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En piel ajena: The work of Teresa Margolles

R. Scott Bray
University of Sydney

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Abstract

Teresa Margolles is a founding member of SEMEFO, Servicio Médico Forense (Forensic Medical Service), an artist's collective in Mexico City that created artworks using forensic materials between 1990 and 1999. Since the late 1990s Margolles has created her own solo encounters around death and the mortuary, extending SEMEFO's interest in the biographies of the dead in relation to social, political and economic practices. This article traverses Margolles' distinctive forensic and aesthetic history to arrive at her testimonials to the dead women of Ciudad Juárez on the US/Mexico Border. Known as 'The City of the Dead Girls', Ciudad Juárez has more than a decade-long history thick with the unsolved murders and disappearances of women in this borderland; a situation that has received increasing international attention. As deputies to the dead, Margolles' artworks about the dead women of Juárez resonate with ethical tensions present in other work. Yet her practice offers a curiously forensic compassion. This article explores those practices to consider the relationship between mourning, the forensics of death and posthumous biography lived in the shadow of law. To begin, the article introduces two texts, one literary, the other cinematic, to consider the concept that anchors Margolles' work and the concerns of this article: the life of the corpse. Thereafter, in moving to discuss specific artworks, the article considers the funereality of her aesthetics and the reconstitution of crime, evidence and violence in Mexico that emerges in the wake of Margolles' labour. Ultimately, the article is interested in these moments which remind us of death; a passage marked on and by the body, even in its absence.

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Rebecca Scott Bray¹

Introduction

Darl from William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*:

Some time towards dawn the rain ceases. But it is not yet day when Cash drives the last nail and stands stiffly up and looks down at the finished coffin, the others watching him. In the lantern-light his face is calm, musing; slowly he strokes his hands on his raincoated thighs in a gesture deliberate, final and composed. Then the four of them — Cash and Pa and Vernon and Peabody — raise the coffin to their shoulders and turn toward the house. It is light, yet they move slowly; empty, yet they carry it carefully; lifeless, yet they move with hushed precautionary words to one another, speaking of it as though, complete, it now slumbered lightly alive, waiting to come awake (Faulkner 1935: 73).

Teresa Margolles is a founding member of SEMEFO, Servicio Médico Forense (Forensic Medical Service), an artist's collective in Mexico City that created artworks using forensic materials between 1990 and 1999. Since the late 1990s Margolles has created her own solo encounters around death and the mortuary, extending SEMEFO's interest in the biographies of the dead in relation to social, political and economic practices. This article traverses Margolles' distinctive forensic and aesthetic history to arrive at her testimonials to the dead women of Ciudad Juárez on the US/Mexico Border. Known as 'The City of the Dead Girls', Ciudad Juárez has more than a decade-long history thick

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with the unsolved murders and disappearances of women in this borderland; a situation that has received increasing international attention.² As deputies to the dead, Margolles' artworks about the dead women of Juárez resonate with ethical tensions present in other work. Yet her practice offers a curiously forensic compassion. This article explores those practices to consider the relationship between mourning, the forensics of death and posthumous biography lived in the shadow of law. To begin, the article introduces two texts, one literary, the other cinematic, to consider the concept that anchors Margolles' work and the concerns of this article: the life of the corpse. Thereafter, in moving to discuss specific artworks, the article considers the funereality of her aesthetics and the reconstitution of crime, evidence and violence in Mexico that emerges in the wake of Margolles' labour. Ultimately, the article is interested in these moments which remind us of death; a passage marked on and by the body, even in its absence.

Mientras Agonizo: mortuary scenes

Mientras Agonizo is the Spanish title translation of William Faulkner's 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying*. The Mexican artist Teresa Margolles has referred to Faulkner's novel when speaking of her work.³ Faulkner's novel tells the story of a family who build a coffin to transport and then bury their dead mother, Addie Bundren. The story revolves around the death of Addie and thereafter the journey of the family and her dead body across forty miles from the Bundren's home to the town of Jefferson; a journey taking ten days to fulfil the will of Addie Bundren that she be buried there. The story is told using soliloquies and monologues of different characters, including Darl, Jewel, Vardaman, Anse and others, and is a requiem text of multiple voices moving around the fading figure of a dead mother. It is a journey with and about a dead body, death, the denial of and identification with it and, at its heart, the book concerns 'the double paradox of a dying life and a living death' as the family, with Addie in the coffin, travel the roads and river to town (Bleikasten 1990: 164).

Just as in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2006), Tommy Lee Jones' film about friendship and promise *post-mortem*, the dead

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body in *As I Lay Dying* does not promptly disappear; burial is delayed and comes only at the end of long and difficult travel. In both texts, the corpse is largely sheathed, covered by blankets or placed in a coffin, but the texts hint at making room for a space for death and the dead in life, however compact or troubling this space may be. This desire is represented by, for example, in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Tommy Lee Jones' character, Pete Perkins', frenzied attempts to prevent late night ants from feeding off of the decomposing corpse of his friend Melquiades, as he transports him across the border from the US into Mexico to lay his body to rest. And in Faulkner's novel, Darl's incongruous switches between the 'was' and 'is' status of the wagon and its lumber that carries his dead mother's corpse, points to his uncertainty over the being of Addie Bundren, echoing what Bleikasten has termed the movement of the dead becoming a 'figure of absence by the disfiguration of presence', echoed also when other characters speak of the dead Addie Bundren in the present tense (1990: 169). To her they attribute some sort of 'parallel life' in Faulkner's prolonged mortuary scene; here, death and the dead body may be cumbersome, but nonetheless, Vardaman Bundren bores holes in his mother's coffin so that she can breathe (Bleikasten 1990: 169).

These texts help us to think about the 'life' of death, or more specifically, the 'life' of the corpse, which lies, self-declared, at the heart of Teresa Margolles' aesthetic practice. Her work engages us in funereal contemplation of this 'is' of a 'was' that Darl struggles with in Faulkner's novel as he lies in the early light before dawn, listening to the last nail being driven into his mother's coffin. This notion of the 'life of the corpse' refers to the transitional biography of the dead body. Margolles attaches this notion of biography to the dead to illustrate that experiences after death are connected to pre-mortem existences. With death, the body continues into another phase that is contingent upon the social, political and economic context of life pre-death (see Görner and Kittleman 2004: 41). Here, forensic 'facts' of death, such as cause and circumstance of injury and death, the age of the deceased et cetera, which are so important in legal processes including registration of deaths and coronial findings, become additional notes in ongoing memoirs.

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These particular adjuncts are part of a larger framing of the life of the death of those who arrive at the mortuary as victims of violence, people who are unknown or unclaimed. The aim of this biographical writing is to obliterate the easy maxim '*death is the great equaliser*'.

Importantly, there exists confusion in discussions of Margolles' work; they concern questions as to whether her art deals with death or the dead, life, law or forensic service? This funereal dream is a dramaturgy of meaning over the corpse's place, its role and function in culture. Invariably, I would argue, these matters melt together and in any account, the corpse threatens life, in classic Kristevian terms, as abject (1982). Correspondingly, the corpse also threatens law because the textuality and visuality of death and the dead are troubling, as demonstrated by a number of writers. The texts and images of law — those portraits of the dead generated at crime scenes, in mortuaries and courtrooms — can be used as props to sketch the deceased into problematic scenes of their own demise or can be the very device of this demise. Thinking about the relationship between the representation of the dead body and the law therefore has important implications. As we have seen through the work of Philadelphoff-Puren and Rush, Meure, Young and Tyson amongst others, the stories that law tells about the dead carry weight, meaning and, importantly, life, in the texts of the law.⁴ To cite Young, the law creates imagined antiportraits of dead men (2005: 83), to remember Meure's lament for Don Gillies, the law projects both idealised figures *and* disorders onto the dead (1997), and to draw from Philadelphoff-Puren and Rush, the material truth of injury is insufficient before the law, 'wounds do not speak until and unless they have the voice and utterance of another' and, ultimately, the disaster is that '*the dead do not speak*' (2003: 197, 210 fn, emphasis added).

Yet, there are problems before entering the scene of legal judgment on death and these other, more concealed sites and mortuary scenes, no less forensic than the trial, are where Margolles' work enacts its force. Her practice calls into question the function, or questions the lack, of legal judgment of and criminal justice processes around events of violence in Mexico, as much as it speaks to the insufficiencies around key cultural issues such as the systematic registration of deaths and

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burial rights. I am taking a step back towards the writing and imaging of the dead body in the mortuary to uncover the detour Margolles makes *by way* of the law. As her images and actions are often difficult to encounter, these are scenes of immense conflict and ethical tension around looking at the dead and thinking of the dead in relation to social, political and economic practices, and the worth of doing so. The next section more fully uncovers these specific encounters, and the escalation of this tension as Margolles develops her mortuary oeuvre alone.

SEMEFO and Teresa Margolles: 'How long can a body live?'⁵

In 1990 Teresa Margolles founded the artists' collective SEMEFO, the acronym for the Servicio Médico Forense or Forensic Medical Service. SEMEFO is also the acronym for the Mexican coroner's office, which manages the dead — the agency that transfers unknown and unclaimed bodies throughout the country. Margolles founded SEMEFO after gaining her art qualifications and a diploma of forensic medicine, at the same time that she began working in the mortuary in Mexico City as a forensic technician.⁶ Other core members of SEMEFO included Arturo Angulo or 'Doctor Arturo' and Carlos López, and the group had a fluctuating membership of other artists over the decade they were together.⁷ Some of these artists were also stationed in other state services in Mexico City, such as emergency medical services, laboratories and research centres (Zamudio Taylor 2002: 53). As a collective in the early 1990s, SEMEFO mainly staged actions partly inspired by the Viennese Actionists and the Catalanian theatre group 'La Fura dels Baus', performing in underground spaces, strongly echoing the wounding and bloodiness of Aktionismus.⁸

Moving from these underground performances to object-based art practice in the mid 1990s, SEMEFO's work drew increasingly on forensic medical materials to comment on social violence and anonymity. In so doing, they withdrew from straight depictions of corpses, instead recalling the now absent body via smell and the fundamental *matter* of death decomposed — body fluids and organic material wrapped closely

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in their relationship to the abandoned poor and marginalised of the state and economic structure in Mexico. Bodies of the unidentified and unclaimed dead are sent to institutions for medical experiments and are then cremated. In many cases, bodies remain unidentified because people cannot afford basic burial expenses and so do not come forward to claim the dead. If families do claim the dead but cannot afford burial expenses, the bodies can be buried in 'common' graves with many other bodies. And at the same time that they recontextualised the problematics of these deaths via aesthetics, SEMEFO positioned this rethinking of death firmly within art history. For example, in their 1996 work *Dermis / Derm*, SEMEFO exhibited linen sheets from the city hospital that had been used to wrap corpses (see Figure 1). Imprinted with the hospital logo and the blood and fluid of murder victims, these sheets recalled Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* from his Blue Period (1960-1961, see Medina 2001). For his *Anthropométries*, Klein staged performances with nude female models who, covered in his signature ultramarine blue paint, named International Klein Blue (IKB), imprinted themselves on white floor and wall papers in strictly pre-determined poses (Schimmel 1998: 33).

The quotation of this work by SEMEFO's *Dermis 1996* nevertheless operates on some key distinctions: the colour is not brilliant infinite blue but body blood red that fades to brown, as blood does with age; the canvas is linen used by emergency services and morgues in efforts of state clean up and catastrophe. The aesthetic image of staged frivolity and playfulness associated with Klein's work now convenes at the scene of an unrehearsed crisis, an unhappy event: unexpected or violent death. Whilst the figures are anatomically orderly, as they are in Klein's pieces, this clarity of form is nonetheless detached from any clear comprehension of the event; it is not a document of a theatrical aesthetic performance, but a piece of death's aftermath, and the damage has well and truly been *done*. Indeed the *dermis* is that layer of skin beneath the epidermis, the sensitive layer that houses the tangle of blood vessels and nerves; it is that part of the body just beneath the surface, which is so painful to expose.

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Figure 1

Teresa Margolles

SEMEFO

Dermis / Derm, 1996 (2 images)

Impressions of corpses' fluids in the sheets of public hospitals.

Mexico City, Mexico. September 1996

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

SEMEFO's other work includes *Fluidos / Fluids* 1996, a fish tank filled with 240 litres of the water used to wash corpses down in the mortuary, thus also containing their blood and fat residue, and in 1997, *Mineralización Estéril / Sterile Mineralisation* consisting of a glass and metal container holding the cremated remains of unidentified, unclaimed corpses of murder victims, transported to the morgue and used for medical experiments before being cremated and, literally, 'thrown in the garbage' (Navarrete 2000: 30). This piece comments on

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Figure 2

Teresa Margolles

SEMEFO

Estudio de la ropa de cadáver / Study of a corpse's clothes, 1997

Study of the 'post death' remnants (smells and blood spots) of the clothes which were worn by these people the moment they were murdered.

Mexico City, Mexico. October 1997

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

anthropological practices of exhibiting human remains, those moments of past violence that reverberate in the present in museums all around the world, just as much as it presents in enclosed sterility, the remains of people lost from society, tragically *left* (see Jauregui 2004: 180). SEMEFO were thoroughly engaged in the forensic remains of death, installing *Sofá tapizado con vísceras / sofa upholstered with viscera*, where a furnisher upholstered entrails prepared by SEMEFO members. In 1997, the group exhibited *Estudio de la ropa del cadáver / Study of a corpse's clothes 1997*, a collection of clothes worn by people the moment they were murdered, including shirts of children killed in accidents, laid out on a lightbox (see Figure 2). The pieces formed what

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Margolles has termed a ‘study of post death remnants’ — blood spots and smells — that clung to the clothing.⁹ Such pieces belong definitively to the forensic: clothing, post-mortem, can become key evidence, loaded with juridical narrative force (think here of Azaria Chamberlain’s jumpsuit and matinee jacket).¹⁰ In a photographic detail of a shirt stained with blood from *Estudio de la ropa de cadáver / Study of a corpse’s clothes, 1997*, arrow labels are aimed at the sites of injury (see Figure 3). These arrows gesture towards the evidential value of crime’s remainders, staggering sight as they home in on, and count, the wounds. Detached from immediate juridical value, this piece with its collection of markers, aimed forensically at details, nonetheless testifies to unlawful and traumatic death.



Figure 3

Teresa Margolles

SEMEFO

Estudio de la ropa de cadáver / Study of a corpse’s clothes, 1997

Study of the ‘post death’ remnants (smells and blood spots) of the clothes which were worn by these people the moment they were murdered.

Mexico City, Mexico. October 1997

Detail

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

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In turning these pieces into a 'study' of remnants, SEMEFO circumvents any bureaucratic analytical authority but still stresses the *moment* of murder and violence: that terrible stage of transition. Ultimately however, looking at and *studying* these remainders offers us little, whereas in a forensic context they might offer something more substantial — forensic medicine can, after all, skillfully read apparel in conjunction with the body, aligning wounds in skin with punctures in clothes and so on, which can shift reconstructive narratives and reformulate insight into what happened at death. Thus, these clothes are heavily personal but enunciate abstraction. Our gaze is found wanting amidst the harrowing basics: blood, loss, death. As Fusco notes, in recasting bodies in this way, SEMEFO were 'pathologists and morticians' tending to the 'ruins of a dysfunctional social organism' (2001: 62).

The emphasis on a troubled bridge between anonymity and individuality accompanies other works by SEMEFO, including *Catafalco / Catafalque 1997* (see Figure 4). Margolles cast whole corpses in gypsum after autopsy while they were still in the mortuary. This casting process took not only a detailed impression of the corpse, an imprint of the face, the skin folds above the knees, but also *bits* of the body, such as hair and skin and other organic matter. Recalling the historiography and theory of forensic science, where hair, fibres and other deposits adhere to both crime scenes and bodies, converting common places into forensic texts, SEMEFO recasts this relation of traces from within a forensic space — the mortuary — and in dialogue not with evidence but with the crypt, the vault, the grave. The dead body as meaningful juridical trace is gone; the alliance is with entombing, which is about memorialising yet also concealing — crypts are topographies and metaphors for mourning (see Derrida 1986, Abraham and Torok 1986). In *Catafalco / Catafalque 1997*, the missing dead body is both unknown and identified. The whirling citation of SEMEFO's practice here engages sarcophagi, tombs, secret places and sanctity. Their shapes as general human figures could possibly substitute any number of other bodies, we might walk up to it and somewhat see ourselves, but as a specific imprint it would never quite fit. And this is a crypt cracked open, a potential moment of the dead returning to 'tax the living' (Castricano 2001: 9).

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Figure 4
Teresa Margolles
SEMEFO
Catafalco / Catafalque, 1997
Adhesion of organic materials on gypsum.
Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

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Mexican historian Federico Navarrete notes that the visibility of the corpse in SEMEFO's work began to disappear as Mexico's experience with violent death in the everyday increased in the 1990s. Navarrete positions the mortuary at the centre of the public arena, highlighting the examples of Mexicans witnessing 'the beginnings of a civil war in 1994, with its respective massacres and executions', the assassination of Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, the 1996 and 1997 massacres at Aguas Blancas and Acteal, and the focus on the decomposing remains of 'drug lord' Amado Carrillo Fuentes for several days in 1997 (2000: 24). Fusco has also translated neoliberalism and its 'money-driven social order' into this troubled landscape, commenting on the dismantling of state operated social services and the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican stock market collapses and the exodus of people into urban areas as a means of survival, including the move across the border into the US (2001: 63). Read against this fractured development, SEMEFO responded with a 'controlled formal language', exhibiting drums used by the forensic service to cook and burn corpses, tattoos cut from the skin of unidentified bodies, and staged public 'interventions' such as *Anden / Sidewalk 1999* in Cali, Colombia (Zamudio Taylor 2002: 53). For the work *Anden*, SEMEFO posted signs inviting the public to participate in the ritual action, the action taking eight hours. SEMEFO dug up 36 metres of the sidewalk of the park 'Las Banderas' and constructed a new one, where the belongings of victims of violence in Colombia and the disappeared from the civil war were placed in a hole and covered with concrete by the relatives. In a similar work of entombment, *Memoria Fosilizada / Fossilized Memory 1998* (see Figure 5), SEMEFO interred objects found on the bodies of 247 murder victims in a cement block, reconstituting the 'rhetorical use given forensic evidence' by removing and interring objects unseen (Navarrete 2000: 31); valuable citations of identity become locked away from any juridical purpose.

These commentaries echo others and are informed by repetition. Commemorative acts and interventions using concrete, such as *Anden / Sidewalk 1999* and *Memoria Fosilizada / Fossilized Memory 1998*,

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Figure 5

Teresa Margolles

SEMEFO

Memoria Fossilizada / Fossilized Memory, 1998

Concrete, 10 x 2.40 x 2.40 cm

Concrete with included objects, which were carried by persons who were murdered.

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

resonate in the work *Entierro / Burial 1999*. For the work *Entierro / Burial 1999*, Margolles interred the stillborn corpse of a child, whose mother could not afford burial expenses, in a block of concrete 20 by 60 by 40 centimetres. In 2003, Margolles exhibited a 950 by 170 centimetre cloth titled *Lienzo / The Shroud* in the Vienna Kunsthalle (see Figures 6 and 7). The material is a blanket used to wrap nine dead bodies at one time and store them in the mortuary. The winding blanket is impregnated with chemicals to suppress decomposition and smells, and the bodies are stored this way in the mortuary for up to 10 months. When Margolles exhibited the winding sheet, it had to be removed from the gallery at times due to the smell. According to some writers, one gallery refused

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Figure 6

Teresa Margolles

Lienzo / The Shroud, 1999-2000

Blanket of 950 x 170 cm, covered with formaldehyde, used as a means of conservation to wrap 9 corpses during 10 months. The secretions and bodily fluids were integrated into the blanket. Mexico City, Mexico.

Installation shot, *Das Leichentuch*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, March 21–May 4, 2003. Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

to exhibit SEMEFO's work because of its putridity (Zamudio Taylor 2000: 53). In these works we witness a return to past efforts: *Lienzo* reworks *Dermis* on a much larger scale. As 'in process' documents about the post-mortem life of the dead, the return to such pieces, the reconsideration of linen, reiterates the tragedy that violent death repeats itself onto different bodies; that it keeps going on (see Zamudio Taylor 2000: 53). Risking slight recontextualisation and following Brault and Naas writing on Derrida's mourning, we might ask 'this is all so commonplace, and yet how does one reckon it'? (2001: 4).

Before SEMEFO disbanded, Margolles had already started to branch out on her own, continuing her work with human remains in a forensic

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Figure 7

Teresa Margolles

Lienzo / The Shroud, 1999-2000. Detail.

Blanket of 950 x 170 cm, covered with formaldehyde, used as a means of conservation to wrap 9 corpses during 10 months. The secretions and bodily fluids were integrated into the blanket. Mexico City, Mexico.

Installation shot, *Das Leichentuch*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, March 21–May 4, 2003. Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

context. She returned to more explicit representations of the body via photography, and in doing so began to push against limits in aesthetic performance. Her work became much more ethically difficult, using scholarship money to fund work such as *Tarjetas para picar cocaína / Cards to cut cocaine 1997-1999*. In this work, Margolles laminated small photographs she had taken in the mortuary of people killed in relation to the drug trade. She distributed the laminated photographs to drug users in Mexico City and Cali, Colombia, to use to cut their cocaine, stating she wanted to watch their reaction.¹¹ This is difficult work. Correspondingly, in 1998 she produced a number of self-portraits, *Autorretratos / Self-Portraits 1998*, the creation of which she describes

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as essays. In these images, she poses next to or holds dead bodies. One of the most arresting images of this series, because of its disturbing charge, is a photograph of Margolles holding the body of a young child. She isn't cradling so much as *displaying* the body. Margolles has said that she knew the child, who was homeless and found dead on the street in Mexico City.¹² Due to forensic treatment her body began to change. Margolles took a picture, holding the child's body before she was cremated. As titled 'self-portraits' the pictures subvert the genre. Margolles is neither the object nor the subject of the portrait, yet, nor is the dead child, who fades before us without clear identification. Margolles knew the child for example, but yet she was unclaimed. We may know that historically portraits signified status, brought authority to the portrayed, could inscribe criminality, and that photographs continue to be important tools in law and forensics, a part of the very vernacular of the forensic mortuary, but nonetheless, Margolles gazes back at us from within the image as if to ask us 'what exactly can be identified in this space of the law'?

Mortuaries are liminal spaces in the legal and cultural imagination. In recent years mortuary scandals have emerged in Australia, America and the United Kingdom amongst other countries, revealing practices such as theft from the deceased and forensic experiments in New South Wales, organ and tissue removal and retention at Alder Hey, Bristol and other hospitals in the UK and Australia, and the scandals in New York in early 2006 where limbs were removed and sold to medical companies and those pilfered bones replaced with plastic pipes (see Scott Bray 1999, 2006). Autopsies and their sister space, the mortuary, function to explain death to 'help the living'.¹³ Margolles — of the mortuary herself — straddles this problematic divide, undoubtedly 'using' bodies as aesthetic matter but turning the gaze beyond this space. Similarly, her moves to portray hint at subjects, and sociality, in pieces. In 2000 she created the work *Lengua / Tongue 2000* (see Figure 8), where she preserved the tongue of a young man murdered in a street fight (see Jauregui 2004: 181). She approached the family and offered to pay for the man's burial expenses in exchange for his tongue, applying her skills to severing and preserving this fragment of his body to synecdotally represent the meaning of his death.

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Figure 8

Teresa Margolles

Lengua / Tongue, 2000

The perforated tongue with a piercing of a teenager murdered in a street fight. Donated by the relatives in exchange for the payment of burial expenses.

Mexico City, Mexico. February 2000

Photographer: Teresa Margolles.

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

For the work *Línea Fronteriza / Border Line 2005* which she is still producing, Margolles has photographed the sutured autopsy incision on bodies of victims of violence, some bodies bearing tattoos (see Figure 9).¹⁴ She exhibits these works together and hasn't offered an endpoint. It is a gothic taxonomy that nonetheless lacks key data: in the cycle of forensic procedures, tattoos are usually clues for identification of individuals. As fragments of skin assembled together they constitute a montage; as an unfinished piece — Margolles has said 'I don't know how many metres I will make'¹⁵ — it is a careful constant work. Tumlrir tells us that fragments:

trail their original meanings and contexts behind them even as they are recontextualised and reinterpreted by the montageur, who thereby treats

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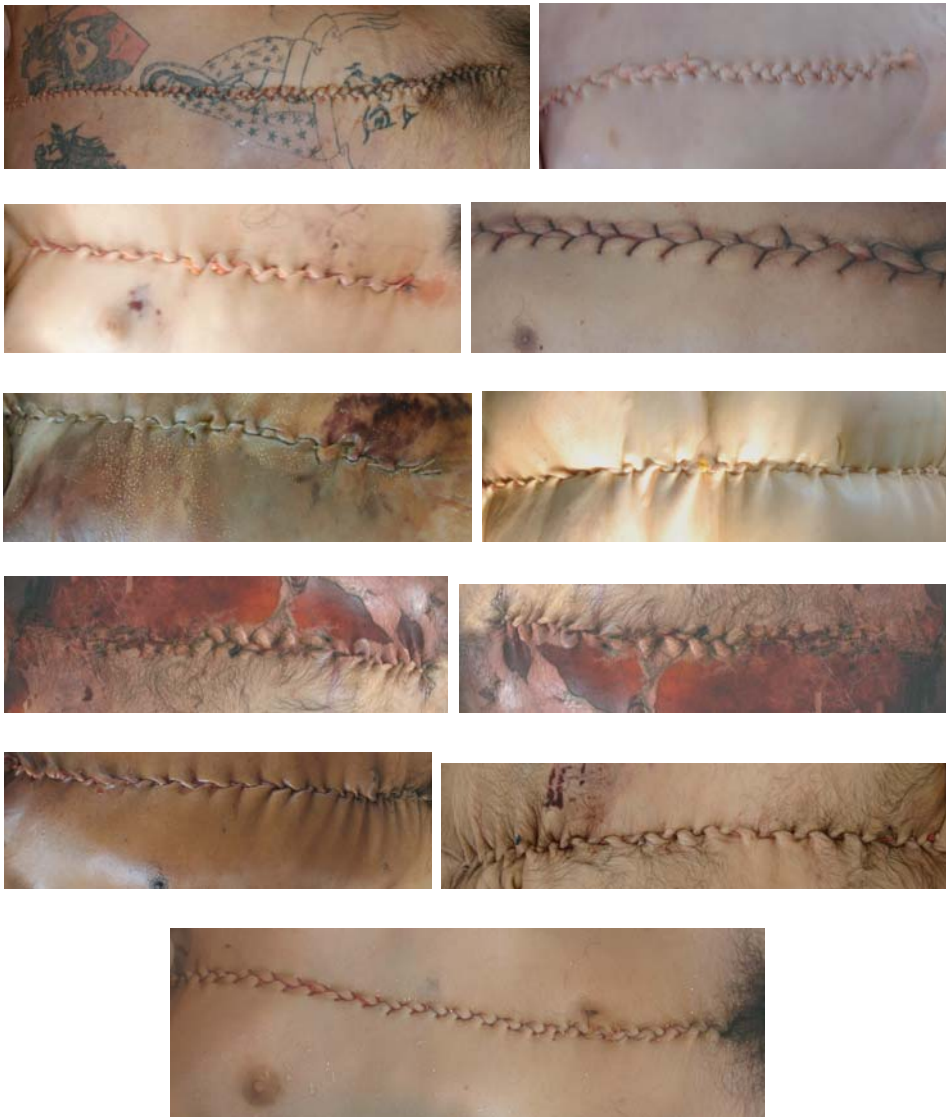


Figure 9
Teresa Margolles
Línea Fronteriza / Border Line, 2005
Colour photographs (11 images)
Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

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the wordly fragment, whether an image or a thing, much like a word. According to Benjamin, this linguistic conversion is a crucial part of art's recuperative purpose; the fragment is drawn out of the temporal continuum so as to be preserved for posterity, but first it must be killed. The representational contract discloses a profound cruelty, and this is precisely what the allegorically dismantled and mortified body communicates most poignantly (2002: 71).

The cruelty inherent in the representational contract, the suspension and aesthetic conversion of the body and its parts essayed in Margolles' art, displays anguish and compassion, a moment of articulating injury differently. By its name, *Línea Fronteriza / Border Line*, the work indicates its deeper political undercurrent, of bodies caught in the socio-political borderland between Mexico and the US. These stitches are evidence of the marks, the fencing of barbed concertina razor wire, that at certain points divide the geographical bodies of the US and Mexico. Jeffrey Silverthorne, an American photographer who has also photographed extensively along the border, has said that these lines on the body are reminiscent of the marks found near the border. Marks made by:

the tyres dragged behind tractors to make fresh earth along usual crossing points so that if anyone steps on it, and it is wide, ten feet, and long, 1/2 mile and longer, an impression will be left. In the early morning when the sun is raking over the land the border patrol will fly these stretches and at the correct angle they can see an impression and actually from the air, flying low, count the number of people who have crossed, how many in a group. It is called sign cutting.¹⁶

As the camera homes in on the specifics of the wound and flesh, with their sumptuous look and colours, the stitching becomes evidence of more than autopsy incisions, proof of a more sinister kind — bodies imperilled by politics, the danger inherent in geographical border crossings. Yet these images also entangle us in their colours, echoing modernist pieces divorced from the political body of meaning.¹⁷ This ambiguity divides an approach to the work. The horror of displaying a body as segment, defined by an autopsy incision, coupled with the careful beauty of some images and the stitching, and the violence of their political life, the context of their creation (violent death), register a deep sadness that lies at their centre. Exhibited together they represent

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Figure 10

Teresa Margolles

Vaporización / Vaporization, 2001

Vaporised water from the morgue that was used to wash the bodies of murder victims after the autopsy.

Installation shot, 'Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values', P.S.1, Long Island City, June 30 – Sept 2, 2002

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

a *number* of individuals. As with the impressions left in the land, bodies counted by the border patrol, this work concerns the measure of bodies, an altered forensic activity.

Some writers refer to the forensic mortuary as SEMEFO's and recently Margolles' 'atelier', with all its contemporary sartorial signifieds and metaphors (see Medina 2001: 40), attaching her aesthetic practice of post-modern Promethean moments (see Fusco 2001: 75, Medina 2001: 36). Medina writes that it is as though, like Victor Frankenstein, the members of SEMEFO, led by Margolles, 'were convinced that in the observation of the tiniest details of the corruption of corpses they could extricate the essence of life' (Medina 2001: 36). Yet there is bereavement infused in Margolles' later works. In 2002 she installed

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Figure 11

Teresa Margolles

En el Aire / In the Air, 2002

Bubbles made with water of the morgue that was used to wash the corpses before the autopsy.

Installation shot, Teresa Margolles, *Vacio y Contrario*, Ex Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City, 2002

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

Vaporización / Vaporization 2001 at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York, using coolers to fill the gallery space with mist made from the water used in the mortuary to wash the corpses after autopsy (see Figure 10). The gallery becomes a smelly fog-bound space with no screening of the dead and visitors breathe in the mist. Is this the fog of history, clarity, confusion, death, the city or mourning?

For *Aire / Air 2003* Margolles humidified a room with the same water, and in 2002 she installed *En el Aire / In the Air 2002*, in the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, a church turned gallery space, in which she placed bubble-making machines used in dance clubs on the ceiling so that the bubbles generated floated down onto gallery visitors and popped onto their skin (see Figure 11). In this work the viewer literally takes in the

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Figure 12

Teresa Margolles

Papeles / Papers, 2003

100 sheets of fabriano paper soaked with water that was used to wash the corpses after the autopsy.

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

dead through the pores, into the body. As with *Vaporización / Vaporisation 2001*, the performance of living, of walking through gallery space, of breathing, brings us into contact with the dead. For *Papeles / Papers 2003*, Margolles created 100 different sheets of 70 by 50 centimetre watercolours (see Figures 12 and 13). The watercolour was from the *lavatio corporis / washing of corpses* in the mortuary. Margolles collected the water after each washing of a body: these papers represent 100 people and exhibited together comprise what Margolles refers to as 'a wall of mourning'.¹⁸

These mourning works with *lavatio corporis* are steeped with force and weight, despite the translucency and fragility of bubbles, or the

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Figure 13

Teresa Margolles

Papeles / Papers, 2003

100 sheets of fabriano paper soaked with water that was used to wash the corpses after the autopsy.

Detail

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

mildness of actions such as draping paper in water to collect colour. For the work *Fin/End 2002* in France Margolles forced gallery visitors out onto the street while she re-concreted the floor, mixed with *lavatio corporis*, thereafter having people walk on the floor. In 2004 she projected a video *El agua en la ciudad / The Water in the City 2004*, demonstrating the process of washing of corpses in the mortuary. Placed in front of the screen was a concrete bench, *Banco / Bench 2004*, made with the same water. This same bench was then moved to France and placed in a park. The use of water from bureaucratic movements and the variations on the use of *lavatio corporis* ensure that forensic activity and purpose is recycled: into watercolour, mist and community seats.

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Lament: Ciudad Juárez and Guadalajara

Margolles has exhibited recent work from time spent in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua State on the northern border of Mexico and the US across the Rio Grande River from El Paso, Texas. Juárez is now known as ‘The City of the Dead Girls’ and has received increasing international attention following the murders and disappearances of women in Chihuahua State beginning in 1993. For more than ten years, hundreds of young and adult women have been murdered or have disappeared in and around Juárez and nearby towns. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch post reports on Juárez, yet despite attention towards the killings, the number of women who have been killed or gone missing is still not completely clear. Numbers of the murdered are officially estimated at around 323, but Casa Amiga, the only sexual assault and domestic violence service in the city, and local human rights agencies estimate the figures at over 400.¹⁹ Some murders have been particularly brutal — with mutilations of bodies, defacements, and evidence of sexual assault (Fregoso 2000: 137). It is believed that up to as many as 400 women have disappeared, and that similar murders are occurring 375 kilometres south of Juárez in Chihuahua City.²⁰

Juárez exploded after the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s. American corporations set up factories in Juárez to assemble prefabricated parts, which are then freighted back over the border to be sold, generating US\$16 billion revenue a year with workers earning around US\$5 a day (see Carroll 2006: 359). The establishment of these industries, termed *maquiladoras*, drew large numbers of people to work, who are named *maquilas*. Initially, it was believed that most of the murdered have been young women *maquilas* from the factories who travelled the roads between the plants and the flats where they lived at night, through the desert. Attached to these women was a trope of self-imperilment, and theorists have commented on the early state discourse that many women lead a ‘doble vida’ a ‘double life’ and were prostitutes by night (see Fregoso 2000: 138). In 1999 State Public

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Prosecutor Arturo González Rascón was reported as saying ‘it’s hard to go out on the street when it’s raining and not get wet’.²¹ As more and more women were murdered or disappeared, it became clear that the perpetration of violence was not only against *maquilas*, but also women between the ages of 11 and 50, students, waitresses and other workers. After eight women were found in a cotton field, volunteers searched the area, locating clothes identified as belonging to the one of the victims, hair, shoes and bits of clothing.²² Following local action drawing international attention and pressure, the Federal Mexican government intervened, establishing the Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence in 2003 and in 2004 created the Federal Special Prosecutor’s Office to review all case files relating to 323 cases. The progress reports of the Special Prosecutor between 2004 and 2005 identified inactivity and negligence that lead to the loss of evidence at crime scenes, omission and abuse by state justice officials in handling cases, and forensic tests that were ‘riddled with grave problems of validity’.²³ Human rights organisations have also criticised police for extracting confessions through the use of torture.²⁴

Teresa Margolles travelled to Juárez in 2005 and began work around the border. She rented a van and drove to the crime scenes of a number of murders, where she spent time at the site, often many nights. At these crime scenes she collected the earth; with the earth she produced 500 stones (see Figure 14), which she has since exhibited in Switzerland and the US in rows on the gallery floor (see Figure 15).

Her aim with this work is to challenge the murders and commemorate the murdered. They bear an unsettling forensic weight — they are of the space of the dead — yet are so bureaucratically useless: symbols of the juridical failure of women in this borderland. Entirely hand made, these ‘individual deputies’ are headstones without a grave.²⁵ They are works of mourning that can be carried globally and displayed internationally. Of the crime scene, they seem to stand in for the dead, but lacking names, epitaphs, they are sadder, both more silent and articulate than any other grave space.

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Figure 14
Teresa Margolles
Lote Bravo, 2005
Production of the handmade adobes
Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

Headstones, graves, tombs, crypts, are supposed to mark the end, or the should-be end, to mourning. These works suggest otherwise. They have been exhibited with a video loop of a car-journey along the roads that women have to take between work and home, entitled *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro 2005*, and a card with facts about Juárez and the murders (see Figure 16). The juxtaposition of these pieces, of sight and visual motion, of silence, text

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Figure 15

Teresa Margolles

Lote Bravo, 2005

Installation with 50 handmade adobes, dimensions variable

50 handmade adobes made out of soil in which the bodies of murdered women were buried.

Installation shot, Ciudad Juárez, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich, June 12 – July 30, 2005

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

and wordlessness, provides a minimalist posthumous biography, a writing which is never enough because it is made in the gap of loss.

As if to echo the work of death *en masse*, deaths that otherwise disappear without recognition and activism, in January 2006 Margolles spent time working on five cinemas in the large Mexican city of Guadalajara. Margolles collected the letters of suicide victims and spelt the text on the canopies of abandoned cinemas using the format of

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Figure 16
Teresa Margolles
Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro, 2005
Video
Stills of video (4 images)
Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

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cinema boards, producing a series of colour photographs: *Recados Póstumos / Posthumous Messages 2006* (see Figure 17).²⁶ As announcements on the declarative site of the cinema they hum as a latest announcement. Yet as texts about death on deserted buildings, they signal the desolation of abandoned life. Suicide notes are strangely present speaking voices from dead hands. These texts sound out from derelict scenes, offering a posthumous narrative life to dead letters. Margolles' use of the letters spells a larger schema of death in Mexico: she writes that 'in Guadalajara alone there were more than 300 suicide cases last year'.²⁷



Figure 17

Teresa Margolles

Recados Póstumos / Posthumous Messages (Cine Avenida), 2006

Colour photograph

Intervention involving suicide notes on the canopies of 5 abandoned cinemas in Guadalajara, Jalisco.

Courtesy of Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

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This work again reconfigures the strange absence and presence of the dead within Margolles' art, an ambiguity that confronts the disconcerted spectator who looks to the canopy for an announcement and, alarmingly, devastatingly, locates words of pain, injury and death. Commenting on Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, Bleikasten notes that to write is:

to fill in gaps, to dress wounds. All texts aspire to the compactness of living bodies. But here the body is dismembered, the texts burst asunder, the discourse falters and gapes, as if to remind us of the lure and liability of all writing, and to let us glimpse, in the interstices between words, where nothing can be seen, what words can neither say nor give up saying — to make us see what they fail to make us hear: the silence of death, unheard music of all desire (1990: 159).

Conclusion: An uneasy frontier

Mientras Agonizo, the Spanish title translation of Faulkner's novel, also translates as *While I'm Suffering* or *While I Suffer*. As with *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Faulkner's novel is a text of losing the *beloved*, the friend, where the 'dying fall prolonged' as the life of the corpse is extended across travel, frontier and text (Wadlington 1987: 103). Addie Bundren returns to Faulkner's narrative five days dead, her monologue issuing at the same time that her corpse decomposes dramatically, recognised and negotiated by all; in Jones' film we switch between Melquiades alive and his problematic death and decomposing corpse, rendered in the disgusted response of the man who killed him, the border patrol agent Mike Norton. These texts and their existential riddles pose questions echoed by Margolles' artwork: how do we, how might we, mourn the other? In reconvening her forensic attention at the body through art practice, Margolles rehearses the scenes: through bubbles and mist the mourning of *ingestion* or digestion, through plaster casts and concrete entombment the mourning of encryption (see Derrida 1986, Abraham and Torok 1986).²⁸ In Margolles' artworks, as in Faulkner's novel, we witness the difficulties, the ambivalence, bewilderment and *suffering* involved in the work of

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mourning, the question of ethics and responsibility (see Deutscher 1998). When Margolles refers to Faulkner's novel in discussing her work, she reiterates the idea that 'one must respond even when one does not have the heart or is at a loss, lacing the words; one must speak, even reckon, so as to combat all the forces that work to efface or conceal not just the names on the tombstones but the apostrophe of mourning' (Brault and Naas 2001: 30). Margolles acknowledges that facing the dead is a fraught business but nonetheless asks: how will I respond?

As the literary, cinematic and aesthetic texts explored here demonstrate, in death the corpse is both subject and object, 'it is neither and both, an uneasy frontier' (Schwenger 2000: 400). Darl from William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* speaks:

Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are was, it is not. Yet the wagon is, because when the wagon is was, Addie Bundren will not be (Faulkner 1935: 74).

Darl's linguistic distinctions catch the word as a site of both ambiguity and declarative power as he grapples with Addie Bundren's death. His self-assurances and articulations about the 'is' of a 'was' represent the struggle for meaning and comprehension over the life of the corpse. Correspondingly, there is a scene in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, when Pete Perkins sits by his friend, takes out a hairbrush and removes the blankets covering Melquiades' face. As he raises the brush, and strokes it through Melquiades' hair, some of it comes away. It is a scene of sadness, tragi-comedy and farce, all rolling into one moment of Pete beside his friend, living with his corpse, watching a transitional biography, contemplating this 'is' of a 'was' and sitting beside him all the same. These texts explicitly concern the life of the dead in league with the necessity of obsequies, but also concern the broader implications, the dangers and ethical responsibilities, involved in managing dead bodies. Both the Bundrens and Pete Perkins follow the wishes of the dead to the letter²⁹ but, in so doing, enact

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individual journeys across the scenes of the text in concert with the corpse's passage.

In reflecting on Margolles' practice, we witness the emergence of a crisis: how to manage the remains of crime and death through aesthetics at sites of juridical failure. Moreover, her practices exhibit the trouble that remains with injuries largely unresolved by law, in the city, at the margins. Margolles attaches these injuries to other sites of enunciation and, in so doing, reconstitutes evidence of crime and violence in Mexico. Ultimately, I am thinking of law's relationship to the body of the other, often lived in the shadow of death, imprinted in images. These works tell us that as we are moored to the body, many *pass by way* of the law, unseen and unnamed, crimes perpetrated *en piel ajena, on another skin*.³⁰ By holding on to forensic notes, as she has done in much of her work, Margolles' art practice provides an alternate route to recognising and responding to events of violence and death, a passage that is complicated by ethical tensions and yet offers a careful forensic compassion.

Notes

- 1 A version of this article was presented as a keynote address at the 13th International Conference of the Law and Literature Association of Australia — Passages. My sincere thanks to the organisers of Passages: Andrew Kenyon, Peter Rush, Alison Young and Nina Philadelphoff-Puren for their invitation to speak and, additionally, as editors of this Special Issue, for the opportunity to publish this paper. The conference provided additional impetus to think around the ideas presented here and I greatly appreciate the comments received regarding Margolles' work and my reading of her practice. My sincere thanks also go to: Teresa Margolles, whose dialogue, practice and artwork has motivated me to think further about the charge of art, Teresa Margolles and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zürich for permission to reproduce images, Cynthia Krell of Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zürich for her comprehensive and generous assistance with the images and permissions, Jeffrey Silverthorne for ongoing, invaluable and lively conversations, Rodolfo Madariaga for his translations, and Dawn Koester for the finish line. Importantly, I wish to thank Derek Dalton and Danielle Tyson for their close and spirited engagement which is, as ever, deeply appreciated.

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- 2 Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have released numerous reports on the situation of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. Juárez is also entering the cultural imagination in other ways: refer to Cesar Alejandro's 2005 film *Juárez: Stages of Fear*, which, at time of writing, is travelling the international film circuit.
- 3 I refer to a presentation by Margolles on 19 November 2005 in Berlin titled 'Mientras Agonizo' at The New Visibility of Death Conference 17-19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 4 See Young 2005, Philadelphoff-Puren and Rush 2003, Tyson 1999, Muere 1997.
- 5 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 6 For a succinct account of Margolles' and SEMEFO's work see Gallo 2004.
- 7 These other artists included: Juan Manuel Pernás, Juan Luis García Zavaleta, Victor Basurto, Antonio Macedo, Anibal Peñuelas and Mónica Salcido.
- 8 See Medina 2001: 36, Navarrete 2000: 26. In these early days, SEMEFO existed largely as a death metal band, incorporating dead animals, nudity and excess in their performances.
- 9 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 10 See Edmond 1998a, 1998b, Howe 1996. Azaria Chamberlain's matinee jacket was found in 1986, five and a half years after her disappearance. Lindy Chamberlain always claimed that Azaria was wearing a matinee jacket. A key prosecution argument in the Chamberlain case concerned another piece of clothing and how it was damaged — the jumpsuit that Azaria Chamberlain was wearing and that was found one week after she disappeared — and engaged in forensic experiments/called forensic experts to posit that the baby's throat was cut. According to this scenario, damage to the jumpsuit was not caused by dingo teeth, as the defence claimed, but by scissors. See Edmond 1998a, 1998b for discussion.
- 11 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 12 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 13 Many forensic texts and mortuaries promote this view, expressed via the latin expression 'Taceant colloquia. Effugiat risus. Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae' which is cited at mortuary entrances (such as that at the Chief Medical Examiner's Office in New York) as 'Let conversation cease. Let laughter flee. This is the place where death delights to help the living'.

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- 14 The mortuary in which these photographs were taken was morgue de Guadalajara and/or Ciudad Juárez according to Cynthia Krell of Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zürich email correspondence 11 July 2006.
- 15 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 16 Jeffrey Silverthorne email correspondence with the artist, 11 July 2006.
- 17 I am grateful to Jeffrey Silverthorne for his discussions and insights on this work, email correspondence with the artist, 11 July 2006.
- 18 Teresa Margolles Berlin 19 November 2005 translated by Romy Bart.
- 19 Sean Mariano García, The Latin America Working Group Education Fund 2005 *Scapegoats of Juárez: The misuse of justice in prosecuting women's murders in Chihuahua, Mexico*, September.
- 20 See Sean Mariano García, The Latin America Working Group Education Fund 2005, Fregoso 2000.
- 21 As reported in the Juárez press *El Diario de Juárez*, 24 February 1999, cited in 'Intolerable Killings: Ten years of abductions and murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua', Amnesty International, AI Index AMR 41/026/2003.
- 22 See Latin America Working Group/ Washington Office on Latin America, *Crying Out for Justice: Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico*, March 2005.
- 23 See Laurie Freeman, Washington Office on Latin America, *Still Waiting for Justice: Shortcomings in Mexico's Efforts to End Impunity for Murders of Girls and Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua*, October 2005. Juárez now has an international profile as a chamber of horrors, the 'laboratory' of the globalised future (Bowden 1998). Visions of the city register a mise-en-scène of horror, a 'polluted nightmare', a psychotic and 'scary tableau of a world gone awry' that recalls *Blade Runner* (Heyman and Campbell 2004: 206). On 5 May 1999, the Governor of Chihuahua stated in a radio interview of the situation in Juárez: '[w]e have something that was deplorable — fortunately it's over — it is something we can see now as a nightmare from which we are just waking up, a huge number of homicides in Ciudad Juárez as has never been seen before in any part of the country ... that killing spree that overwhelmed Chihuahua and has now ended; almost 190 women murdered in a period of 5 years ...' (see Monárrez Fragoso 2002: 7).
- 24 See Sean Mariano García, The Latin America Working Group Education Fund 2005 *Scapegoats of Juárez: The misuse of justice in prosecuting women's murders in Chihuahua, Mexico*, September.

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- 25 See Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zürich Press Release for Teresa Margolles Ciudad Juárez 12 June – 30 July 2005 on file with author.
- 26 Teresa Margolles email correspondence 11 July 2006 translated by Rodolfo Madariaga.
- 27 Teresa Margolles email correspondence 11 July 2006 translated by Rodolfo Madariaga.
- 28 I am grateful to Juliet Rogers whose discussion of this work following presentation of this paper stimulated further thinking around mourning.
- 29 See Bleikasten 1990: 176.
- 30 Santiago Sierra, in the catalogue 'muerte sin fin', writes 'Margolles' work puts the assassins on constant trial by placing the corpses of those victims on the society's table. It opposes the general indifference towards crimes always committed on another skin, in another city, on the other side of the atlantic or on global television, and a constant reminder of the fact that this Mexican who got killed could be any one of us' (2004: 214).

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