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## **Materialist Spectrality**

### i. The trepidation of the imaginary

According to the Mexican press, more bullets were fired in 2008 than in any other year of the country's recent history.<sup>1</sup> Figures from both official and journalistic sources concur that more than 5.000 people lost their lives in violent incidents connected with drug trafficking and the efforts to control it; the total for the previous year, 2007, was around 2.800.<sup>2</sup> The shocking arithmetic of these statistics, showing the net level of violence in Mexico surpassing that of several war zones around the world, was widely reported in early 2009 by all the major news agencies – causing national politicians and intellectuals to sound the alarm at the deterioration of “Mexico's image abroad”.<sup>3</sup> The trepidation of the imaginary reached its height in January this year, when the United States Department of Defense published a report by one of its strategic analysis groups. This evoked the possibility of Mexico's “rapid and sudden collapse” as a result of the stress placed by criminal gangs on the nation's judicial, police and financial structures.<sup>4</sup> The report's characterization of Mexico as a “weak, failed state” was immediately repudiated by the Mexican diplomatic corps, and some weeks later the new US administration seemed to be adopting a more conciliating discourse that acknowledged the co-responsibility of North America in the violence: both in terms of its insatiable demand for illegal substances, and as the provenance of the vast majority of the weapons at the disposal of the armed wings of the various cartels.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the crisis forced the Mexican government to dispatch thousands of soldiers to patrol the streets of border towns, as the only way to reduce the belligerence.<sup>6</sup> Even so, the first four months of 2009 saw a death toll of almost 1.900 people caught up in the whirlwind of executions, decapitations and shoot-outs.<sup>7</sup> Though it may be an exaggeration to speak of the displacement of the nation-state by outlaw organizations taking control of some of its territories

and populations, in a serious challenge to government hegemony, it is certainly fair to say that the exacerbation of the violence has given rise to a situation of chaotic disorder, of the kind that was once the preserve of social revolts. In a country where, as in most parts of the world, modernity amounts to an *unhinged* experience (in the sense of outside the frame) that moves from the murkiness of colonialism to the perpetual drift of the nation-state, it cannot be denied that the emergence of pure destructiveness is also the sign and the engine of transition from one period to the next.

## ii. Phenomenology of what has died

For over fifteen years, in its various incarnations, the work developed by Teresa Margolles around the institutional treatment of corpses and the materiality of death has operated like a kind of unconscious historiography of the brutality of Mexican social experience. This narrative springs not from any direct impulse towards reportage, so much as from the exercise of a heterodox experience of knowledge and an ethical investigation pushed to the limit. Margolles's oeuvre, like much else that falls into the tired category of "political art", is the visual transcription of a project of public opinion. It is politically corrosive above all because it refuses any other mode of thinking and sensing the social. This adventure on the outer limits, one of very few such that have infiltrated the artistic arena, combines the heterogeneity of a point of view with individual, subcultural negativity, and undertook the risk, from the outset, of operating out of one of the blind spots of our imaginary: that involving contact with, learning about, and working on deceased matter.

This ominous epistemological adventure has achieved a painful public relevance over time. Without being precisely the implementation of a program, Margolles's work has embraced a succession of subjective and aesthetic positions, all of which have functioned against a background of concrete historical processes. Thus it is perfectly feasible, in general terms, to outline a phenomenology of the various phases through which the dead has figured the living in this work. While Margolles proceeds with visceral sensibility within a domain which most of her contemporaries would go out of their way to avoid, the construction of her serial perspectives can be seen as the double foundering of a social epoch. The stages of her work are like codified, hyper-sensitive ghost-doubles of a period that has been anything but the

expression of historical inertia.<sup>8</sup>

—*Gothic Modernity*: At the beginning of the 1990s, the SEMEFO group fielded a gothic aesthetic as it investigated the “life of the corpse” by means of performances, videos and hybrid sculptural objects. This activity coincided in unsettling fashion with the disruptions of the social order imposed by globalization and the neoliberal turn upon the economies of the South. In retrospect, SEMEFO’s way of referencing Artaud, Bataille or José Clemente Orozco constituted a nihilist reaction to the propaganda of a sublime modernization that promised us imminent entrance into the mercantile-democratic normality of the “first world”, provided we were ready to throw out the post-revolutionary social contract. SEMEFO’s macabre games presented the Mexican experience as a montage of conflicts and catastrophes, encompassing indigenous sacrificial practices, colonial extermination and the violence of subsequent revolutions.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, rather than confine itself to the subcultural margins one might have expected of its origins in *Death metal rock* and its clear predilection for the dark side of the urban tribes of the periphery,<sup>10</sup> SEMEFO established itself as a key exemplar of the kinds of “art of the crisis” that flourished in the Mexico of the 1990s – largely because its negotiations with the ultimate horror worked as an extreme cipher for shared anxieties. However, the collective’s uncompromising anti-humanism was the feature which set it apart from other artists and groups emerging from the counterculture at that time. Conveying the contact with repellent or abject things in an ecstatic register, vilifying modernity with the objects expelled by historical putrefaction, SEMEFO foresaw the way the capitalist party would entrench cyclical instability, in Mexico as in practically all the southern economies. The “gothic” aspect cultivated by the group (including in its Frankensteinian allusions) expressed a classic aesthetic condition of modernity, in which the theme of horror and the “undead” stands for a primal reaction to the brutality of modernization – for it expresses a present haunted by fear of the return of the repressed, and bracing itself for changes that are quite the opposite of those dangled before us by the illusions of progress and homogeneity.

—*The morgue as atelier*. During the next phase, roughly corresponding to the second half of the decade of the 1990s, Margolles (first as a member of SEMEFO, and then independently) moved towards the necrological appropriation of the protocols of artistic production, by using the forensic

institution of the mortuary as her studio. A double disruption was this effected: not only was the artist abusing a pillar of the legal apparatus, twisting it away from its official purpose, but also she was contaminating the contemporary aesthetic apparatus with sacred horror.<sup>11</sup>

Over and above the worth of specific pieces produced in that workshop, Margolles's use of the mortuary as a studio entailed a structural consequence. All of her artistic operations became defined by the fact of occupying a classic institutional space, of the kind Michel Foucault described as "heterotopias": spaces designated by every civilization as "outside all places", even when they are clearly localized; institutions "controlled by an unspoken sacralization".<sup>12</sup> To operate within the morgue, and upon its content and purpose; to operate from this "space outside" allowed Margolles to realize a "heteropology": a description or reading of a territory that appeared as a "refutation, both mythical and real, of the space of life".<sup>13</sup> The critical potential of this location found itself heightened by historical contingency, when the fairy-tale of Mexican modernization met its nemesis in violence. The outbreak of the Zapatista rebellion, the pandemic of crime unleashed by the economic crisis of 1994-1995, and a string of spectacular political assassinations marked the collapse of the one-party regime that had ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000. These events transformed Margolles's gruesome headquarters into a public image of the political and social crisis of the mid-1990s. The necrophiliac studio had turned into the showcase of necropolitics.

—*Spectral exportation*. In the first five years of the new century, Margolles's work spilled outwards in complex fashion. Although the investigative terrain, the raw materials and the technical referent continued to be anchored in the Mexican morgue, the poetic spur was now to develop a series of methodologies for transmission beyond the bounds of the institution, which at the same time involved a growing rejection of the circumscription of the "artistic object". With extraordinary prolixity, Margolles unfolded a whole arsenal of production tactics designed to facilitate a ghoulish contraband of the by-products and sidelines of forensic work in the direction of another kind of heterotopia: the global art-exhibition room. She launched into a wide range of interventions upon actual display spaces and surfaces as well as impregnating works specifically localized in urban territory, recycling the water that had been employed in the cleansing rites of the mortuary, the fats expelled by cadaver

processing techniques, and even body parts, as a way of spectralizing the exhibition space. Except for a number of crucial exceptions, Margolles exported the waste products of her work environment, rather than dead bodies themselves. Corporal substances and fluids were transferred into the surroundings and bodies of the spectators through variously contaminated media: the essences were dispersed in the form of vapor, mixed into cement, or turned into soap bubbles. The artist also used human fat to coat monochrome installations or as “filler” to repair cracks in the building, the social body. Esthetically speaking, she was enabling this contraband by subjecting the post-minimalist repertoire and the poetics of de-materialization to a process of symbolic pollution.

The “purified” esthetic of the monochrome, the production of environmental conditions that are sensitive on the purely material level of exposure, the recourse to minimal sculptures to transport the body of a foetus, the systematic over-use of the procedures of the ready-made – all these were deployed like parasites exploiting the dominant esthetic. Under the deceptive guise of a minimalist conceptualism, Margolles was performing surreptitious operations involving a materialist cadaverism, exposing her audience to a category defined by Georges Bataille as “base materialism”: things that can neither be classified nor controlled, “what can never serve in any case to ape a given authority” and remain “external and foreign” to the objects of productive idealization and consumption.<sup>14</sup> But the full radicalism of such an infiltration can only be appreciated once we see that in these polluted pieces, Margolles was inverting the contemplative relations of modern esthetics. In place of any neutral, dispassionate observation of “beauty”, spectators’ bodies and feelings were being exposed to works in the form of substances that violated the distance implied by esthetic attention; that threatened to merge with the receptor’s very flesh, infused into his lungs and bloodstream.

This invasion, propelled by the commissions and invitations of the world cultural circuit, functioned as a debased analogy of the globalization process. If not deliberately or explicitly, the work’s expansion beyond the walls of the studio-morgue mirrored the insidious, invisible and dissolvent effect of global capitalism, ignoring frontiers and fostering a constant transposition of identities. Indeed, by performing operations which frequently exploited a legal vacuum, Margolles was positing the deregulation of transactions between the dead and that which is destined to be (ex)posed. Not the least achievement of this procedure is how it shows elements which are culturally repellent and

instantly vomited out, infiltrating the circulatory stream of culture.

### iii. Price and Innocence

Every death has a multiplicatory effect. That is why executions are not exclusively directed at the condemned; they establish and maintain a perverse system of communication.<sup>15</sup> The lords of the War on Drugs – traffickers and their pursuers – know as well as do the media and its audience that each corpse is a semiotic bombshell, that strikes fear into the population whilst goading the adversary to greater heights.<sup>16</sup> Every murder leaves a family forever damaged, local people terrorized, and urban space reconfigured; it will be branded on memories for generations. In the cities close to the US-Mexico border,<sup>17</sup> violence has engulfed the lives above all of young people, who run an ever-growing risk of dying before their time. Within the affective networks that constitute families and communities, each violent death, no matter what the circumstances or motives, creates a lasting trauma. “Violence has broken the continuity of a life line. The survivor has not merely changed: he or she is another person.”<sup>18</sup>

Until recently, it has been difficult to acknowledge the indiscriminate force-field of each of these deaths, due to the interference of morality. The press, the neighbors, family members themselves, and most of all, the state, seek to exorcize the trauma of violent death by applying a double standard that separates “guilt” from “innocence”, the “criminals” from the “victims”. Although capital punishment has been abolished in Mexico, many cruel ends are welcomed with an indifference bordering on glee, in that they are perceived as well-deserved. So long as the bad guys stick to killing each other, that’s nothing to the rest of us. For decades, throughout the criminalization of the drug trade that took place during the last century, the homicides among rival gangs were viewed by the public as an occupational hazard, the effect of immanent justice. It’s not so much the consumption of illegal substances as the murderous economy surrounding this commerce that produces the moralism spiked with ethical indifference which is also the standard reaction to the slaying of a prostitute.

What we have here, then, is a mechanism of class and labor divisions presiding over the act of death. Gangsters, dealers, addicts, users and the very forces of law and order are ultimately regarded as forming part of the same rotten mass that is to be repudiated wholesale. These people

are accursed, cannon fodder, eminently sacrificeable. By contrast, the media are duty-bound to whip up maximum shock-horror whenever a crime victim can be portrayed as an illustration of the “absence of evil”.<sup>19</sup>

A social project can be glimpsed behind these distinctions. It is not by chance that the etymology of the word “innocence” derives from denial of wrong-doing; *in* – not, and *nocere* – to hurt; an *innocens* is “one who does no harm”.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting upon the consequences of the military metaphors embedded in another of our contemporary symbolic “wars” (incited by dread of pandemia), Susan Sontag expounded with great lucidity the implications of the obsession with “radical innocence” that currently inhabits the language:

Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt.<sup>21</sup>

At the present juncture, where violence acts as a mediation between the capitalist duty of enrichment and the dwindling of opportunity at the edges, the allocation of guilt and innocence constitutes a stratagem that well serves a historical regime committed to the celebration of “normality” equated with “non-guilt”. The cult of innocence that is conspicuous in the narratives about crime consecrates inoffensiveness as the highest ethical value. The smaller the mark an individual makes upon his time and society, the more his death is mourned. We create hells so as to go on believing that heaven is full of meek and silent sheep.

#### iv. Necro-urbanism

As though in synchrony with the exacerbation of violence in the north of Mexico, Margolles’s work, already (although not without tensions) implanted into the world-wide art circuit, has lately begun to engage with a new heterotopic domain. Every one of Margolles’s recent works has declared, not without dismay, the obsolescence of the morgue as sole container of dead matter; a comprehensive violence literally carpets public space, the discourse of the media and urban sensibility with the signs and traces of an all-embracing economy of the abject. Given that the mortuary has lost its monopoly

on the storage of cadavers, Margolles has abandoned this chilly atelier and proceeded to investigate, both materially and symbolically, the ways in which the “base globalization” of the drugs business (the machine that articulates the oft-denied solidarity between consumer pleasure and sacrificial sovereignty) steeps the public arena in death. The artist has once more pushed her research outward, in order to explore the physical and symbolic spaces of what Sergio González Rodríguez has called “abject architecture”:

An uncanny construction, like a kind of branch line of the sewer system symbolically threatening the whole of society, seeking to entrench itself in the most anaesthetic perpetuity with its unacceptable mandate: mind your own business.<sup>22</sup>

In this new phase —symbolically inaugurated with the creation of a pavement made of pieces of shattered windscreens from cars whose occupants were shot as they drove through Mexico City, which was installed in a socially debased neighborhood of Liverpool (*On Pain/Sobre el dolor*, 2006)— Margolles has made use of a wide range of new procedures aimed at concentrating the social waste products of extended terror within the exhibition space, by means of actions and performative pieces.

Margolles’s latest projects, while amplifying all her previous methods of clandestine exportation, are far more energetically invested in the search for material evidence in the streets. By an unusual route, her work has moved into nomadism. It is no longer a question of the abstract presentation of this substance or that, but rather the outcome of a series of *necro-geographical* tours. Walter Benjamin’s felicitous description of the *flâneur* as a wanderer through modernity “who goes botanizing on the asphalt”,<sup>23</sup> might here have found its monstrous double. In the combings of crime scenes carried out by Margolles and her network of helpers, the *flâneur* is reborn as a crew of amateur forensic investigators: collecting up mud, blood and broken glass from the roadway, recording the vacant horror of mortally wounded places on photographs and videos, filleting newspaper reports and popular commentary for the phrases and clichés that every execution attracts. This close tracking of base materiality and verblativity takes place once the police and forensic technicians have finished with the scene. After these authorities’ removal of the bodies and any

evidence, there are still plenty of remains and effluvia testifying to a life cut short. All such residue (dirt, blood, glass, stains, fragments, noises) is what Margolles encapsulates in the formula: “all that’s left”.

This experience (one that generally resists representation) is an act of defiance and restitution in itself, braving the geo-geography of fear that the killings institute within cities. To tread the dust of these disregarded dead is one way of restoring the right to the city. But the wandering must soon give way to a transportation. “All that’s left” is reworked by the artist with the goal of carrying it, like a body is carried to the grave, into the public terrain of art – and this is done, needless to say, by the infusion of a basely material intervention. The blood and dirt, after drying into lengths of fabric, is re-humidified and thus brought back in the exhibition room. The shards of glass are mounted as pieces of jewellery, modelled on the bling that is so popular among the big crime bosses. The phrases that buzz around the killings are “tattooed” onto the walls or embroidered in gold thread over the blood-soaked fabrics, setting up a friction between luxury, greed and the peculiar moral code supposedly ratified by every assassination. In sum, this body of work uses the artistic space to reveal the complex economy of abjection and desire that bubbles along quietly, like a murder without end. If Margolles has turned herself into a *flâneur*, the chronicler and philosopher of the new necropoli of the outskirts, it’s because we needed to look squarely at the intimate relations that actually exist between the universal triumph of capitalism-cum-electoral democracy, and the *laissez-faire* of violence.

#### v. A crisis of over-execution

The different values assigned to different lives, which make it possible for a society to shrug off the mutual slaughter of the “dispensable classes”, is nevertheless reaching a saturation point that increasingly obscures the distinction between innocent and guilty victims. The relative normality that once allowed drug tycoons and their staff to mingle freely with the local elites, ceases to apply as soon as the “war” ceases to discern between combatants and spectators. In cases of a reckless overflow of violence such as we are witnessing in Mexico, the so-called war on drugs morphs into a kind of “total war” which ignores conventional curbs such as respect for the adversary’s family, restraint towards people who have no involvement with the narco-underworld, or relative deference to authority figures.

Media reports and citizen protest, faced with the magnitude of the carnage, no longer revolve as before around who did, or did not, deserve everything he got due to the company he kept. Not only does the rise in the number of slayings appear to place the very stability of the Republic in jeopardy; it actually defies understanding, it has become inconceivable. The production of corpses is on such a scale that the warehouses of good and evil can no longer contain them. The argument of individual responsibility is just one more casualty of the frenzied “bullet-fest” that is overrunning countries like Mexico.

vi. From “all that’s left” to what does not appear

Margolles places us in a tough, tense, intractable negotiation both intellectually and emotionally. The referent of violence does not provide us with any context, since it features on a quasi-dematerialized level. The phenomenon to which it alludes cannot be articulated as metalanguage, nor is it figuratively lodged in any object. Its bringing-across devolves into a series of situations marked by an unmediated short-circuit between filth and gold, blood and money, palatial decadence and impoverished suburb. It’s clearly a machine, but less clear is what it produces. We might venture to say that this machine squeezes, from “all that’s left”, an “appears”.

Only by means of an immanent development of the devices through which contemporary artists lay claim to a field of practice, can a particular level of esthetic autonomy continue to obtain in contemporary art. This is true even (or perhaps especially) when the chief medium of poetic production relies on a combination of capture and intervention of reality. More precisely, the friction set up by the contemporary artwork between the social fragments or episodes which it absorbs and adapts, and its finality, which is to parasite on, or intervene in, spaces, social circuits, collective affects and public discourses, negotiates a role which is anything but to represent: because the esthetic operations have shed their inert or ideal condition as non-things, and the image they offer of “reality” can never now be stabilized as a piece of conscious data. In all the confusion between criticism and affirmation, this non-production/non-consumption has nothing to display: its goal is to perturb epistemologies and practices. This is a political undertaking, to the extent that it refuses to have any truck with the amazing efficiency of the art world at grinding concern with history down into

curatorial pabulum. Here at least is an operation that refuses, tooth and nail, to offer up a violence tamed.

Following this path, it is no less imperative to discard the notion of the artistic artefact as a self-sufficient whole, guaranteed by being distanced. Indeed it would be a let-down, surely, were vestiges and fragments susceptible to being treated as a coherent whole, however crumbling this entity might be inside. The register of the residual is incompatible with notions of medium and technique. At any rate, the gesture which until recently ruled that the artwork was a product of its abstract, negative differentiation from the functional or reified object can no longer be made, since the dissonance can scarcely any more be heard due to the cacophony of the so-called art world. The residual can be brought to bear only as the input into a machine that churns out more residue. This is the figure of a process, a fluid, that is impossible to collect. It can certainly be felt, on the other hand; it smears us all over. Leaving us with trash under the skin.

And yet, this way of sweeping through what has been swept, just to stir it all up, allows us to air a provisional epistemology. Its interaction with collectivities and institutions unleashes a friction in which the text, rather than postulate a “context”, introduces it partially or in localized fashion into its own texture. But this altered reality is by no means generalizable. Like all sweeping, it’s a task that is never done. It gathers, it disperses, but does not sediment anything. It mixes up social knowledges, absorbs them, scatters them, and returns them to dust. If there is a writing that could accompany this experience, it too would have to be a blend of glimmers and dirt, facts and weeping, interjections and aphorisms. Margolles’s machine exists in the form of an unclean intelligence. The “almost nothing” that is “all that’s left” many not even be capable of being perceived as a “work of art”. No matter: what matters is that the artefact should at least agitate that phantom. Likewise, its value as a clue or symptom is minimal. Violence brought across into art only indicates that out there, the violence goes on.

An intervention like that which Margolles is effecting in Venice must have as a corollary the creation of huge dissatisfaction. It’s obviously not about to work as a showcase or proxy for the Mexican foreign service, tourism ministry or cultural bureaucracy. But nor will it gratify the receiver with the slightest sense of understanding either its raw material or its referent, in benefit of acquiring some global

knowledge. The bringing-across of the thing, of death, must not sediment the least gain in terms of justice, truth or safety.

As anyone knows who has lived in a city besieged by a pandemic, what pokes up, what appears behind the “it’s nothing”, is a materialist spectrality. Here, the unclean cannot be sublimated: it is administered, yes, in dilute enough form to preserve it from disgust. But the dose has to be sufficiently concentrated to make us uneasy about its microscopic virulence.

#### vii. The atrophy and hypertrophy of sovereignty

Beneath the bland unreality of the statistics and the battle to contain their symbolic effect, a relentless drama unfolds, which, like all power struggles, plays itself out on the farthest limit of bodies and feelings. The violence between the cartels, as we call them, and the organizations of the state is discharged in games of perception, affiliation and language, but its ultimate implementation is upon the lives of concrete individuals: their skin, their organs, their illusions, their fears, their privacy and their integrity. What was once a person, possessing a full range of potentials, flaws, neuroses and lights, becomes reduced to a formless, infectious mass. As we can see from the grisly pictures splashed over the crime tabloids, and equally in the scenes broadcast like war trophies by contemporary armies of occupation, death by execution has the peculiar trait of not being spiritualized. Unlike those who die from “natural causes”, the murdered gangster finds his memory overlaid by the fearsome image of his remains.

Beyond confirming that “criminal violence” is to blame for the outlawing of drug circulation and consumption,<sup>24</sup> a further element stands out in the Mexican case: the way in which for some years now, the battles for control over the black market have increased not only in number but in theatricality. An execution has to play its part in the growing induction of terror, which implies wide publicization of tortures when alive and dismemberment when dead; that is, the constant exercise of what the media like to call “a luxury of violence”. What is intolerable is to see that faced with the withdrawal, delay or failure of the state’s “monopoly on legitimate violence”, there is no diversification of the “legitimate violences” represented by rebellions. Instead we have the proliferation, theatricalization and inexorable progression of a violence that is spectacular and

*without measure*. In particular, the fever of beheadings<sup>25</sup> suggests that in northern Mexico, the scarecrow of a sacrificial sovereignty has emerged: the search for affiliation, the stupefied fascination with a kind of pre-modern power that imposes itself by making “everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign”.<sup>26</sup> We cannot, therefore, but detect a close relationship between the atrophy of a democracy helpless to implant itself by the force of its measured violence,<sup>27</sup> and the hypertrophy of the sovereignty of a sacrificial practice that does not aspire to political hegemony: it merely seeks to tighten control over this necessarily fluctuating commerce, whose illegality turns it into an particularly deregulated branch of contemporary capitalism.

Indeed, the violence raging over many parts of the world has no organizational potential, and thus cannot project itself as the foundation of a possible order to come.<sup>28</sup> It appears as a hypertrophied sovereignty, because in its massive outflow of transgression and its rehabilitation of the sacrificial economy, it turns out to be the mirror of today’s labor market. After all, what the police refer to as “organized crime” works exactly like a *maquiladora*, or assembly plant. The assassin only resorts to extreme measures in order to avoid being the next casualty. Such was the argument of a beheader interviewed by Sergio González Rodríguez, explaining that his principal task was to please the boss:

At the time, I think: I don’t want it to be me. But this guy was asking for it, and I don’t even know his name. Just hope I do it right so they can see I did what I was told, and don’t kick me out of a job. [...] After that I’m at home by myself, waiting for the boss to phone and say what he thought of my hit.<sup>29</sup>

The viscous, spectacular dying that inundates our fields and streets is an image of unemployment. The only difference is that the sackings are accomplished with a sharp chop from a machete.

A hundred years after America’s imposition of total prohibition based on the Puritan assumption that “drugs can destroy the soul”,<sup>30</sup> what Richard Nixon called the “drug war” has proved to be the most ineffectual campaign in history. Its sole achievement has been the encouragement of an ever larger market for ever cheaper “illegal substances” – and, of course, a towering mountain of corpses. It is not even true that the violence occurs mostly in the South: some estimates claim the number of homicides

connected with illicit drugs in the United States to be around 10,000.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the countries most affected by drug-war violence (the US, Colombia and Mexico) are still the loudest advocates of prohibitionist orthodoxy in all the international forums, ranged against Western governments which are increasingly tempted by the heresy of “harm reduction” policies as an alternative to the rigid “Just Say No”,<sup>32</sup> provides an excellent illustration of how ideologies articulate themselves around the compulsion to repeat. As Luis Astorga has pointed out, this obstinacy in “prolonging a policy of failure that compounds the problem, and insisting that nothing else will do” sums up the fundamental tautology of the war on drugs: “the real goal of this alleged war seems to be its own perpetuation”.<sup>33</sup>

Just like the “war on terror”, the exclusion of migrants, the management of pandemics, and even the fight to stop global warming, the war on drugs is a model for perpetual war. Rather than the dynamic whereby states located their foundation in an act of originary violence, we are drifting into a normalized management of conflict, designed to secure the immortality of democratic capitalism by means of everlasting wars without truces or victories. The scandal of the social body must not let us glimpse the torrent of violence beneath the asepsis of distancing. It is more appropriate in this situation to delve more deeply into shock, to dirty our hands with pain and grief, aspiring without knowing how to found a politics of discomfort. Otherwise, we run the risk of submitting to a new order, founded on fear and the infinite crusade.

#### viii. A theory of scandal

The experiences which Margolles confabulates and releases cannot be absorbed without anguish. If there is something of witchcraft in this material hubbling and bubbling, it has to do with the artist’s ability to summon up all sorts of unspecified terrors. Margolles’s procedures lure her audience into a house of phantoms. A space which, as Freud said about the uncanny – *unheimlich* – is at once familiar and estranged, intimate and alien, modest and obscene. The pavilion is a place where we must relate “to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts”, always fearful that “that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off”.<sup>34</sup> This is why, to the spectators as much as to the organizers, the pavilion sometimes feels like a vector of contagion. The matter which *is* the work and yet is not a work, by the process of washing/polluting the

pavilion floor, invades us as we walk upon it; summoning the dead to follow the dead.

This spectral operation (appearance and summons to appear) has taken possession even of the rhetorical question that serves as the title of this intervention. “What Else Could We Talk About?” is, of course, the retort to a reprimand. The sentence encloses a visceral reaction to the expectation of the Mexican elites that for the sake of the national image, or to safeguard the illusions of tourism, we should maintain a contrite silence about the indiscretion of a society bent on slaughter in such a noisy, immoderate and public fashion. They wish. In reality, the only thing liable to silence the obligation to do and to speak about the present catastrophe, will be the next one. The worst of experiencing history as a serial compulsion to disaster is that all too soon, there *will* be something else to talk about: the next massacre, the future failed revolution, a fresh cycle of economic collapse, the renewed disappointment of democracy, environmental cataclysms galore, another looming pandemic. Just as the mounting deaths resulting from the drugs battles was all that could smother the outcry over the hundreds of women murdered in places like Ciudad Juárez, so the only way to break the spell of the beheadings in the north of the country was for Mexico City to become the source of infection of a new strain of global influenza, as happened in April and May 2009.

Staggering from crisis to crisis; living from one scandal to the next. But no dialogue is being mooted here. The curator would simply like to share his delight in the fact that the word “scandal” derives from the Greek *skandalon*, meaning “stumbling-block”.<sup>35</sup>

As we shall soon see...

From a ghost-town called Mexico City, 2009.

<sup>1</sup> “2008, year with most bullets fired in recent Mexican history”, in “Entre el horror y el Luto”, *Reforma*, Mexico City, 5 January 2008. *Anuario 2008*.

<sup>2</sup> “Más de 5.000 asesinatos en México en lo que va de año”, *El País*, Madrid, Spain, 3 December 2008. ([http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/5000/asesinatos/Mexico/va/ano/elpepuint/20081203elpepuint\\_16/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/5000/asesinatos/Mexico/va/ano/elpepuint/20081203elpepuint_16/Tes)). According to the summary in Mexico City’s *Reforma* newspaper of the figures that appeared in its day-to-day reportage, these executions included 50 soldiers, 552 police officers, 626 bodies with evidence of having been tortured, and 170 decapitations. 312 bodies were accompanied by a message of some sort. See “Ejecutómetro 2008”, animated graphic at <http://www.reforma.com>

<sup>3</sup> Enrique Krauze, “La defensa de nuestra imagen”, *Reforma*, México, 14 January 2009.

<sup>4</sup> US. Joint Forces Command, “The Joint Operating Environment 2008”, November 25, 2008, p. 36. See: [www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2008/JOE2008.pdf](http://www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2008/JOE2008.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan, “Clinton: U.S. Drug Policies Failed, Fueled Mexico’s Drug War”, *The Washington Post*, 26 March 2009; p. A01.

<sup>6</sup> Rolando Herrera and Benito Jiménez, “Prometen duplicar la fuerza en Juárez”, *Reforma*, 26 February 2009, and Rolando Herrera, “1,800 soldiers arrive in Juárez”, *Reforma*, 1 March 2009

<sup>7</sup> “Narco: Ejecuciones 2009”, *Reforma*, 25 April 2009, p. 2. Among the victims recorded up to 25 April 2009, the paper specified 188 individuals who had been tortured before execution, 129 associated with messages, and 64 decapitations.

<sup>8</sup> The arguments in this section draw upon the reading of Margolles I developed in my essay, “Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO and beyond”, *Parachute* no. 104, October-December 2001, pp. 32-49.

<sup>9</sup> All these allusions were explicitly made by SEMEFO in their classic actions and exhibitions of the 1990s, most prominently in the group’s first museum show, *Lavatio Corporis* (1994) at the Museo Carrillo Gil in Mexico City.

<sup>10</sup> Lourdes Morales has provided a detailed examination of the sub-cultural currents feeding into SEMEFO, with special attention to the “dark” category, in her master’s thesis entitled “From Darkness to Metonymy” (“De la oscuridad a la Metonimia. Un ensayo sobre SEMEFO y Teresa Margolles”; MA in History, Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, Mexico City, UNAM, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> “This sacredness is the revelation of a continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite.” Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, translated by Mary Dalwood, City Lights, San Francisco, 1986, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces”, in: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion. New York, The New Press, 1998, pp. 177-178.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 181.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosis”, in *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*, edited by Allan Stoekl et al., University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 50-51

<sup>15</sup> For an artistic reading of the sign system of violence in Colombia, and of how it is codified in keeping with a

Catholic grammar going back to the Counter-Reformation, see José Alejandro Restrepo, *Cuerpo gramatical. Cuerpo, arte y violencia*. Bogotá, Universidad de los Andes, Fundación Valenzuela y Klenner, 2006

<sup>16</sup> Luis Astorga, a leading Mexican scholar of the drug phenomenon in Mexico and its history, notes that many former soldiers who passed over into the ranks of the drug gangs would have been trained in psychological counter-subversion techniques, making them experts in the logic of dazing the enemy with terror in order to elicit a hike in violence in return. (Personal communication from Luis Astorga, 21 April 2009.)

<sup>17</sup> “Son cuatro las ciudades más violentas en México: Patricia Espinosa”, *La Jornada*, Mexico City, 14 January 2009, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *Tratado sobre la violencia*, translated by Joaquín Chamorro Mielke, Madrid, Abada Editores, 2006, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> As is well known, Augustine of Hippo rejected both the manichaeian theory of the duality of good and evil and the neo-Platonic argument for the hierarchy of ideas, to arrive at a notion of evil as *privatio boni*, “the privation of good” (Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, 22). Today’s more pragmatic conception of the good always appears insubstantial, as the mere removal or reduction of evil in the search for security. Indeed, for our current hegemony, goodness is little more than the privation of evil

<sup>20</sup> *The Chambers Dictionary*, 1998, p. 828.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Picador, New York 2001, p. 99

<sup>22</sup> In his remarkable essay about beheadings in Mexico, Sergio González Rodríguez contends that the proliferation of smuggling tunnels, the safe houses in basements, the “underground” transmission of the imagery and discourse of violence through the media and on Internet, and the multiplication of heterodox sites of worship related to the criminal underworld, such as the temples and altars of Malverde and *La Santa Muerte* or Holy Death—come together to form a new urban design. He calls this “abject architecture,” the home of all that is “lugubrious, cadaverous, a place of rotting refuse”. (Sergio González Rodríguez, *El hombre sin cabeza*, Barcelona, Editorial Anagrama, 2009, pp. 161-163.) Nevertheless, one might add that this specialty in abjection is more of an anti-architecture, for it operates at the antipodes of Bataille’s definition of “architecture” as a metaphor for the face of authority, the monumental concealment of death and the structuring of rational thought. See Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture. The Writings of Georges Bataille*, translated by Betsy Wing, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1989, pp. 46-56.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938-1940, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, translated by Edmund Jephcott et al. London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p 19.

<sup>24</sup> Due to the traffickers’ need to settle their disputes without reference to a court of law, and to accumulate ever more weapons against their competitors and the police, as well as to the way in which the drugs war distracts the justice system from prosecuting other offences. (See Arthur Benavie, *Drugs. America’s Holy War*, New York,

Routledge, 2009, p. 38.)

<sup>25</sup> Probably unleashed, as Sergio González Rodríguez has suggested, by the “planetary impact” of the photographs of prisoners being tortured in Abu Ghraib, and the response of radical Islamic groups to post decapitation videos online. (Sergio González Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 73.)

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> It is not, to reprise Benjamin’s terminology, either a “foundational, mythic” violence (such as that originally invoked by states), nor a “conservative-repressive” violence (as that which re-establishes the rule of law); but nor is this a “divine violence” that overthrows the law as the expression of revolutionary redemption. (Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 243-244.)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 41-45. It is interesting to note how Slavoj Žižek concretizes Benjamin’s notion of divine violence in terms of the revolutionary Jacobin terror in France, between 1792 and 1794. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence. Six sideways reflections*. New York, Picador, 2008, p. 196.

<sup>29</sup> González Rodríguez, *Ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Proceedings of the Association of the American Pharmaceutical Association*, 51, 1903, p. 447. Quoted by Antonio Escobedo, *Historia General de las Drogas. Completada por el apéndice Fenomenología de las drogas*, 8th edition, updated and expanded. Madrid, Espasa Calpe S.A., 2008, p. 607.

<sup>31</sup> Benavie, *Drugs. America’s Holy War*, pp. 4, 37. As Benavie demonstrates, the data proves that throughout the twentieth century, the homicide rate in the US doubles or more during periods of prohibitionism.

<sup>32</sup> This split emerged very clearly in the recent statement put out by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in March 2009, after meeting in Vienna. Twenty-six governments including Germany, the UK, Australia and Croatia signed a dissident interpretation of the international resolution, in favor of “harm reduction” policies. See “After months of talks, UN still split over strategy on drugs”, *The Guardian*, Thursday 12 March 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas. El narcotráfico, del porfiriato al nuevo milenio*. Mexico City, Plaza y Janés, 2005, p.180

<sup>34</sup> *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud; Vol. XVII (1917-1919). London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953, pp. 241-242.

<sup>35</sup> *The Chambers Dictionary*, p. 1471.