo and uncomfortable. Yet not to include female bodies in this is to give an unbalanced picture both of society at large and social taboos. Throughout the history of art, the female nude has featured disproportionately highly. The naked female body has been over-represented and tends to be eroticised; perhaps Margolles' generalised exclusion of female bodies from her work is a rejection of this tradition. John Everett Millais' 1852 painting *Ophelia* is the most famous artistic representation of the ill-fated Shakespearean character, which depicts her lying dead in a pool. Here, the dead woman is aesthetically pleasing and sexualised, the corpse possessing a romanticised erotic appeal. Margolles does not treat her corpses in the same way. They are certainly not overtly romanticised; she reveals the processes

which occur after death, instead of presenting a clean, fictional view of the pretty corpse. Indeed, a counterpoint to this has also been given by artists who have revelled in the filthy and that which is not traditionally considered beautiful (a very good example of this is Baudelaire's poem *The Carcass*, which is discussed in Chapter Two).

Margolles denies the conventional beautifying and fetishising of the female nude. In *Grupos sobre la piel*, it is the male body that is fetishised. We do not see Mohamed's face; our view is of his naked torso and the artist's surgical-gloved hand as she smears fat onto his skin. His body is fragmented, and there is an implicit level of eroticism here but it is concealed by the viewer's confrontation with the abject. The artist thus subverts the traditional association of the abject, the pollutant and the threatening with the female body, to associate it instead with the male body using confrontation with the threat of corpse pollution and decay as her point of reference. This piece shows the tension between the social and the aesthetic in her work. The artist excludes the female corpse in a rejection and re-aligning of the aesthetic tradition of the sexualisation of the female body, even though it potentially compromises the scope of her social commentary by giving a limited view of who is directly affected by violent crime. There is no way of knowing why the artist uses such a disproportionately high number of male bodies in her work. I would like to put this question to her in an interview but she seems somewhat reluctant to speak about her work². However, Margolles' artistic interest is not in gender but in death. This is something that affects all human beings, regardless of gender, material wealth or social status. We all have a physical body, and we all share a common fate, although, as Margolles points out, social and economic inequalities are not erased by death.

² As I mentioned in the Foreword, I have tried to contact the artist several times to arrange an interview, and have so far been unsuccessful.

Car Wash (2003) is an action in which cars were washed using water from the morgue. It took place in Mexico City during the opening of an exhibition at the capital's Spanish Cultural Centre. The water used for *Car Wash* was previously used to wash corpses, and was subsequently used to wash cars on a street in Mexico City. This act links the dead and the living through the medium of water. In both symbolic and literal terms, water cleanses and purifies that which it touches. The corpse, which according to Kristeva (1987) is the ultimate in abjection, is cleansed before burial. The corpse threatens to pollute the living with communicable disease due to the bacteria breaking it down and also threatens to pollute with death itself. It is as though one can become infected with death from coming into contact with a dead body. Mexico City is one of the most polluted cities in the world, with traffic being one of the primary causes. The car and the corpse are both polluters, and both are cleansed by the same water, effectively connected by it. Margolles therefore brings the anonymous dead back into social world through the repetition of the first cleansing act of the dead human body upon the mechanical body of the car. She inscribes the memory of the dead onto the world of the living in this way, which is similar to her action in *Grupos sobre la piel*; although unlike the Barcelona piece there is no contact between the dead and living human bodies here. The social commentary is the same, however: the raising of awareness of the destructive effect of violence on bodies, and exposing the causal relationship between violence and absence. In 2006, Margolles carried out an action across the Mexican city of Guadalajara: *Posthumous Messages* (2006). For it, Margolles wrote fragments of suicide notes on the canopies of five abandoned cinemas in different parts of the city. The notes are all real, and anonymous, but the writers' ages are displayed after them, and it is possible to infer a few details about the dead person from this and the content of the note. For

example, one reads 'No me extrañen, ni me lloren. Hagan de cuenta que me fui de viaje y volveré. 14 años' (Do not miss me, or cry for me. Just pretend that I've gone on a trip and I'm coming back.) (*127 cuerpos* catalogue 2006: 190). Another reads 'Adiós te dice la fea, la asquerosa que siempre odiaste' (The ugly woman, the disgusting woman you always hated bids you goodbye) (*127 cuerpos* catalogue 2006: 193). In this piece, the artist displays these notes, meant to be private messages from the deceased to their families, in the public sphere. She exposes the tragedies of not only the deaths themselves, but also the circumstances behind them. In this case, the traces left behind by the now absent bodies are not physical residues such as blood, but words. The body thus becomes one step further removed, even more so when we consider that *Posthumous Messages* is displayed as a series of photographs, so that the spectator does not experience the work first-hand. Instead, it is viewed from across a temporal and spatial gap. These degrees of separation between the art work and the viewer emphasise the absence of the body through the act of distancing, which creates a sense of the desolation and loneliness of the suicidal person.

Sobre el dolor (2006) formed part of the Liverpool Biennial exhibition. Margolles showed another piece here (*Untitled*, 2006) in the Tate Liverpool gallery, which will receive attention in the following chapter. *Sobre el dolor* is a pavement made from broken glass collected from the scenes of violent crimes in Mexico and other countries across Latin America. This raw material was then cleaned, transported by ship to Liverpool and laid down in a location in the city centre. I was told by one of the curators that the artist had originally wanted to make the glass into paving stones, but changed her mind for practical reasons. Eventually, the pavement was constructed by coating the glass fragments with a kind of resin to bind them together to produce a smooth surface. The artist's use of glass is significant. As Sorcha Carey points out:

Glass is ubiquitous. An essential part of the fabric of our lives, glass presents a transparent face to the world, an unremarkable surface to be looked through or walked upon. It is only in the act of its breaking that it suddenly becomes visible; its fragments shatter the apparent stability and transparency of the everyday. (Carey 2006: 137)



Figure 2: *Sobre el dolor* (2006) Photograph mine

other materials, such as air and bubbles, in a similar way. They seem light, transparent, and almost ethereal. The viewer is attracted by their aesthetic qualities, and then shocked to learn of their origin and their close association with the dead body. This tactic is employed by the artist to draw the viewer into contact with her work. It is symptomatic of a shift in Margolles' aesthetics and techniques of representation from a tendency to reveal that which provokes horror in her earlier work, to a more minimalist style of representation which plays with the absence of the dead body using non-corporeal materials to suggest the life of the corpse. Gerardo Mosquera quotes the artist, saying that 'she now tries "not to exhibit the physical horror, but the silence"' (Mosquera 2006: 136). In her proposal for the two pieces she

This material appears to be something we may enjoy visually, appreciating its aesthetic appeal, for instance when the pavement is lit at night and glitters. Yet when we discover the origin of the glass, it takes on a deeper layer of meaning, representative of the acts of violence which smashed it and began the chain of events which led to its becoming used in a work of art. In her

later work, Margolles has also used

exhibited at the Liverpool Biennial, Margolles explains her reasons for using glass and her plans for the location, which is a kind of covered street ‘corridor’ that connects two side streets in a district of Liverpool’s city centre:

Para acentuar la luminosidad del material colocado cambiaré el tipo de iluminación con el que cuenta el espacio por una de mucha mayor intensidad, lo que producirá en los pedazos de vidrio, un tono brillante semejante al de las esmeraldas colombianas. El lugar se convertirá en un pasillo de luz que contrastará con las condiciones climático atmosféricas características de la época del año en la ciudad. (Margolles 2006: 1)

Polite references to the British autumn / winter climate aside, this is a helpful revelation of the artist’s intention to put light into the space. The location itself is rather drab, as were the atmospheric conditions whilst the Biennial was taking place, so her reasons for doing this in order to maximise the impressive effect of the glass fragments, are logical. In this way, Margolles injects life and light into the location whilst also connecting it explicitly with death and violence. *Sobre el dolor* is situated in a part of the city centre that enjoys a vibrant nightlife, within a few metres of the famous Cream nightclub. This setting is a social space through which many people pass and interact with each other, and Margolles has effectively placed death and the dead body at the centre of it, confronting the living with the destructive effect of violence upon the human body and the social body. Nightclubs are associated with youth and vitality. The term ‘night life’ is used to describe the social interaction that takes place in such locations, and a city’s night life is one indicator of whether or not it is perceived as an exciting and vibrant place within which to interact with others. Margolles places death in this space, explicitly connecting death with life. According to one report, Liverpool, which beat bids from other British cities that have undergone recent large-scale urban regeneration such as Newcastle / Gateshead to win the status of Britain’s Capital of Culture, is ‘England’s most deprived area’ (Power

2008: 14), with social and economic problems particularly affecting the north of the city. During my visit to Liverpool to attend the exhibition, I spoke with two curators who had been involved in working with Margolles on her commission. One told me that the week after the artist had visited the location there had been a shooting outside the Cream nightclub. The local newspaper had reported that some bystanders had been injured by fragments of glass, which had been shattered by bullets passing through them. It seemed fittingly ironic given the nature of the material Margolles used for this piece. I was also told that the artist had gone for a walk around Liverpool city centre and commented on the large quantity of broken glass lying on the street. It had given her the impression that Liverpool is a violent city (it does have a reputation for high crime) and she had joked that, being from Mexico City (whose high murder rate is well known but not accurately documented) she felt a connection between the two troubled cities. In an interview done a part of the Biennial, Margolles remarks that 'Liverpool is an intense city [...] full of extremes' (Margolles 2006: 1). *Sobre el dolor* is a meditation on what is left behind by violent murder, i.e., broken glass on the streets. Margolles spent a year collecting the glass for this piece from different cities (Margolles 2006: 1) and then transported it to Liverpool. She draws a direct comparison between Liverpool, and Mexico City:

I've noticed that in Liverpool streets are also covered with glass [...] It's a city where there's murders [...] If you walk around you see that streets are stained with blood. (Margolles 2006: 2)

Certainly, the location for *Sobre el dolor* is an ideal means by which the artist may transcend the boundary between private and public. The aesthetic beauty and simplicity of this piece are vehicles for Margolles' social message, that violence creates absence and emptiness. The bodies themselves remain absent even though the

art work is placed firmly in a public location through which people will move in their daily life; the blood has been washed off the glass fragments so that no bodily traces remain. Margolles' aesthetic of absence is the method by which she makes the viewer conscious of it as a direct result of violent crime, making the spectator conscious of these conspicuously absent bodies and creating space in the collective memory of the social body where Mexico City's forgotten dead may be remembered and brought into closer contact with the living. Margolles, in her account of her collection of the glass fragments to produce this piece, explains that

In the last few years in Mexico there's been a style of murders, "setting [sic] scores", where people are murdered in their cars. They shoot them sitting in their cars and they're killed on the spot. The police tow the car away, but the glass remains on the streets. The broken glass becomes part of the city.
(Margolles 2006: 1)

This glass, which had been recovered from various locations, unites the geographically disparate Latin American cities with the English one in which they are laid down and set into a pavement, a surface that people will walk on, that will enable them to get from one side to the other. The dead, victims of brutal crimes, thus communicate with the living as a material part of the city they traverse on the other side of the world.

The following chapter will look at works by Margolles that have been shown in art galleries. A piece shown in a gallery, though this is still a public setting, has a more controlled reception, i.e. those who view it have probably paid to enter the building and subsequently make a conscious decision to walk into the rooms to look at exhibits. In the open air settings we have just examined, however, the audience is potentially more accidental, for example, one may stroll past a work of art completely unaware of its existence until that point. Having said that, the viewer must still

actively engage with it, which in the cases of some of Margolles' works would involve reading information provided by the artist which explains the origins of the raw materials she uses. Without this knowledge, the works cannot convey their full intended messages. It is worth pointing out at this stage that despite the actions themselves taking place outside galleries, in most cases the majority of the audience was still located within the gallery, experiencing the live action second-hand through photographs, video footage, and written explanations of the actions of the artist and other participants. For example, the action of *Grumos sobre la piel* was carried out on a backstreet in Barcelona, but obviously the specificities of time and location dictated that the majority of the audience only saw the work second-hand, that is to say by watching it on DVD after the event, in a different location.

The site of the action is displaced; as it is reported after the event itself has taken place, in a different location, likely a different country due to the international range of Margolles' exhibitions. The only witnesses to the original action (except the artist and Mohamed) are the person holding the camera and the camera itself, which is present in place of the spectator and becomes the medium by which the action is told visually in the exhibition space. This displacement enhances the sense of the absence of the dead body which the artist fosters, using the fat as a symbol, its disappearance by the artist echoing the disappearance of the dead from social life.

Chapter Four

Gallery Art

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the locations where Margolles' works have been shown range from prestigious, well-known galleries such as Tate Liverpool, to independent exhibition spaces such as *Art & Idea* in Mexico City. Some pieces (e.g. *Lengua*) have been exhibited in more than one country over a period of years. I will group the pieces in categories according to the principal raw materials employed by the artist (such as soap bubbles, or artefacts from the morgue), and similarities in their aesthetics. Each group of works will receive detailed attention in the light of the critical material and theoretical debates introduced in previous chapters.

Human body parts

Several of Teresa Margolles' art works use human body parts as their principal raw material. Controversy regarding the ethics of obtaining permission and exhibiting body parts has, unsurprisingly, arisen around these pieces, which is compounded by socioeconomic factors.

Lengua (2000) consists of a preserved pierced tongue which is displayed on small stand. The tongue belonged to a young male heroin addict, and was obtained by the artist with the consent of the man's family, in exchange for the cost of his burial.

Medina provides an account of how the body part was obtained:

Margolles tuvo una idea sobrecogedora: ofreció a la madre del joven un ataúd para llevar a cabo los ritos funerarios del asesinado, a cambio de obtener un fragmento de cadáver a fin de exponerlo como *readymade*. Margolles llegó incluso a sugerir que le gustaría adquirir precisamente la lengua o el pene, pues ambos órganos tenían *piercings* que "hablarían" de modo metafórico del desafío del hombre a las normas sociales. Esos retazos del cuerpo denotarían su contemporaneidad marginal y mundial. En definitiva, exhibirían su identidad subcultural. (Medina 2005: 342)

Here, Margolles herself explains in a 2004 interview with Rocío Silva Santisteban the way in which she approached the man's family to ask their permission.

La artista trabaja en la morgue de México como técnica forense, oficio que aprendió por la necesidad de entrar en contacto con su materia prima: 'me comentaron un día que había un cuerpo que podría interesarme. Era el de un muchacho muy joven, un adolescente punk, adicto, con un cuerpo totalmente tatuado. Había muerto de forma violenta. Pensé que podía hacer algo para que, con esa materia, dejar una memoria de su muerte anónima. Hablé 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, reaccionó 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'. (Silva Santisteban 2004: 2)

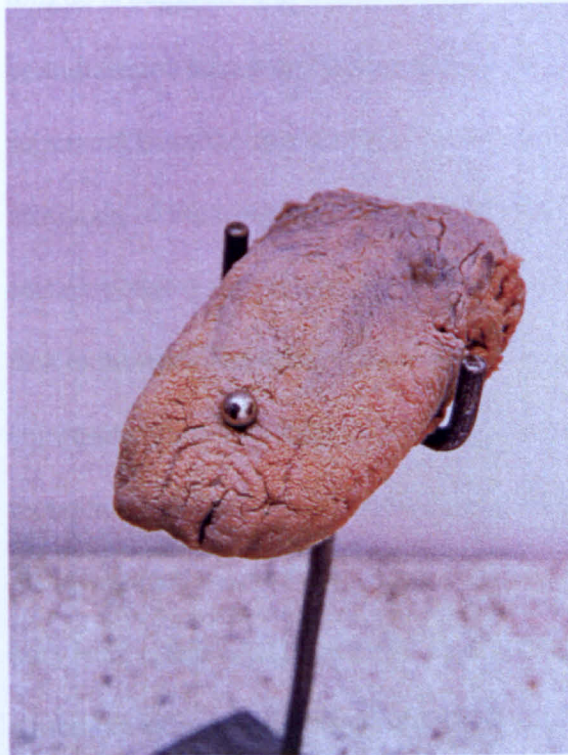


Figure 1: *Lengua* (2000) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

The act of the artist's exchange of money to pay for the man to be buried, in trade for the use of a specific part of his body, may be viewed in various ways, especially when we consider the ethical implications. Certainly, the funeral afforded the young man a far more dignified fate than burial in a mass grave (the final resting place of many of Mexico City's unclaimed corpses) and the artist's generosity in providing this is significant. However,

Margolles undertook this act as part of a trade with the intention of obtaining a body part to be used in a work of art. At this point the transaction becomes ethically complicated. Whilst it is true that the man's family agreed to the exchange, they were

in a sense compromised by their unfortunate financial circumstances, which meant that they could not afford for the man to be properly buried. Consequently, it may be argued that Margolles in effect took advantage of these disadvantaged circumstances. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this piece is one of Margolles' most well known and has been exhibited in many locations over a period of years. It has considerably deteriorated in condition – it is preserved to a certain extent but not with the almost indefinite effects of Gunther von Hagens' technique of 'plastination', which preserves corpses and body parts for thousands of years. Despite the tongue's decay and consequent aesthetic decline, however, it continues to attract the attention of audiences. The tongue is suggestive in a number of ways. Firstly, this body part has strong erotic connotations, which are further reinforced by its presentation here as a fetish object, separated from the rest of the body so that the audience can focus upon it alone. The eroticism of the tongue is further enhanced by the fact that it is pierced. This gives it certain potency despite its deterioration - it is, after all, now nine years since it was first exhibited. The other principal association of the tongue is with speech and communication. Its removal from the rest of the body could in this way be metaphorically suggestive of silencing. The young man, as both an economically disadvantaged member of society (let us not forget that his family could not afford to bury him, a fact which the artist exploited in order to be able to use the body part) and a member of a subculture, a heavily pierced and tattooed punk, represents two social realities that cause discomfort – the existence of poverty, and marginalised social groups. In this way, the tongue may be taken to stand for social groups who have no say in the running of their country, groups who effectively have no voice. It must be pointed out that the only reason we know that the tongue belonged to a man, is because we are told this. There is nothing about the piece anatomically that

relates specifically to gender, and, certainly, a pierced tongue could belong to either a man or a woman. In this way, Margolles de-associates the fetish object from its traditional association with looking at the female body, firstly because we know that this tongue belonged to a man, and secondly because, although both the tongue itself and the piercing are sexually suggestive, neither the tongue itself nor the piercing can be unequivocally associated with *either* the male *or* the female, therefore the gender boundary is arguably deconstructed by the tongue's potential association with any human body regardless of gender. There is an inescapable fascination to this piece, however, firstly because of the sexual suggestiveness of the tongue itself, and secondly because of its origin. The morgue is a space that cannot usually be accessed by non-professionals. Margolles is qualified to enter this space legitimately, as a professional, although she gained access by ethically questionable means, and she breaks the boundary between public and private in order to allow the spectator to share her privileged view. Medina (2001) points out, however, that this could not happen without the relaxed attitude of the morgue officials, which he connects to corruption within the judicial system. He states that:

Obras tales como *Lengua* describen puntualmente la negligencia con que se tratan los restos humanos por parte de los forenses mexicanos y, por extensión, la crisis institucional que vive el sistema judicial en su conjunto. (Medina 2001: 354-5)

In this way, the work of art may be seen as both an indictment and a symptom of corrupt institutions in Mexico. Corruption in the judicial system has been recognised by other commentators; for example, Wright's 2005 study on the many unsolved murders of young women in the northern Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez suggests that these brutal crimes have not been taken sufficiently seriously by the Mexican

authorities at both local and national levels (see Chapter One for a fuller exploration of this text).

It is also possible to read *Lengua* from a religious point of view. Bätzner (2006) points out that the tongues of saints have sometimes become holy artefacts ‘for their miraculous intercession, or, during the saints’ lifetimes, for their silence, for instance in refusing to confess or betray even under torture’ (Bätzner 2006: 175). In this way, the author compares *Lengua* to a modern-day relic. SEMEFO have stated emphatically that there is no Catholic or religious tone to their artwork, but the parallels with religious iconography are hard to ignore. The tongue is, as Biesenbach puts it, a ‘secular relic’ (Biesenbach 2002: 36), a symbolic object and the only remaining trace of the young man’s physical body. The tongue did not belong to a venerated person of high standing; it was taken from the corpse of an individual who existed at the margins of society. Bätzner goes on to ask:

What can *Lengua*, this relic of a nameless and voiceless adolescent whose status as criminal or victim is unclear, say to us? [...] Sundered from its body, pure presence, the tongue bespeaks the perversity of society lost between pleasure and violence, and becomes its fetish. (Bätzner 2006: 175)

The tongue is a material, physical reminder of the economic and social inequalities that enforced the young man’s status (or rather lack of it) and arguably led to the manner of his death, which Margolles wants the viewer to acknowledge. Medina reads the object also within the context of art being produced in Mexico, positing Margolles as an exemplar of Mexico’s new artistic canon:

No sería excesivo afirmar que Teresa Margolles es, por mérito propio, parte del canón local en formación. [...] Sólo porque explota la brutalidad de la desigualdad económica, la *Lengua* debe parecerse un índice de la situación local del arte contemporáneo. (Medina 2005: 352)

The disembodied organ 'speaks' metaphorically of Mexico's social problems, and of death itself, and the position of Margolles as a highly acclaimed artist both inside and outside Mexico is also indicative of the attitudes of Mexican artists working in the 1990s, who adopted new aesthetics that broke with the conservative nature of art production prior to this period. A more detailed examination of this subject will take place in Chapter Five. On its journey to exhibitions outside Mexico, it transgresses the geographical boundary between its country of origin and other countries where it has been exhibited. It also dissolves the boundary between dead and living bodies, to confront the viewer directly. This fragment of the individual body it once belonged to, thus takes on the role of speaker not just for its own past physical life, but also for multiple bodies, and on one level, for the whole of humanity, for each individual has a body. Heriberto Yépez has made an explicit connection between Margolles and the ancient Mexican shamanic tradition of Nagualism. According to this tradition, it is possible for the shaman to connect his body with that of another (e.g. an animal) so that he may exist in a 'Co-Body' with this other being (Yépez 2006: 196). Following this notion, Yépez has identified a clear continuity between this ancient belief system and one of the central tenets of Margolles' artistic project, that is, 'meditation on [...] whether the posthumous part can speak on the Bio-Whole' (Yépez 2006: 197).

Lengua, in my view, is the most effective example of this aspect of Margolles' aesthetic, in which a connection may be traced between pre-Hispanic notions of the body, and Margolles' tactics of representation of the physical body.

Another well-known, arresting and controversial piece by Margolles is entitled *Entierro* (1999). This piece consists of the body of a foetus encased in a block of concrete. Here, unlike the majority of Margolles' art works, the corpse is not absent, suggested, or physically evidenced by residues such as blood, but present in the

exhibition space (although not visible), inside what has been referred to as ‘una verdadera tumba’ (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 31). This tomb is not like others, though, because it can be transported – it was created not only to house human

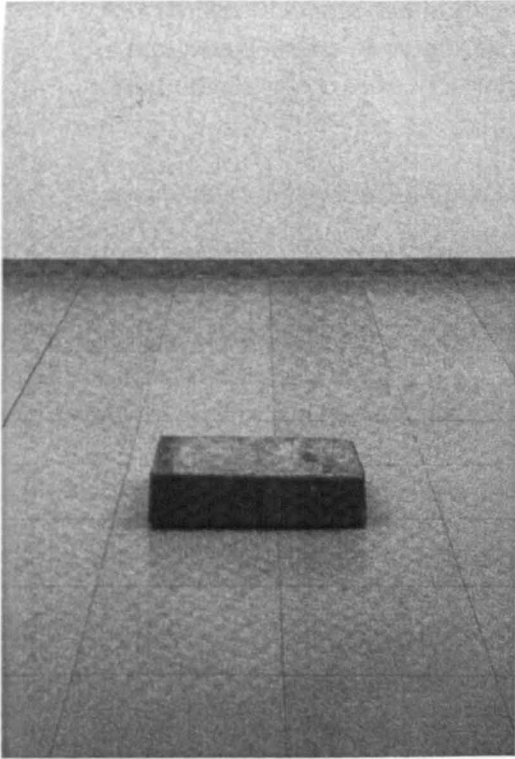


Figure 2: *Entierro* (1999) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

added poignancy by the shocking brevity of its conscious life; a powerful motif of tragically unfulfilled potential which gnaws at the values of today’s youth-oriented culture. Powerful feelings of shock and sadness at the knowledge of what the mini-tomb contains are coupled with a desire to view what is inside: the corpse itself is present yet tantalisingly invisible. This piece is a re-working of the tradition of the memorial to the dead child: here it is not an image that stands in commemoration, but the body of the child itself. It is not cradled by a loving parent in the family home, but wrapped in a shroud of concrete which also substitutes both coffin and grave, on the floor of an unadorned exhibition space. Guillermo Gómez-Peña calls this piece ‘the ultimate metaphor of our times’ (Gómez-Peña 2001: 24), levelling an accusation of

remains but also for the purpose of exhibition in an art gallery. This is a private space made public, the final resting place of the dead infant (but not the corpse itself) made spectacle. As the authors observe, ‘con este ejemplo, se pone de manifiesto el

trabajo de Teresa Margolles que sobrepasa los límites. La muerte y sus circunstancias no se *representan* sino se *presentan*’ (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 31, emphasis mine). This individual’s death is afforded

voyeurism at its producer, situating her within a category of artists in the “alternative”

Latin American art world:

As voyeurs of crime and biological pathologies in search of intense perceptual experiences, artists photograph, paint, video or reenact in a performance the silent drama of a corpse. (Gómez-Peña 2001: 24)

This perspective on art produced by Margolles and others (Gómez-Peña also mentions, but does not name, a collective from Ciudad Juárez who specialised in photographing the mutilated corpses of murdered women and the victims of executions related to the narcotics trade), taps into the uncomfortable appeal of looking at such works, which is one explanation for their popularity (and notoriety): the compulsive desire to look at images that provoke feelings of horror is deep-rooted within the human psyche (see chapter Two for an exploration of the ideas of Bataille and Kristeva on the subject). Works such as these, walk a fine line between their contextually inspired references to social realities, and their reworking of death’s long aesthetic history.

It has been argued that this piece contains a strong element of social commentary, and that through it the artist draws attention to the persisting social and economic inequalities in Mexico, by confronting the spectator with the traces left behind by bodies after death (in this case, the body itself) which evidence the existence of marginalised people:

A todos estos muertos Margolles les confiere el mismo derecho que se les negó en su muerte – el derecho de atención y de reconocimiento. Aunque anónimos, no se les da totalmente al olvido sino que se les conservan como restos verídicos de muestras escandalosas. (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 31)

The authors acknowledge here that the dead remain anonymous. This may be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the perpetuation of the anonymity of the corpses may

be seen to compromise the effectiveness of any social commentary on the part of the artist. Surely it would be better to reveal the individual stories of life and death as examples of the effects of economic deprivation and social injustice on real human beings? The second point and counterargument to this, is that these individuals, precisely because they remain anonymous, serve as examples of the effects of inequality across the whole of society. In this way, they collectively symbolise the death of the social corpus - the social body as opposed to the individual, who may be in danger of being perceived as an isolated example. Margolles therefore exposes the effects of violence on both the individual and social bodies.

An early work in which Margolles uses human body parts taken from the morgue, is *Tatuajes* (1996), which is referred to in another study¹ as *Dermis*². This was produced when Teresa Margolles belonged to the SEMEFO collective, and consists of pieces of tattooed skin taken from, according to Rubén Gallo, the corpses of prisoners (Gallo 2004: 117). As illustrated in an article by Gallo (1997), the artist in this particular case did not obtain official permission to use the body parts which comprise *Tatuajes*.

Margolles explained in an interview:

One of our pieces is a collection of tattoos taken from cadavers. I would sneak into the morgue and spot the dead bodies that were about to be cremated. When the guards were distracted – and they often were – I would take out a knife and cut off the tattoos and hide them in my groin. It was kind of gross, but how else was I supposed to steal them? Many of these tattoos were made in prison, so they were done very crudely with needles. It was so odd to see these huge, hairy guys with these tattoos. We have only shown these tattoos a few times, and then only for a day at a time, because they are illegal art pieces, and we do not want to mess up our access to the morgue. (Margolles cited in Gallo 1997: 62)

¹ Debroise et al (2006), pp. 421 and 430

² *Dermis* is the title that has been given to the 1996 work that consists of the imprints of corpses upon hospital sheets, and I use it only to refer to that work.

According to the artist, permission to use the body parts was not officially obtained in this example, and due to the clandestine acquisition of the raw materials, the piece was never exhibited except only for a few days at a time in unofficial spaces. It was first exhibited in September 1996 alongside a collection of hospital sheets imprinted with blood from corpses (*Dermis* will receive more detailed attention later in this chapter) at La Panadería, an independent gallery space in Mexico City, which was set up shortly after the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico that protested Mexico's joining of NAFTA in 1994, after reportedly having been refused by Curare, Espacio Crítico para las Artes, an independent space established in 1991³. Cuauhtémoc Medina states that SEMEFO 'obtuvieron tatuajes de la piel de varios individuos para colgarlos en las paredes de la Galería Art & Idea,⁴ de la ciudad de México (1997), como si quisieran cuestionar la legitimidad de la pintura tradicional' (2005: 345). Prison tattooing marks the convict's identity as a prisoner and therefore as a member of a marginalised social group. Prison tattoos are distinctive because they are done using only black ink, and often with crude, improvised machines. The display of prison tattoos in an art gallery is subversive (even though the gallery where this piece was shown is not as highbrow as some of the other gallery spaces Margolles has occupied), because it blurs the boundary between fine art and the stigmatised practice of prison tattooing, a subculture within a subculture. It has been reported that prison tattooists find it hard to get legitimate jobs practicing their art once they leave jail, because professional studios are often reluctant to employ ex convicts (Govenar 1988). In this way, *Tatuajes* could be said to challenge both the stigmatisation of prison tattooing within the cultural sphere of the tattoo community and notions of the high cultural status of art. This piece also blurs the public / private boundary, bringing

³ *ibid.*, p. 408

⁴ A not-for-profit exhibition space in Mexico City

remnants of these doubly tabooed bodies (the corpse of the social Other) into contact with the living.

Santiago Sierra (2004) gives an account of one critic's reaction to the exhibition of this piece at La Panadería, which was no doubt a knee-jerk reaction to the material used by the artist. He describes how *Tatuajes* 'fue considerado como apología del nazismo por [una] crítico de arte [...] Era a los ojos de aquella como si la artista hubiese tatuado y luego asesinado y luego estetizado el cuerpo ajeno' (Sierra 2004: 206). The ferocity of this response to Margolles' work, which according to Sierra was as good as an accusation of murder against the artist (arguably, to accuse of Nazi apologism is tantamount to this), illustrates well the possible scope of reactions to some of the materials she chooses to use. It is also proof that her work is highly emotive, and not always viewed in a favourable light. Vania Macías reports that the La Panadería showing of the piece (which she calls *Dermis*) was cut short after only a few hours by the arrival of the police (Macías 2006: 368). Clearly, the tactic employed by Margolles in *Tatuajes* is a highly controversial method of drawing attention to the central themes of her artwork. With this piece, SEMEFO defy the viewer not to react, unambiguously challenging us with a reality she makes it impossible to ignore. Sierra argues that the brutality of this piece is necessary in order to bring victims of social injustice into the collective consciousness on an international scale:

La obra de Margolles es un constante reclamo al asesino por el contundente método de poner sobre la mesa de la sociedad los cuerpos de sus víctimas. Es lo opuesto a la general indiferencia ante un crimen cometido siempre en piel ajena, en sociedad ajena, al otro lado del Atlántico o del televisor global, y un recordatorio de que ese mexicano asesinado podría ser cualquiera de nosotros. (Sierra 2004: 206)

Her works thus embody a tension between, on the one hand, an indictment of the social conditions which allow their production through enabling the artist to gain access to the materials she employs, and on the other hand the rather more cynical perception that the artist is taking advantage of this set of conditions in order to produce works of art for selfish, aesthetically motivated reasons.

Another artist whose work has come up against this kind of criticism is Andrés Serrano. His *Morgue* series was featured on a British TV documentary entitled *Vile Bodies*, which explored the ways in which photographers challenge taboos about the body. The third and final programme dealt specifically with photographers who look at death. The interviewer asked Serrano how he reacts to accusations that he is exploiting the dead to make money, to which he responds by saying that the *Morgue* series has been a slow seller. This argument certainly dispels the notion that the artist was simply trying to make a fast buck, but the images have been selling, so the issue remains uncomfortable. On the issue of consent, the other controversial subject around the use of dead bodies in art, Serrano says that protecting the identities of the corpses (he does this by covering their faces and other strong identifying characteristics with a white shroud) would enable him to 'make art without their permission'⁵, i.e. do it without consent. Clearly, it is impossible to ask a corpse for permission to take a photograph, but he does not mention next of kin. Serrano compares his work to the Victorian portraits of the dead, where for example a deceased child is photographed being cradled in the arms of a parent, and their face is clearly visible. This comparison is somewhat uncomfortable for two main reasons. Firstly, this kind of photograph was taken within the home as a personal token, an image of a loved one to commemorate the place they once occupied within a family,

⁵ Serrano interview broadcast in 1998, as part of the Channel Four documentary *Vile Bodies: The Dead*

not a picture of a dead stranger taken in the less sentimental setting of the morgue.

Secondly, the Victorian death portraits were not taken for the purpose of display to a large audience or for sale to collectors - unlike Serrano's photographs.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between Margolles and Serrano, in that his *Morgue* series comprises only photographs. The corpses in Serrano's work therefore always remain physically removed from their audience. On the other hand, Margolles' use of physical residues and, occasionally, body parts, brings the audience into more direct contact with the bodies she uses.

In *Autorretratos en la morgue* (1998), Margolles does two things that are unusual in her work: she shows an entire corpse, and she appears in her own work. This is a series of five photographs in which the artist is shown standing beside or holding corpses of individuals who have died violently. Gabriela Jáuregui discusses the most striking image, which shows

Margolles cargando a una niña muerta, cuya gigantesca cicatriz en la cabeza (evidencia de la autopsia) parece una diadema o corona. La niña yace inanimada y delicada en los brazos de una nueva Madre Teresa, de una Pietà con guantes de autopsia. (Jáuregui 2004: 163)

The girl in the photograph is estimated to be between 8 and 10 years old. The cause of death is not revealed but it is obvious that the body is badly damaged and that an autopsy has been carried out (note the stitches in the torso and across the forehead). The woman holding the child is Margolles. The artist meets our gaze, and holds the body outwards so that the viewer may see as clearly as possible.

The camera is positioned at an elevated angle, looking down on the two figures. The artist is looking directly up at the camera, confronting the viewer with both the child's damaged body, which she holds in her outstretched arms, and her own gaze. We cannot avoid looking. This produces mixed feelings – it is impossible not to be

affected by this image. Jáuregui highlights here the potential reading of this image as having religious connotations. This is suggested in particular by the corona of stitches running across the girl's forehead, which could be taken to give the impression of a



Figure 3: *Autorretratos en la morgue* (1998)
Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

halo. Coupled with the added tragedy that the girl died so young, this piece has connotations of martyrdom and saintliness. SEMEFO have stated unambiguously that their work is not religious in nature. However, the weight of the strong presence of Catholicism in Mexico, and its long history of representation makes this observation hard to avoid, regardless of the intentions of the artist(s). Jáuregui draws a comparison between this photograph and the well-known pre-Raphaelite depictions of dead women, the most famous of which is John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, painted in 1852. This painting depicts a dead woman lying on her back in a pool of water. Her hands are raised above its surface, palms facing skywards. She is wearing an opulent dress and is surrounded by lush vegetation and plants bearing delicate flowers. The visible parts of her body show no outward sign of decay – indeed, she barely even looks dead - and her slightly parted lips have lost none of their colour. Millais shows a romanticised, eroticised female corpse that embodies an idealised feminine beauty surrounded by nature. Margolles' picture, as Jáuregui points out, does not conform to these criteria of representation, she presents the viewer with an unmediated reality: 'Margolles no idealiza el cuerpo (femenino) muerto sino que más bien presenta los rastros de estos cuerpos y enfatiza su

anonimidad grotesca' (Jáuregui 2004: 163). The artist shows the corpse in the unsentimental setting of the morgue, not resting in the midst of lush foliage but surrounded by chipped, stained tiles, held by a stranger wearing heavy duty rubber gloves. The image subverts the tradition of the idealised female corpse, because it does not represent a fantasised view of an aesthetically pleasing dead body; instead, it presents the reality of the impact of violent death on the human body, rendering it in this case devoid of any adornment or distinguishing features. The corpse is unadorned and the horror of the girl's premature and violent death is unmasked. Margolles looks up at the camera with a grim, accusatory expression on her face, confronting the viewer with the injustice of the child's death, and calling for those responsible not to be allowed to get away with it. Her act of looking out of the photograph to meet the viewer's gaze, involves the viewer directly, so that they share the sense of loss undoubtedly experienced by the family and friends the dead girl has left behind. Silva Santistéban (2004) has not reacted positively to Margolles' work:

No puedo dejar de sentir miedo, perturbación, dolor ante esa imagen: me pregunto, asimismo, cuál es la delgada línea que divide esa forma de acercamiento a la muerte como denuncia a la simple estimulación de nuestro morbo, qué es lo que impele a alguien a ver lo que produce esta artista, cuál es una reacción honesta, en qué medida este tipo de productos culturales no aceleran el proceso de indiferencia ante el propio cadáver. No lo sé. Veo a los estudiantes de Harvard comer nachos con salsa roja mientras Margolles habla de su trabajo [...] "¿Y cuál es la reacción de las personas?" pregunta otro asistente. "Me han dicho de todo, desde buitre hasta que comercio con la muerte". En realidad, ¿no será que los buitres somos nosotros mismos?⁶

Here, she asserts that she could not escape feeling scared and disturbed by this image, and she and some other critics ask whether this form of approaching death, is simply a titillation of our morbid curiosity. Her use of the word 'buitres' (vultures) is

⁶ Silva Santistéban, Rocío (2004) *El arte revulsivo de Teresa Margolles: Agua de cadáver*. Accessible at http://www.lainsignia.org/2004/enero/cul_068.htm

particularly indicative of her rejection of the image and her feeling that any admission of curiosity or interest on the part of the spectator is morally reprehensible. Silva Santistéban refuses to accept the definition of Margolles' *oeuvre* as 'art', instead preferring to refer to her work as a 'producto cultural'. Georges Bataille (1958) argues in *L'Érotisme*, however, that curiosity is part of the complex reaction to looking at such a scene. This, indeed, is why such images produce such mixed reactions, and this is the artist's aim. Margolles does not set out to produce images that are easy or comfortable to look at, that can be contemplated passively. She wants to inspire emotional and physical reactions in the viewer, and the effectiveness of Margolles' work at producing these reactions comes from the blurring of the boundaries between life and death. The ethical and legal grey area within which the artist operates serves to further complicate the reactions of the viewer.

The brutal realism of this *autorretrato* threatens the conventional aestheticisation of the female corpse and arguably challenges the beautifying of the dead female body in artistic tradition. The romanticised depiction of the female dead body in *Ophelia*, where the corpse has an ethereal, pallid beauty, was part of the Victorian aesthetic of death. Margolles has created a different aesthetic of death. Of course, hers are not the only representations of corpses to have presented a challenge to the audience's sensibilities by drawing attention to the dead body. Charles Baudelaire's poem *A Carcass* is a florid literary example (see Chapter Two). Margolles' aesthetic of the death of humans, though, is not fictional. This is what sets it apart, and the reason that some of her work is especially difficult to contemplate.

The presence of both the artist and the corpse in the *autorretrato*, on the same plane, challenges the taboo against the corpse, and physically blurs the boundary between life and death – in the majority of Margolles' photographs, the artist and the dead

body are physically separated by the camera. Margolles therefore aims to bring us close to the reality of death, it is not dressed up, surrounded by flowers – this is the naked body of a child, in the harshly lit, medicalised setting of the morgue, held by a woman (Margolles is a qualified professional) in a white coat and heavy black rubber gloves. The artist's facial expression is defiant and unsentimental, daring the viewer to look or look away. The female corpse in this image is uncomfortable to look at, and very far from a beautified, romanticised Ophelia. Through looking at this body, the viewer is connected with the tragedy of the girl's death: the loss therefore affects not only individuals inside the morgue or people who knew her, but people in different parts of the world who look at the photograph.

This particular photograph in the *Autorretratos* series has attracted more attention than the others. Certainly, it is a deeply challenging image. I would argue that the increased attention is because the corpse in this image is female, and a child. The overwhelming majority of the bodies used by Margolles in her art works are adult males, so this image is bound to stand out for those reasons alone, and the death of a child arguably has particular poignancy because of its connotations of life denied its full potential to develop and mature. The use of male bodies by Margolles could be simply a reflection of the demographic of violent crime victims in Mexico City, but even so the use of male corpses is disproportionately high, and it is unlikely that the morgue contains only male bodies. I would argue, though, that the artist is not making a point about gender; she is making a point about death. Margolles confronts the viewer with the uncomfortable reality of violent death by laying bare that which is usually hidden from public view. She reveals the effects of violence on both male and female bodies, and shows that no body is privileged. Medina (2001) has rightly observed that death is not a leveller. All of Margolles' bodies belonged to individuals

who were economically disadvantaged in life, and her art works highlight that death has not erased these differences. We know that the young man whose tongue was used by Margolles for *Lengua*, died in a street fight. It is hard to prove this due to a lack of accurate crime statistics for Mexico City, but the majority of members of street gangs tend to be young males. However, that is not to say that women do not die on the streets. For example, prostitutes are a particularly vulnerable group, because many work on the street, late at night, and also this is a social group that tends to be marginalised, which makes producing accurate statistics yet more difficult. The female corpse used by Margolles in the self-portrait we have looked at, however, is a child. In this way it is reminiscent of the 'retratos de angelitos', but here the child is not carefully posed as though sleeping, but presented with the scars of her autopsy clearly visible. Her cause of death, though, is not revealed; therefore making any statements regarding the importance of gender to the way she died is highly problematic. Teresa Margolles deliberately avoids commenting on gender in her work because her focal points are death, the corpse, and social inequality. Death is universal; it affects us all, men and women alike. It transcends any gender-related boundary. We all have a physical body, and every body is affected in the same way by the processes of death and decay.

The fourth photograph in the *Autorretratos* series⁷ shows Margolles standing in a room in the morgue. Beside her is a set of metal platforms mounted on the wall, similar to autopsy tables, which are designed to hold corpses. They are reminiscent of spaces where people sleep in close proximity to one another, such as bunk beds or military quarters. The artist, dressed in black (she is not wearing a white lab coat as in the *Autorretrato* with the girl), stands with her arms folded across her chest, looking

⁷ *Autorretratos / Self-Portraits* (no. 4) (March 1988) is accessible at http://www.peterkilchmann.com/zh/works.php?art_id=99&wor_id=463 (accessed 7/12/2008).

directly at the camera, which is not looking down from a higher plane as in the previously discussed image, but regards the scene from the same level. A naked, uncovered corpse is visible on one of the metal platforms. The body does not appear to have undergone an autopsy as there are no stitches in the torso, but it is unclear what the purpose of the space is. It could be a room where bodies await examination, but this is not confirmed, so there is a sense of being in limbo, between places and between states. The bodies are left here as though they are of no consequence. Margolles has commented in an interview done as part of the Liverpool Biennial in 2006 that she sees the morgue as 'a thermometer of society. What happens in a city morgue is what happens outside' (Margolles 2006: 2). A journalist in the documentary *El Diablo y la nota roja* makes a similar comment. In this way, the literal shelving of these bodies may be seen to parallel their low social status. The artist affirms that 'in Mexico City's morgue the majority of the victims belong to the lower classes' (Margolles 2006: 2). The lack of importance of the poor continues after death. Margolles' placing of herself inside the photographic frame in the *Autorretratos*, is a statement of her belief that this social injustice should not be ignored. She looks not at the bodies but at the viewer, connecting her presence in another place and time, with the present experienced by the individual who looks at these images in the gallery space.

Animal corpses

Lavatio Corporis (1994), exhibited at the Carrillo Gil Museum of Art in Mexico City, comprised a collection of rotting horse carcasses, some suspended and chained to a carousel and others shackled to a metal apparatus, which, according to Coco Fusco,

was ‘reminiscent of torture paraphernalia’ (Fusco 2001: 61). Blas Galindo gives a more detailed description:

It is made up of horse carcasses – some placed on wincing metallic structures which both supported and imprisoned them, others on a fast-moving carousel or roundabout – as well as horse heads sectioned and preserved in blocks of plastic resin and juxtaposed alongside metallic sculptures (which were perhaps too convencional [sic]). The lighting was dim and the pieces enclosed by a fence of black painted wooden stands. (Blas Galindo 1994: 117)

The fact that SEMEFO’s horse carcasses were, as Fusco puts it, ‘exposed to the elements’ (Fusco 2001: 62) as opposed to being preserved in tanks à la Damien Hirst, is crucial, and for more than one reason. Firstly, as has been mentioned, this leaves the bodies vulnerable to the process of decay. It must be pointed out that Fusco describes the carcasses as ‘preserved’, although she does also comment on the odour associated with the piece: ‘Wafts of formaldehyde and a faint scent of putrescent flesh floated through the air’ (Fusco 2001: 61). The notion of smell is highly important to the effectiveness of this piece in producing the discomfort that is associated with looking at the dead body. As Bataille and Kristeva have theorised, one of the characteristic sensations of horror toward the corpse, particularly the rotting corpse, is the fear that the dead, decaying body is a vehicle through which death itself may trespass upon life. The corpse transcends the boundary between life and death; and the process of decay dissolves the boundary between the inside and the outside of the body. The corpse is a taboo subject, and therefore touching it is forbidden. The onlooker may desire to do so, however, and experience conflicting sensations of repulsion and attraction. The viewer of *Lavatio Corporis* is thus afflicted by the internal antagonism of their own emotions as they are confronted with, and threatened with invasion by the decaying bodies on display. This invasion occurs not only visually, but through the sense of smell. When looking at a picture, photograph or

scene which one finds uncomfortable to behold, it is possible to turn the page, switch off the screen or leave the room in order to defend oneself against the violent imposition of the image. However, by then it is too late, because upon the instant of viewing a shocking spectacle, it becomes imprinted indelibly onto the memory and therefore physically internalised by the viewer's body (albeit in the form of electrical impulses in the brain). The reaction to seeing such images is both emotional and visceral. In this way, their influence extends beyond the mental imprint they leave in the memory, into the realm of the physical, to be experienced as a feeling. This

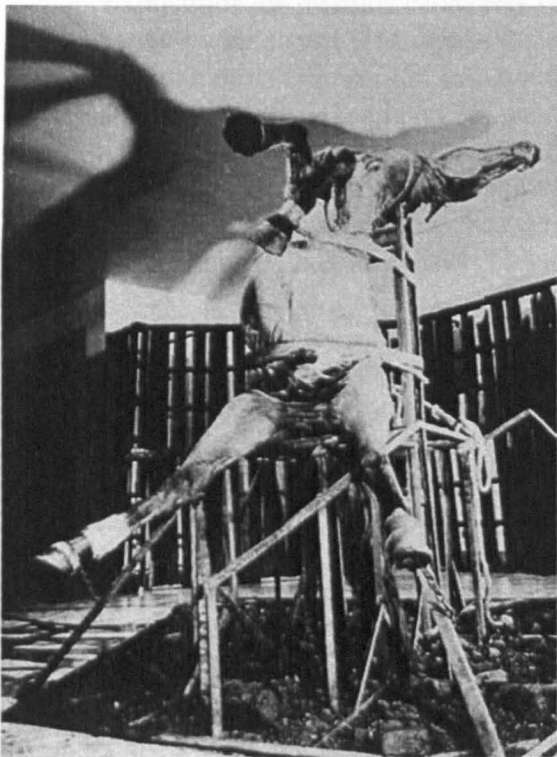


Figure 4: *Lavatio corporis* (1994) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

Corporis explicitly manifests the interest of the group in the way in which material bodies are affected by decay after death. In an interview with SEMEFO conducted by Osvaldo Sánchez, the artists comment of this piece that ‘Ahí empezamos a manejar lo taxidérmico. Habíamos estudiado técnica forense a fin de evitar que se nos siguieran pudriendo las piezas. Tuvo mucho impacto y marcó un momento de madurez del grupo’ (Sánchez 1999: 136). SEMEFO had worked with dead animal bodies in order

invasion also acts upon the viewer's sense of smell: inhalation of the odours produced by the corpse is another route by which death and decay may permeate the bodily boundaries of the spectator. In these ways, the corpse, and by association, death, may insinuate into the viewer's body despite the fact that the regulatory taboo against touching the corpse, which is at the zenith of the abject, is being obeyed. *Lavatio*

to explore the process of decay that the body undergoes after death. They relate to Sánchez the story of an occasion when a friend lent them the use of his property to store some animal carcasses, which initiated SEMEFO's interest in the decay of the physical body. The roof of the building fell in, and the carcasses got wet: 'Se pudrieron. Lo único que nos pareció fascinante fue la fauna cadavérica que habían creado. Y decidimos dedicarnos a esto' (Sánchez 1999: 137). This sequence of events inspired a fascination, which they subsequently explored in their art works:

Expusimos los mismos cadáveres de caballos, todavía con vida... Era un *ready-made* de esa vida que está oculta en la putrefacción... faunas que originan otras faunas. Ahí comenzamos a trabajar de manera explícita sobre el tema de la vida del cadáver. Exponerlo fue un pleito, por el olor... Había olor a muerte. Los expusimos a la entrada del museo y los niños se asomaban al contenedor de vidrio fascinados con el colorido y la vivacidad de las dermestés... Veían gusanos, mariposas, huevos –vida- emergiendo de aquellas partes de caballos putrefactos. (Sánchez 1999: 137)

This is Bataille's idea on death as the origin of new life, quite literally made flesh.

Here we see both facets of the notion of horror produced in the presence of a corpse:

the mingled disgust and fascination towards, on the one hand, the corpse itself as

something that shows death; and on the other hand, the rotting body as source of

nourishment for the life it supports. According to Bataille, the putrefying corpse in

this way reminds us of our coming into, and passing from life, and we are attracted

and disturbed by this. This piece, through its assault on the viewer's senses,

exemplifies SEMEFO's 'fascination with the changes in organisms once they have

died – which have ceased to exist but whose existence cannot be denied.' (Blas

Galindo 1994: 117), bringing the literal 'vida del cadáver' into the public sphere.

Blas Galindo situates this piece within various art traditions. He posits that *Lavatio*

Corporis refers to a work by the Muralist painter José Clemente Orozco, *Los teules IV*

(1947), part of a series that deals thematically with the European invasion of Mexico

during the 16th Century (*'teules'* being an Aztec word which Coco Fusco argues was used as a term of denigration). SEMEFO's referencing of Orozco is also noted in another account of the exhibition, which links the group's interest in the ideas of Georges Bataille to their commentary on Mexican history: *'el grupo buscaba indicar la continuidad histórica de la violencia, desde los sacrificios humanos a las matanzas de la época colonial'* (Debroise et al 2006: 421). Violence is a theme that is present in all of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles' art works, in varying degrees of intensity. This particular example is one of the most confrontational, which in my view forms a historical starting point both in terms of the personal history of Margolles' career as an artist, and the way in which she deals with the history of Mexico from the pre-Hispanic era to the twenty-first century. The continuity of violence thus becomes the thread that runs through centuries of history, through the exposure of its destructive effects on individual bodies and on wider society.

The horse motif in Mexican art is highly culturally significant in Mexico, a strong symbol of the loss of power representing the domination and subjugation of the country during the colonial period. It is no accident that the Museum where this work was exhibited contains many works by Orozco.

Indeed, as Coco Fusco, points out, the *Lavatio Corporis* exhibition in fact

began with a reproduction of a José Clemente Orozco painting that lay in a box parallel to the floor. In the center of the image was the head of a fallen horse pointed vertically upward, framed by the slain rider's pierced palm and head. (Fusco 2001: 61)

Blas Galindo argues that this perceived reference to the great Muralist is part of a *'great expressionist current in contemporary art which runs from last century'* (Blas Galindo 1994:117), which is characterised by:

[A] preference for aesthetic options based on what is tragic, terrifying, sinister, nefarious, horrible, grotesque and brutal. Their work hits us, moves us, wounds us: rather than seduced, we are trapped by their vision, which emphasizes the dangers, anguish, pain and upheavals of the present. (Blas Galindo 1994: 117)

The reference to Orozco is arguably a self-consciously political commentary by the artists. Of course, Mexican art with a political message is nothing new – this is most famously exemplified by the work of the Muralists. This art movement emerged after the Mexican Revolution, as part of the subsequent nation-building project. This involved a state-sanctioned drive to foment a strong sense of Mexican national identity by creating myths based around heroic revolutionary figures such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Muralist painters, the three most famous of whom were Diego Rivera, David Siquieros and José Clemente Orozco, were commissioned to produce murals which explored revolutionary and social themes, many of which were painted in important public buildings in Mexico, thus linking the new, post-Revolution state with a strong concept of nationhood and *mexicanidad*. Years later, though, in a Mexico troubled by persistent social inequality, whose capital city is struggling to deal with a high level of violent crime, the idealised violence of the Mexican Revolution seems a naïve representation. Margolles shows the brutally destructive effect that violence has upon the body, leaving it broken and fragmented. The decaying horse bodies of *Lavatio corporis* form a challenge to the myths the post-Revolution government tried to foster, a view of national identity not held up by revolutionary heroes but beaten down by continued violence. Interestingly, Medina in *Parachute 104* states that:

In their early interviews, the members of SEMEFO were quite adamant in denying any political motivations. They argued that political interpretations attributed to them were means by which the audience denied their taste for the morbid scenes they created. (Medina 2001: 51)

Perhaps the group did not want to be pigeonholed due to a perception that attaching a particular terminology to their work would reduce the potential for exploring other readings. Blas Galindo clearly perceives the work of SEMEFO as drawing attention to social injustice in Mexico, done using highly provocative aesthetic methods. He comments on the exhibition's popularity with young people:

The enormous number of young persons who flocked to the opening of *Lavatio Corporis* confirms that the success of SEMEFO is not only based on the spectacular nature of its work, but on the satisfaction of artistic needs in a sector of the population which, although receptive and rather passive, can fulfill its cultural aspirations with up to date versions of an objectual expressionism, rather than with works, like those of Orozco – which are also full of death and violence. They sense that they are part of something new, of belonging to a community which can use vandalism as a means of ex-pressing [sic] its understandable de-mands [sic] and sense of resentment. In short, they are a Mexican version of a global generational phenomenon. (Blas Galindo 1994: 118)

Blas Galindo argues here that the young people, with whom the exhibition proved so popular, felt able to relate far more easily to the work of SEMEFO than to the Muralist maestro whom they reference with this piece. He points out that this is not because of the violence of SEMEFO's works. The attraction of a large audience to an exhibition in which the works are controversial and deal with a taboo subject such as death may be cynically interpreted as a symptom of morbid voyeurism on the part of the audience. However, Orozco's work also featured death. This theme has, in fact, fascinated artists throughout history, and the exploration of death and violence are certainly not confined to recent times. It is the same concern, expressed in a different aesthetic language. The author also asserts that this sector of the audience was inspired by a feeling that they were part of a new generation that could creatively express itself through 'vandalism'. To a certain extent, this is true. The global

information revolution propelled by the Internet has led to the formation of new kinds of communities in cyberspace, where communication between geographically disparate subjects can be instantaneous and the exchange of information and values can occur faster than ever before in history. At the time of this exhibition, though, Internet access was by no means as fast, accessible and widespread as it is currently. According to Taylor and Pitman, Mexico has one of the largest populations of Internet users in Latin America, with an estimated 18.5 million people having access to the World Wide Web (even though this is proportionately still far lower than the Internet using populations of the US and Europe) (Taylor and Pitman 2008: 5). The most important thing that Blas Galindo fails to acknowledge here is that impulses of the younger generation to disrupt what has gone before, and to shock, are not new phenomena. The drive in young people to rebel against the values they see enshrined in their parents, which they feel are not relevant to them, has existed throughout human history. Furthermore, the art avant-garde has historically desired to shock or offend the bourgeoisie, the Surrealist movement of the early twentieth century being a clear example of this. Margolles' later work, therefore, though not so overtly visually shocking, is no less effective, her minimalist aesthetic employed to trigger unsettling thought processes and strong emotional reactions in the viewer.

Human fat

Secreciones en el muro (2002) and *Sobre el muro* (2002) use human fat, which some have claimed is 'from liposuctions done on Mexico City's wealthier inhabitants' (Bätzner 2006:170). In this way, *Secreciones en el muro* has been taken as an indictment on one of the most widespread forms of body modification currently undertaken: cosmetic surgery. This practice is associated with altering the body as a

mode of conformity with (predominantly Western, with only a few exceptions) ideals of feminine beauty. Niklaas Maak, for example, asserts that:

Secreciones es el muro de las lamentaciones de una cultura de lujo y bienestar, en la cual la grasa, antaño tan necesario para la vida, se ha transformado en la mayor amenaza al cuerpo ideal solo se puede reconstruir mediante su destrucción parcial con los ap--- de liposucción de las clínicas. (Maak, undated: paragraph 8)

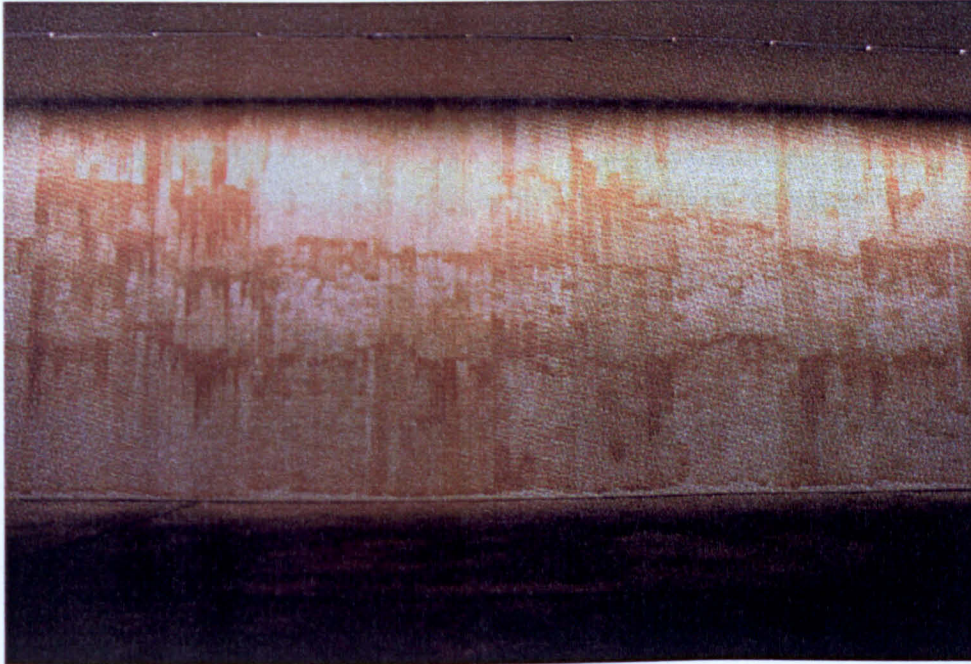


Figure 7: *Sobre el muro* (2002) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

According to Medina and Biesenbach, however, the use of human fat as the raw material for this work has led to misinterpretation. Biesenbach states that the fat came not from cosmetic surgery clinics, as believed by some commentators, but that it was, in fact, purchased by Margolles ‘from corrupt employees of the city morgue’ (Biesenbach 2002a: 36). Medina argues that in this way, it stands not as a criticism of an increasingly popular form of body modification, but as an indictment of the laxity of institutions which should be upholding the dignity of the dead but in fact undermine it. Conrad-Bradshaw (2004) shares this view:

Though mistakenly interpreted by some as a comment on the cult of beauty and the common practice of liposuction, the artist made clear that the action was [...] angled to reveal the corrupt services that handle the so-called sacred rituals of death. (Conrad-Bradshaw 2004: 27)

In this way, Biesenbach points out, it is not in fact unwanted fat violently removed from the bodies of Mexico City's wealthy inhabitants that now adorns the gallery wall, but 'in reality it was the poor, working class that for once left their trace in the exclusive and clean spaces of contemporary art' (Biesenbach 2002b: 84). The artist's action of smearing this fat on the gallery wall thus subverts the traditionally higher visibility of the rich (exemplified most brashly in the artistic sphere by Daniela Rossell's 2002 collection of photographs *Ricas y famosas*). Furthermore, this fat, which had been taken from anonymous corpses, in becoming an exhibit at an art gallery, arguably breaks the association of physical presence in this kind of setting with being a pastime reserved for the upper and middle classes. However, it must be noted that the bodies of the poor are not present as spectators, but as objects, displayed for the gaze of the viewer, so the extent to which this act is subversive is questionable. Fat is a substance that can exist as a liquid or a solid, or something in between. This property gives it a transgressive quality, and the ability to seep across boundaries both in terms of its mutability and its suggestion of the transition between inside and outside. It is a residue left behind in the morgue after bones from different corpses have been cleaned by boiling them in large metal drums so that they can be studied. In this context, then, fat is a waste product. It is a physical trace of the body, which has now disappeared, but it has no individuality. This echoes the anonymity of the bodies themselves; without names they have become a homogenous collection of parts to be disposed of via the processes which occur in the morgue.

In *Caída libre* (2005) the fat drips from the ceiling of the exhibition space, directly onto the floor. The droplets are timed so that one falls each minute, which they did

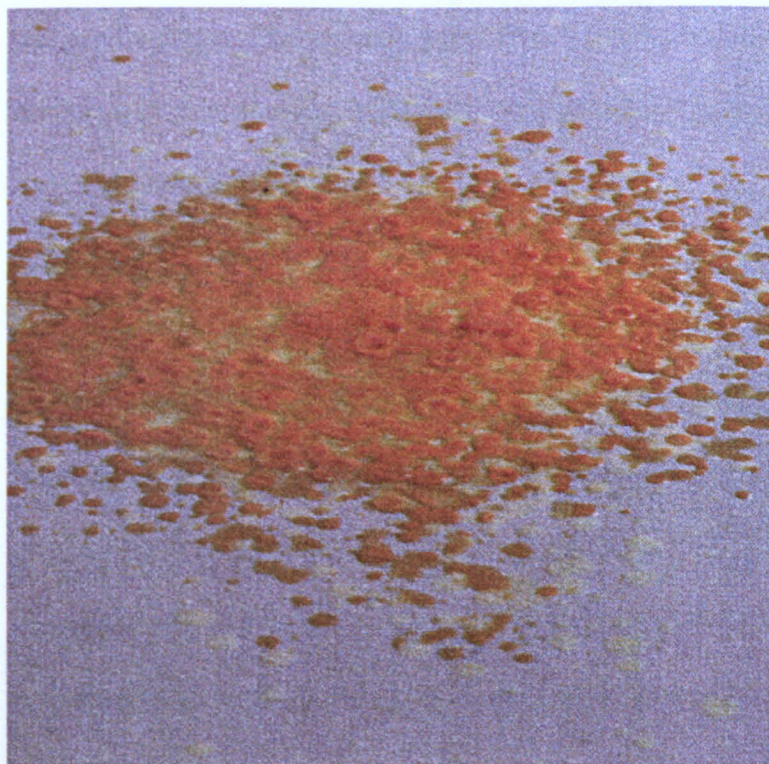


Figure 5: *Caída libre* (2005) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

during the entire 3-month duration of their exhibition (*127 cuerpos* catalogue 2006: 159), gradually accumulating and solidifying. The fallen drops, unlike the drops of water in *Llorado* (2004), do not merge into little puddles; rather, they partially maintain their

form to appear as though they have been captured individually at the moment of impact with the floor in tiny freeze-framed splashes. The substance originates not from one single body but from many; it is a residue from combined individuals. The act of separation into droplets gives back individuality in a sense, although each droplet looks more or less the same. Each one falls and lands individually, some on top of others, burying the ones underneath like layers of bodies in a mass grave. Each tiny droplet is a trace of a forgotten body, collectively forming a morgue in miniature, a metaphor for the processing of anonymous corpses through autopsy and finally burial or cremation. They are a microcosm of the morgue, which in turn, in the words of Margolles, is a microcosm of Mexico City, 'this city, the largest in the world, which – like the morgue – is a great funnel through which hundreds of bodies fall into

a very small space' (Gallo 1997: 62). The act of falling is significant, it functions as an effective allegory for what happens to these unclaimed corpses, they fall from view and are forgotten. Through this substance, the artist brings the viewer into direct contact with these bodies; effectively un-disappearing them to imprint their memory back onto the consciousness.

Imprints of the dead body

Dermis (1996) does not show the corpse itself but its imprint; they are bloody impressions of the human form on white hospital sheets, which were achieved by draping the sheet over the bodies. This piece shows 'la vida del cadáver' in that it is composed of a residue left behind after the event of death. Following Bataille's explanation for the sensation of fear that is felt when confronted with death via proximity to a corpse, *Dermis* reminds the spectator of his or her own inevitable mortality, and thus produces discomfort. This piece, although the corpse itself is not present, is equally effective because the very absence of the body reinforces the moment of coming to awareness that one day, the bodies that we prize so highly and through which our experiences during life are negotiated, will also be gone, and all that will remain are residues left by the process of physical decay and imprints in the memories of those who knew us. This piece, like others by Margolles, contains elements of ritual. In this example, the ritual is the wrapping of the body in cloth. As noted by Gabriela Jáuregui, this distorts the images of the cadavers so that they become 'más grandes que en la vida real' (Jáuregui 2004: 159). The impression of the bodies' traces being 'larger than life' is experienced both in a literal sense (the act of wrapping the corpse has produced an image which is larger than the body itself was in life), and in the sense that these imprints speak not only of the individuals who left

them but also of a tradition of artistic representation of corpses that has been traced by Jáuregui back to ancient times. She asserts that these images ‘hacen alusión a la vez al sudario de Cristo [...] y a las figuras pintados dentro de cuevas, que son las más antiguas representaciones artísticas de cadáveres’ (Jáuregui 2004: 159). Her comparison of *Dermis* to the Turin Shroud is interesting (although it is debated whether the Turin Shroud is a genuine representation of the corpse of Jesus Christ – one theory has suggested that it was faked by Leonardo Da Vinci), but SEMEFO have commented that their work does not have any religious connotations: ‘¿Religiosidad? La mayoría somos ateos’ (Sánchez 1998: 134). This strong denial of any religious element to their work is reiterated in their affirmation of their intention to explore ‘la vida del cadáver’: ‘En obras como *Estudio de la ropa de cadáveres* [...] las muestras de ropa no están colocadas como reliquia, sino como una presencia [...] de las minucias en la que persiste la vida de alguien que ha sido asesinado’ (Sánchez 1998: 134-5). The work mentioned by Sánchez, *Estudio de la ropa de cadaver* (1997)⁸ consists of five items of clothing laid out on top of a light box. The effect is that the dirt and grime on the garments, which belonged to people now deceased, is literally illuminated from underneath. This highlights the fact that, having been lived in, the garments are now empty of the bodies they once covered.

Despite their negation of a possible reading of their works as displaying a religious aspect, much of SEMEFO and Margolles’ work deals with rituals performed upon the body after death, such as washing, wrapping and burial of the corpse. Historically, post mortem rituals such as these have been conducted in religious settings, alongside rites that are carried out in order to ensure that the spirit or the soul of the deceased passes safely into the afterlife. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why

⁸ A photograph of this work is accessible on the Galerie Peter Kilchmann web site at: http://www.peterkilchmann.com/zh/works.php?art_id=99&wor_id=460

Jáuregui has compared *Dermis* to the Turin Shroud. However, as SEMEFO themselves have stated, their work is focussed not on any endeavour towards spiritualistic contemplation, but rather it is concentrated on the exploration of the life of the corpse itself after death. This is central to the early work of Margolles with the SEMEFO collective, and also her later, more abstract pieces such as *Vaporización* (2000). This is not a religious life after death but a secular one, not spiritual but physical. *La tela de los muertos* (2003) also bears the imprints of corpses, but this time on a far larger piece of fabric, measuring two by twenty-four metres (Bätzner 2006: 171). This cloth ‘impregnada de fluidos, grasa y líquidos conservadores con la que se cubrieron cadáveres por más de 10 meses en el anfiteatro de la facultad de medicina de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México’ (*127 cuerpos* catalogue 2006: 173). The bodily residues that have impregnated the cloth stand in place of the bodies themselves, the imprints as proof of their physical presence.

This piece has been read from a non-Mexican perspective as evidence of the group’s Mexican cultural identity in that it may be seen to display the supposed Mexican cultural affinity with, or closeness to death: ‘En Madrid las sábanas tuvieron una lectura más referida a la muerte, como expresión de mexicanidad.’ (Sánchez 1998: 138). This interpretation could lead to the conclusion that SEMEFO, as Mexican artists, have a clear and culturally rooted aesthetic of death. Yépez has asserted that ‘popular Mexican culture has a long tradition of displaying corpses’ (Yépez 2006: 199). SEMEFO’s particular aesthetic, however, is not so much about death but about the corpse and its life after death:

Pero nuestro discurso no es la muerte, sino el cadáver [...] la vida del cadáver, eso que aun con sólo haber estado allí un día, un minuto, unos años, sigue generando gérmenes, microbios, gusanos [...] un olor que también es vida. (Sánchez 1998: 138)

This aesthetic of the corpse and the effect it has upon the viewer is present in all of Margolles' works. Even when the body itself is not on display, its former presence is suggested by the bodily fluids and residues it has left behind as a consequence of the decaying process which acts upon the bodily matter post mortem.

In *Catafalco* (1997), the imprints are, in the words of SEMEFO, 'vaciados en yeso, como catafalcos ... la impronta [sic] del cuerpo' (Sánchez 1998: 137). The imprints that are at the centre of the artistic project are the bodily fluids that were left behind on the surface of the plaster when the corpse was separated from its mould. The artists assert that 'insistimos en que la obra era los restos de la vida del cadáver que reposaban casi imperceptibles sobre el soporte del yeso. Todas las secreciones estaban ahí' (Sánchez 1998: 138). Therefore, it is not the bodies themselves that form the intended focus of attention; rather, it is the impression left by their life after death.

Görner and Kittelman argue that the plaster casts 'nos dan "imágenes" de los muertos como pruebas válidas de su existencia y de su martirio' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 31). As with all of the bodies used by Margolles, these corpses also remain anonymous, even though their individual features have marked the surface of the plaster, and their bodies have left traces such as skin cells and bodily fluids behind. It is not necessary to know their names, because their existence is affirmed by the imprints and residual traces their now absent bodies have left behind. The artists are keen to make clear that the corpses used in the production of this piece are not objects as they are not even the main concern of the artwork. The word '*catafalco*' translates as '*catafalque*' in English (which has imported the French word). This, according to the Oxford English dictionary, is 'a decorated wooden framework for supporting the coffin of a distinguished person during a funeral or while lying in state' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English 1998: 205). The individuals whose bodies were

used by the artist to make these plaster casts were far from distinguished, however. Like all the corpses Margolles uses, they remain anonymous. Furthermore, we do not see the bodies themselves, their absence from the exhibited work highlighting their absence from the social consciousness. This absence and forgetting oppose the way in

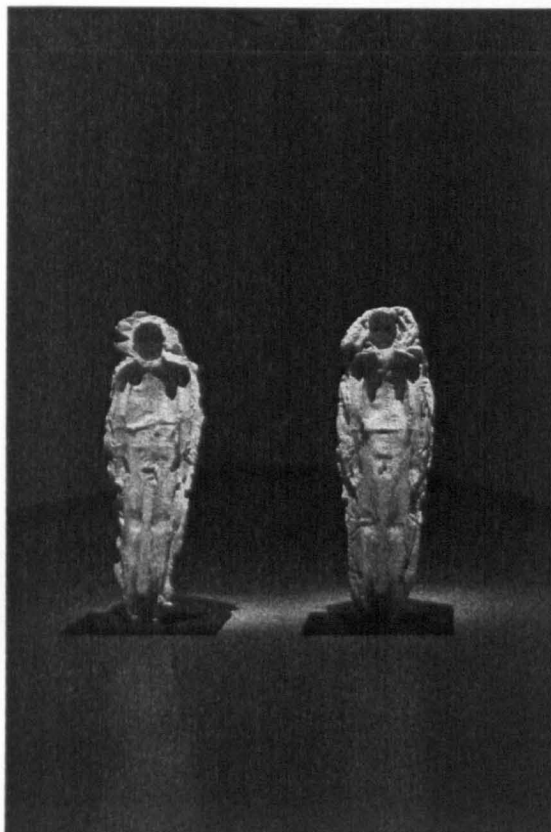


Figure 6: *Catafalco* (1997) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

which the body of a ‘distinguished person’ would be treated. The artist uses the contradiction between the connotations of the term *catafalco* and the absence and anonymity of the unidentified corpses she uses, to draw attention to the social inequalities that persist after death. The two plaster structures support not bodies but the imprints they have left behind, memories of the physical forms that no longer occupy these spaces.

Air and vapourised water

Vaporización (2000) is an installation which consists of a room filled with vapourised water. This water has been used to wash corpses being autopsied in the Mexico City morgue where Margolles works, and then sterilised before being used to create an environment through which viewers can move. A plaque on the wall outside the room explains the origin of the mist. This piece demonstrates Margolles’ fascination with ‘la vida del cadáver’ as a term which encompasses the organic residues left behind by

dead bodies, and also draws attention to the rituals of washing and burial which are performed upon the corpses in the morgue after death.

This piece, and others produced using the same raw material, is an example of a stylistic shift towards minimalism in Margolles' more recent works (produced from around 2000 onwards), and away from the visual brutality of SEMEFO's early installations. The overt violence of displaying human and animal corpses and body parts in works such as *Lavatio corporis*, thus becomes the more subtle, yet no less threatening insinuation of the dead body into the viewer's body through senses other than the visual, in this example, through the inhalation and absorption of water droplets in the gallery space. Medina observes that 'la búsqueda de *shock* fue reemplazada por la invención de una variedad de formas conceptuales de duelo, mucho más sutiles y afines a la reflexión contemplativa que al talante transgresor de las subculturas urbanas' (Medina 2005: 348). Beausse asserts that this method of erasing the distance between the bodies in the morgue and those in the gallery is, in the end, though subtler, really no gentler than showing corpses: 'The atmospheric dimension of the fog doesn't permit any distance' (Beausse 2005: 108). Therefore, I would argue, contact between the dead and the living is more effective. Visual contemplation of an object at least allows the viewer to maintain a certain physical distance – with *Vaporización* this is not possible because the viewer becomes physically implicated in the artwork itself. The multi-sensorial nature of the experience negates the possibility of ignoring its effects.

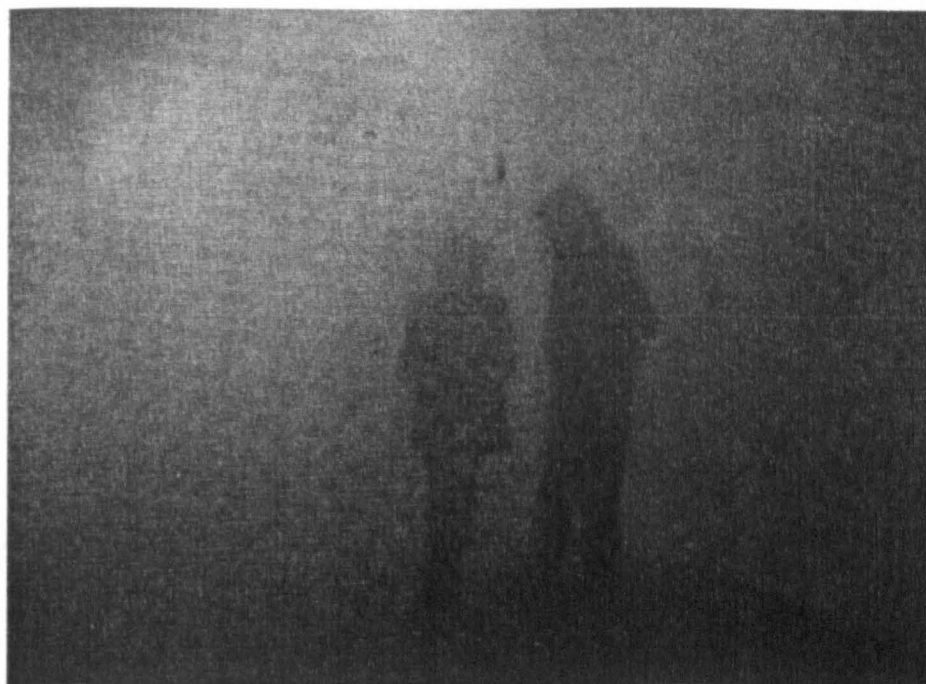


Figure 7: *Vaporización* (2000) Image courtesy the artist and Pater Kilchmann Gallery

The raw material used to produce *Vaporización*, because of the purpose (the washing of corpses) for which it was used before being removed from the environment of the morgue to be used in an art installation, acts upon the viewer in several ways. Firstly, as indicated by Klaus Biesenbach, this piece ‘visualizes the physical memory of a last washing’ (Biesenbach 2002: 36). The viewer is informed as to where the water has come from, and thus, upon entering the room; contact with the mist conjures up a mental image of its history. The author asserts that this art work also ‘alludes to the notion of fading away or dissolving’ (Biesenbach 2002: 36), reading it as an allegory for Mexico City, whose sheer enormity subsumes its millions of inhabitants into the vast expanse of the Federal District. Whilst this is a valid socially based interpretation of *Vaporización*, another potential reading of this piece may be identified. The notion of ‘fading away or dissolving’ may also be taken in a physical sense, to signify the disappearance of the dead body through decomposition. In this way, *Vaporización* forces viewers to meditate upon their own inevitable demise, by producing the sensations of discomfort and horror that come from the contemplation of the abject.

The corpse itself is not present, but the suggestion of its presence through a material which has come into contact with it during the ritual of washing is enough to provoke reflection on the fate which awaits and unites us all, regardless of social class and location. The absence of the dead bodies from the artwork echoes their absence from view on a societal level: they are the unclaimed, forgotten corpses of marginalised people, many of whom have died violently. Margolles is commenting on both their 'forgetting' by society and the laxity of the institutions that handle them. The artist draws attention to the fate of these bodies – anonymity in the morgue and eventual undignified burial in a mass grave (*fosa común*, which is the title of one of her art works). Conrad-Bradshaw places the artist as central to (re)placing the disappeared into the collective consciousness:

It is such situations of silence, where there is no one to speak for the dead or injured, that work such as [...] Margolles' becomes particularly powerful. Those who remain must testify so the dead do not concede to the victors. (Conrad-Bradshaw 2004: 8)

The viewer is confronted with this uncomfortable social reality so that the work produces dual sensations of uneasiness at the contemplation of the corpses' absence from life on an individual level, and their disappearance from the society they once inhabited. Reust comments that 'unsettling social realities [...] were permeating the atmosphere, hardly noticeable but nonetheless powerfully present' (Reust 2003: 199). They are absent, their physical forms altered by processes such as autopsy, decay, and cremation, but as one commentator indicates, are bodies that 'have ceased to exist but whose existence cannot be denied' (Blas Galindo 1994: 117). The notion of not existing here can be interpreted as both corporeal absence, and bureaucratic oblivion. The act of taking the water from the morgue and placing it in a gallery in the form of mist is an act that transcends more than one boundary. This is achieved by Margolles

through her physical placing of a substance normally sequestered (as is the function it performs) from public view. The distance between the realms of private and public is thus erased by the act of using this substance which was previously used in a private, hidden setting, in an art installation, an occasion which by its very nature is intended to be public. The artist reveals one of the purposes of the morgue, and with it, by association, death and the corpse. The gallery goer is thus confronted with these events, which impel him or her to contemplate the horror-inducing thought of their own deaths and what will happen to their bodies after the event. In this way, the mist serves as a conduit through which the boundary between life and death is transcended. The water used to cleanse now carries the threat of pollution. *Vaporización* also effects the removal of the barrier between the living body and the corpse, which is usually enforced by the taboo against the dead body. This occurs via the permeation of the mist through bodily boundaries: it enters by absorption into the skin and inhalation into the spectator's respiratory system. It is death threatening life. According to Yépez, *Vaporización* also indicates Margolles' clear links with pre-Hispanic Mexican tradition, specifically the shamanistic practice of Nagualism, in which a shaman may connect with the body of another being using various bodily emanations, one of which is a substance called 'ihíyotl' or 'hijillo' (Yépez 2006: 197).

This substance is reportedly

conceived of as a luminous gas capable of influencing other beings, in particular of attracting a being to the person, animal or object from which it emanated. [...] The emanations issued not only from a living being. They could also issue from human remains [...] The worst emanation is the one issued by cadavers. (Yépez 2006: 199)

This description shows clearly the notion of death infecting life, being contagious and dangerous to the living. This vapourised water rinsed off unclaimed corpses in

Mexico City thus not only confronts us with the abject; it crosses spatial and temporal boundaries, playing upon ancient and contemporary belief systems, and invades our vulnerable, permeable bodies. Reust terms it ‘an infective agent’ (Reust 2003: 200), the memory of which persists in the memory of gallery goers long after leaving the exhibition space, reminding them of the disturbing vulnerability of the body. His choice of word ties in with the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s ideas on corpse pollution, a threat which plays on people’s fears for their bodies as sites for attack by invisible micro-organisms that are capable of crossing bodily boundaries without detection. The experience of moving through the fog-filled space operates on two levels: it is inescapably corporeal, and also provokes meditation. Reust comments that ‘one’s own body is engaged; the physical and the mental are equally affected’ (Reust 2003: 199). This also serves to reinforce the interconnectedness of mind and body, and the inescapability of our corporeal form. As Yépez affirms, ‘the body is the ultimate truth’ (Yépez 2006: 196), a lesson we must all bear in mind. The corpse itself is absent, not presented or represented but suggested by the water that has cleansed it. The awareness of the origin of the water and its threat to the boundaries of the spectator’s body is coupled with the knowledge that the dead body cannot be seen. It is palpably and tantalisingly absent from view, our desire to look at it denied whilst it insinuates its way into the body through the other senses. One reviewer states that ‘it wasn’t revulsion that created a sense of the uncanny but rather the idea of being unable to escape the dead because of this purified water of their last cleansing’ (Reust 2003: 199).

Reust makes an important point with regard to the reception of Margolles’ work in Europe, arguing that it ‘might be associated with the material-centric performance art of the Viennese Actionists’ (Reust 2003: 199). This comparison has also been drawn

by other writers (e.g. Sánchez 1998), who identify similarities in the artists' mutual interest in using materials such as blood and bodily fluids in their performances. This is especially pertinent to Margolles' earlier work as part of the SEMEFO collective, during which time the group fomented an interest in 'la vida del cadáver', the decomposition of the corpse post mortem, which gives rise to life in the form of bacteria and other organisms that feed on the rotting flesh (see Sánchez 1998 for an interview). The piece *Lavatio Corporis* (1994), a collection of rotting horse carcasses fully exposed to the air so that the natural decay process was not arrested, and the smell of putrefaction had a strong impact on gallery goers (see Fusco's 1997 account of her experience of viewing this work), was produced during this stage of Margolles' artistic career. The Actionists believed that art is reality, and SEMEFO shared this perspective. Margolles mentioned her interest in the Vienna group in a 2003 interview. Reust, however, draws an important distinction between them and the Mexican group. He asserts that to view them as directly comparable based on their shared interest in certain types of material

would miss the Mexican artist's very different conceptual stance and approach to the public. While the actions of artists like Hermann Nitsch or Otto Muehl still follow a theatrical kind of dramaturgy, with Margolles all resemblance to stage and *mise-en-scène* falls away. (Reust 2003: 199)

This is a crucial difference. Bätzner also points out that many of Margolles' art works 'contrast starkly with the ecstatic, orgiastic thrust of Vienna Actionism due to their formal clarity that eschews citation of explicitly clerical motifs' (Bätzner 2006: 171). The Mexican artist's minimalism enhances the physicality of the materials she employs, and lays bare the commentaries she is making without any distractions. She does not often appear personally in her art works. They are not staged so that the artist intervenes in the space to provide a barrier between the audience and the material

being used (both groups use raw materials which may permeate the body's boundaries and threaten pollution), rather, with her gallery-based pieces, Margolles exposes the audience directly to reality. *Vaporización* is not presented at a safe distance so that the audience may leave the gallery untouched; spectators are invited into the space and into contact with the material, participating directly.

Aire (2003) also uses air and water as its raw materials, and like many of Margolles' other later works, it is more abstract than SEMEFO's earlier pieces involving bodily fluids and residues. This work comprises a room containing two devices which humidify the air using water from the morgue. The effect of *Aire* is similar to that of *Vaporización* in that the humidified air is inhaled and absorbed by the spectator, causing a confrontation with the death of the body as it is lived by the individual, and therefore with the object. The difference is that with *Aire*, the water is not visible as a mist, rather the spectator becomes aware of its presence through other senses, smell (the water emits a faint antiseptic odour) and touch (the increased humidity of the air against the skin). Görner and Kittelman point out that the circulation of this water suspended invisibly in the air itself, brings the spectator into close contact with the corpse:

Cuando se respira el aire de la sala, el contacto es directo e inevitable. La incorporación de, en *En el aire*, aún visible y separado del espectador en forma de burbujas, se lleva a cabo en el visitante mismo. (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 32-3)

The insinuation of the water vapour into the interior of the spectator's body as s/he walks around the exhibition space, physically demonstrates the interconnectedness of life and death by uniting living and dead bodies, erasing the distance between the dead and the living. The residue of the absent corpse pollutes the living with death,

whilst at the same time being given life by its transport through the air and insinuation into the living body.

En el aire (2003) also makes use of water previously used to wash corpses in the morgue, this time turning it into soap bubbles. Görner and Kittelman draw a distinction between how the raw material for these bubbles is perceived by the spectator before and after the knowledge of its origin: 'Lo que antes era bello y deseable se convierte a través de la muerte en algo repugnante' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 30). The bubbles thus take on a double meaning as both objects of innocent beauty and symbols of mortality, combining sensations of attraction and repulsion. As they burst upon contact with the skin of the viewer, he or she experiences a moment of being physically touched by death: the boundaries between interior and exterior of the body, life and death are transgressed. The soap bubbles therefore bridge the gap between the body of the deceased, who has been cleansed by the water, and the body of the living, whose skin absorbs it. Through them, corporeal boundaries are breached, which produces a sensation of profound discomfort. Also, the bubbles allow death to trespass across the boundary between life and death, serving as a reminder of the fragility of our bodies and our lives. Görner and Kittelman identify another facet of this piece, which on the one hand serves to remind us of our mortality but may also, by the same token, reinforce the state of being alive:

La autora nos demuestra que las burbujas representan la vida que puede acabar en cualquier momento y el choque de una burbuja sobre la piel nos recuerda que estamos vivos. (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 30)

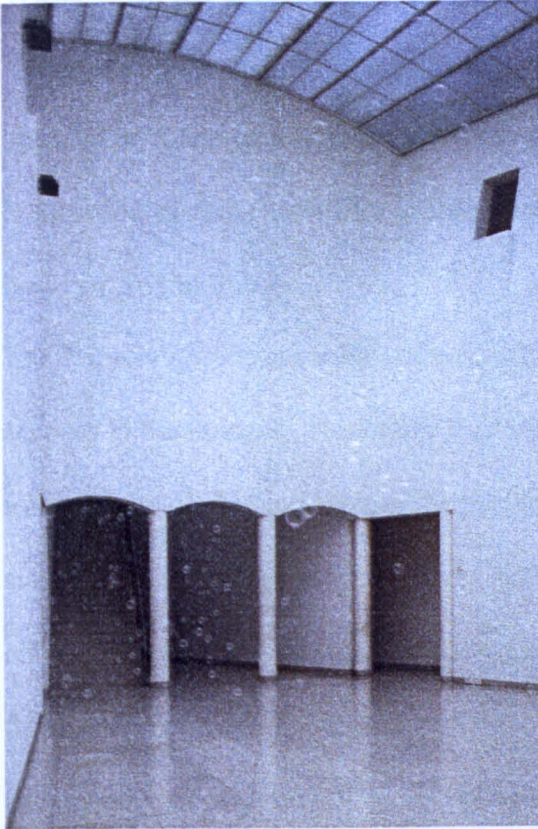


Figure 8: *En el aire* (2003) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

viewer with subjects that he or she may find uncomfortable to contemplate, or may rather ignore. The artist explores the link between death, the corpse, the abject, and eroticism, and transgresses boundaries through the display of dead bodies and the traces they leave behind after death. Her pieces bring the viewer face to face with the abject, a concept which was described by Julia Kristeva. This concept is centred on the notion that the abject is something which we would rather deny but to which we are inextricably linked, which both disgusts and fascinates us. The corpse illustrates Kristeva's ideas because for the spectator, it quite literally embodies the abject. The act of viewing the dead body produces deeply rooted and conflicting sensations which cause us to want to look away from the disturbing object, yet also compel us to do so. Margolles plays upon the conflict and the feelings it produces, so that viewers of her work experience the dual facets of abjection.

In this way they may be seen as objects of *Vanitas*, part of a long tradition of art that provokes meditation on the inevitable mortality of human beings. In the case of *En el aire*, the shock for the viewer comes from the fact that the bubbles effectively blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, between life and death, where the abject touches us. Teresa Margolles' work, when analysed in relation to the ideas of Georges Bataille

and Julia Kristeva, serves to confront the

Water from the morgue

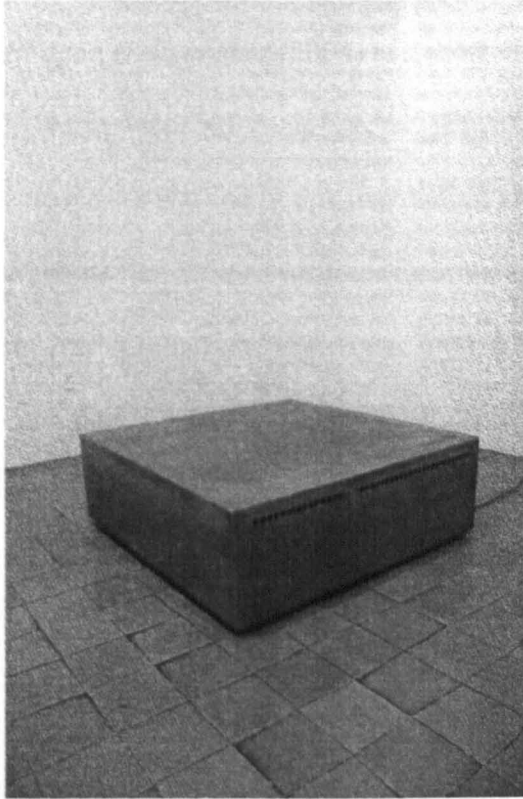
Margolles has used water for many purposes: soaking paper, as a construction material in concrete, and ritual washing. All of these actions subvert the traditional association of water with life, so that water becomes instead a way of connecting dead bodies with the living.

The *Papeles* (2003) are sheets of paper that have been soaked in water used to wash corpses in the morgue. This water contains blood, fat and other bodily fluids, the traces of the double invasion of the bodies by their violent causes of death and the subsequent autopsy procedure. These residues stand in place of the absent bodies, a testimony to the transgression of the boundaries between inside and outside, life and death. Each piece of paper was produced using fluids from one corpse, so that 'de cada papel sale un "retrato" anónimo del difunto' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 30). The individuality of these 'portraits' in blood and bodily fluids, is comparable to the little drops of fat in *Caída libre* and the strands of autopsy thread in *127 cuerpos*. All of these works contain residues left behind by corpses. The fluids from different bodies have merged inside the morgue, in the vessels used to channel and collect waste fluids released during autopsy and the preparation of body parts for medical study. Later, a kind of re-individuation occurs in the gallery space, each separate droplet, piece of thread or sheet of paper now uniting the traces left by multiple bodies.

Llorado (2004) is made using drinking water which is dripped from various points in the ceiling of the exhibition space onto the floor and gallery visitors. Its appearance in a space where the living circulate, serves as a reminder of the deaths of the forgotten corpses to whom Margolles draws attention, a call for them not to simply be washed away and forgotten in the bureaucratic void into which unidentified corpses fall: 'el

escándalo trata de borrarse, pero la muerte queda colgada en el aire y encuentra siempre su forma de reaparecer' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 33).

Sin título (fluidos) (2006) also features dripping water, but this time the water drips not onto the floor of the gallery but onto a steel hotplate. The caption states: 'Fluidos.



Caída de agua con la que, después de la autopsia, se lavaron cuerpos de personas asesinadas' (*Liverpool Biennial: International 06* catalogue 2006: 138). The water droplets, which fall intermittently from a device attached to the ceiling, evaporate with a sharp *hiss* as soon as they come into contact with the metal surface, a sound which has been likened to a gunshot (Sillars 2006: 138). A white residue, which is visible on the surface of the steel

Figure 12: *Sin título (fluidos)* (2006) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

hotplate, is the trace left behind after the water has evaporated, and a faint burning smell is also perceptible in the air. In this way, the piece engages the spectator on more than one sensory plane, therefore implicating him or her physically on multiple levels and eroding the distance between the observer and the observed. Sillars observes that '*Untitled* formally resembles Minimalist sculpture' and that 'the structure also alludes to a post-mortem examination table' (Sillars 2006: 138), from which the corpse is now absent. The disappearance of the water droplets as they hit the flat steel surface alludes to the disappearance of murdered people and their passing through the intermediary space of the morgue. It symbolises the crossing of

the boundary from life into death, corporeal existence into decay and disintegration.

These processes are universal to human beings; only the circumstances differ.

Margolles reminds us of this and imprints onto our consciousness the circumstances by which the bodies washed with this water had been affected.

El agua en la ciudad (2004) is a short video loop which shows a body being washed in warm water before an autopsy is performed. As Görner and Kittelman report, corpses are washed in this way before and after autopsy, so that the runoff water contains 'los últimos residuos de la vida y los primeros de la "vida" después de la muerte' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 32). This bringing together of life and death is central to Margolles' aesthetic. Water traditionally symbolises life, and has also been used throughout history in the ritual cleansing of the dead body and, in some cultures, the preparation of the deceased for the afterlife. It is associated with purity and used in rituals such as baptism. The water from the morgue sends out a mixed message: within the morgue it cleanses, but in the art gallery, in contact with the living, it threatens pollution. The title of this piece also links the city and the morgue overtly.

Margolles has commented that the morgue may be seen as a microcosm of the megalopolis of Mexico City's Federal District, 'this city, the largest in the world, which – like the morgue – is a great funnel through which hundreds of bodies fall into a very small space' (Gallo 1997: 62).

Banco (2004) is a simple concrete bench made using this water as an ingredient. It is placed in the gallery as a convenient seat upon which to rest whilst watching *El agua de la ciudad*. This piece of furniture brings the spectator (should they choose to sit on it) into direct contact with the dead, through the medium of water. *Mesa y dos bancos* (2003) consists of, as the title suggests, a table and two benches. These were also made of concrete that contained water that had been used to wash bodies in the

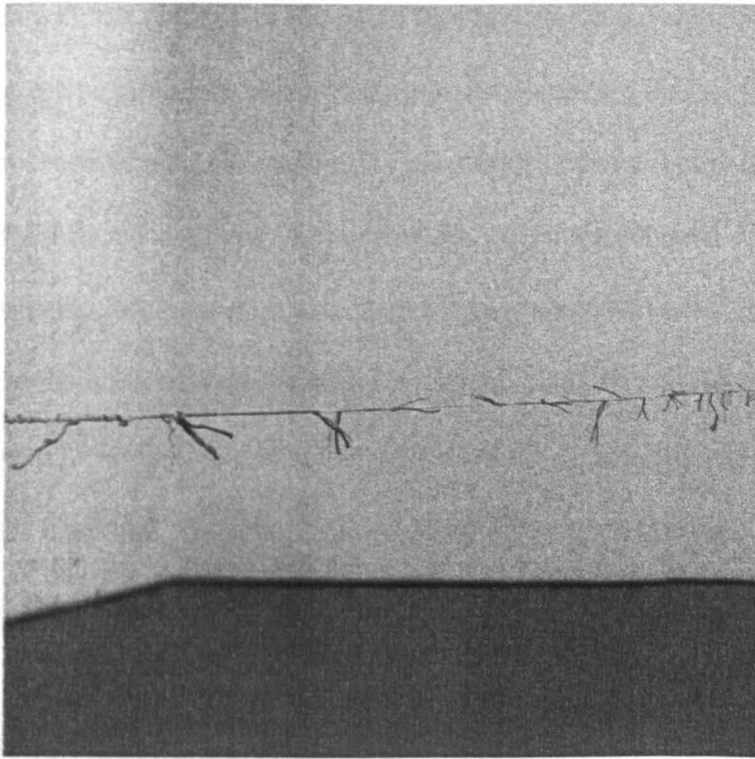
morgue as an ingredient. The act of sitting down on the bench brings the living body into direct contact with a material that has integrated into its solid structure traces of the dead bodies it has been used to wash. Beausse explores the significance for the viewer of sitting upon an object that contains water from the morgue:

This concrete furniture welcomes the living bodies of the viewers while evacuating the question of form (the design itself is not relevant) and finding in turn another form. What does the ordinary act of sitting on an object mean, when that object refers to the reification of the corpse, because it is made of a mix of cement and used water from the morgue? What occurs is a re-animation of the corpse, a circulation of corporeal substances, as the artist systematically carries these fluids from Mexico to the various locations of her exhibitions. (Beausse 2005: 109)

So, the use of this water to make objects that may be used by viewers is another means by which Margolles brings living and dead bodies into direct contact, in this case literally bringing them together: traces of the dead exist collectively within the concrete, and, as Beausse points out, the arrangement of the table and two benches is a suggestion that the living also participate collectively in this space (Beausse 2005: 109). This, then is a social space, which the dead and the living may share.

Artefacts from the morgue

Sin título (1997) is a collection of eight metal drums of various sizes. These had previously been used in the morgue to cook human bones as a method of cleaning them before study. It is from drums similar to these that Margolles collected the human fat she used for *Grumos sobre la piel* (2001). *Larvario* (1992) is a metal casket, which according to Gallo was 'freshly unearthed from a cemetery' (Gallo 2004:117). No more detail is given by the author, and I have so far found only this reference to the piece.



127 cuerpos (2006)

consists of 127 pieces of autopsy thread, knotted together and suspended from either end of the exhibition space at approximately waist height. Each fragment is a remnant of thread that had been used to sew up the torsos of corpses

Figure 13: *127 cuerpos* (2006) Image courtesy the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

after they have undergone a post mortem examination. It was shown as part of the Düsseldorf Quadriennial during late 2006 and January 2007. The spectator is able to approach the piece and observe it at very close range, because no barriers are in place. Viewing from this intimate distance makes clear that each piece of thread is visibly different; for example, they vary in length, and some are frayed and tattered whilst others look relatively intact. Most noticeably, they are stained to varying degrees with dried blood and other bodily residues. The human body is absent, but brought into close proximity with the spectator by this material with which it has come into contact. There is a greater level of violence implicit in using this particular material than, for example, water that has been used to wash corpses: the thread has been attached to a needle which pierced and altered dead skin, aggressively modifying its form to close the violated body cavity. The ability of the spectator to approach *127 cuerpos* is significant. The artist is not shielding the audience, but rather confronting

us with the realities of the violence which put these people into the morgue, and the intrusive processes performed upon dead bodies. The fact that unclaimed corpses do not receive a decent burial after all these indignities is the final and shocking reality. Margolles brings into the view of the audience the uncomfortable social truths which are affecting her native city and other parts of Mexico and Latin America, bridging the distance between these geographical locations and the galleries there and in other, sometimes very distant, parts of the world where her works are shown. In this way, she also transcends the physical distance between the dead and the living body, to invade the senses of the viewer.

Sound installation

Trepanaciones (2003) is a recording of the sound of a skull being sawn open during an autopsy. This is a different tactic by which Margolles aims to penetrate the senses of the audience. There is no accompanying visual recording, which on one hand is comforting because we do not have to endure the sight of something that most lay people (i.e. people who do not perform autopsies as part of their profession) would find horrifying. On the other hand, the sound installation is disquieting because the listener's imagination is allowed to run free and create its own vivid mental image, which will almost undoubtedly be just as distressing as seeing the real thing. Görner and Kittelman state that 'la penetración de lo espantoso que entra por las orejas, es aún más despiadada ya que no podemos cerrar las orejas como los hacemos con los ojos' (Görner and Kittelman 2004: 32). The effectiveness of this piece centres on the principle that one's imagination is capable of creating horrors far worse than ones we are shown, because they are our own, very personal horrors and are therefore likely to disturb us far more. Its non-visual form of representation allows the reader to form

vivid mental pictures so horrifying that perhaps it would be impossible to recreate them convincingly to such effect in a photograph, for example. *Trepanaciones* provokes horror at the invasion of the body and the violence of the act it reveals, not by showing it to the audience visually but by engaging the other physical senses, in this case, hearing. This allows the imagination of the hearer to speculate freely upon what the person holding the saw was seeing during the act, unrestricted by the boundaries imposed by photographic representation.

Margolles' work has undergone a generalised stylistic transition, as a result of which the majority of her work is now visually more minimalist than the output of her early career. It is, however, no less effective at communicating with the viewer, in fact it is arguably more so because a visual assault with a gruesome image could cause people to lessen their receptivity as a self-defence mechanism. For example, in the *Anatomists* documentary about Gunther Von Hagens, viewers' reactions to the 2003 version of his *Body Worlds* exhibition were filmed. Many of them rejected what they were seeing as 'disgusting', although none turned away. Susan Sontag (whose writings on photography receive greater attention in Chapter Two), like Bataille, asserts that the compulsion to look at gruesome images and events is a common human desire:

Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome. Calling such wishes 'morbid' suggests a rare aberration, but the attraction to such sights is not rare, and is a perennial source of inner torment. (Sontag 2003: 85)

The subtlety of Margolles' later work is deceptive. The artist's obsessions have remained the same throughout her career, but as she has stated, her methods of exploring them have changed (see the interview with Margolles conducted by High &

Nicolayevsky in *Felix: Risk/Riesgo* 2003: 90-97). Whilst it may be seen as necessary for images to be shocking to make their point by impacting sufficiently upon the viewer, there arguably comes a point of over-saturation where they no longer have the same impact. Sontag has commented on this phenomenon with regard to photography:

Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown. Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock. (Sontag 2003: 72)

But the problem with this, as Sontag rightly observes, is that the intensity of shock can lessen over time with repeated viewing: 'As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images' (Sontag 2003: 73). This diminishing of intensity in reactions to gruesome images poses the problem of how to convey a message that will have a strong impact, without simply perpetuating the drive towards producing ever more shocking images, which, if we accept Sontag's view, becomes ultimately counterproductive, the shocked reaction turning to indifference and emotional numbness. Margolles gets around this problem by presenting the viewer with something that does not appear shocking at first. However, upon the acquisition of more information, such as the origin of materials used to produce a particular work, it is too late to shut out an emotional response. Her recent, stylistically more minimalist work is therefore subtler, more insidious, and cleverer. The point itself is just as shocking, this has not changed, but the method of communication is different.

Does Teresa Margolles have an 'aesthetic of death'? It is certainly true that death is a central theme in her art works, and through them their viewers are forced to contemplate their own mortality. This is a theme that has been explored by many

artists and in various ways, and Margolles is certainly not the only artist to use corpses. There is, for example, a long and rich tradition of photographing the dead body for various purposes. Memorial photography emerged as a way for loved ones to retain a keepsake in the form of an image of the deceased; a snapshot of their body that would exist long after the natural processes of decay had broken down the corpse. This form of death photography was undertaken within the private sphere, although many of these photographs have since appeared in exhibitions, recognised for their value as sociohistorical documents. In contrast, journalistic photography has intentionally made the image of the dead body public by printing it in newspapers alongside the words of the crime reporter. Images of the dead thus inhabit multiple realms, providing a further challenge to the viewer in that they not only trespass across the boundaries between living and dead bodies, and life and death, but occupy an ambiguous position between the private and the public. This adds to both the fascination and the shock produced by the images.

Although Margolles' later work is more abstract than some of the pieces produced as part of the SEMEFO collective, she uses real bodies, and even in the works where the body is not shown directly, the confrontation of the viewer with death and the corpse is as effective as it would be if the bodies were present. Margolles does not have an aesthetic of death *per se*, although death is certainly a central theme in her art works; rather, as has been stated by the artist, it is also about the corpse, 'la vida del cadáver.' The focus of Margolles' art works on the body itself is a highly effective method for the artist to play upon the reactions of the audience by addressing an uncomfortable subject.

Using raw materials taken from the morgue, and from the corpses within it, then, Teresa Margolles creates her own aesthetic of death and the dead body: a

preoccupation with themes that affect us as individuals and as members of society.

These themes are universal: Margolles' art works transcend the boundaries between the dead bodies in the morgue, and the living bodies of the individuals who view them inside and outside art galleries, inside and outside Mexico.

Chapter Five

Margolles and Modern Art

It may be tempting for critics to situate the work of Teresa Margolles and the global span of the locations where she has exhibited, within a homogenising, globalising trend that can be identified in contemporary art from the 1990s onwards. As this chapter will show, however, Margolles, although her artistic language is internationally readable, responds to specifically Mexican issues. She operates within a zone of interplay between the visual codes she employs, and the layers of meaning that reside just below the surface. Having examined Margolles' work in detail, then, it is necessary to situate her artistic production within the wider contexts of Mexican history from the late 1960s onwards, the history of artistic production in Mexico during this period, and the development and globalisation of art.

Mexican art and the state in the late twentieth century

The history of artistic production in Mexico during the late twentieth century has received relatively little attention. In fact, there is a notable dearth of critical material that deals with Mexican artistic production during and since the 1990s. Gallo's 1997 book *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: the 1990s* has been a valuable resource for this study, as have several exhibition catalogues containing essays on Margolles' work. In 2006, however, a study conducted on a hitherto unattempted scale was published. *La era de la discrepancia* traces the previously unaccounted history of Mexican visual cultural production from 1968 to 1997, focusing on artists who worked outside the mainstream. This task was complicated by various factors such as the aforementioned lack of attention given to this subject previously, and the fact that some art works had been destroyed. Nevertheless, this study is the most comprehensive examination of

Mexican underground art during the late twentieth century that has been published to date. Various explanations for the lack of attention given to artistic production outside the mainstream approved by government cultural policy are perceived, including a disregard of institutions towards the collection of new art works, a lack of state financial support for innovative contemporary art production, and a policy of covert repression, which functioned by:

[...] hacer creer a los artistas y los agentes culturales que los acompañan, que las autoridades culturales se preocupan por la creación artística, aunque condenando las prácticas “alternas” a lo efímero y la invisibilidad en una multitud de exhibiciones y concursos, cancelando al mismo tiempo su oportunidad de adquirir significación permanente. (Debroise and Medina 2006: 20)

Furthermore, a perception, held both inside and outside Mexico, of Mexican art as simply a subsidiary of art being produced in the traditionally dominant cultural centres of Europe and the United States, had been held since the 1940s (Debroise and Medina 2006: 18), and this fostered a sense of isolation in the country until a period of rapid globalisation of Mexican art began during the late 1980s.

1968 was of course a significant year in Mexican cultural and political history. A student demonstration in October of that year marked the end of a summer of protests against the brutality and heavy-handedness of the government under President Díaz Ordaz, who held office from 1964 to 1970. On the eve of the Mexico City Olympic games, a demonstration at Tlatelolco ended in a massacre, in which, according to John Gibler, ‘hundreds of high school and university students’ (Gibler 2009: 45) were killed. Gibler points out, though, that the high visibility of this event is not shared by other injustices carried out by the state such as massacres of rural farmers and indigenous people indicating that ‘Tlatelolco was not then, and is not now, an isolated nor entirely unique act of repression’ (Gibler 2009: 45). At the moment of the

Tlatelolco massacre, then, the attitude of Ordaz's government towards those who would express feelings of discontent was crystallised in the eyes of Mexicans and the world, and the repression carried out during the summer of 1968 proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the regime's already shaky reputation. Until this point, according to Debroise and Medina, certain cultural spheres had been treated leniently:

1968 marca el violento final de una etapa de relativa tolerancia a la experimentación cultural de las clases medias intelectuales mexicanas que no ponían en cuestión la hegemonía del antiguo régimen, y a las que se les concedieron libertades extraordinarias en comparación al resto de la población. (Debroise and Medina 2006: 21)

It must be acknowledged here that this uncharacteristic lenience was, according to this report, afforded only to middle class intellectuals who were not perceived as a threat to Díaz Ordaz's regime, which became characterised by its brutal, and public repression of dissenters. The Tlatelolco massacre, as described by Hamnett, occurred in plain view of observers both inside and outside Mexico:

The massacre took place in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building and many who worked there witnessed it. The horror of the incident was compounded by the large number of persons arrested or who disappeared thereafter. The unanticipated bloodshed in Mexico City, in full view of the international media, provoked a lengthy crisis between the intellectual middle classes and the PRI – until that time a significant supporter and beneficiary. (Hamnett 1999: 271)

The extraordinary brutality of these events and the government's subsequent loss of support from the previously loyal stratum of middle-class intellectuals, deepened the fracture lines between the increasingly repressive government and the Mexican population, and seriously damaged perceptions of Díaz Ordaz outside the country. The events of the summer and autumn of 1968, then, marked a watershed, and ushered in a period of cultural and political repression of the youth counterculture and

of intellectuals that was to last well into the 1980s (Debroise and Medina 2006: 21). In the period following the cataclysmic events of 1968, the Mexican state ceased to become involved in collecting contemporary art works for display in public collections in museums. This is one facet of a general lessening of involvement of the state in visual cultural production and the plastic arts. It is unclear, however, whether this was a deliberate exclusion on the part of the government, or simply the result of bureaucratic ambivalence:

No es fácil precisar si ésta fue una decisión consciente, o una suma de evasivas de la burocracia cultural, pero indicaba que la producción artística [...] no encajó en las políticas culturales de un Estado acostumbrado a la escenificación museológica de lo nacional. (Debroise and Medina 2006: 19)

As a consequence of the progression of this diminishing of state interest in new art, and as a response to it, artists began to establish small independent spaces in which to produce, house and display their works. This point has been called the 'Ruptura', because it marks the splitting off of a branch of art production from the mainstream. The lack of dialogue between these artists and the state therefore had the effect that the purchasing of art works for public display by institutions declined, which meant that many works were consigned to absence from public view, and consequently 'se quedaron históricamente en el olvido' (Debroise and Medina 2006: 20). During this period the state showed scant interest in acquiring contemporary art works, and the one or two that were purchased annually tended not to be representative of art being produced in Mexico at that time. Art collections tended to be private, and were often amassed by artists themselves, most notably Rufino Tamayo, who donated his collection to found a museum, which shares his name, in 1982. This atmosphere of 'descuido institucionalizado' (Debroise and Medina 2006: 20) regarding the relationship between art production and the state, forced art production into a

culturally peripheral zone, and art, for now, was not a high priority on the governmental agenda. This would change.

From the mid- to late 1980s and beyond, art in Mexico began to undergo a period of globalisation, which continued throughout the 1990s. According to Olivier Debroise, two milestones during the earlier years of this new era of artistic expansion were the first and second Havana Biennials, held in 1984 and 1986 respectively. These events encouraged collaboration and encounters between artists and critics from other Latin American nations, and later from further afield as funding for the Biennials increased, enabling the organizers to invite guests from across the world. Among these guests were, importantly, ‘*artistas y críticos de países pobres que, en ese entonces, no tenían los medios para viajar a un evento internacional de esa índole*’ (Debroise 2006: 328). The two countries that particularly benefitted from this strengthening of pan-American connections were Mexico and Cuba, who sought to employ ‘un formato “regional” y esencialmente “tercermundista”’ (Debroise 2006: 328) as a reaction against the traditional concentration of focus on artists from Europe and North America. This opening up of Mexico to the world art market continued apace during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who took office in 1988. This period marked a significant shift in the relationship between artists, art production and the state.

State cultural politics: promoting the myth

In September 1985, a terrible earthquake struck Mexico City. The country was already in the grip of a deep economic recession: one study reports that by the year in question, ‘real wages had fallen by 40 percent from their 1982 level; living standards fell even further as subsidies for such staples as corn tortillas were ended’ (Skidmore

and Smith 1997: 254). The government, which was at that time headed by President Miguel de la Madrid, had been beset by successive financial traumas. The domestic economic crisis, already a cause for great concern both nationally and internationally, was further deepened by falling oil prices – in 1982, Mexico had supplied a greater proportion of US oil imports than Saudi Arabia (Hamnett 1999: 281), and she continued to be a major exporter of oil; furthermore, rising US interest rates were having knock-on effects for heavily indebted third world nations, Mexico among them. The earthquake shook the Mexican capital in the midst of this economic storm. The result?

An incalculable number of deaths and missing persons [that] strained hospital resources to the limit, [and] severely dented not only government economic strategy but also its political reputation through failure to react promptly. (Hamnett 1999: 281-2)

The earthquake was, according to Medina, one of several large scale tragedies ‘exacerbated by the infrastructure’s incompetence and frauds’ (Medina 2002: 39), which culminated in the economic and political collapses of 1994. By the time President Carlos Salinas de Gortari took office in 1988, the aftermath of the seismic and economic events of the preceding few years seemed to have significantly calmed down. Mexico’s new leader thought that the country’s priority should now be to look forward to a brighter economic future. An integral part of this, according to Salinas’ plan, would be Mexico’s participation in the free market. This goal was to be achieved by the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada and Mexico, the plans for which were revealed by President Salinas in 1992. As explained in Chapter One, the economic stability promised prior to Mexico’s entry into NAFTA, did not materialise.

Prior to the implementation of NAFTA on 1 January 1994, Salinas had put in place a number of means by which to promote Mexico, thereby hoping to foster positive attitudes from other countries (namely the US) and thereby safeguard Mexico's entry into the favoured company of economically prosperous nations. One of the ways in which this goal was pursued, was through state funding and promotion of the creative arts, with the establishment of a comprehensive system of patronage very soon after Salinas took office. As Vania Macías explains:

Apenas instalado en el poder, el gobierno de Salinas instituyó el Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las Artes (CNCA) y un amplio sistema de becas a través del Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes con el fin de promover y financiar proyectos artísticos. (Macías 2006: 366)

This financial drive to encourage Mexican cultural production was not simply a sign of the government's official re-engagement with artists and re-awakening of interest in the creative arts after a long period of institutionalised indifference to contemporary art being produced in the country. It was, as Macías and other critics (including López Cuenca, who will be discussed later in this chapter) note, a central component of Salinas' plan to foster a positive opinion of Mexico in other countries and promote her entry into the free market, which, it was hoped, would raise her international economic profile and minimise any political resistance, especially from the United States, to her signing of NAFTA. At the symbolic centre of state cultural policy, which aimed to 'exaltar los logros de la nación' (Macías 2006: 366) were traditional motifs of 'lo mexicano' and traditional forms of artistic representation such as painting. At this point, it is relevant to mention the most famous period of involvement of the Mexican state in artistic production that occurred during the twentieth century: the Muralist movement. The Muralists expressed in paint the creation of a myth of Mexican national identity, a use of the visual arts as a

promotional tool, a 'new didactic image' (Gruzinski 2001: 220) that was the vision of the post-Revolution government. As observed by Anny Brooksbank Jones, 'since the Revolution visual culture has been a key resource in the "rediscovery", building, legitimation and projection of the new Mexico' (Brooksbank Jones 2007a: 38). This was a state-sanctioned drive to plant a notion of 'lo mexicano' in the imaginary of the country's population following the bitter and bloody Revolutionary war that had lasted a decade (1910-1920). This protracted series of battles fought by different leaders under the banners of different causes, had left the country fractured, and the post-Revolution government was confronted with the task of reconstructing the nation, a task that was made even more difficult by the recession that was affecting the world following the end of World War I in 1918 (Skidmore and Smith 1997: 239). Lázaro Cárdenas was president of Mexico between 1934 and 1940. One of the main characteristics of his years in office was his drive to create a unified Mexico in the minds of the population through the use of revolutionary ideology and imagery. This was achieved through state patronage of artistic production, namely the Muralist movement led most famously by 'los tres grandes' (the three greats), Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Murals were a way to instill a strong ideological code by means of imagery, through which a view of Mexicanness was promoted. This united elements such as the country's pre-Hispanic past, and Revolutionary imagery, set against a backdrop of landscapes that were placed to exemplify the typically Mexican, as one critic has put it, 'to rally national unity around a radicalized revolutionary creed' (Halperín Donghi 1993: 236). The construction of national identity through state cultural policies in this way is described by Néstor García Canclini as an 'estrategia unificadora' under which 'las diferencias culturales entre las ciudades de un mismo país eran asumidas como modos particulares dentro de un "ser nacional" común'

(García Canclini 1995: 80). Images were thus employed as an educational tool, as part of the state's drive to unite the diverse population of this huge country. Gruzinski points out that:

It remains to be seen to what degree these frescoes, with their historical pretensions, repeated in schoolbooks and teaching, managed to animate and lastingly implant a nationalistic imagery in the heart of the Mexican peoples. (Gruzinski 2001: 221)

It is unclear whether or not this policy of symbolic didacticism was effective, however, because as Gruzinski notes, even though images of the Revolutionary heroes have been disseminated widely, they have not achieved the same level of devotion as other images, most notably religious icons. There is a crucial difference between the state-sanctioned educational drive of Muralism, which Roger Bartra has called 'the frantic search for "Mexicanness" that accompanied the postwar modernizing boom' (Bartra 2002: 5), and the involvement of Salinas' government in the arts, however. Whilst the Muralist movement was primarily used as an educational tool for political promotion, largely inside Mexico, the cultural interests of the pre-NAFTA government under Salinas were part of a publicity drive aimed at raising the country's profile elsewhere, primarily in the United States; this was essentially an advertising strategy aimed at easing Mexico's insertion into closer association with the free market economies with the hope of benefitting financially. The Muralism of the 1930s has not been the only period in the history of Mexican art during the twentieth century that has promoted an idealised view of Mexico through the production of images. In the 1980s, there arose a number of artists whose work featured nationalistic icons of Mexicanness such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, symbol of Mexico's *mestizo* cultural heritage, and references to pre-Hispanic culture. A foremost painter from this period is Julio Galán, whose 1987 work *China poblana* is,

in the words of Rubén Gallo, ‘a painting of a Mexican woman dressed in folkloric garb, [which] is one of the most accomplished – and most representative – works of this period’ (Gallo 2004: 7). This movement was given the name ‘neomexicanismo’ (Neomexicanism). Neomexicanism was at its height during the late 1980s, the first years of Carlos Salinas’ presidency. This was an art concerned primarily with, as López Cuenca points out, issues of identity, ‘ya sea cultural, personal, o sexual’ (López Cuenca 2005: 11). Gallo draws attention to the position of Neomexicanism at odds with the economic and political turbulence being experienced by Mexico at this time, thereby promoting a pleasant, apolitical, essentially false view of the country that did not in fact reflect the historical backdrop against which the works were produced. As stated by Gallo:

It is no wonder that these paintings met with great commercial success, locally and abroad: they presented a palatable image of Mexico as a colorful, festive country filled with age-old traditions and untouched by the complex troubles of present-day life. (Gallo 2004: 7)

In this way, Neomexicanism presented a heroicised fantasy view of a Mexico described in Mayan symbols and icons of Mexicanness similar to those painted by the Muralists some fifty years previously. This, in my view, is the Revolutionary myth taken out of context and painted over a very different set of socio-historical circumstances, arguably a visual escapism from a harsh reality that it avoids representing. Margolles’ art works take a very different approach, not denying or masking uncomfortable realities but exposing them with an uncompromising directness that at times crosses the border into brutality.

Large, high profile exhibitions such as ‘Mexico: The Splendors of Thirty Centuries’, which opened in 1990 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (and travelled to other major US cities including Los Angeles), and ‘Mito y magia en América: Los

Ochenta' ('Myth and Magic in America: The 1980s'), held in 1991 at Monterrey's Museum of Contemporary Art (Yúdice 1995: 208), formed an integral component of the promotion of Mexico's involvement in NAFTA by Carlos Salinas' government, on a cultural level. George Yúdice calls this phenomenon 'a medium of negotiation, a form of cultural brokering' (Yúdice 1995: 207). He highlights the financial aspect of this promotional drive, pointing out that Mexican television company Televisa 'has much at stake in NAFTA' (Yúdice 1995: 207). Gruzinski charts the 'fantastic rise of Mexican commercial television' (Gruzinski 2001: 221), at the head of which is Televisa, whose vast geographical reach has placed the company in a powerful position regarding its potential for influencing audiences through the use of the televisual image. Gruzinski identifies the company with a visual cultural tradition that had grown in strength in Mexico from the 1930s onwards, and stood in contrast to the way in which the Muralists used images. He explains that this 'expression of an electronic culture without any national ties replaced the furiously Mexican frescoes' (Gruzinski 2001: 221). This, possibly, is a factor that has counteracted the potential influence of the Muralist project in establishing a canon of images that inspire a sense of national identity around Revolutionary motifs. Gruzinski traces the lineage of the apolitical image back through the cinematic tradition, whose 'flood of cinematographic images wove a new consensus centered on the new values of city, technology, illusions of consumerism' (Gruzinski 2001: 222), a drive that televisual companies later picked up, and that took 'the opposite view from state muralism' (Gruzinski 2001: 222). Televisa has grown to become the most powerful of these companies, with a sphere of influence that has crossed national boundaries to incorporate the whole of Latin America, Hispanic communities living in the US, and even, as Gruzinski notes, 'Spain in a counter-conquest, an unforeseen reversal of a

war of images five centuries old' (Gruzinski 2001: 222). The success of Televisa lies in its broad appeal and its ability to unite diverse sectors of society in the desire to consume the broadcast images, the key to which resides in the bland, apolitical nature of the material (the foremost example of which is the soap opera), that can easily transcend obstacles such as differences in geographical location or economic status through the dissemination and glorification of the image and, in the case of the soap opera, feed the audience's consumerist aspirations by presenting idealised lifestyles. The idea that television unites people across population sectors, is ultimately illusory by dint of the encouragement of passive consumerism that commercial television foregrounds. The vast viewing public, in disparate locations and at various levels of economic disadvantage, only have in common the programmes they watch.

Gruzinski states that:

The televised image easily recuperates the most disparate ambitions in order to neutralize and visually pipe them through; it is a leveling image, meant to bring about a consensus – “television must bridge the gap between all Mexicans” – built on a universal model of North American inspiration. (Gruzinski 2001: 222)

Salinas' promotional drive arguably took advantage of, and further entrenched, stereotyped perceptions of Mexican culture and cultural identity. However, it has been noted that the 'Splendors' [sic] exhibition also had the consequence of opening up avenues for the expression of discontent from minorities within the United States who felt that they were under-represented, even disregarded, on a national cultural level.

Yúdice points out that:

The emphasis on Mexico's indigenous past enabled a critique of the show and of the institutions that sponsored it from the perspective of currently oppressed indigenous minorities. Chicanos and other minorities (particularly Native Americans) organized alternative exhibitions in order to make visible that

which the 'Splendours' left without recognition, viz. popular arts and the cultural production of Chicanos in the USA. (Yúdice 2005: 207)

The role of the globalised art market

Another major factor in the reception of art is the globalisation of the art market, which has led to a commodification of art and the hyperinflation of the monetary value of art works. According to the New York-based Australian art critic Robert Hughes, this 'entanglement of big money with art affects the way art is made, controlled and experienced', and is a curse that 'has infected the entire art world' (Hughes 2008). The influence of money on the art world is also discussed by Jerry Saltz, a high profile art critic who has twice been a finalist in the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. He asks: 'Is the art world of greater interest to people outside it because art has become more interesting or because art is hot property?' (Saltz 2007: 93). In this environment, where magazines such as *Vanity Fair* run special issues on art (Saltz 2007: 93) and works by artists such as Damien Hirst, whom Hughes refers to as 'the savviest marketing artist of our times' (Hughes 2008), can sell for thousands, if not millions of dollars. Hirst's work *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted platinum cast of a human skull produced in 2007, was put on display at London's White Cube gallery with a price tag of £50 million, the highest price ever for a work of contemporary art. According to Ben Hoyle, the piece was sold but it was later discovered that Hirst himself was 'part of the consortium that had bought it for £50 million' (Hoyle 2008:1). Hughes' disgust at the financial fetishisation of art works has led, he argues, to the value of works being represented numerically, giving far less importance to their artistic quality, so that the expensive overwhelms the interesting and monetary value has become confused with quality. Saltz valuably enquires as to whether our opinions about art works are influenced by how much they cost: 'Are we

sometimes liking things because we know the market likes them or are we really liking them?’ (Saltz 2007: 92). This suspicion would appear to be confirmed by a quote in a BBC News article about the Hirst skull, from ‘art expert Charles Dupplin from specialist insurer Hiscox’, which reveals that according to Dupplin: ‘This is a spectacular piece and undoubtedly the work with the highest intrinsic value in modern and contemporary art’¹. The equation of artistic validity with monetary value is clearly evidenced by this statement, in which an ‘art expert’ who represents not a cultural institution or organisation of any kind, but an insurance firm, elevates Hirst to the zenith of artistic achievement on the back of a price tag. This phenomenon, according to Hughes, began during the 1980s, when the market became the dominant force in the buying and selling of art. As prices grew, art works began to attract a new type of buyer: one who saw art as a financial, not a cultural investment. Wealthy collectors such as Charles Saatchi (who has purchased many of Damien Hirst’s works) thus became powerful forces in the world art market. Hughes states that:

The consequence of such prices was not that art became admired through any critical perspective, but for its price tag. Auction houses were the new arbiters of taste. (Hughes 2008)

Another consequence of this is the extension of influence of these collectors into the world of museums, so that wealthy trustees who can afford to buy art works at inflated prices, lend them to museums and therefore implicitly dictate which works should occupy a high cultural status and be appreciated by the viewing public. Hughes gives the example of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which has at its entrance a list of ‘founders’, who are in fact wealthy trustees who

¹ Dupplin, quoted at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6712015.stm> accessed 12/2/2009

loan works from their collections to be put on display in museums. For example, Damien Hirst's infamous formaldehyde-preserved shark is currently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from its owner, hedge fund billionaire Steve Cohen (Hughes 2008). Hoyle observes that 'at the elite end of today's art market, where records have been tumbling for years, the stakes are now so high that nothing is ever quite as it seems' (Hoyle 2008: 1). Saltz's view on this situation is that it is 'too good to be true' (Saltz 2007: 91), but he also astutely observes the benefits of this market, both for artists who are able to sell their works for large sums of money and can therefore afford to be artists on a full-time basis, and for art critics who are able to make a living from writing about it (Saltz 2007: 92). Protests against the power of big money in the art market have not just come from critics, however. At Madrid's recent ARCO art fair, Spanish artist Eugenio Merino displayed a selection of works that parody works by Damien Hirst. The most attention-grabbing of these is a sculpture entitled *4 the Love of Go(l)d*, a sculpture of the infamous British artist committing suicide by shooting himself in the head. Merino, who claims to be a fan of Hirst, stated that 'I thought that, given that he thinks so much about money, his next work could be that he shot himself. Like that the value of his work would increase dramatically.'² This sculpture, a strong protest against the commercialisation of art, is somewhat tinged with irony, however, given the fact that this exhibition has been the most commercially successful Merino has ever done. The artist, who has sold every work exhibited at ARCO (the 'suicide' sculpture to a US-based collector, and the other pieces to collectors in Holland and Portugal), muses that 'the art market is bad

² Quoted in Tremlett (2009), accessed 20/02/2009 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/18/damien-hirst-suicide-sculpture-eugenio-moreno>

but actually this year has been spectacular for me [...] I've never sold so much.'³

These somewhat bizarre events support Jerry Saltz's assertion that, despite well-founded complaints on the one hand about the arguably exaggerated amount of money circulating around the art market, it can on the other afford some artists the luxury of devoting themselves to art on a full time basis. The picture is undoubtedly a complex one, but as Saltz would have it, not as entirely suffused with gloomy prospects for the quality of artistic production as Hughes appears to suggest.

Ultimately, Saltz argues, art still has the power to provoke strong emotional reactions by presenting the viewer with 'places on the edge of language that the market can't strip away' (Saltz 2007: 93). What is needed is a new theoretical approach to the analysis of art that takes into account the dynamics and influence of the global art market. He observes that there is currently 'no philosophy that addresses the ways in which the ongoing feeding frenzy is affecting the production, presentation and reception of art' (Saltz 2007: 92). This is clearly a problem if we are to examine properly the extent of the impact of the financially driven market upon creative expression both on an individual level and within the context of national cultures. It is unclear what the implications of the power of money in the art market are for Margolles. She is, undoubtedly, a global artist, but the ethical and legal implications of buying and selling many of her works on the international art market for private collections would certainly be complicated. I have found no documentation of whether or not her works have been bought or sold, and Margolles' reluctance to be interviewed means that no answer to this question is forthcoming. For now I assume

³ Ibid.

that Margolles' income is derived from fees for doing installations and participating in exhibitions, and grants, prizes and scholarships.⁴

It is pertinent to ask whether, in the light of the global economic recession that began early in 2008, exchanges of vast sums of money for art works is sustainable, especially if, as in the example given above, wealthy artists end up buying a stake in their own work to reinforce the perception that they really are worth millions? A digest of international art news published in the US-based art journal *Art Forum*, provides snapshots of opinion amongst art dealers in various countries from Europe to the Far East (Beijing and Hong Kong), the US, and Russia. Allen reports that in New York, dealers are reluctant to comment on how they think the financial crisis will affect the art world, and there is a palpable sense that 'while the effects of the crash can be felt in luxury boutiques on Fifth Avenue and delays in building projects' (Allen 2008: 1), art dealers are somewhat in denial about openly discussing the economic crisis. A commentator in Berlin cited the comparison drawn by Christian Boros, an advertising agency director, between the business and art spheres following the financial crash of 1990, where he drew attention to 'the now-familiar litany of Hirst's auction in London [...] during the financial world's worst week' (Allen 2008: 1). The comments of one dealer from Zürich, referring to the current crisis, seem to echo the feeling that the art world is somewhat independent of financial downturns (although not to quite such an extreme degree), asserting that 'connoisseurs among the top collectors will keep on buying, perhaps right at the moment, because they will be able to acquire top-level works more easily' (Victor Gisler, cited in Allen 2008: 1). Peter Kilchmann, the dealer whose gallery represents Teresa Margolles and the

⁴ A full list of awards is available on Margolles' page on the Galerie Peter Kilchmann web site, at: http://www.peterkilchmann.com/zh/biography.php?art_id=99#bio4

Mexico-based Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, states that ‘the hype atmosphere is definitely over’ (Kilchmann cited in Allen 2008: 1). It is possible to observe, based on these comments, that the type of art dealing criticised by Robert Hughes, and the types of works it circulates, will decline, but not to the detriment of the art market as a whole. Another Swiss commentator advances the view that ‘should the actual situation lead to more discussion about substance, that would only be good for the scene’ (Florian Berktold, cited in Allen 2008: 1). The view in London was rather more pessimistic, with Andreas Rumbler, a specialist in twentieth century art, commenting that ‘high-end artists will continue to sell, while the market for midpriced art works and for emerging artists will suffer’ (Rumbler cited in Allen 2008: 1). So, it is possible to speculate that the knock-on effects of the financial crisis will not affect wealthy art collectors and established artists to the same degree as less ‘collectable’ works by lesser-known artists. This is confirmed by Ben Hoyle’s report of recent events in London at Sotheby’s auction house. An auction held in September 2008 of a selection of works by Damien Hirst, generated a reported £111 million⁵ for the artist, spectacularly bucking the downward economic trend. However, Hoyle acknowledges that this event should not necessarily be taken as representative of the situation for other artists when he says that ‘what the sale means for [Hirst’s] dealers, other artists and the art market in general is anybody’s guess’ (Hoyle 2008: 1). An article in Forbes, by Sian Evans, examines events in the global art market at the end of October 2008. She points out that autumn ‘really is the season for the art market’ (Evans 2008: 1), and asks what the consequences of the global economic downturn will, or will not be. She reports that, despite claims by ‘art dealers, critics and

⁵ Tremlett (2009), accessed 20/02/2009 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/18/damien-hirst-suicide-sculpture-eugenio-moreno>

auctioneers [...] the art market would remain miraculously immune to the global financial crisis' (Evans 2008:1). It would appear that there has been some effect, with attendance at auctions, and revenue, down. But Evans' report ultimately supports what other commentators have hypothesised about the ability of certain 'blockbuster' pieces that will reach high prices regardless of the economic circumstances. She does, however, sense a change in the atmosphere, as a result of which

we might be approaching a paradigm shift, big or small, which could very well change not only the climate on the auction floor and at the art fairs, but also in the studio and the gallery space. (Evans 2008: 2-3)

What the implications of this are for Teresa Margolles is unclear at this time. She continues to be active internationally, with solo exhibitions during 2008 in Austria, China (Beijing) and the United States (New York), and has recently had an exhibition at the Peter Kilchmann gallery in Zürich (January 17 to February 21, 2009). She has also recently participated in a group exhibition in Spain. Peter Kilchmann's comment above indicates perhaps that in spite of the worries of wealthy investors, works by high profile artists who operate on an international scale will continue to attract interest from galleries, and enjoy opportunities to exhibit new works.

The reception of Latin American art outside Latin America

According to Carolina Ponce de León, the globalisation of the art market has consequences for the way in which Latin American art is perceived outside the continent:

The power structure built by institutions such as MoMA, the art market and the auction houses – which still deal with Latin American art as a separate category – around multiculturalism and the possibility that Latin American art can overcome geopolitical determinants seems to be a considerable obstacle

blocking the possibility of viewing Latin American art within more accurate aesthetic or cultural terms. (Ponce de León 1995: 227)

This has created a dilemma for Latin American artists in recent years, which stems from the stereotypes attached to cultural production in the continent. The ‘Latin American Boom’ in the literary world, that propelled writers such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez into a global spotlight, has created a cultural framework for the way in which Latin American art is experienced in other countries⁶, that is, as an exoticised ‘other’ unfettered by the plagues of unrest that trouble industrialised nations. The cultivation of this view of Latin American culture has been actively encouraged by cultural policies such as the promotion of Mexico by Carlos Salinas’ government during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which Debroise describes as the ‘representación diplomático-económica del país, es decir, el operativo “México: esplendores de treinta siglos”’ (Debroise 2006: 328). Furthermore, as Brooksbank Jones observes:

Influential Mexican critics have been scathing about the appropriation of art produced in Mexico by the curators of extra-national contemporary art institutions [...] Mexican art becomes an exotic supplement used to refresh otherwise lacklustre programmes. (Brooksbank Jones 2007a: 17)

The exoticisation of Latin American art is problematic for artists because it potentially places limits on the ways in which their work can be received, and indeed perceived. Ponce de León states that:

Latin American art [...] is recognized for its multiple exoticisms: sexual, social, ritual or political – the preindustrial paradise of magical realism and postcolonial condition. This frame of reference allows only two options: one, correspondence to the models of the centre, which condemns it to being an

⁶ This argument is explored by Swanson throughout his 1995 study *The new novel in Latin America*.

epigone and to seeing itself diluted within aseptic internationalism; two, difference, deluded by a closed notion of cultural identity as the only possibility for originality. Latin American artists are interpreted as being either outside the art system or subordinate to Euramerican models. (Ponce de León 1995: 226)

The implication of the enforcement of this binary view is that art that deviates from these qualities or challenges assumptions will remain confined to a peripheral position. This attitude reinforces the fact Latin American art has traditionally been viewed in comparison with how it relates to art being produced in the 'centre'. The increased attention directed towards Latin American art during and since the rapid globalisation of the 1990s has concentrated not just around large exhibitions held in other countries, but also in increased attention in the international art press. Mariana David's article in a 2005 edition of *Flash Art International* provides a tidy description of the position of Latin American art within the global art world:

Latin American art, traditionally part of the periphery, has always been valued by its difference, similitude or else its capacity to comply with the accepted discourse and forms established by the centre. The work itself has no value as an object, outside its consumption quotient. (David 2005: 102)

David highlights the current appeal of Latin American art as a cultural product that 'allows easy consumption' (David 2005: 102) due in large part to the marketing of an exoticised view of Latin American cultures by national governments who wish to foster this view as part of a political agenda (Carlos Salinas' promotion of Mexico serves as an effective example of this, as does the recent 'Colombia es pasión' campaign⁷). In this way, David argues, 'an emphasized stereotyping has served local governments well in the promotion and sale of a name and product that is often equated with national soccer teams in all their exotic glory' (David 2005: 102). So,

⁷ The official web site is located at <http://www.colombiaespasion.com>

the exoticisation of Latin American art is not something entirely imposed from outside; it has also been actively encouraged by governments with an interest in the promotion of this perception, who have, one could argue, effectively exploited an already existing view of Latin America. David states, perhaps cynically, of Latin American artists working in recent years, that ‘conversely, the artist develops a strategy of negating all local identity, only to partake of it later – a quite popular method in acceding to the international circuit’ (David 2005: 102). This view is an extension of the binarism inherent in looking at Latin American art, and evidences a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ aspect to the way in which art is perceived abroad. By this token, art is categorised as either conforming to exoticised stereotypes, or copying the language of the ‘centre’. This is a slightly patronising view that does not seem to allow room for any dialogue between locally-based subject matter and globally accessible styles of artistic expression, a dialogue which is strongly present in Teresa Margolles’ work and in Mexican art generally from the 1990s onwards. Furthermore, what use is a binaristic view of culture in the face of the immense multiplicity of not only the geographical origins of cultural artefacts (consider the vastness of Latin America!) but diversities in the cultural origins and ideological projects of their producers. Globalisation and the growth of the mass media have challenged and deconstructed definitive notions of local identity. The accessibility of information and the potentially instantaneous exchange of ideas has produced accelerated assimilations of the non-local, which makes it now impossible to essentialise cultural products according to the locations where they were produced. As García Canclini has observed:

¿Qué queda de estos vínculos entre ciertas ciudades y ciertos símbolos cuando las músicas nacionales se hibridizan con los de otros países y cuando el cine se dedica a hacer coproducciones internacionales? (García Canclini 1995: 86)

This dialogue is visible in Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2001 film *Amores perros*, which was compared to Quentin Tarantino's cult classic *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) because of features such as the circular narrative, the foregrounding of violence and the gritty, confrontational way in which the film was shot. Certainly, the opening scene of *Amores perros*, in which an injured, bleeding dog is lying on the back seat of a car during a high-speed chase, may be seen to reference *Reservoir Dogs*' opening scene (Mr. Orange, played by Tim Roth, has been shot and lies bleeding in the back of a car during a chase).

The internationalisation of artistic language can also pose a problem for Latin American artists, however. Guillermo Gómez-Peña views this as another opportunity for the easy commodification of Latin American art and its producers, so long as they conform to the homogenised codes of representation favoured by the globalised art world:

The new praxis is to engage in a stylistically "radical" but thoroughly apolitical type of transnational/multiculturalism that indulges a-critically in mild difference. (Gómez-Peña 2001: 16)

If we follow this line of argument, the globalisation of art has led to a dumbing-down of political content, and has thus become a means by which Latin American artists can be treated as quirky and mildly different within a discourse of 'hybridity' yet ultimately be positioned as unchallenging to the dominant value system and devoid of strong, potentially unpalatable political statements. Gómez-Peña describes the homogenising of artistic styles of representation in the following way:

No matter where you are, whether at a chic art space in New York or Buenos Aires or at the Biennale in Venice or Istanbul, the art you will find is strangely

similar, its differences only superficial and idiosyncratic. (Gómez-Peña 2001: 16)

As Brooksbank Jones has noted, conceptual art is especially attractive, its visual codes easy to interpret across national and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, by definition this kind of art tends to lack overt visual messages, a characteristic that makes this kind of art safe for 'viewing': if the viewer does not wish to engage, it is easier for him or her to simply pass by a work in a gallery and not be troubled by its memory.

Margolles and Mexican Art

As I have mentioned, one method employed pre-NAFTA by Salinas' government with the aim of encouraging domestic visual cultural production that he hoped would form part of the promotion of Mexican culture, was the creation of grants schemes distributed through the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA), to fund arts projects. However, many young artists during the early 1990s were not interested in towing the governmental line. Salinas signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992. This brought with it political and economic reforms that were unpopular with groups in many arenas of political thought. Politically, Mexico had traditionally stood independently from the United States in terms of foreign policy, but the country's goals under Salinas became centred on making Mexico more appealing to foreign investors, and encouraging free trade. As Gallo points out, this drive for closer relations with the country's northern neighbours, meant that some of Mexico's previous foreign policies would be considered highly offensive for the reason that they were completely at odds with previous policies:

Many of the Mexican government's actions, including support for Castro's Cuba and Nicaragua's Sandinista government, were in open defiance of the American stance. (Gallo 2004: 3)

Following Salinas' acceptance of the accord with Canada and the US, discontent grew in many sectors of Mexican society. One major area of concern was industry, which suffered greatly due to an influx of cheap foreign imports against which local manufacturers who according to Gallo 'were ill prepared to compete against foreign rivals after decades of protectionism' (Gallo 2004: 2) found it impossible to compete. This allowed foreign companies to gain footholds in the Mexican domestic market, and many locally based firms collapsed.

The decade of the 1990s has been referred to as 'the most tumultuous in Mexican history since the Revolution ended in 1920' (Gallo 2004: 1). The weakening of Mexican industry caused by a relaxation of import duties, coupled with Salinas' appeasement of United States foreign policy interests in Latin America, fomented deep discord within his own political party, the PRI. This atmosphere of discontent took physical shape in the form of high-profile assassinations, including the murder of the Archbishop of Guadalajara in May 1993. This crime was never solved, but questions have been raised over whether the Archbishop's death had anything to do with his suspicion that President Salinas was corrupt and had become involved with the drug trade (Gallo 2004: 3) (the issue of the narcotics trade and the high-level corruption and rise in violent crime with which it is associated, has been discussed in Chapter One). The political instability ushered in by the signing of NAFTA crystallised on 1 January 1994, the day the agreement was officially implemented, with the armed uprising of Subcomandante Marcos' Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. This was the final nail in the coffin of Salinas' utopian promises of stability and prosperity for Mexico. The Zapatistas especially were a thorn in the side of Salinas' ideals,

because their fight for land reforms in southern Mexico, though the actual conflict was brief, drew attention to the inequality inherent in NAFTA's economic reforms, thereby promoting an alternative model of development for third world nations. The uprising, along with several other events including the December economic collapse, thus 'suddenly revealed the illusory character of the promises of development that had been the main selling point for Mexico's entry into NAFTA' (Medina 2002: 40). The Zapatista's shrewd use of the Internet raised awareness of their cause on a global scale and threw open to the eyes of not just Mexico but the world, the fact that Salinas' government had failed to address by remaining ignorant of, or willfully ignoring, serious problems being experienced by significant sectors of the Mexican population. Vania Macías states that:

El territorio nacional se desequilibró, terminando con la idea idílica de progreso que las prácticas políticas y económicas que la administración de Carlos Salinas de Gortari había logrado erigir para algunos sectores favorecidos de la nación, que, desde luego, no incluían los reclamos culturales de los artistas contemporáneos, ni de intelectuales que ya navegaban por otras rutas (incluyendo la Internet y las llamadas nuevas tecnologías). (Macías 2006: 368)

This exclusion and underestimation of artists and intellectuals who did not espouse the Salinas governments' aesthetic priorities, and the lack of official spaces in Mexico where artists could exhibit their work, eventually exposed the failings of the state cultural system, which was, as Macías asserts, 'incapaz de generar nuevos discursos y de entender la transformación e hibridación cultural que se estaba gestando en el país' (Macías 2006: 366). Medina agrees with this view, describing the particular set of circumstances present in Mexico that made engagement with progressive artistic ideas difficult at the very least:

México tenía un mundo artístico local institucionalmente desarrollado, con [...] una narración monolítica acerca de la historia del arte nacional, respaldada activamente por programas de exposiciones locales e internacionales, y un sistema de educación monstruosamente conservador, que desalentaba la experimentación y el cambio. (Medina 2005: 353)

Along with the apparent stagnation in the mainstream Mexican art world and its resistance to change, the growth of the Internet and the 'information revolution' that occurred during this period are key factors in understanding the processes that occurred during the 1990s. The World Wide Web facilitates communication between individuals on a global scale, instantaneously. This has effectively rendered geographical distance irrelevant, and the development of new and progressive ideas and forms of expression is far easier and quicker than ever before, with influences accessible from culturally and geographically disparate sources. Artists in Mexico in the 1990s had grown up in the age of the mass media and were now benefitting from the cultural and information revolution brought about by the Internet. The arts grants schemes set up by the Salinas administration, which had been established to fund his vision of how Mexico should be perceived outside the country, were a way for the Mexican state under the PRI to promote Mexican culture in accordance with how policymakers wanted this to happen. As Gallo points out, 'the most money went to artists who – like the Neo-Mexicanists – celebrated Mexican identity but stayed clear of controversial topics like religion or politics' (Gallo 2004: 11). The new generation of artists, of whom Teresa Margolles was one, had rather different aims in mind. Within a sociopolitical context of fracture and unrest, emerged creative minds that were not interested in the creation of a national myth of Mexicanness that displayed stereotypical icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Mayan pyramids of Palenque. The global accessibility of information rendered the Neomexicanist utopian vision of a Mexico untroubled by the dangers of the modern world, an obedient,

unchallenging fantasy with which the new generation of artists were unable and unwilling to identify. The glorification of the past and transposition of exoticised, mythologised iconography was not in line with their progressive intentions to experiment with new media and ideas.

The globalisation of Mexican art that had begun during the late 1980s at the start of Salinas' presidency continued apace in the following decade. This process of rapid change happened on various planes. An early catalyst was the arrival of foreign artists in the country, for example the Belgian Francis Alÿs, who arrived in February 1986 (Debroise 2006: 329) and still lives in Mexico City. Alÿs, an architect, has a studio in the Centro district of Mexico City, and uses the streets as the focus for his performances. For example, his work *Ambulantes* (1995-2001) documents the day to day experiences of the street vendors who make their living by wandering through the city with carts that form portable shops selling a multitude of goods, as Gallo puts it, 'everything from miraculous ointments to pirated computer programs' (Gallo 2004: 94). Alÿs, who has come from outside Mexico and chosen to settle in its chaotic capital city, draws attention with this series of performances to the importance of the role the street vendors play in the non-official economy of Mexico by providing an income upon which millions of Mexicans depend. The unofficial nature of this occupation has not attracted kindness from the Mexico City authorities, however.

Gallo reports that:

In 2003, the city government, following a recommendation by Rudolph Giuliani's security consulting firm, attempted to remove the *ambulantes* from their spots. They were chased away repeatedly, but eventually they always managed to return to their place of business. (Gallo 2004: 94)

As mentioned in Chapter One, Giuliani, the ex-Mayor of New York City whose zero-tolerance approach to tackling crime became the defining feature of his policy, was

appointed as consultant to the Mexico City government to help ‘clean up’ the growing problem of drug-related violent crime in the Mexican capital. The events recounted above make clear the importance of the ‘unofficial’ economy to the lives of ordinary people in Mexico City, and hint also at the unequal distribution of the wealth and resources of the mainstream economy – hence the necessity for an alternative economy. Alÿs’ work also deals with the theme of violence, although his approach differs from Margolles’. Again, he uses the street as his stage, situating his work firmly within the realm of public space. Biesenbach gives an account of a performance by the artist entitled *Reenactment*, for which he placed himself in an extremely vulnerable position:

Alÿs was filmed as he walked through the streets of downtown Mexico City while casually carrying a loaded gun. The performance, which was recorded with a hidden videocamera, lasted for approximately twelve minutes until Alÿs was overpowered and arrested by the police. (Biesenbach 2002b: 82)

Biesenbach points out that the police could have simply shot Alÿs dead, rather than going to the effort of arresting him. In this performance, the artist risked his life on the streets of Mexico City in order to highlight the casual presence of violence in the daily life of the city. The day after this performance was carried out, Alÿs did it again, this time with more cameramen and the consent of the police. Biesenbach perceives through the viewing of the two recordings together, ‘a dry commentary on the freedom one can negotiate through fiction, [and] a reflection on the limitations imposed by reality’ (Biesenbach 2002b: 82). The perception of the performance as ‘fiction’ undoubtedly allowed the artist to carry out what in fact was an uncomfortably close approximation of reality. The gun, let us remember, was loaded (at least, that is what we are told). Alÿs, like Margolles, talks of realities affecting the inhabitants of Mexico City, but his focus is slightly different. Margolles lays bare the

fate of bodies by exposing the processes that occur within the morgue, and the horror of violence enacted upon the body. Alÿs also highlights a reality that perhaps people would rather ignore: the presence of this violence in the streets on a day-to-day basis. He exposes the risk, and Margolles shows the potential result.

During the period of expansion being experienced in the Mexican art world during the 1990s, native artists were not always wholly receptive to the presence of foreigners in Mexico. Debroise explains that:

Las relaciones de los artistas locales con los recién llegados fueron muy debatidas a lo largo de los años noventa, y no siempre del todo cordiales; sea lo que fuere, las discusiones, aunque rípidas, despejaron el horizonte y enriquecieron los debates, aun cuando exigieron, a veces, cerradas tomas de postura. (Debroise 2006: 328)

In this way, even though the exchanges of information between Mexican artists and their foreign counterparts were not always polite, they facilitated the circulation of new ideas and helped breathe life into Mexican art production after the conformism of the Neomexicanists. The new generation of artists based in Mexico, wanted to talk about reality, about things that were going on around them and affecting the country they lived in. These artists embraced new technology and ideas as a rejection of *neomexicanismo* and the system of selective state patronage. In order to address the problem of the lack of 'official' exhibition spaces, alternative spaces were established, that became hubs where artists, including Margolles, could exchange ideas and show their works. These spaces stood as markers of independence from state involvement, and interference, in the arts, and were instrumental in raising the profile of Mexican art on an international level: many artists whose work has been shown in these unofficial spaces have gone on to exhibit in galleries in other countries, some of them highly prestigious mainstream institutions. For example, Teresa Margolles exhibited

two pieces (*Sobre el dolor* and *Sin título [fluidos]*) at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial in 2006. The latter of these pieces has also been shown in Guadalajara, Mexico (*Sobre el dolor* was created to fill a designated space in Liverpool city centre and was produced specifically for this exhibition).

Independent workshops and gallery spaces allowed the artists exhibiting within them to operate independently from the strictures of government policy, and they were therefore able to show art works that explored controversial subject matter such as social and political issues. In terms of techniques of representation, it was possible to move away from traditional media such as painting, and explore the possibilities of expression using other, sometimes controversial raw materials. Medina identifies an explicit link between rapid globalisation during the 1990s combined with economic problems closer to home, and the shifts occurring in the Mexican art world during this time:

Este desplazamiento de orientación fue en gran parte resultado de las consecuencias de la globalización, pues si de hecho las presiones a favor de un cambio artístico a principios de los años noventa habían provenido en gran medida del diálogo con un mundo globalizado, la crisis política y social de 1994-1995 debida a la modernización autoritaria y la integración económica tuvo por efecto radicalizar la práctica artística. (Medina 2005: 353)

In other words, these spaces allowed a generation of artists who were unconcerned with the cultural politics of that state, a public forum for their works that would not attract interest from the more 'official' institutions, in which they could make art that dealt thematically with issues they considered more important and more relevant, such as violence and social inequality, as a way of reacting to these circumstances. In March 1993, a group of fourteen young artists set up an independent space, Temístocles 44, which at first was a meeting point for artists but later on became an exhibition space into which members of the public were allowed to enter and 'formar

parte del proceso reflexivo' (Macías 2006: 367) of the discussion and exchange of ideas about art. A magazine entitled *Alegría* was produced, which contained a variety of information including theoretical texts about art, and unofficial translations of admired works (Macías 2006: 367). An effect of these spaces was that they allowed local artists to engage in various dialogues with the traditionally dominant modes of artistic representation, sociopolitical events within Mexico, and the effects of globalisation. According to Medina:

Se trató de un proceso de autodidacticismo que [...] llevó a los participantes locales a movilizar creativamente las paradojas culturales y sociales que experimentaban en un sitio situado en línea de fuego de la expansión del capitalismo global. (Medina 2005: 353)

The Art & Idea gallery was founded in Mexico City in 1996. This space was established by a non-Mexican, the Austrian Robert Punkenhofner, with the aim of hosting exhibitions of international contemporary art in Mexico City (which would also include the work of artists from Mexico). According to Macías, Art & Idea progressed from its informal beginnings to become a more formal space with 'un fin claramente comercial' (Macías 2006: 367). Despite this shift in ethos, though, the gallery 'mantenía su carácter alternativo y propiciaba la discusión de ideas a través de foros, mesas redondas, etc.' (Macías 2006: 367). The importance of such a location for the development of artistic ideas and practices outside the mainstream is obvious. One of the foremost independent spaces in Mexico City, which was closely connected to the early artistic career of Teresa Margolles, was La Panadería, founded on the site of an old bakery shortly after the EZLN rebellion in Chiapas in 1994 by Yoshua Okón and Miguel Calderón. These two young Mexican artists had recently returned from travels in the United States and Mexico. Until its closure in 2002 (on which more later), this independent space was dedicated to displaying the work of artists, curators,

writers, and musicians, including Teresa Margolles. Yoshua Okón explains the role of La Panadería:

[It] was a platform that provided a context favourable to the development of an artistic underground. Through La Panadería, it was possible to articulate positions critical of hegemonic practices of the time. This space was an activity linked to the quotidian, produced by politically engaged beings and absolutely dependant upon a socially dynamic context. Our agenda was not to have one, or better yet to simply allow the dynamic of the space to take place in organic and unexpected ways. (Poggianti 2007: 69)

La Panadería was distinguished by the 'brutalidad visual, libidinal y estilística de sus actividades' (Debroise 2006: 430). In this space, artists were free to explore ideas and take risks that would not have been possible elsewhere. It was during this period, in this environment of growing economic and sociopolitical uncertainty in Mexico, that SEMEFO formed. The group's early pieces were characterised by a direct, aggressive confrontational style, and a strongly physical, visceral dimension to the approach of their subject matter and the materials they used to create their installations. The piece *Dermis* was shown there in 1996, after having been rejected by Curare, another independent gallery space in Mexico City. The group, who had started out as a heavy metal band, produced a series of sculptures consisting of a carousel with dead horses placed in the positions of carousel ponies, and a collection of metal structures inside which were encased desiccated horse foetuses, entitled *Lavatio Corporis*, which was exhibited at the Museo Carrillo Gil in 1994. Coco Fusco's account of her reactions as a viewer of this installation (see Chapter Four) provides a compelling description of the multi-sensory experience of being confronted by this art work, by token of which it is not difficult to imagine why there was a gulf, at least at first, between the young generation of artists and the established institutions. The experimental approach to art that was central to the philosophy of La Panadería, continued until its closure in 2002. For this occasion, Teresa Margolles carried out a performance for which she poured

into the exhibition space a mixture of cement, and one hundred litres of water that had been used to wash corpses in the morgue (Macías 2006: 369). Water from the morgue is a raw material that features in many of the art works Margolles has produced during her solo artistic career. The effect of pouring the cement was that the spectators inside the gallery were forced out onto the street, in a sense becoming participants in the performance by being physically implicated, a tactic employed by Margolles in order to actively involve the viewer in experiencing the art work and remove any possibility for distanced, passive contemplation. This technique, like the controversial ideas explored by Margolles and other artists during the 1990s, stands as a way of creating and experiencing art that is separate from, even opposed to the state-financed favouring of non-confrontational artworks and their display in government-funded institutions. Spaces like La Panadería allowed artists to move away from traditional forms of artistic expression such as painting and drawing, both of which are notably absent from Margolles' repertoire.

The international dimension to Mexican art production during the 1990s did not come just from an injection of visiting artists; Mexican artists also travelled abroad. In this decade, the profile of Mexican art on the international stage (and in the international market) skyrocketed, and close attention was given to Mexican art and artists in the art press in respected publications such as *Flash Art*, which ran a special feature on Mexico in 2002. A notable number of artists from Mexico are represented by galleries outside the country (Margolles is represented by the Zürich-based Galerie Peter Kilchmann). Large exhibitions of Mexican art have been shown abroad, one of the most notable of these being 'Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values', which held residence at the P.S.1 in New York from June until September 2002, then travelled across the Atlantic to the Berlin Kunst-Werke where it

stayed from September 2002 until January 2003. Featured at this exhibition was Margolles' mist installation *Vaporización*. Germany has been the location for several important exhibitions of works by Margolles, the largest of which to date has been 'Muerte sin fin', held from April to August 2004 at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. This expansion, and the success of Mexican artists in high-profile international exhibitions, signalled a 'radical change in the institutional receptivity to experimental art' (Gallo 2004: 10). As Gallo points out, this has had the positive effects of challenging the 'veiled form of censorship [that] was the flipside of the PRI's historical support for the arts' (Gallo 2004: 11) and raising awareness of controversial political issues, which undoubtedly leads to a greater openness of debate. Also, Mexican artists now have greater access to, and visibility in the international art market. Yoshua Okón examines the consequences and implications of the insertion of Mexican artists and their work onto the global platform. He points out that, despite the dangers of artists' work becoming subsumed by big, powerful institutions as soon as it appears on the market:

One thing La Panadería did was demonstrate that resistance to the system did not necessarily entail clashing with the market, on the contrary, one must use the market to attain one's goals [...] There are always alternatives and with so many art fairs and institutions, there is always space for new proposals. (Poggianti 2007: 69)

Clearly, international activity can provide invaluable opportunities for young artists to achieve recognition and become involved in new projects. But, as Okón observes, this can also create problems:

There was a short period, more or less between 2000 and 2003, in which a series of Mexican artists started to receive a lot of attention from foreign as well as local institutions and curators. This generated a lot of anxiety in a community used to working in the margins. What was once a scene of total co-operation, became a very competitive one. (Poggianti 2007: 69)

Teresa Margolles has certainly received a lot of attention both inside and outside Mexico. Indeed, Medina considers her a 'parte del canón local en formación' (Medina 2005: 352). She has been acclaimed in Mexico throughout the length of her artistic career, exhibited her work all over the world, and received awards and grants that have enabled her to do this. She, and indeed all the artists who emerged in the 1990s and broke with previous tradition by rejecting Neomexicanism, work in many different media and experiment with many forms of representation. Their drive to break with the conservative aesthetics of past generations of artists saw them look to outside Mexico for inspiration. Consequently, their artistic language may be understood across national boundaries and they cannot be easily pigeonholed as a 'movement' according to style, or the thematic content of their work, unlike their predecessors. This stylistic shift has attracted criticism from some camps, however. For example, López Cuenca reports that Abraham Cruzvillegas derided this generation of artists for not being 'Mexican' enough:

[...] por ser creadores que suscriben un vocabulario "contaminado" e internacionalizado que, dejando de lado el tema recurrente de la identidad mexicana, se pone como referencia al vecino del Norte, metronomía del mundo artístico en su conjunto. (López Cuenca 2005: 15)

The opinion displayed here, that by not showing obviously 'Mexican' characteristics these artists are essentially bowing to the hegemony of the United States, is a reduction of contemporary Mexican culture to the stereotypical symbols used by the Neomexicanists and the Muralists, the icons of the national myth promoted by artistic movements with the support of the government. A feature of conceptual art is that it uses visual codes that can be easily understood outside the context of their production. Indeed, as Brooksbank Jones asserts, 'conceptual art is global art *par excellence*,

circulating freely by virtue of its instant accessibility and political blandness' (Brooksbank Jones 2007a: 18). This apoliticism and inoffensiveness are, clearly, attractive in commercial terms. However, Margolles' work, though neo-conceptual in style, is not bland or easily decipherable. Her subject matter makes uncomfortable contemplation, yet her work attracts attention worldwide.

Artists working in Mexico the 1990s sought deliberately to subvert previous representational norms and use art to deal with the context they were working within: the economic, social, and political events of the moment they occupied in Mexican cultural history. In order to do this, the artistic language of the past was abandoned, and as Debroise and Medina state, there was a strong intention to

marcar la mayor distancia posible frente al caudillismo cultural local, y [emplear] referencias de una historia del arte internacional para comprender la creación del momento. (Debroise and Medina 2006: 19)

This generation of artists explored and employed an internationally accessible artistic language to talk about Mexican themes. Mariana David has argued that 'the choice of maintaining a national identity or opening up to international influence is a type of schizophrenia that is most evident in the arts' (David 2005: 102). Artists working in Mexico have, one could argue, been presented with such a decision: conform to the stereotype, or adopt another language. The generation to which Margolles belongs, opted for the latter, using these techniques of representation to tackle local realities. There is, however, a certain ironic reverse logic here, in that these artists who wished to reject stereotypically 'Mexican' styles of representation to challenge reductionist interpretations of art from outside the 'centre', may be seen to be conforming to a model they purport to reject. This, though, further underlines the problem with using a binaristic language to talk about art. By this token it seems impossible to break away

from the strictures of having to either conform to, or reject an artistic language. While it may be appealing for some to judge Margolles on her internationally accessible language and conclude that this damages the validity of her artistic project, this view fails to recognise that her work deals with a specifically Mexican context.

Furthermore, to adopt such a view would be to perpetuate the unhelpful categorisation of art as *either* one thing *or* another. Margolles operates within several converging spheres, so that multiple layers of reading of her work are possible, but the most fundamental truth is that her artistic project is inspired by events in her own country, rather than any simple wish to merely ape the language of international conceptual art. She has, arguably, skillfully employed this language to her own advantage, which has made it very difficult to apply simplistic categories.

The failure of Salinas' promises of the curative powers of NAFTA to remedy Mexico's economic problems, the rise in crime, and the persistence of poverty and social inequality became central thematic concerns for Mexican artists working during the 1990s, whose aim is to document these daily realities and the effects they have upon the people experiencing them. This is strongly evident in the work of many artists such as Francis Alÿs, and Minerva Cuevas. Cuevas, who founded the 'Mejor Vida Corporation' in 1997 (Gallo 2004: 101), marries art with social activism by carrying out activities such as distributing free metro tickets to the city's poor. Her work, as Gallo notes, alludes subtly to 'the constant threat of violence that hangs over Mexico City [by distributing] pepper spray and caffeine pills so residents can protect themselves from thugs with guns' (Gallo 2004: 101). Teresa Margolles also addresses the reality of violence in Mexico City, but from a different and far more confrontational perspective, by showing its destructive effects on the body, and the result: death.

Teresa Margolles' art works contain no hint of the magical, or the extraordinary, nor any interest in promoting a state-sanctioned national myth. So, does this mean that she is simply apeing styles of representation that did not originate in Mexico? Margolles' stylistic approach reflects a combination of her aesthetic project, and her thematic concerns of commenting on Mexico's troubled process of modernisation. She has done this within the climate of 'alternative' artistic production in Mexico during the 1990s and beyond, and the increasing visibility of Mexican artists on the global stage (both by their travelling to other countries, and also by the exchange of ideas with foreign artists who had travelled to Mexico). This occurred, as Debroise and Medina point out, independently, 'sin la precondition otrora inevitable de una visibilidad local y la bendición de las autoridades culturales del país' (Debroise and Medina 2006: 18). This allowed young Mexican artists to pursue new avenues of interest separate from the agenda of cultural policymakers. The assumption that Margolles is simply reproducing the artistic language of cultural hegemony, embodies a failure to recognise the possibility that there can be, as López Cuenca puts it, 'zones of convergence, tension and expansion among the individual paths taken by artists, establishing networks that do not neutralize the signs of difference' (López Cuenca 1995: 228), and also demonstrates ignorance of the artistic context within which Margolles has pursued her career. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Margolles has often employed (especially during the more recent years of her career) subtle techniques of representation in order to erase the distance between the viewer and the work of art. Her art works are undeniably, but not 'typically' Mexican in that they deal with realities that affect Mexico, and, certainly, she would not have had access to certain of the raw materials used in their production in other countries, yet her modes of representation do not conform to idealised national stereotypes. Medina locates

SEMEFO and Margolles within the broad sweep of events that occurred in the Mexican art world during the 1990s, and the relationship of the new generation of artists with the global art market, a “nuevo arte” [que] en México podía ser, al mismo tiempo, localmente marginal y globalmente integrado’ (Medina 2005: 354). Artists working in the 1990s who sought to subvert the previous artistic norms typefied by the Neomexicanists during the 1980s, established themselves outside the mainstream in independent work and exhibition spaces where they were free to develop their new aesthetic. This aesthetic would comment upon controversial sociopolitical themes, in the case of SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles, the crime, violence, and social inequality that pose some of the most serious problems currently facing Mexico. Margolles, in this way, produced works that were not simply shocking in the way they assaulted the viewer’s sensibilities and forced contemplation of the difficult realities of inevitable death and decay, but also spoke of the turbulent sociohistorical circumstances within which they were produced. As Medina observes:

Margolles hizo acciones rituales que iban más allá del simple desafío al decoro social, para mostrar que la acumulación de cadáveres en los laboratorios forenses era el resultado directo de la violencia política y social. (Medina 2005: 348)

As discussed in Chapter Two, the depiction and representation in art of themes around death and the dead body has a long and well-documented history, which is engrained in many cultures across the world. In this way, a fascination with death may be seen as not a specifically culturally-related concern (although clearly, modes of representation and conceptual approaches to death vary across cultures and are tied in to widely varying religious belief systems), but a human concern. Margolles’ artwork deals with broad themes that affect all of humanity: the inevitability of death and physical decay. Within this broad theme lies a more specific focus that relates to the

sociohistorical context within which Margolles, and other artists of her generation, began to work during the turbulent decade of the 1990s. As Vania Macías states:

Ante la crisis económica, el aumento de pobreza y desigualdad social, el clima de desesperanza y pesimismo inundaba al país, y estos jóvenes creadores empezaron a trabajar con otras preocupaciones sociales como la inseguridad, la corrupción, y la violencia urbana, generando un nuevo discurso estético, producto del análisis de los fenómenos característicos de la modernización en un país como México, en donde ésta representa más que un progreso, un deterioro social. (Macías 2006: 370)

Margolles' take on this is to present the viewer with a vision of death in Mexico that defies the stereotypically cheerful perspective presented by the images of dancing, grinning skeletons which seem to have been appropriated into a symbolic system that promotes a 'special relationship' between the Mexican imaginary and death. Medina asserts that:

While superannuated official national culture continues to profit from the myth that Mexicans laugh at death, Margolles' work rubs our noses in the stark, shady reality of what it means to die in Mexico – a country where widespread misery and violence go hand in hand with the inefficiency of the overburdened forensic, medical and legal systems. (Medina 2002: 44)

In this way, Margolles uses art as a means to expose this reality and comment upon its implications for the inhabitants of her native country.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

The absent body?

The dead body, at first glance, appears to be absent from the majority of Margolles' art works, as only a small proportion of works directly confront the viewer with corpses, or include parts of dead bodies. The most notable examples are *Lengua* (2000), and *Autorretratos en la morgue* (1998), both of which have received detailed attention in Chapter Four. Only one work, *Grumos sobre la piel* (2001), a short film which was shot in a back street in Barcelona, features a living body: a Moroccan drug dealer whom the artist encountered during her exploration of the city, and onto whose torso the artist's rubber-gloved hand smears human fat collected from the morgue in Mexico City where she is based. This male body, a racial and social Other (the man is an immigrant who participates in criminal activity), is fetishised by the artist's gloved hand, the gaze of the camera whose lens is focused closely on a specific area of the body, and by extension the gaze of the viewer who watches the film in an art gallery or at home on DVD in a different time and place, physically remote from the scene and the action yet intimately involved through the act of looking.

Upon closer examination of other works, however, the body is revealed. It is not absent so much as disappeared, missing; it is gone from view and leaves behind various material traces that testify to its previous visibility. The body, although not directly visible in many cases, is still present, connected to the viewer by means of these traces, which can be bodily residues such as fat or blood, or other materials with which the corpse has come into contact, such as water used to wash the body, thread which has pierced the skin of the torso as it has sealed the cavity created by the autopsy examination, or hospital sheets which shroud cadavers as they await autopsy.

Margolles draws the spectator into a complex experiencing of her art works by playing on senses other than the visual. For instance, the viewer experiences *Vaporización* by walking through a room filled with mist. This vapourised water initially seems innocuous, but this pleasant first impression becomes complicated following the realisation after reading a plaque on the wall that explains the origin of this water: it has been used to wash corpses in a morgue, then sterilised and vapourised. To walk around this mist-filled room is not simply to look at the water droplets but to involve one's own body directly through contact with and absorption into the skin, and most disturbingly, inhalation into the lungs, the dark interior of the body which we wish to protect. Margolles' tactic of implication of the spectator into the artwork in this way effectively connects the dead and the living bodies directly, although the corpse is not visible. In my view, this bridging of geographical space and the resulting transgression of the boundaries between the living and the dead, and the exterior and interior of the body, serves to make it impossible for the viewer to maintain a safe distance of passive contemplation which is far easier when simply looking at an artwork, especially one that may be shocking. The mingling sensations of fascination with disgust that surge from the awareness of the raw materials used by Margolles, feelings made physical by the multi-sensorial way in which they are experienced, make it impossible for the viewer to suppress the intensity of these reactions.

Individual and social bodies

Death happens to all of humanity. The materiality of the body and the inevitability of its eventual demise and decay, are inescapable. The fact of death defies control, and ultimately reduces all efforts at improvement of the body and resistance of the effects of the ageing process, to the emptiness of the post mortem loss of individual consciousness. Margolles presents a stark reminder of this in all of her art works, which she achieves by inviting the viewer into the contemplation of the interconnectedness of life and death, sometimes by confrontational and unsettling means. It has been argued that Margolles' work, more specifically the means by which the artist obtains the raw materials she uses, 'demonstrates [...] a dark, gruesome flipside' (Gallo 2004: 126) to the Mexican cultural attitude towards death, an exoticised notion of cultural difference best exemplified in the minds of non-Mexicans by the colourful Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations. Certainly, Margolles presents a view of death that is violently at odds with this stereotypical image of jolly folk celebrations and the well-known *Calaveras* of the prolific nineteenth-century engraver José Guadalupe Posada. Nor is this the aestheticised death presented by some other visual representations, such as the well-known *Ophelia* (1851-52) as painted by John Everett Millais. This corpse proposes a view of beautified death: the woman has the pallid beauty and frail, sickly femininity celebrated during the Victorian era, and although she is dead, physical evidence for the cause of death is absent from the scene. This is not a death that offends the sensibilities of the viewer – quite the opposite. Margolles' artwork stands in contrast to this. She shows the brutal effects of violent death upon the corpse: the blood, the wounds, and the aftermath of the post mortem intrusion of the autopsy examination

written in scars on the skin. Put more concisely, she presents not a fantasy of death but its reality.

Margolles' works use raw materials that come from, or have come into contact with, cadavers collected by the SeMeFo (Servicio Médico Forense), a service in Mexico City that collects unclaimed corpses and delivers them to the morgue. These bodies, many of which remain unidentified, belong to marginalised individuals from lower social strata, and often, even when identified, cannot be buried properly because their next of kin lack the economic means to do so. Many have often been subjected to violent death, and the vast majority of the bodies used by Margolles are male.¹ This is not so much a reversal of the tradition of using female bodies (especially female nudes) in art, as a reflection of the demographic of violent crime victims in Mexico City. For example, the tongue used by Margolles for *Lengua* (2000), came from a young man, a tattooed, heroin-addicted punk who had died in a street fight. The man, as a member of an economically disadvantaged stratum of society and a member of a subculture, is doubly marginalised. His family could not afford to bury him, so the artist offered to pay for the burial (she already had a coffin in her possession that had come from the morgue where she works) in return for the right to display his pierced tongue at art exhibitions. This exchange exemplifies one of the most uncomfortable facets of Margolles' work, in that her artistic project operates within a legal and ethical grey area. Although she is a qualified professional with legitimate access to the space of the morgue, which is usually restricted from public view, her use of bodies in this way for her art works is certainly problematic, and arguably exploitative. Regarding the example given above, for instance, it could be argued that

¹ It is unknown what the proportion of male to female corpses in this morgue is, as accurate crime statistics are lacking.

the artist took advantage of the family's poverty to her own ends. The trading of money for a human body part conjures up images of the ghoulish realities of illegal organ theft and trafficking, and of voluntary organ donation from live donors in exchange for money, which currently occurs in some poverty-stricken parts of the world (e.g. India), and high-profile scandals surrounding the retention of human organs without the consent of relatives (in the UK this occurred most famously in the cases of the Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool, and the Bristol Royal Infirmary), whose portrayal in the British news media caused a frenzy of emotional outrage.

This obvious and understandable controversy surrounding Margolles' choice of materials and the means by which she obtains them, draw attention to her work and focus it on the bodies she uses. However questionable her ethics, though, the message transmitted is a strong one. By exposing these bodies, the artist highlights the effects of violence upon not just individual bodies, but the whole of society. By showing them at exhibitions across the world, she demonstrates the universality of death, and connects the bodies of the dead with the living bodies of her audience. Her works embody a tension between the social reality with which she confronts the viewer, and her aestheticisation of death and the corpse.

Margolles confronts the viewer with the uncomfortable reality of violent death, by showing the results upon bodies. This is used to even more powerful effect in the works in which the bodies themselves are not directly visible, their apparent absence mirroring the physical disappearance of the individuals from the social world. This could also be interpreted as a commentary on the invisibility of the poor. In this way, Margolles raises awareness of social injustice and its effects upon individuals and society.

It is highly probable that Margolles would not be able to use body parts in this way outside Mexico. The laxity of institutions regarding the treatment of human remains has been observed (Medina, 2001; Gallo, 2004). This is not a symptom of the fabled Mexican cultural attitude towards death, however. It is arguably a reflection of one of the most significant social problems presently facing Mexico, and the attitude of institutions towards it. The 1990s saw a huge increase in the trade in narcotics, a business that is associated with many deaths. This brought with it a significant rise in crime rates. These problems have been compounded by institutionalised corruption at all levels of law enforcement, judicial and governmental bodies, and a tendency for many people in positions of power and influence to turn a blind eye or not take matters sufficiently seriously, which results in many crimes remaining unsolved (most famously, the hundreds of disappearances and brutal murders of young women in the northern Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez). The result of this, which is not usually visible, is the mounting number of corpses. Many of the bodies used by Margolles died violently, some as a result of the trade in drugs. She comments directly upon this in *Tarjetas para cortar cocaína* (1998), a series of laminated cards which were designed to directly confront recreational drug users with the dirty, uncomfortable side of their appetite for cocaine as they cut lines of the drug to consume at parties. In this example, Margolles' aesthetics of death and the corpse are employed to transmit a clear social message and provoke meditation on the themes of death and violence, their effects upon the individual body and their consequences for wider society. Despite the artist's arguably selfish motives in the production of her work, her works effectively convey her feelings on Mexico's social problems and her appeal for these injustices to be rectified; attention is drawn to the increase in violent crime by showing the broken bodies of those affected by it. She establishes a direct link

between violent crime and violent death. The viewer is thus confronted with a reality that is uncomfortable on two levels, because it not only forces contemplation of individual mortality, but also highlights the persistence of social inequality, uneven distribution of wealth and the dramatic increase in the narcotics trade in Mexico from the 1990s onwards. These socioeconomic issues testify to the failure of the promised regeneration of Mexico following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the 1st of January 1994.

There is a strong element of ritual in some of Margolles' artwork. This is particularly present in works such as *Entierro*, *El agua en la ciudad*, and *Bañando al bebé*. These works show rituals of washing and burial carried out on the body after death.

Traditionally, religious practices are deeply infused with ritual. To use examples from Roman Catholicism: Holy Communion; prayer; and processions through the streets on saints' days and during Holy Week. Margolles comes from a deeply Catholic country, but her work is not spiritually motivated. The artist proposes instead a secular life-after-death, which she calls 'la vida del cadáver' ('the life of the corpse'). Stylistically, Margolles' work has undergone a perceptible shift, from more directly confrontational and overtly disturbing pieces during the earlier years of her career as a member of the SEMEFO collective, such as *Lavatio corporis* (1994) and *Tatuajes* (1996), to a more minimalist approach in recent years, exemplified by works such as *Sin título (fluidos)* (2006), and *Vaporización*. This shift is not universal, however, as Margolles has produced some of her visually more arresting works as a solo artist, two of the most obvious examples being *Lengua* and the *Autorretratos en la morgue* photographs.

SEMEFO's early performances, that explored the aesthetic and the physical sides of death and decay, as Medina points out, took on a particular relevance to events

occurring in wider society. They showed through their work that there is a direct link between violence and death, i.e., the more people are killed violently, the more corpses will populate the morgues. By centralising the brutality of the effects of this violence upon the body, especially during their earlier works, SEMEFO confronted the audience with the ultimate in abjection in the form of the dead body. But, differently from many traditional representations of death in art, where the corpse is highly aestheticised and devoid of any potentially disturbing markers of violence such as wounds or scars, thereby allowing the possibility that the viewer would be able to contemplate the art work passively, SEMEFO's art works directly implicated the viewer so that the work was regarded not just from the visual plane, but through other senses such as hearing and smell. This was intended to provoke a strong reaction and confuse the spectator's fascination with feelings of disgust and rejection so that passive contemplation from a safe distance was impossible. The interest of the group in the writings of Georges Bataille was put to practical use in their explorations of their necrophiliac artistic project. Later, as a solo artist, Teresa Margolles employed more subtle means, by which the audience is invited to think about, as well as reacting to the artwork. For example, *Sin título (fluidos)* (2006) involves the viewer's body on three sensual planes: the visual - the act of looking; the aural – noticing the sound of the water droplets as they hit the steel hotplate; and the olfactory – the faint smell of burning or singeing that emanates from the metal surface into the gallery space. Works such as this, realised during the more recent period of Margolles' artistic career, go further than the physical, however: a plaque on the wall of the gallery explains the history of the water, telling of its previous use in the ritual of washing corpses in the morgue as part of the autopsy examination.

The global appeal of conceptual art, and the increased attention given to Mexican art outside Mexico since the 1990s has, arguably, aided Margolles' insertion into the international art world. However, there is more to her work than meets the eye. The minimal visual codes and seemingly inert materials (air, metal, water) she employs are underlain by something that is far less easy to digest. The artist's aesthetic of death confronts the viewer with the commonality of human experience vis à vis the inevitability of death and decay, whereas her discussion of Mexico's failed modernisation and social problems highlights a reality experienced by millions in her native country. The interplay between a globally accessible visual language, the artist's comments on specifically Mexican circumstances and her refusal of cultural stereotypes, locate her at an intersection between the international and the local. These aspects of her work do not always coexist harmoniously within her art works, but this does not detract from their strength as statements.

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