UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Body Traces:

Performance Art against Violence

in Contemporary Mexico

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

by

Megan Lorraine Debin

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Body Traces: Performance Art against Violence in Contemporary Mexico

by

Megan Lorraine Debin

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Charlene Villaseñor Black, Chair

In 2006, then-President Felipe Calderón declared war on drug cartels in Mexico, and subsequently, an estimated 150,000 or more people have been killed as a result of the ongoing violence. Since the 1994 passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, unknown numbers of women have been murdered, often victims of torture and sexual violence, around the border city of Juárez. As early as the 1960s, leftists were being "disappeared" and tortured by a repressive government and police force in Mexico City. Contemporary artists in Mexico have responded to this pervasive violence against the body with an increasingly symbolic language, bearing witness to tragedy on behalf of victims whose voices have been silenced.

"Body Traces: Art against Violence in Contemporary Mexico" traces this history of the disappearing body in contemporary Mexican performance, street and land art, focusing on strategies that I call "invisibility tactics," which include the privileging of traces of the body over its actual presence and substituting either objects or the artist's own body as indexical references to absent bodies. Further, female artists in particular create work centered on themes of ritual cleansing and washing as a redemptive action to heal the pain of these absent bodies. My

dissertation maps out this tendency for the artist's body or its symbolic substitutions to do the work of suffering. Utilizing case studies, I examine the work of Nayla Altamirano, Artemio, Enrique Ježik, Teresa Margolles, Lorena Wolffer, and the 1970s "los grupos" movement, among others. In an attempt to, like the artists, bear witness to violence on the collective social body, I argue that, through the ghostly presence that highlights the body's absence, the trauma of physical violence is rendered most legible.

"Body Traces" represents an important contribution to the field of Mexican art history. My project addresses a critical absence in existing scholarship, situating contemporary Mexican performance art within its larger political narrative, and beyond the documentation of hereto understudied artworks, includes some of the first close readings of some of these works. Furthermore, by placing these actions within a theoretical framework that privileges the influence of local antecedents, my work rewrites the history of Mexican performance art from a Latin American perspective.

The dissertation of Megan Lorraine Debin is approved.

Cecelia Klein

Chon A. Noriega

Charlene Villaseñor Black, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

Dedicated to the people of Mexico, whose indomitable spirits inspire hope for justice.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the UCLA Graduate Division, UCLA Department of Art History, UCLA Latin American Institute and Latin American Studies Program, UCLA Center for the Study of Women, Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, Mellon Foundation, and UC Mexus for their generous financial and other support for the preliminary research, dissertation research, writing, and completion of this dissertation.

I would like to thank my brilliant advisor, Charlene Villaseñor Black: your dedication to the discipline, commitment to justice and to decolonizing the field, your vast knowledge, inspiring lectures, astute readings, beautiful writings, your endless energy and warmth in what can sometimes be cold spaces, and your unwavering support for those around you motivate me and all your students and colleagues. I could not have done any of this without your guidance, wisdom, kindness, and unending support, and I can only hope that I can offer the same to my students. Thank you to my equally brilliant committee members, Cecelia Klein, Saloni Mathur, and Chon Noriega: your guidance, support, and feedback have been crucial to the development and completion of this text. I would also like to thank my many other academic mentors for their encouragement and help: Karen Cordero, David Kunzle, Cuauhtémoc Medina, John Pohl, Joanna Roche, Kevin Terraciano, and Carol Wells. I hope that I can make y'all proud.

Thanks go out to my UCLA Department of Art History graduate cohort, especially Tom Folland, whose guidance helped me crossed the finish line, and, for their friendship, Tenley Bick, James Fishburne, Andrea Gyorody, Julia McHugh, Naomi Pitamber, Adrienne Posner, Beth Rosenbloom, Erin Vaden, and my fellow Latin Americanists in the Department of Art History. Thanks also to my Latin American Studies Program *comadres* Alicia Houtrouw and

Jacqueline Torres, and to my Department of Spanish cohort, Xochitl Flores-Marcial and Román Lujan.

Thank you to my contacts in Mexico, including those at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Universidad Iberoamericana, Ex-Teresa in Mexico City and ASARO in Oaxaca. Thank you to all my friends, scholars, and artists in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Tepoztlán, in particular Eva Careen Romero and mi compadre Yeska. Thank you to all the artists who have shared their important work, for their ceaseless efforts at bravely healing wounds, especially Nayla Altamirano, Artemio, Enrique Jezik, Teresa Margolles, Monica Mayer, Lorena Wolffer, and Niña Yhared.

Thank you to *mi familia en México*, including all members of the Le Batard Noble and Argüelles families, and in particular Maite Argüelles and Jorge Le Batard. Thank you for always treating me like family, for opening your homes and your hearts to me, for teaching me and feeding me, and especially for all the love.

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at Fullerton College, especially Carla Falb, Carol Henke, Kristin Mihaylovich, Jaime Perez, and Klutch Stanaway. Thank you to my community at The Dewella, the place where I finally released my albatross. Rob and Christine Huisman, Kennelyn Deloach, Mary Rose, and everyone who brought me nourishment (especially the citrus fruits!) both physical and spiritual in those days. Thank you to my trainer Coach Ken Afriken for helping me to find my strength and for teaching me the power of softening and letting go. Thank you to Ariel Gentalen, Karla Monterey, and Matt Salazar for the *ossobuco* and art dates. Thank you to Bam for being a friend until the end -ride or die! Thank you to all of my friends in the Fullerton community for inspiring me.

Thank you to Adrian Herry, who challenged, encouraged, and supported me in the final stages of this journey and supplied me with enough love, prosecco, and flower to get me through the turns-out-not-so-terrible task of completing the revision stages of this dissertation. Thank you for challenging me to never doubt my ability to do great things in this world, encouraging me to seek greatness within myself and others and to remember the power of gratitude, and supporting me in countless ways. My giant lil Buddha! When the student is ready, the guru appears.

Thank you to my dearest friends for believing in me and listening (what a gift!) on so many late nights, especially Bre Allen, Allison Brinkerhoff, Lindsay Hooper, Samina Saude, and Stacey Schrader. Thank you to my friends in Italy for helping to shape the woman I am today, especially Stefano Costa, Federica Schirinzi, and Michelle Tarnopolsky. Thank you to my dear friend Vanessa Raabe, for always loving me and cheering me on; your energy grounds me and builds me up. Thank you also to Nada Ayad for being my heart sister since 1995 (and wifey for life), teaching me about the pomodoro, and helping to catalyze the finishing of this dissertation. For all of this, I am forever grateful.

Most importantly, thank you to my family. Thank you to my grandma for encouraging me to follow my dreams and live life to the fullest, and to my grandpa for instilling in me an appreciation for the Spanish language and the holiness of corn, which sustained much of my life in Mexico. Thank you to my dad Thomas James Debin for always believing in me and to my mom Susan Hinkle Debin for being my feminist icon. Thank you to my parents for birthing, loving, and supporting me. Thank you, mom and dad, for taking me on my first trip to the pyramids at Teotihuacan, where this journey began, for nurturing my passion for the arts and education, and for always being game for whatever wild ideas I cook up. Thank you to my sister Shannon Severaid for being my best friend and to my brother Ryan Thomas Debin for being my

consigliere. Thank you to my entire family, especially to my cousins, and to Matt, Zosia, and Niko Severaid and Jennifer, Reaves, Grant, Dorian, and Clarke Debin for bringing such joy into my life. Thank you to my friends and family for their unconditional love.

Thank you to all of my mentors, teachers, professors, colleagues, family, friends and loved ones who have supported me in this epic journey. Thank you to everyone listed above and the long list of important people who couldn't be included here for brevity's sake. You all have taught and continue to teach me so much every day. I have no idea how I will ever repay you all.

Thank you to every challenge and struggle along the way that made me stronger, taught me compassion and humility, and renewed my resolve. Thanks to the haters for keeping me real. Thank you for every blessing and for every lesson.

Thank you to the people of Mexico for your courage in the face of grave injustices, and to artists the globe over for the bravery to face and attempt to heal the wounds of these injustices.

Importantly, I would like to thank all my students – present, past, and future – for giving my life purpose and for being the hope of future generations.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Invisibility Tactics in Contemporary Mexican Performance Art

In April 2013, the Mexican government inaugurated its official monument to the victims of the drug war amidst both pomp and circumstance and the wailing cries of victims' families. Designed by architectural firm Gaeta-Springall, *Memorial a las victimas de violencia en Mexico* (*Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico*) consists of 70 corten steel slabs, some 40 feet tall, jutting toward the sky amidst the trees of Parque Chapultepec, considered the Central Park of Mexico City.[1] (Figure 1) Paid for with money seized from cartel raids and on land donated by the Department of Defense, the tall, thin blocks display quotations from famous writers and thinkers like Octavio Paz and Martin Luther King Jr.[2] The massive steel slabs, some rusted, others stainless steel or mirrored so as to reflect the trees in the park or the sight of the memorial visitors themselves, are balanced with open spaces defined by concrete walkways and benches, and a large fountain that reflects the views of slabs and trees, and that, according to the architects, represents the cleansing power of water. The memorial's designers assert that the soaring walls draw the eye upward, in a hopeful gesture, an action only completed by the involvement of the public.[3] Visitors to the memorial are invited to mark the walls with text, images, prayers, and pleas for peace in the ongoing drug war.

[1] COR-TEN (or corten) is a type of steel that is meant to weather, therefore eliminating the need to be painted and maintained.

[2] Alissa Walker, "Can Mexico's Drug War Memorial Honor both Victims and Criminals?" *Gizmodo*, September, 5, 2013, accessed December 27, 2016, http://gizmodo.com/can-mexicos-drug-war-memorial-honor-both-victims-and-c-1246783198.

[3] "Memorial to Victims of Violence / Gaeta-Springall Arquitectos," Arch Daily, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.archdaily.com/359698/memorial-to-victims-of-violence-gaeta-springall-arquitectos.

Memorial is conceived as a space of public expression, where the public, from private citizens to activist groups, has expressed grief but also anger and frustration.[4] While some activist groups support the memorial, others oppose it for various reasons, not the least of which because the memorials rests on former military land in spite of the military's alleged complicity in the ongoing violence. Others would oppose any memorial, regardless of its location. At the inauguration, political science professor at Mexico's Autonomous Institute of Technology José Merino argued, in an interview with the *Associated Press*, that part of the problem as he sees it is that the Mexican government is not properly documenting the disappeared and deceased, stating, "We haven't reached the point where we can agree on what is hurting us and why. The job of the government is to study all these cases and not pile up stones for memorials."[5] Renowned poet and a major figure in the contemporary anti-violence movement, Javier Sicilia, publically rejected the government's official memorial in favor of protests occupying space at the then-recently unveiled *Estela de luz* (*Pillar of Light*).

Located at the easternmost end of Chapultepec Park on the massive thoroughfare Avenida Paseo de la Reforma, the *Pillar of Light*, which opened in February 2012, just over a year before *Memorial*, consists of two 104-meter-tall quartz pillars mounted on a metal frame and adorned with lights, and ostensibly stands as a monument to Mexico's independence from Spain in the 19th century. (Figure 2) Widely critiqued for its $79 million price tag amidst allegations of corruption and its 16-months-late inauguration date, public opinion in Mexico

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[4] Damien Cave, "These Walls Speak, Recalling Victims of Violence in Mexico," *New York Times,* August 22, 2013, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/23/world/americas/these-walls-speak-recalling-victims-of-violence.html.

[5] Associated Press, "Mexico Divided Over Memorial to Drug War Victims," *USA Today*, April 5, 2013, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/04/05/mexico-drug-war-memorial/2058323/.

suggests a more fitting dedication as a monument to the hopelessness of the situation in the country.[6] Neither the *Estela de luz* nor the *Memorial* serve as proper memorials to the countless lives lost in the ongoing violence. Public memorials are meant to bring a sense of closure after a traumatic moment in history, but *Memorial* does not seem to serve its intended effect. Memorials are usually erected after a war has ended, which is certainly not the case of the drug violence in Mexico. Despite the government's efforts, *Memorial* represents, at best, the tactics of a regime out of touch with its people, and at worst, an attempt to ensconce the realities of a war that is far from over.

The government's attempt to ignore the reality of the drug war in Mexico is reflected in the formal elements of the work. Reminiscent of Richard Serra's monumental sculptures, *Memorial*'s aesthetic is decidedly modern. But its clean language does not suit such a messy subject as a violent drug war. The steel slabs of *Memorial* jut out of the earth in an empty gesture that reflects the government's own empty gestures in the public arena.[7] The medium is sterile and industrial in nature, a cold, emotionless response to an intensely emotional topic in Mexico. Further, the massive, overwhelming scale of the work dwarfs the viewer, refusing to engage with the public on an intimate, human scale, betraying its own lack of humanity. The Mexican

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[6] Ken Ellingwood, "Critics Say Mexico Bicentennial Tower a Monument to Its Failings," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2012, accessed December 27, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/07/world/la-fg-mexico-monument-20120207.

[7] The Mexican government holds press conferences about a war it is losing and builds memorials to victims of a war that is far from won. Instead of addressing the root causes of the violence, including the problems of corruption, lack of development, unemployment, violent misogyny, and the like, the government's primary tactic is the deployment of security forces, which often spurs more violence, according to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). The CFR points out that "Mexican authorities have been waging a war against drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) for more than a decade, but with limited success. Thousands of Mexicans, including politicians, students, and journalists, continue to die in the conflict every year." In 2018, Mexico's homicide rate was the highest it had been in over 30 years. For more information, see https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-drug-war

government may have had the best intentions, but the result seems to be an attempt to make something beautiful to commemorate the victims without having actually done much to end the violence in the first place. In this way, despite its apparent beauty, *Memorial* reads as no substance, all pretense.

As an aesthetic project, *Memorial* may be considered in opposition to the graphic images regularly published on the cover of the aptly named tabloid *El Gráfico*, which commonly features two images on its cover: an explicitly gruesome, violent image paired with an overly sexualized female body, a grisly juxtaposition, the significance of which is not lost on the viewer, particularly considering the problem of violence against women in the region. (Figure 3) Unlike the country's major newspapers and in disregard for international codes of ethics on printing graphic images[8], *El Gráfico* ensures that people are bombarded on public streets with gruesome images of violence on a regular basis. Surely, as Susan Sontag asserts in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us."[9] The violent images published on the cover of *El Gráfico* and displayed on the streets of the metropolis normalize violence against the body in general, and in particular against women, creating the cultural circumstances that allow violence to continue. On

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[8] The Fourth Estate Public Benefit Corporation (also referred to as Fourth Estate) is an international, non-partisan, human rights, membership organization dedicated to an engaged and informed public, well equipped with quality information needed to make informed decisions by a strong free press. The Fourth Estate's "Journalism Code of Practices" sets standards for journalism and related professional fields. According to their Code, "The Fourth Estate recognizes three core principles that are fundamental to the ethical practice of journalism: reporting the truth, ensuring transparency and serving the community." Further, there is a section on harm minimization that reads, "Avoid the gratuitous use of offensive, confronting, or harm-inducing sounds, imagery, or words." Another statement reads, "Show sensitivity when dealing with children, victims of crime, or people who are especially vulnerable due, for example, to trauma, injury, illness, or other factors." For more information on the Fourth Estate's Code, see https://www.fourthestate.org/journalism-code-of-practice/. *El Grafico*'s publication of gruesome crime photographs on its cover is in direct opposition to this international code of ethics.

[9] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 80.

the other end of the spectrum, *Memorial* serves as the government's official stance on the violence: we won't count the dead, but we will raise pillars in their memory. *Memorial*'s sanitized response erases the often personal and intimate nature of violent crime. Together with the general public, artists in Mexico are surrounded by these images, and it is this haunting visual landscape that sets the stage for artistic responses to the contemporary situation. Amidst this backdrop of gruesome, vivid images of death in *El Gráfico* and the arguably aesthetically pleasing but ultimately hollow response of the federal government in the form of *Memorial*, many people feel hopeless, abandoned by those in positions of power, purportedly with the power to changes the situation for the better in Mexico. Contemporary artists in Mexico navigate the waters somewhere in between these two extremes of the total figuration of violence in *El Gráfico* and the white-washed, sanitized, state-sponsored *Memorial*.

Alongside massive public projects like *Memorial*, artists in Mexico have been responding to state violence, border violence, and narco-violence with performance and conceptual art that functions on a more intimate scale and a more personal level than the large, state-sponsored actions. Dating back into the 1970s and continuing into the 2010s, a trend has emerged amongst many contemporary artists in Mexico that aims to highlight violence against the body through the removal of that body and its replacement with indexical references. Sometimes in the form of other objects, like women's brassieres or garbage bags wrapped in rope, other times as remnants of the body, in the form of bodily fluids like blood for example, and still other times in the form of the artist's own body, these indexical references to the victims render the harm enacted against the body in Mexico more visible than do graphic images of violence. The body's traces highlight its very absence, rendering the invisible body even more visible.

Situated in this nebulous space between two extremes, my dissertation examines contemporary art in Mexico in the 1970s and then again in the post-NAFTA era with the aim of examining the trend that I call "invisibility tactics," which refers to the artists' use of indexical references to the body to highlight that body's absence and therefore make that body's wounds even more visible. Most of this artwork is conceptual in nature, taking the form of performance or land art, and is presented in contrast to the shock value of the gruesome and desensitizing images of *El Gráfico* and the meaninglessness of *Memorial*'s sanitized interpretation. Precisely because tabloid images desensitize the viewer and government-sponsored monuments ring hollow, artists in Mexico resort to a coded language that succeeds where street protests and press conferences fail.

Contemporary art in Mexico must be understood within the context of its contemporary political, economic, and social circumstances. Young, radical artists from the 1970s to 2010s often responded directly to the historical events of the prior decades and to a government known for its repressive silencing of dissent. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ruled Mexico continuously from 1929 to 2000 and then again from 2012 to 2018, dominating Mexican politics at local, state, and national levels for most of the 20th century, apart from a 12-year interval under the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). Today, the PRI stands as a symbol of corruption and electoral fraud in Mexico and aligns with centrist views and a neoliberal platform.

By the 1960s, the powerful PRI had held power in Mexico for decades. At a time of great economic uncertainty in Mexico, the PRI silenced protests in the capital. Student and worker's movements spread throughout Mexico in the 1960s as part of the global movements for workers' and civil rights. The government did not welcome the massive protests that were sweeping the capital during the 1960s, culminating in 1968. In that year, protests had been going on

throughout Mexico City, in the historic center of the city and on the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), or National Autonomous University of Mexico, campus for several months. Meanwhile, the PRI continued its suppression of such protests.

In these same months, the government was preparing Mexico City to host the 19th Olympic games – the first and only Olympic games held in Latin America until Brazil's effort in 2016. Student and worker's groups were taking advantage of the increased foreign media attention to voice their concerns and had been staging protests for several months leading up to the Olympic games, much like the myriad protest in Brazil leading up to the 2016 Olympic games. Of particular concern to many in Mexico was the rapid modernization of the metropolis that was part of the creation of the handsome facade that was being presented to the rest of the world during the Olympics, a modernization which benefited the few rich and left the poorest Mexicans behind. Massive highways were built as people lived in shantytowns on the outskirts of the city.[10] The political climate in Mexico in the 1960s was in many ways similar to that of pre-revolutionary Mexico, when similar kinds of improvements were made to the city (widening boulevards like Paseo de la Reforma, European-style architectural programs, etc) but ignored the plight of the city's poorest denizens, changes which in part led to the continuing frustrations of the lower classes and ultimately to full blown revolution in the early 20th century. It is not difficult to imagine that artists in the 1960s and 70s felt a resurgence of those same pressures.

Growing tensions came to head in the fall of 1968, culminating with the Tlatelolco Massacre, just ten days before the start of the Olympic games.[11] In early October, students had assembled around the plaza at Tlatelolco, just outside the city center. What started as a peaceful

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[10] Gallo, "Mexican Pentagon," in *Collectivism After Modernism*, 180.
[11] Kara Michelle Borden, "Mexico '68: An Analysis of the Tlatelolco Massacre and its Legacy" (Thesis, University of Oregon, 2005), 3.

student demonstration ended in utter disaster, with the deaths of tens or hundreds of students and civilians at the hands of the Mexican military.[12] (Figure 4) In the years after the massacre at Tlatelolco, artists, scholars and journalists became increasingly censored and were threatened with physical harm. Journalists suffered the seizure of their work and the closing down of their operations. Police kidnapped and tortured supposed dissenters. During these tumultuous years, young artists associated with social and political movements began to coalesce against not only a corrupt government but also a tone deaf art establishment. [13]

Likewise, art in the early years of the 21st century must be considered within its own decidedly global historical context. Nothing has marked this period of Mexican economic history more than the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which instigated US corporate reliance on the *maquiladora*[14] system, which, in turn fueled the internal migration of gendered labor from rural parts of Mexico to the industrialized northern borderlands around Ciudad Juárez. (Figure 5) Coinciding with the changes brought on by NAFTA, since the mid 1990s, women have been murdered at an alarming rate around Ciudad Juárez, with an environment of impunity providing little hope of relief. In 2009, Ciudad Juárez was declared the "most violent city in the world," according to a study by the Mexican non-profit group Citizen Council for Public Security and Justice, which presented its report to Mexico's

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[12] There is no consensus as to how many students and civilians died at Tlatelolco, but numbers range from 44 to over 300, according to some estimates. See: Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, "Problema Estudantil," *ADFS* 3 October 1968.
[13] Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de Historia Oral*, (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1998).
[14] *Maquiladora* is the Mexican term for manufacturing operations in a free trade zone (FTZ), where factories import material and equipment on a tax-free basis for assembly, processing, or manufacturing and then re-export the assembled, processed and/or manufactured products, sometimes back to the raw materials' country of origin. The maquiladora factory system in Mexico essentially services US corporations at the expense of poor Mexicans, providing low wages to a work force with little agency to fight for better working conditions.

security minister in August of that year. Statistics of violent homicide in the region remain high.[15]

Further complicating problems in the border areas and other parts of Mexico, a major political shift occurred when, in 2000, the PRI's decades-long reign ended and Mexico elected the PAN's Vicente Fox to the presidency. Six years later, President Felipe Calderon continued the PAN's period in power at *Los Pinos*[16] and in that same year, decided to fight the cartels that had begun to wreak havoc in the plazas of disputed Mexican territories. It is a common belief that cartels had operated with impunity in Mexico under the PRI, and these views have been confirmed in recent years with the revelations of corrupt mayors' and governors' involvement in cartel-related violence. Evidently, before the shift, local PRI governments would covertly allow cartels to move product through Mexico toward its destination in the US, provided that the *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) kept the violence of their turf wars outside of the plazas and the public eye. When the PRI lost power in the early 2000s, as cartel bosses saw it, all bets were off and unspoken contracts were to be re-negotiated. As expected, drug lords rushed in to fill the power vacuum created with this political shift. However, instead of re-negotiating with the PAN, whose stance was decidedly confrontational, cartels became, in some areas, the de facto local power. On December 11, 2006, then-president Calderon declared war on the cartels, and since

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[15] In 2009, Ciudad Juárez was declared the "most violent city in the world," according to a study by the Mexican non-profit group Citizen Council for Public Security and Justice, which presented its report to Mexico's security minister in August of that year. For further reading, see: Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmzan, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and la Frontera* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011); Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2015); Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2008); and Marie France Labrecque, "From Ciudad Juárez to the Highway of Tears: These Aboriginal Women Murdered with Complete Impunity," in *Cahiers Dialog,* n 2014-2, Montreal 2014.

[16] "Los Pinos" is the term used to reference the residence of the Mexican president.

then an estimated 150,000 have died and at least 27,000 have been disappeared in the Mexican Drug War, the Mexican theater of the so-called Global War on Drugs.[17]

Due in part to these devastating historical circumstances, Mexico has of late been of interest to academics in the disciplines of economics, political science, and the social sciences, as well as to journalists. Much of the writing in this area is journalistic in nature, and includes the many books written by journalist Charles Bowden, such as his 2004 *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* or his 2010 *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*. Other books of importance include: Mexican novelist Carmen Boullosa and US historian Mike Wallace's *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the 'Mexican Drug War*; Howard Campbell's *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*; Sylvia Longmire's *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars*; and Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda's *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy*. Chicanx Studies scholars have tackled the subject in texts such as: *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation* in Mexico by Alice Driver*; Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* by Rosa-Linda Fregoso*; Sangre en el desierto/ Desert Blood: Las muertas de Juárez/ The Juárez Murders* by Alicia Gaspar De Alba; *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán; *The Femicide Machine* (Semiotext(e) /

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[17] Unfortunately, estimates are all we have, as records of those killed or disappeared in the drug war are not accurate. See for example: Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, "Counting Mexico's drug victims is a murky Business," *NCR*, March 1, 2014, https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/counting-mexicos-drug-victims-murky-business; William Booth, "Mexico's crime wave has left about 25,000 missing government documents show," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexicos-crime-wave-has-left-up-to-25000-missing-government-documents-show/2012/11/29/7ca4ee44-3a6a-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_story.html; and Jason Breslow, "The Staggering death toll of Mexico's drug war," *PBS Frontline*, July 27, 2015, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/; accessed December 27, 2016.

Intervention Series) by Sergio González Rodríguez and Michael Parker-Stainback (Translator); and *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* by Diana Washington.

As visual artists, writers, and poets have responded to the increasing violence, scholars in the humanities and the arts have initiated research on the topic of activist art in Mexico. That said, activist art in Mexico in the decades of the 1970s to the 2010s is a severely understudied field of art history, with most of the literature focusing on the 1970s. For example, George Flaherty's *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the '68 Movement*, published in 2016, focusses on literary, photographic, and cinematic responses to the tragic events of 1968 in Mexico, and Rubén Gallo's chapter "The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism during the 1970s," published in 2007 in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette's *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, examines the work of the post-1968 artist collectives in Mexico City. Even less is written on Mexican art in the post-NAFTA era, and what little is written exists primarily in Spanish. It is possible to find both English and Spanish-language monographs on some of the more well-known post-NAFTA artists. For example, one can find a handful of texts on Teresa Margolles, due in part to the fact that she represented Mexico at the 2009 Venice Biennial, including Julia Banwell's *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death* from 2015 or Florian Steininger's German-language *Teresa Margolles* published in 2020. However, other artists discussed in this dissertation, such as Nayla Altamirano or Niña Yhared, remain unpublished in either monographs or anthologies; what little is written comes in the form of short newspaper articles or unpublished texts found in archives, almost always written only in Spanish. Overall, very little has been written about the topic of artistic responses to violence during these decades. None of these can be considered definitive texts on contemporary Mexican performance

art; nor too does this dissertation purport to be. Instead, this dissertation is foundational, laying the fundamental basis for future studies in the field.

Unfortunately, this history of Mexican performance art remains understudied, undervalued, and, in many ways, unwritten. Despite the strengths of their works, Mexican performance artists are often disregarded in mainstream histories. They are usually confined to histories of Latin American performance and, even then, they are often excluded in favor of the few Latin American performance artists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Ana Mendieta who have managed to enter mainstream discourse, perhaps in part because they worked in the US. These token inclusions are rare and misrepresent the complete expanse of Latin American performance art. Though their contributions have been invaluable, Gómez-Peña and Mendieta are certainly not the only great Latin American performance artists.

English-language scholarship on the subject of Latin American performance art began only in the 1980s and 1990s, with the publication of anthologies like *Holy Terrors* and *Corpus Delecti*. Diana Taylor's *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform* presents some of the major female players on the stage and includes textual transcripts from some of their performances and *Holy Terrors* represents an attempt to bring increased visibility to female performance artists in Latin America. Coco Fusco's 1999 *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* documents the most renowned contributions to the field and also includes textual or visual excerpts from selected performances. In many ways, it is the best-written anthology on the subject, maintaining high standards of art historical writing.

Another essential text, *Arte no es vida*, presents a history of performance art in the region, acting as a companion to a retrospective-style exhibition at El Museo del Barrio in New York in 2008. The illustrated tome includes a handy timeline, listing major artists and actions as well as

important historical and political events in the region. Deborah Cullen organizes this anthology geographically in an area where many of these artists are questioning the very nationalist boundaries that are used to contain and categorize them. At the same time, it is vital to understand these artist actions within their local and highly specialized dialogue, a concern that ultimately prevails in the case of most anthologies on the subject. *Arte no es vida* should be recognized as a useful reference more than a critical engagement with the history of performance art in Latin America. Like *Arte no es vida*, Kaytie Johnson's 2016 text *Strange Currencies: Art and Action in Mexico City 1990-2000* accompanies an exhibition of the same name, which showed at the Galleries at Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania September 19 – December 15, 2015. The exhibition and text serve as important documentation of Mexican experimental art in the 1990s. Though *Strange Currencies* constitutes a vital step in the right direction, as is the nature of an exhibition catalog, there is little in the way of detailed analyses of artworks, a space my dissertation aims to fill.

Mexican scholars have also begun to write comprehensive histories of performance art, providing indispensable information that can serve as a foundation for further critical analysis. For example, Josefina Alcázar and Fernando Fuentes published *Performance y Arte-Acción en América Latina* in Spanish, which presents a logical, well-organized, chronological history, providing a list of important artists and works. This publication, like much of the writing coming out of Mexico, functions as a possible departure point. It is important to note that all of these texts deal with histories of Latin American, not solely Mexican, performance. Despite its critical place in the socio-cultural life of Mexico, there exists no comprehensive written history of post-1968 Mexican performance art.

Scholar Amy Sara Carroll has begun this process in her recent book *Remex: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era,* based on a theoretically complex dissertation "The Allegorical Performative: Mexican and United States Transnational Tactics for Representing and Reinventing the 'New World Border'." Her work, based in literature and on a loose interpretation of the term "performative," represents the direction in which scholars writing on Mexican performance need to move. Another step in the right direction is apparent in Mexican scholar and critic Cuauhtémoc Medina's *Era de la Discrepancia*, a catalog that accompanies an exhibition of the same name that attempts to see Mexican artists on their own terms. A useful resource, this text is meant to function only a placeholder for more complex histories that are yet to be written.

Certainly, texts like those of Taylor, Fusco, and Cullen have brought legitimacy to the field, ensuring that Latin American artists will not be written out of the histories. While the importance of these books cannot be understated, the scholarship on Latin American performance art is seriously deficient. Even worse off is the field of Mexican performance art, despite Carroll's and Medina's best efforts. What the field needs is theoretical work that can both document the contributions of artists in Mexico and posit new understandings of contemporary Mexican art history. My dissertation begins to fill this gap.

Based on my training as a social art historian at University of California, Los Angeles, overall, I employ a social art historical approach, concentrating on the political, economic, cultural, and ideological factors that help shape the works that I examine, though elements of feminist and semiotic theories also contribute to my interpretation. While social art history is grounded in Marxist theory, a theory which still informs my position, its definition has evolved to refer to the study of the social factors that are relevant to the production of an artwork and the

creation of its meaning, that is, the context around the work of art. My work is informed primarily by Shifra Goldman's seminal work *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin American and the United States* from 1994, which examines the work of Latin American activist artists within their interconnected social contexts. Feminist critique informs my readings of Mexican art, especially the work produced in relation to violence against women in the border region. At the outset, as a scholar, I was influenced by work by second-wave feminists such as Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking feminist work in the 1970s and Audre Lourde's work on intersectionality in the 1980s. Since then, third- and fourth-wave feminist theories have influenced my scholarship as well. My formation as a feminist academic is indebted to scholars such as Eli Bartra, Judith Butler, Norma Broude, Mary Garrard, Amelia Jones, Lucy Lippard, Peggy Phelan, Griselda Pollock, and Hilary Robinson, and artists such as Lynda Benglis, Judy Chicago, Eva Hesse, Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, The Guerilla Girls, and Yoko Ono and, more recently, Tracey Emin and Micol Hebron. Writings on feminist art and domesticity, including the work of Francesca Berry, Julia Bryon-Wilson and Mignon Nixon, also guide my readings of the works. Examining feminism at the intersection of decolonial theory has led me to take an intersectional feminist approach, which considers how race and class, for example, create magnified marginalization for certain groups.

My dissertation focusses on case studies in the form of close readings of the performances, relying on both film and still images from archives and in-person observation of performances. For these visual analyses, I owe much to semiotic, postmodernist, deconstructivist, and poststructuralist strategies as presented by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and feminist scholars, including American performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan. I

look to Derrida's notion of the trace, as presented in *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, to negotiate the discussion of the presence/absence dichotomy. For Derrida, the trace is the "mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present."[18] I make use of Derrida's theory to understand how the absence of the corporeal creates meaning in the artworks. For example, like Derrida's trace, the blood that artist Teresa Margolles[19] uses is "the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself."[20] Expanding on Derrida's definition of the trace, I use Barthes's account of the function of photography in *Camera Lucida* to identify how performance can act like a photographic trace. The disappearance, obfuscation or removal of the corporeal, like Barthes's photograph of his mother, reminds us of what *was*, not what *is*. For example, as the viewer watches artist Lorena Wolffer[21] figuratively mutilate herself, she is not only reminded of her own mortality but is paralyzed by the realization that the lives of the murdered women cannot be recovered. Functioning like a photograph, performance provides a visible mnemonic device for the spectator. Sometimes, memory does not need that which is visible, and absence then becomes more compelling than presence. Here, I depend on the work of Phelan, who explains the power of the invisible in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. For Phelan, real power lies not in greater visibility but in the unmarked, the unseen, the unspoken. Phelan contends that "visibility is a trap" because it "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial

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[18] Gayatari Chakravorti Spivak, "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), XVII.
[19] Mexican artist Teresa Margolles is known for using remnants of the bodies of victims of violence, including blood and sweat, as the medium for her artwork.
[20] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London & New York: Routledge, 1978), 493.
[21] Mexican artist Lorena Wolffer is known for her performances and social practice work related to the topic of violence against women.

appetite for possession."[22] The work of these Mexican artists is effective because it rejects this "voyeurism" – the viewer does not need the image of a cadaver – and simultaneously invites the "fetishism" of the reliquary residue. Phelan's work relies on that of Derrida and Barthes, and together they combine to facilitate the theoretical foundation for my analysis.

My field work consisted of archival research; studio, gallery, and museum visits; performance attendance; and informal and formal interviews with artists. Most of my research was done in my two-year residence in Mexico City from 2010-2012, with earlier stints in Oaxaca City in 2008 and 2009. While in Mexico City, the majority of my research was conducted at the Ex-Teresa, an alternative arts space that was pivotal to the development of performance art in Mexico. The Ex-Teresa holds a large collection of rare Spanish language texts and a digital archive of all performances that took place there since the early 1990s. I also visited the archives at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas (Institute for Aesthetic Research), the most important arts research institute in Mexico, affiliated with the National Autonomous University (UNAM) in Mexico City. The Institute houses the BEXART archive, a large collection of documentation on Mexican artists and exhibitions, including artist biographical information, ephemera, catalogs from both local and international exhibitions by Mexican artists, and information on the artistic and cultural spaces that have cultivated revolutionary art practices in Mexico. I was granted access to Pinto Mi Raya's archives and library, which contain, in addition to specialized texts not readily available in the US, an invaluable collection of all Spanish-language newspaper articles on contemporary performance art since the 1990s.

While in residence in Mexico, my focus was not only on archival research but also on interviews with artists and important scholars. I had meetings with Mónica Mayer, feminist

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[22] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 65.

performance artist, historian, co-founder of the archive Pinto Mi Raya, and one of the most influential figures in the field. Throughout my research, I interviewed artists and scholars such as Nayla Altamirano, Artemio, Maris Bustamante, Karen Cordero-Reiman, Felipe Ehrenberg, Victor Lerma, Teresa Margolles, Lorena Wolffer, and Niña Yhared. As often as possible, I attended live performances, gallery openings, and museum exhibitions related to contemporary art in Mexico. My research in Mexico City was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and two Dickson Fellowships in Art History.

Funded by the Latin American Institute at UCLA, my research in Oaxaca spanned the two summers of 2008 and 2009. The focus of my research in Oaxaca was on contemporary street artist collective Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca (ASARO), a popular youth art movement formed in response to political events in the summer of 2006, the Oaxacan teachers protest movement. While in residence in Oaxaca City, I integrated into ASARO, assisting them with the creation of stencils, shadowing them on street painting events, participating in a public mural painting program, and learning woodblock printmaking from the artists. During my time with the group, I learned through informal interviews with the members of the collective of the historical context of their work as well as their local Mexican and international artistic influences. As in Mexico City, I regularly visited artists' studios, attended gallery openings, and visited museums and cultural sites. Complementing artist interviews, archival research was conducted at the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO). My dissertation is the culmination of nearly four years of field research in Mexico and several years' worth of post-fieldwork research on contemporary performance art in Mexico.

Body Traces is the culmination of this research, focusing on post-NAFTA developments in performance art in Mexico and their roots in the decade following the global protests of 1968,

as young, politically motivated artists reconceptualized their work. Organized chronologically, my dissertation consists of five chapters: an introduction, three case studies, and a conclusion. Starting with 1968 as the historical moment that initiates a new artistic era in Mexico, I first trace "los grupos" (the groups) movement in Mexico City, focusing on how Mexican artist collectives engage in invisibility tactics. The subsequent case studies focus on art in the era after NAFTA, again examining invisibility tactics used by artists engaged with the themes of border violence and narco-violence.

Chapter Two, "*Agruparse o morir:* Artist Collectives in 1970s Mexico City," posits the project of these artist collectives as a local, Mexican precedent for the work of artists in post-NAFTA Mexico. My case studies begin with the staged kidnapping of one of the members of the artist collective Proceso Pentágono (Pentagon Process). Their 1973 performance *El Sequestro* (*The Kidnapping*) took place on the street in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes (The Palace of Fine Arts) in downtown Mexico City, as part of their exhibition entitled *A Nivel Informativo* (*For Informational Purposes Only*).

Their staged kidnapping in broad daylight and in front of stunned passersby denounced the recent kidnappings, disappearances, and torture of leftists by the Mexican government and police, the complete truth about which is still obscured by sealed government documents. The work also functions on a more subtle level, renouncing the hijacking of ideas occurring in Mexico during these years -- namely censorship of mass media outlets, harassment of journalists, illegal search and seizure, and the silencing of alternative presses. Moreover, *El Sequestro* represents an act of solidarity that condemns the disappearances of leftists by oppressive regimes throughout Latin America. The body was already under attack by the government, as evidenced by the actual kidnappings; in re-staging the event, the artists precipitate the disappearance of the

body, emphasizing its absence. This moment is the critical precursor to the work of more contemporary artists, who respond to conditions in which the body is increasingly vulnerable.

"*Agruparse o Morir*" traces the development of the performative work of Proceso Pentágono as well as their conceptual installations of the 1970s. In addition to collaboration in the artistic process, los grupos artists experimented with genres, working in performance, conceptual art, and street art, and shared a renewed belief in the artist as cultural worker, harkening back to post-Revolution Mexico. This chapter documents the street art of the collective Grupo Suma, whose spray paint and stencil work in the 1970s serves as a precedent for more contemporary street art in Mexico. The work of Grupo Suma, like Proceso Pentágono, confronts the topic of disappearances of political dissenters in Latin America, as seen in their public paintings of the then-missing Argentine guerrillera "Tania" Tamara Bunker Bider. Grupo Suma utilizes the medium of street art as a method to reach a larger audience, painting their images on the walls of the streets of the capital city so as to influence the non-museum going public with their political message. The chapter closes with a look at the No Grupo, who offered a dissenting alternative to the serious political project of the grupos generation through the use of humor, an emphasis on radical performativity, and the production of both solo and group work.

Through their collective practice, Mexican artists in the 1970s critiqued and denounced the repressive Mexican regime that controlled the country for decades and the restrictions on freedoms that the regime imposed. Los grupos were interested not only in experiments in collaboration but also in revolutionizing the interaction between artists and the public. They brought art out from the gallery onto the streets, where the public participated in the process in unprecedented ways, engaging in dialogue about contemporary political, economic and social circumstances.

My next case study takes the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 as a crucial historical and artistic moment. NAFTA reshaped the relationship between the US and Mexico, especially in regards to the movement of products and people within and across the Mexican border. It has resulted in the relocation of factories to the Mexican side of the border, where labor is inexpensive. For example, in the border city of Juárez, a massive system of maquiladoras (factories) sprang up. The need for labor to run these factories has caused massive migrations within Mexico.[23] The maquiladora workforce is comprised mostly of women, hired because they are perceived as more compliant, who have migrated alone from other parts Mexico. These women, who have arrived at the border town having left their families behind, are particularly vulnerable to the environment of police corruption and complacency. Since 1994, women have been murdered at an alarming rate, their bodies left mutilated, often showing signs of sexual violence and torture, in the desert outskirts of the city.[24]

In reaction to this violence against the female body in Juárez, Lorena Wolffer metaphorically dissected her own body into symbolic parts that stand for all the femicide victims. In her 2002 performance *Mientras Dormíamos/While We Were Sleeping*, Wolffer marked up her naked body with a black permanent marker, indicating the parts of her body that would be severed or mutilated were she one of the victims. Wolffer then redressed, obscuring the evidence, hiding her body, and exited the gallery. Her body acts as a signifier for others, mangled parts standing in for the whole person. Wolffer's concealment of her symbolically mutilated body mimics the inaction of the Mexican government and local police in Juárez, who have been

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[23] For more information on NAFTA's impact on Ciudad Juárez, see Chris Bowden, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, (New York: Aperture, 1998).

[24] While the femicides may have decreased since 2006 (when President Calderón declared war on the drug cartels), many scholars believe that the violence against women along the border has merely been replaced by increasing violence at the hands of the cartels.

accused of covering up the truth about the murders. In an effort to make the plight of these murdered women visible, Wolffer metaphorically dismembers her body, allowing it to function as an analogue for all the mutilated victims.

Chapter Three, "*Las Nobodies*: Performing Testimony in the Borderlands," examines the performance and land-based works of contemporary Mexican artists creating art centered on the topic of violence in the borderland region, particularly Ciudad Juárez, considering how these artists conceive of their work as part of the process of witnessing to the violence in the region. In responding to gender violence in the borderlands, this chapter notes that female artists respond on a more intimate, personal level, often utilizing their own bodies as stand-ins for victims of violence, while male artists respond on a more monumental level, often in the form of massive earthworks. This chapter also considers the ritual aspects of performance art, reading female artists' figurative substitutions as redemptive actions that heal the nation in the wake of the violence.

Likewise, Chapter Four, "Bloody Body Doubles: Narcoviolence, Cleansing, and Redemption," considers art actions that function as redemptive rituals, in this case looking closely at cleansing in the performances as a metaphor for washing away the sins of the nation. In the third and most recent case study, the body continues to disappear in the face of the increasing violence of the Drug War. Though most casualties are members of the cartels, soldiers or police officers, a number of innocent or otherwise uninvolved people (e.g., toddlers and university students) have been caught in the crossfire.[25] In the face of these statistics, Mexican artist Teresa Margolles emphatically asks, "What else we could talk about?" For her 2009 *¿De*

[25] Arthur Brice, "Drug war death toll in Mexico since 2006 exceeds 28,000, officials say," *CNN*, August 3, 2010, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/08/03/mexico.drug.deaths/index.html.

qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?, Margolles substitutes blood, as if it were a relic, for the body; victims' family members mop the floor with a mixture of blood and water.

While certain aspects of Margolles's work appear to fit in the category of installation, not performance, other components are clearly performative. Yet another Mexican contribution to the field of performance art, Margolles is able to blur the lines between the two, expanding the definition of performance itself. In this work, where the exhibition is on and in the floors, not on the walls, the body is almost completely effaced. Blood becomes the signifier for the missing body, functioning as a kind of *memento mori*. Barely visible traces of the body heighten the phenomenological reaction in the viewer, eliciting a corporeal and visceral response despite the body's absence.

"Bloody Body Doubles" traces a shift in Margolles's work, from her early work that highlights the shock value of graphic imagery to her eventual embracing of the remnant as a more powerful visual language. Chapter Four not only examines the work of Margolles but also looks at other performance and conceptual art in Mexico that deals with the use of symbolic cleansing actions. For example, I survey Wolffer's *Bañate*, in which the artist washes her own body in blood, Niña Yhared's symbolic corpse cleaning, and Altamirano's use of intimate laundering in *Las Nobodies*. Cleansing is read as a symbolic action that works to heal the nation of the wounds of narcoviolence. These artists utilize objects and body doubles to stand in for the absent body, making corporeal trauma visible through their performances. Artists in Mexico activate the body double through the domestic act of cleansing and in invoking domesticity, symbolically heal the trauma of narcoviolence. This ritual functions as a feminist act, one that empowers the artist through the transformation of objects. The locus of change lies at the heart of feminized work.

Margolles's conceptual endeavor represents the culmination of a project taken up by Mexican artists decades earlier -- the erasure of the body in contemporary Mexican performance art. My dissertation traces this history, utilizing three case studies to illustrate the gradual refusal of the body as a necessary element to performance. Instead of performance art that is contingent on the figure, many contemporary Mexican artists conceive of a practice without the corpus, some substituting body parts for the whole while others employ objects as symbols of the corporeal.

The work of contemporary feminist performance artists in Mexico is certainly informed by the history of mainstream performance art worldwide.[26] By definition, performance artists are concerned with the body. Take, for example, US artist Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* from 1975. In this famous work, Schneemann pulled a long scroll out of her vagina and read from it. In 1971, Chris Burden had his assistant shoot him in the arm, and, in 1975, he had himself nailed, as if crucified, to a Volkswagen Beetle. These artists, like many contemporary performance artists, inflicted physical pain on their own bodies, by now a common trend in the genre. In fact, many feminist performance artists have abused their bodies in order to remind the viewer of violence against women, as well as to demystify the female body, empower women, or even expose their own fragility. Growing out of this global history but also responding to local precedents – as evidenced in Chapter Two, artists in Mexico exemplify a shift away from the highly visible body in performance art.[27] Utilizing an increasingly symbolic language, Mexican

[26] I use the term "mainstream" to refer to performance art produced in the United States and Europe and particularly in art centers like New York City, Los Angeles and Paris. A tangential goal of my project is to allow for the entrance of Mexican artists into this mainstream.
[27] Many mainstream performance artists continue to engage the highly visible body in their practices. Take, for example, Marina Abramovíc's (2010) *The Artist Is Present* at the New York Museum of Modern Art, in which the artist sat in a chair for seven hours a day during the entirety of the retrospective exhibition.

artists hide, obfuscate, remove or substitute other items for the body, in a seemingly contradictory effort to make visible its erasure. Mexican artists symbolically re-enact violence against the body, instead of enacting actual violence against the self, as if in ritualistic acts of redemption.[28]

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Phelan argues that real power lies not in greater visibility but in the unmarked, the unseen, the unspoken. Phelan asserts that "visibility is a trap" because it "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession."[29] For Phelan, this state of being marked is a loss of power. Intuitively recognizing Phelan's notion of the power of the invisible, early Mexican performance artists employ invisibility tactics. They turn away from the body, understanding that the absence or trace of the body can reveal its frailty more effectively than a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the arm. Proceso Pentágono literally removes the body in *A Nivel Informativo*; Lorena Wolffer allows the parts of the body to stand for the whole in *Mientras Dormíamos*; and, in *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, Teresa Margolles needs only the trace to stand in for the body itself. In all these examples, the Mexican body slowly disappears, until it evaporates into thin air, like the blood on the floor of Palazzo Rota Ivancich.

To understand the disappearance of the body in Mexican performance art, my project asks why so many Mexican artists engage with this notion of bodily erasure. What are the conditions prompting this shift? How are these works related to social and political change in the region? What role does real violence against the body play in this turning away from the corpus?

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[28] This notion of redemption may stem from the idea that violence against the body can lead to salvation. In Catholicism, for example, Christ's sacrifice of his worldly body redeems all of humanity. While these artists are not overtly religious individuals, Mexico is an overwhelmingly Catholic nation and these cultural beliefs may inform their work.
[29] Phelan, 6.

Is this primarily a Mexican phenomenon? Or is this a pan-Latin American trend? Has it influenced the mainstream? And, perhaps most importantly, can we imagine performance art without the body?

While it is commonly maintained that performance art grew out of European Dadaism, Japanese Gutai, and New York's happenings,[30] Mexican performance art does not fit into this traditional narrative. Instead, it unfolds along its own trajectory. That Mexican performance grew out of the tradition of Latin American protest art and in dialogue with its own art history is a divergence from the common misconception of Mexican art as peripheral to the center, derivative of mainstream trends.[31] My dissertation takes as its starting point the idea that performance art in Mexico is fundamentally public and political in nature and that it responds directly to localized socio-economic and political circumstances. Artists in Mexico are concerned with developing works that allow for a public dialogue in response to an increasingly conservative, privatized and reactionary government that seems to foster the resulting violence against the body. Responding to what scholar Olivier Debroise calls the problem of "institutionalized amnesia"[32] regarding the importance of local precedents for this art, my project is an attempt to resituate Mexican performance art within the historical and conceptual milieu of Mexican artists like Felipe Ehrenberg and Helen Escobedo, rather than adhering to a model that insists on thinking of Marcel Duchamp and Hélio Oticica as its most critical precedents. Though Oticica is Brazilian (little more than geographic proximity), his work does not necessarily relate to Mexican realities nor does it deal with similar problems. My project asks, "Is there a more

[30] Roselee Goldberg was one of the first to trace this narrative in *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).
[31] Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation, (*Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).
[32] Olivier Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*, (Mexico City: UNAM, 2007), 19.

relevant historical precedent for the work of these Mexican artists than that of a Brazilian artist whose work is more in line with Dadaist concerns?"

My project aims to address this critical absence in existing scholarship on art from Mexico, while situating it within the larger and critical political narrative of Mexico. Furthermore, by placing these actions within a theoretical framework that privileges the influence of local antecedents over a forced and often ill-suited engagement with their American and European counterparts, my work rewrites the history of Mexican performance art from a Latin American perspective. This new history will contribute to the field of mainstream performance art, revealing the contribution of Mexican artists to the field and widening the scope of the mainstream to include frequently marginalized artists.

I envision my dissertation as a first step toward a comprehensive critical history of performance art in Mexico. I hope to bring a critical perspective to these underrepresented artists, situating their work within the postmodernist discourse it warrants. While I stress the importance of local political and economic circumstances, especially the changing relationship between Mexico and the US, these Mexican examples can serve to help understand an evolving art practice worldwide. As globalization continues, performance art will continue to adapt to changing conditions. And as the body is met with increasing violence – from Guatemala to Palestine, Afghanistan to Syria – artists will turn to an increasingly symbolic language. As the body, the tool of the performance artist, evaporates, the practice itself evolves, finding power in invisibility.

Chapter Two

Agruparse o morir: Artist Collectives in 1970s Mexico City

Contemporary Mexican performance art has its roots in the years following the global protests of 1968, as young, politically motivated artists reconceptualized their work. My dissertation begins with an examination of these post-1968 developments in Mexican art. Concerned with state violence, censorship, and disappearances, and informed by international developments in contemporary art, many Mexican artists in the 1970s turn to performance art and, in particular, collective art practices, often embracing invisibility tactics to make visible the dead and disappeared victims of institutionalized violence.

Organized mostly chronologically, my case studies begin with what is known as "los grupos" (the groups) generation, young artists who were practicing collective art making in the 1970s in Mexico City. In addition to collaboration in the artistic process, los grupos artists experimented with genres, working in performance, conceptual art, and street art, and shared a renewed belief in the artist as cultural worker, harkening back to post-Revolution Mexico. One such practice took the form of the staged kidnapping of one of the members of the artist collective Proceso Pentágono (Pentagon Process). Their 1973 performance *El Secuestro* (*The Kidnapping*) took place on the street in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes (The Palace of Fine Arts) in downtown Mexico City, as part of their exhibition entitled *A Nivel Informativo* (*For Informational Purposes Only*). (Figure 6) Oddly enough, the Mexican government had originally sponsored the event in an attempt to support vanguard art practices.[33] Despite their usual

[33] Many politicians later regretted their initial support of Proceso Pentágono because the group's work directly criticized the Mexican government. In fact, then-ruling party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), today a symbol of corruption and electoral fraud in Mexico, censured a Proceso

aversion to government-run arts institutions, the artists accepted the invitation, welcoming it as an opportunity for institutional critique. They set up an installation inside the galleries, as they had promised, yet added a performance not in the hallowed space of the museum but on the streets, where the city brimmed with life. One of the group's members acted as a passerby, mingling with the crowd. Suddenly, three men (the other members of Proceso Pentágono) ran toward him, threw a sack over his head, tied him up, and carried him away in front of an astonished crowd.[34]

While Proceso Pentágono's staged kidnapping denounced the physical implications of state-sponsored repression, the work also renounces the hijacking of ideas occurring in Mexico during these years -- namely censorship of mass media outlets, harassment of journalists, illegal search and seizure, and the silencing of alternative presses. Artists of "los grupos" generation were globally-minded, and it is clear that *El Secuestro* functioned as an act of solidarity that condemned the disappearances of leftists by oppressive regimes throughout Latin America. The body was already under attack by the government, as evidenced by the actual kidnappings; in re-staging the event, the artists precipitate the disappearance of the body, emphasizing its absence. This moment is the critical precursor to the work of more contemporary artists since 1994, who, through invisibility tactics, respond to conditions in which the body becomes increasingly vulnerable.

The collective art practices that coalesced in the 1970s in Mexico officially earned their "los grupos" title after appearing on the international stage. In 1976, the organizers of the 10th

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Pentágono installation that denounced the PRI, in 1978, when the ruling group hosted its 50th anniversary celebration in the same building.

[34] Rubén Gallo, "The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism during the 1970s," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 171.

Paris Youth Biennial invited artist and museum director Helen Escobedo to select the Mexican artists who would participate in the exhibition the following year. Escobedo proposed that groups rather than individual artists should represent Mexico on the international stage.[35] Among the groups, Escobedo invited Proceso Pentágono and Grupo Suma, two of the groups discussed in this chapter. For the Paris Biennial, these artist collectives had developed explicit critiques of Mexican political authority, particularly the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) or the PRI, which had controlled the Mexican government for decades.

The art of the grupos was unambiguously political. In a structure that they built in the shape of a pentagon – surely a reference to the United States Department of Defense, Proceso Pentágono denounced the systematic use of torture by police and government officials in repressing social movements worldwide. Grupo Suma's work critiqued the reforms proposed by Jesús Reyes Heroles, then Secretary of the Interior.[36] Imagine that American artists today send artwork to an international exhibition that explicitly criticizes the policies of the current federal government. Critiquing the government through art is a hallowed tradition in Mexico. Consistent with this tradition, the Mexican art establishment repeated this critical (albeit controversial) move on the international stage at the Venice Biennial in 2009 with the work of Teresa Margolles, who, much to the dismay of politicians, the economic elite, and the tourism industry in Mexico, exposed to the international art-going public the problem of narcoviolence in contemporary Mexico, topic of a later chapter in this dissertation.

Participating artists critiqued not only the political authority at the time but also the art establishment at the Paris Biennial. For example, Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg (1943-2017),

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[35] Olivier Debroise, Alvaro Vazquez Mantecon, and Cuauhtemoc Medina, *La Era de la Discrepancia: Arte y Cultura Visual en Mexico, 1968-1997* (Mexico City: Turner/UNAM, 2007), 217.
[36] Ibid., 217.

who participated in the international Fluxus[37] movement and was a member of Proceso Pentágono, led a protest against the curator of the biennial's Latin American section, Ángel Kalemberg, arguing that he functioned as a representative of Uruguay's military dictatorship and therefore could not be trusted to be impartial in his curatorship of art from the region -- especially considering the political nature of the art exhibited by Mexican groups.[38] Ultimately, due to the controversies, the Mexican artists were exhibited separately from the rest of the Latin American art shown at the Paris Biennial of 1976, and the Mexican artists published their own alternative catalog, almost as if a contemporary Salon des Refusés.

In July of 1977, when reporting on the Mexican artist collectives' participation in the 10th Paris Youth Biennial, Mexican newspaper *El Gallo Illustrado* published the headline "Agruparse o morir" – "group together or die." For artists of this generation, the situation was dire. The biennial catalyzed the solidification of the "grupos" movement in Mexico, in the 1970s, when many visual artists chose the path of collective production as the only solution in an era of repression. On the international stage, Mexican artists had presented themselves as groups of "cultural workers," in solidarity with workers and student movements worldwide, and displayed highly conceptual, politically-charged works.[39]

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[37] Fluxus was an experimental international art movement in the 1960s, founded by George Maciunas in New York City, that embraced play, introduced humor into art, blurred the boundary between art and everyday life, rejected formal arts institutions and education systems, and encouraged participatory art. For more information, see: Jacquelyn Baas, *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Dorotheé Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth University Press, 2010); Ken Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 1998); Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Thomas Kellein, *George Maciunas: The Dream of Fluxus* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007); and Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego, California: San Diego State University Press, 1998).

[38] Debroise, 217.

[39] Shifra Goldman, "Elite Artists and Popular Audiences: The Mexican Front of Cultural Workers," in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 123-139.

The definitive book on “los grupos” is yet to be written, though two dissertations provide evidence of a growing scholarly interest in post-1968 Mexican art collectives.[40] Here, I discuss three of these numerous conceptual and performance art collectives in Mexico City after the tumultuous years of the 1960s. I begin by presenting the historical context – the political and economic factors, particularly events in the 1950s and 60s – that led artists to believe that they would need to “group together or die.” You will also see the artistic traditions, particularly abstract painting, these collectives were breaking with. Then, I will present case studies from three of these Mexico City-based artist collectives, Proceso Pentágono, Grupo Suma, and the No Grupo. To further narrow the scope, I will focus on their works that consider themes of the disappearing body, traces of the body, body doubles or stand-ins, and issues of visibility and invisibility. The grupos generation is an important but often overlooked component of Mexican contemporary art history and an essential local precursor for Mexican artists working in the post-NAFTA era.

In the 1970s, Mexican artists began working collectively staging performances – often in the streets – and creating conceptual or non-object based works that reflected their response to numerous socio-political issues occurring in Mexico and other countries in Latin America. Proceso Pentágono staged a kidnapping in broad daylight in their performance work *A Nivel Informativo* and denounced torture by the Mexican police and state with recreated installations of torture chambers. Grupo Suma turned painting into an action, bringing art out of the gallery and onto the streets, where they made visible the often invisible urban realities in the rapidly modernizing metropolis of Mexico City. No Grupo, utilizing sarcasm and irony, spoke in the

[40] See Arden Decker, “*Los grupos* and the Art of Intervention in 1960s and 1970s Mexico,” PhD dissertation, CUNY, 2015 and Elizabeth Christine López, “The Mexican Front: Artist Collectives in Mexico City, 1968-1985,” PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2002.

language of masks to engage with notions of representation and, in a comment on Proceso Pentágono's earlier work, staged a symbolic kidnapping.

The historical context provides a framework for the artist's perceived need to "agruparse o morir." After the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco and decades of a stagnant political landscape – under the powerful Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) – artists come together in groups to collectively produce conceptual and performance art. The PRI is a Mexican political party that held power in the country for more than 70 years. After several decades in power, the PRI has become today a symbol of corruption and electoral fraud in Mexico. Despite the term "revolutionary" in the party's name, the group is not what we in the US would consider "leftist." On the contrary, the group is more aligned with centrist views and functions on what would be called a neoliberal platform.

This period of Mexican history saw the devaluation of the peso, massive migration to the newly industrialized Mexico City and the birth of shantytowns, government corruption, and wide sweeping practices of repression. After WWII, the US began to invest in Mexico. This new relationship benefited the US and elite Mexicans but the disparity between rich and poor only widened. Throughout the 1950s, the PRI put down several strikes, crushing the usually powerful unions. Student and worker's movements spread throughout Mexico in the 1960s as part of the global movements for workers' and civil rights. The government did not welcome the massive protests that were sweeping the capital during the 1960s, culminating in 1968. In that year, protests had been going on throughout Mexico City, in the historic center of the city and on the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), or National Autonomous University of

Mexico, campus for several months. Meanwhile, the PRI continued its suppression of such protests.[41]

In these same months, the government was preparing Mexico City to host the 19th Olympic games – the first and only Olympic games held in Latin America until Brazil's effort in 2016. Student and workers' groups were taking advantage of the increased foreign media attention to voice their concerns and had been staging protests for several months leading up to the Olympic games, much like the protests in Brazil leading up to the 2016 Olympic games. Of particular concern to many in Mexico was the rapid modernization of the metropolis that was part of the creation of the handsome facade that was being presented to the rest of the world during the Olympics, a modernization that benefited the few rich and left the poorest Mexicans behind. Massive highways were built as people lived in shantytowns on the outskirts of the city.[42] The political climate in Mexico in the 1960s was in many ways similar to that of pre-revolutionary Mexico, when similar kinds of improvements were made to the city (widening boulevards like Paseo de la Reforma, European-style architectural programs, etc) but ignored the plight of the city's poorest denizens, changes which in part led to the continuing frustrations of the lower classes and ultimately to full blown revolution in the early 20th century. It is not difficult to imagine that artists in the 1960s and 70s felt a resurgence of those same pressures.

Growing tensions came to a head in the fall of 1968, culminating with the Tlatelolco Massacre, just ten days before the start of the Olympic games.[43] In early October, students had assembled around the plaza at Tlatelolco, just outside the city center. What started as a peaceful

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[41] See Rubén Gallo, "Mexican Pentagon," in *Collectivism After Modernism* and George Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the '68 Movement* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2016).
[42] Gallo, "Mexican Pentagon," in *Collectivism After Modernism*, 180.
[43] Kara Michelle Borden, "Mexico '68: An Analysis of the Tlatelolco Massacre and its Legacy" (Thesis, University of Oregon, 2005), 3.

student demonstration ended in utter disaster, with the deaths of tens or hundreds of students and civilians at the hands of the Mexican military.[44]

According to Rubén Gallo, the massacre at Tlatelolco was made possible in part by architecture and urban planning. At Tlatelolco Plaza was a new modernist housing complex that was part of the modernization project in Mexico City, designed by the architect Mario Pani. Pani, a disciple of Le Corbusier, was inspired by the modernist ideal of rational and efficient urban planning. The flipside of this rationalism is an obsession with crowd control: like most modernist designs, Tlatelolco had mechanisms of surveillance and control built into it. There were few exits and entrances, which could be easily controlled with gates, and few public spaces. When students gathered in one of these few spaces in October of 1968, they were essentially exposed in a modernist panopticon, where they could be surveyed from almost any point in the complex and with very little control over their own mobility.[45]

Students had assembled in the plaza to protest the coming Olympic games; they shouted, "We don't want the Olympics! We want revolution!" Around sunset, the Mexican military entered the area with tanks. Now declassified documents reveal that the military had fired into the crowd, chaos ensued, and the plaza was sealed off, essentially trapping unarmed students and civilians in the area. Likely hundreds of civilian protestors and bystanders: students, professors, academics, artists, workers, and local residents were massacred by the Mexican military.[46] While at the time, government propaganda and the mainstream media in Mexico claimed that government forces had been provoked by protesters shooting at them, government documents

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[44] There is no consensus as to how many students and civilians died at Tlatelolco, but numbers range from 44 to over 300, according to some estimates. See: Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, "Problema Estudiantil," *ADFS* 3 October, 1968 and Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de Historia Oral* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1998).
[45] Gallo, 174.
[46] "All Things Considered," *National Public Radio*, February 14, 2002.

that have been made public since 2001 under then President Vicente Fox suggest that the snipers had in fact been employed by the government.

Human rights abuses in the period are rarely discussed in part because many documents are still sealed or mysteriously missing. It was only in 2001 that the National Human Rights Commission in Mexico released statistics on the period. For example, the Commission found that between 1970 and 1985, at least 532 people associated with militant leftist groups were disappeared and that the police and other government agents were responsible for the illegal detention and killing of at least 275 people.[47]

Decades later, in June of 2006, an ailing, 84-year-old Luis Echeverría, who was Secretary of the Government in 1968 and later a PRI president, was charged with genocide in connection with the massacre at Tlatelolco. He was placed under house arrest pending trial. In early July of that year, he was cleared of genocide charges, as the judge found that Echeverría could not be put on trial because the statute of limitations had expired and also, asserted the judge, the massacre did not constitute genocide.[48] His exoneration was upheld by a federal judge in 2009.

In the years after the massacre at Tlatelolco, artists, scholars and journalists became increasingly censored and were threatened with physical harm. During these tumultuous years, young artists associated with the social and political movements began to coalesce against a tone deaf art establishment. While students were murdered in the streets, artists of "La Ruptura" generation continued to create apolitical abstract paintings. Gunther Gerzso's *Figure in Red and*

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[47] "Mexico's National Human Rights Commission: A Critical Assessment," *Human Rights Watch*, February 12, 2008, accessed December 27, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/02/12/mexicos-national-human-rights-commission/critical-assessment.
[48] "Warrant for Mexico Ex-President," *BBC News*, June 30, 2006, accessed December 27, 2016, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5135378.stm.

Blue from 1964, to be discussed below, exemplifies the abstract style, influenced by the painting of the New York School, that was typical of La Ruptura (The Rupture/Breakaway) generation.

La Ruptura refers to the postwar generation of artists working in the 1950s to ‘70s and beyond in Mexico, mostly working in abstract styles that were in vogue internationally, including abstract expressionism, neofiguration, and the cooler, more cerebral geometric abstraction.[49] After WWII, young artists of La Ruptura generation had reacted against the muralism of “los tres grandes” in Mexico. For these artists, the muralism of the Mexican School was too didactic, too nationalistic, and the local political focus too limiting. In contrast, they argued, the language of abstraction was universal. For these artists, abstract painting was apolitical, a fact they fervently embraced. Many of these artists of The Rupture generation felt they were painting in a hostile environment, seen by their younger counterparts as traitors, embracing the foreign style of abstraction. But for them, their abstract painting rejected the by-now institutionalized work of what is referred to as “the Mexican School” in favor of a universal artistic language.[50]

Though not always unified by style, as some artists were figurative painters while others were abstractionists, they were unified in their rejection of the stifling nature of the Mexican muralist movement. One such abstract painter and one of the most well-known at the time, Gunther Gerzso (1915-2000) worked in geometric abstraction, as evidenced in *Personaje en*

[49] See the following texts on La Ruptura generation in Mexico: Lelia Driben, *La Generación de la Ruptura y sus antecedentes (Historia del Arte Mexicano)* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Ecónomica, 2012); Edward Mc Caguhan, *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012); Edward Sullivan, *Latin American Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000) and for their American counterparts, see Mahon Sharp Young, *Early American Moderns, Paintings of the Stieglitz Group* (New York: Watson Guptill, 1974).

[50] “Felguérez dice que su generación de es de ruptura sino de apertura universal.” *El Informador*, Guadalajara, March 8, 2012.

Rojo y Azul (*Figure in Red and Blue*) from 1964, which consists of relatively flat areas of color in bright blues, reds, and greens, constructed into geometric shapes stacked atop one another. (Figure 7) In terms of content, the meaning is not obvious. The viewer may bring her own interpretation to this kind of geometric abstraction. For Gerzso, the lack of figuration could allow the viewer to approach the canvas with her own perspectives and reactions, much like the Color Field painting of Mark Rothko or Barnet Newman. In line with the ideals of action painters like Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Robert Motherwell, Gerzso's work allows for multiple interpretations by spectators and appeals to the emotions and subconscious desires of the viewer. Gerzso was also a screenwriter, director, and designer. The Breakaway generation artists no longer felt obliged to respect the confines of the strict political message – in support of the Revolution – that was required of the Mexican School.[51]

Other Breakaway generation artists embraced figuration, as evidenced in the work of José Luís Cuevas (b. 1934), a proponent of neo-figuration. In fact, Cuevas was one of the first to challenge the tradition of Mexican muralism.[52] Cuevas's loosely figurative, expressive paintings often gestured toward the grotesque, which caused some controversy in his lifetime, perhaps reminding the viewer of the work of Irish painter Francis Bacon and the naïve style of Jean Dubuffet. Cuevas's moody self-portraits, as evidenced in his 1968 lithograph *Self Portrait*, focused on the emotional landscape of the artist, offering the image of a distorted head as a metaphor for the artist's own contemporary struggles with self. (Figure 8) Cuevas's work is

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[51] See the major studies on the artist, including: Rita Eder, *Gunter Gerzso: El esplendor de la muralla* (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1994); Jennifer Josten, *Mathias Goeritz: Modernist Art and Architecture in Cold War Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and Eduardo de la Vega and Luís Martin Lozano, *The Art of Gunther Gerzso: Risking the Abstract* (Nashville, Tennessee: Turner, 2003).
[52] "Cronología biográfica," José Luis Cuevas Museum, Mexico City, accessed April 11, 2014. See the major studies on the artist, including: Jaime Moreno Villareal, *José Luis Cuevas: el monstruo y el monumento. Iconografía de una imagen pública* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996) and Jose Luis Trueba Lara, *Jose Luis Cuevas: Cuevas Antes de Cuevas* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2006).

sometimes difficult to look at, as it presents grotesque imagery that projects a pessimistic view of human existence. However, the work is more personal and is not overtly critical of the perceived ills of society, such as the struggles of the poorest classes, for example.

Embracing abstracted figuration yet with a brighter, more exuberant color palette and more playful gestures than is seen in the work of Cuevas, Oaxacan born Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991) was also one of the first to break with the muralist tradition with his abstract expressionistic and neofigurative paintings.[53] His work represents a return to formalist interests, including an emphasis on line and composition, and he perhaps is most celebrated for his embracing of pure, highly saturated colors. His paintings were often very colorful and were not completely abstract, often revealing human figures or animal forms, one such painting depicting a man being bitten by a dog, for example. In *Children's Games* from 1959, Tamayo uses abstracted geometric shapes such as circles and rectangles to depict pink figures on a bold red background. The largely monochromatic painting imparts a timelessness in its abstraction, disconnected from the social conditions in Tamayo's home state of Oaxaca. (Figure 9)

Abstraction permeated both painting and sculpture in post WWII Mexico. The geometric abstraction of Manuel Felguérez (b. 1928) is another perfect example of the trajectory that art had followed in Mexico during these decades.[54] Felguérez's *Energy of the Origin Point* from 1973 consists of metal slabs reduced to abstracted geometric forms that are then painted in a bright but limited color palette. (Figure 10) These kinds of abstract works were prevalent in the

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[53] See the major studies on the artist, including: Diana C. Du Pont, *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* (Nashville, Tennessee: Turner, 2007); Irene Herner and Karen Reiman, *Mexican Modern Painting: The Andrés Blaisten Collection* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2011), and Ramiro Martinez, *The Prints of Rufino Tamayo: Catalogue Raisonné, 1925-1991* (Nashville, Tennessee: Turner, 2004).
[54] See the major studies on the artist, including: Dore Ashton and Juan Villoro, *Manuel Felguérez* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2010) and Juan Villoro, *Manuel Felguérez: El Limite de una seguencia* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de la Cultura, 2002).

mainstream art world of the time and their popularity is in part tied to the popularization of Freudian and Jungian ideas on the human psyche in the postwar period. While abstraction became conventional in the postwar period, Mexican abstractionism, though a revolt against Mexican muralism's strict guidelines, was not revolutionary when compared with the history of painting in the US. What is radical about art in Mexico in the 1970s is the rejection of La Ruptura's school of thought, especially the cool detachment of geometric abstraction and the wild expressivity of painterly abstraction, and sometimes of painting altogether, in favor of an art that spoke not to the inner human condition but to outer social conditions. Art, for the los grupos generation, must serve a social function.

Of course, just as the Rupture generation reacted against the artistic goals of their predecessors in the Mexican School, the younger generation of the "grupos" rejected the traditions of their predecessors, finding abstraction too academic, too formalist. After such political and economic turmoil during the period, for artists of los grupos, circumstances called for an art that was decidedly political, that was directed to an urban and at times uneducated audience, not just elite academics. This moment called for an art that came out from the gallery and onto the street (Grupo Suma), that engaged with the realities of life in the metropolis under a repressive regime (Proceso Pentágono), and that utilized the language of satire and protest (El No Grupo).

Artists of the grupos generation turned to the process of collective art-making in reaction to an increasingly aggressive and repressive state. By the 1960s, the conservative Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had been repressing labor unions and subduing peaceful protests for decades. This period of Mexican history saw the devaluation of the peso, government corruption, increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, and wide sweeping practices of

repression.[55] These events came to head in October of 1968, with the Massacre at Tlatelolco, a bloodbath that left peaceful civilian protesters and bystanders – students, professors, artists, workers and local residents – dead.[56]

In reaction to the violent events of 1968 and the ensuing years of repression of journalists, academics, and artists, groups of artists formed in acts of solidarity, conceiving of themselves as cultural workers, tasked with the charge of fighting against the establishment. One such group, Proceso Pentágono, formed in the early 1970s and included Felipe Ehrenberg (1943-2017), Carlos Finck (b. 1946), José Antonio Hernández Amezcua (b. 1947) and Víctor Muñoz (b. 1948).[57] (Figure 11) Most of the group met through their studies at la Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado (ENPEG) the Mexico City art school known as "La Esmeralda." Proceso Pentágono's aims included critiquing the Mexican government as well as the art establishment. Aligned with Fluxus ideals, Proceso brought art out of the museum and gallery and onto the streets, in a push to make art a part of the everyday lives of the people of Mexico City, not just the art elite. They created both performances/art actions and complex installations works throughout their relatively-short career. In 1973, the group was invited to create an exhibition at the Palace of Fine Arts (often referred to as Bellas Artes) and, despite their usual general rejection of government-run arts institutions, agreed as it presented an opportunity to disrupt the art establishment. The location, for the artists, illustrated the vast disconnect between the art world and the daily lives of the city's inhabitants. Bellas Artes stands in one of the

[55] Gallo, 165-190.
[56] See Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco, Testimonios de Historia Oral* for the definitive information on the massacre at Tlatelolco.
[57] Original members of Proceso Pentágono included Ehrenberg, Fink, Hernández Amezcua and Muñoz. Later, Carlos Aguirre (b. 1948), Miguel Ehrenberg (1952-2006), Lourdes Grobet (b. 1940) and Rowena Morales (b. 1948) joined the group. This information can be found on the UNAM's Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo's website: http://muac.unam.mx/expo-detalle-105-grupo-proceso-pentagono

liveliest working class neighborhoods in Mexico City – el centro. On its crowded streets and in the Alameda Central, a central gathering place, vendors sell their goods, poor indigenous women beg for change with their babies on their backs, teenagers hold hands, young and old, rich and poor live side by side. Inside, the cool, marble galleries of Bellas Artes seem tomblike, empty, illuminated by crystal chandeliers. The artists chose to accept this invitation to expose just how out of touch the elite art world was with its surroundings.

Their work for the 1973 exhibition, *A nivel informativo*, opened up the gallery into the street. While they did create some installations inside the galleries, the group proceeded to perform actions (we might today call performances) outside of the museum, on the sidewalk in front of the museum. These street actions meant to involve the passers-by in the events. One such action, titled *El Secuestro (The Kidnapping),* took the form of a staged a kidnapping in broad daylight, on the sidewalk in front of Bellas Artes. As previously discussed in Chapter One, *El Secuestro* denounced the kidnappings and disappearances not only in Mexico City but also those going on throughout Latin America in this period. Importantly, the performance essentially moved the exhibition from the gallery out onto the street of the metropolis. It forced viewers who came to enjoy quiet moments inside the cool building to confront the brutal reality, the violence of urban life, and to engage in dialogue with strangers. For the artists, life was happening not in the space of the museum but right out on the busy and chaotic streets of downtown Mexico City.

In addition to their aim of bringing art out of the tomblike museum and onto the lively city streets, Proceso was concerned with what was happening specifically to the body in contemporary Mexico. Their concern with the disappearing body drove them to create their own disappearance, highlighting that absence. The public nature of the event meant that regular citizens would bear witness to this disappearing, an idea echoed by more contemporary artists

working in the post-NAFTA era, as discussed in the following chapters. Through the act of disappearance, the group of artists could reclaim a sense of control over their lives. The public nature of the disappearance highlighted the reality of the lack of agency that the Mexican public truly had over their bodily well-being. These kinds of invisibility tactics, here through the staged kidnapping, made very public and very visible the precarity of the body in the public sphere, especially the bodies of those who dared to speak out against the Mexican government. In putting the bag over the head of the victim, the perpetrators deprived him of vision, highlighting the myopic public who ignored or was blind to the reality of what the Mexican government was doing to dissidents.

Proceso Pentágono continued their public critique of torture in *Pentágono*, their collaborative work created for the Paris Youth Biennial in 1977.[58] For this project, the group recreated a small pentagon-shaped room, the interior of which recreated a torture chamber used by the Mexican police. Against the wall was a simple wooden chair for the accused; visitors to the Paris Biennial were encouraged to have a seat, literally placing their bodies in the place of victims of torture. On a nearby table lay various harmful chemicals and other torture devices, and items referring to Mexico's "Dirty War" populated shelves hung on the walls.[59] Other elements around the room alluded to Latin American dictatorships and to the imperialist policies of the United States within Latin America. The five exterior walls are covered in maps and text, with words like "coffee," "labor," and "land" spelled out in computer graphic reminiscent of running or moving text on an electronic sign. (Figures 12)

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[58] First held in 1959, the Biennale de Paris (Paris Biennial) was set up by the French Ministry of Culture as an international art festival for young artists to exhibition on the global stage. The exhibition continues today, after it was relaunched in 2000 following a hiatus, and now focusses on immaterial or non-object based art. More information available here: http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/biennale-de-paris/.

[59] Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*, 221.

The empty chair reminds the viewer of the missing body – that of the disappeared – in this torture chamber. That emptiness is amplified by the viewer's own embodiment, which can take the place of the absent body, causing a visceral reaction to that absence. Furthermore, outside of the torture chamber, an object wrapped in black plastic and rope, visually reminiscent of a discarded body, lies on the ground. This haunting image indexically references the body but the body itself is absent. The body is invisible but the reality of the torture feels almost palpable. This wrapped image is reminiscent of Christo and Jeanne Claude's "Wrapped Objects" (1958-1969), sculptures of found objects rendered mostly unrecognizable as they're bound in fabric and rope.[60] Though the object inside the packaging is not visible, there is a sense of its being a body, perhaps because it conjures images of butchered meat, flesh neatly packed in fabric and string. Wrapping obscures, hiding the truth. Pentágono's wrapping also references that most Catholic of symbols, Jesus's burial shroud, reminding the viewer of the Christ-like martyrs who die because they are not free to express their discontent during the Dirty War. (Figure 13)

In the same way that the kidnapping forced Mexicans to confront the violence of the street, *Pentágono* confronted Biennial visitors with the shocking reality of Mexican political life. For the collective, this was an opportunity not only to create conceptual art but more importantly to disseminate information on the international stage in the face of misinformation and media censorship back home. The focus on torture reveals their intent on exposing the viewer to the violence of daily life in Mexico. And this work, like their others, condemns Mexico's ruling party, the PRI, and their mystification of political reality. Shortly after their return to Mexico, the

[60] See Adam Thomas Blackbourn, "Wrapped Objects, Statues and Women" *Christo and Jeanne Claude*, 2011, http://christojeanneclaude.net/mobile/projects?p=wrapped-objects-statues-and-women, accessed December 16, 2017.

collective created another version of this work, in part in reaction to the PRI's upcoming 50th anniversary celebration.

Like *Pentágono, Proceso 1929* recreated the interior of a police station, complete with torture devices. (Figure 14) The group exhibited this 1978 work in Mexico City's Auditorio Nacional (National Auditorium) on the occasion of the PRI's 50th anniversary celebrations. This installation was more disturbing, due to the graphic depiction of references to violence, than the work shown in Paris. *Proceso 1929* was also a much larger installation, consisting of over 1200 square feet of spaces set up as a dark, cave-like succession of rooms. All of the walls were painted black, recalling the oppressive nature of torture chambers. The first room resembled an office containing all the usual signifiers of Mexican bureaucracy: a desk, a calendar, a photograph of the president, and a sign on the door prohibiting strangers from wandering in. This room referred to the institutionalization and acceptance on behalf of the police of torture as something that was simply part of the mechanism, something that could not be avoided. The next room, more sinister, consisted of a blackened torture cell with a hanging light bulb, a simple wooden chair, bloody clothes, and a bucket of water used for the "submarine," a gruesome torture method involving submerging the suspect's head in water.[61]

Here, the pile of bloody clothes and again the chair acted as stand-ins or signifiers of a body disappeared. In another room, torture devices like axes, knives and ropes hung neatly on the wall. In a later room, a large window was set up, as if to allow the visitor to watch the torture as a spectacle, almost as easily as one views an image on television. This installation, more than their earlier work, was marked by a brutal and vivid realism, which directly and overtly critiqued the ruling powers. Panicked government officials censored Proceso Pentágono, closing the

[61] Gallo, 183.

exhibition for several days as the PRI was hosting its 50th anniversary celebration in the same building. That is, the PRI silenced the very same exhibition that denounced their corrupt censorship and torture practices.

For the general museum-going public at the time, accustomed to viewing cool, unemotional abstract paintings in the formal museum and gallery settings, revolutionary political art that made bold, angry, anti-establishment statements as we see in the installations of Proceso Pentágono, was unusual. The anti-PRI content of Pentagono's work and the gritty, all too realistic style was a major departure from the theoretically apolitical canvases of the abstract painters. Furthermore, Pentagon's work was decidedly anti-market. While objects were on display in their installations, these were found objects placed together to create a temporary environment, not meant for sale in the way that a painting is bought and sold. Once the exhibition ended, all that was left was the memory and documentation in the form of photographs and text.

Another group of Mexican artists from this generation that engaged with the topic of the disappearing body during the post-1968 years is Grupo Suma, active from 1976-1982. Grupo Suma members included: Óscar Aguilar Olea, José Barbosa (b. 1948), Paloma Díaz Abreu (b. 1958), Mario Rangel Faz (1956-2009), René Freire (b. 1952), Oliverio Hinojosa (b. 1953), Armandina Lozano (b. 1952), Gabriel Macotela (b. 1954), Ernesto Molina (b. 1952), Alfonso Moraza, César Nuñez (b. 1961), Hiram Ramírez, Armando Ramos, Mario Rangel Faz (b. 1956), Santiago Rebolledo (b. 1951), Jesús Reyes Cordero (b. 1956), Ricardo Rocha (1954-2005), Jaime Rodríguez, Patricia Salas, Guadalupe Sobarzo, Alma Valtierra, and Luis Vidal (b. 1952).[62]

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[62] Some of the birthdates of the members of Grupo Suma were unverifiable. This information comes from the UNAM MUAC catalog, here: http://cc-catalogo.org/site/pdf/coordenadas.pdf: "The Grupo SUMA (Óscar Aguilera Olea, José Barbosa, Paloma Díaz Abreu, René Freire, Oliverio Hinojosa (†), Armandina Lozano, Gabriel Macotela, Ernesto Molina, Alfonso Moraza, César Núñez, Hiram Ramírez, Armando

Comprised of young students, the street art collective Grupo Suma joined together to create public paintings – which the artists considered street performances – using spray paint and stencils. Grupo Suma formed in 1976 and consisted primarily of art students in Ricardo Rocha's experimental arts course at ENAP, La Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (The National School of Visual Arts).[63] Many of the students began working in the abstract painting style that was popular at the time, but with the events of 1968 fresh in the collective memory, began to meet regularly to discuss the nature and role of art in society, agreeing that art making should serve society through collective and public practice. Likewise, art should involve the spectator in new ways, bringing art to the everyday, on the streets of the Mexican capital, no longer limited to the confines of the museum or gallery space. Painting would no longer be a solitary action by a lone artist in a studio; instead, painting was a performative act, its grand gesture best suited to the public sphere: the street. As painters, they embraced painting as a medium yet rejected the universalist themes and abstraction of their forerunners/elders.

In bringing art to the streets, they embraced modern painting production techniques, including use of spray paint and stencils, necessary for completing art quickly. The use of the stencil allowed for the creation of repetitious imagery. Clearly referencing the seriality of Pop art, which had become popular in the US in 1960s, Suma chose political activities in place of

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Ramos, Mario Rangel Faz (†), Santiago Rebolledo, Jesús Reyes Cordero, Ricardo Rocha (†), Jaime Rodríguez, Arturo Rosales, Patricia Salas, Guadalupe Sobarzo, Alma Valtierra and Luis Vidal (†), active between 1976 and 1982), came into being at the Academia de San Carlos, the main campus of the National School of Fine Art, in the Studio of Visual Research into Mural Painting under the direction of Ricardo Rocha. Some of the interests the group had in common were a search for new strategies for public art actions, a new dialogue between art and politics, as well as experimentation with new means of graphic production." See also: "Generacion de los grupos," http://www.revistacodigo.com/generacion-de-los-grupos-10-colectivos-de-los-70-en-mexico/.

[63] Charmaine Picard, "The Art of Urban Recycling: The Artist Collective *Suma*, 1976-1982," (Paper presented at ILASSA, Latin American Network Information Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1999) http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/ilassa/conference/1999/papers/picard/picard2.htm.

Warhol's celebrities. Like pop art, Suma also appropriated the visual language of advertising with simple forms, linear or graphic quality, and bright colors. In line with pop art in Latin America as seen in Cuban poster art and Argentine Pop, Suma utilized this contemporary style but appropriated the aesthetic for revolutionary purposes, using this popular visual language not to sell products but to communicate ideas simply and effectively with the public, not the art elite. The lay public could read the simple clear messages of advertising, so too could they read the direct imagery Suma placed on the walls of the city. Suma's aims were democratic, believing that art should be "for the people" (arte para el pueblo), reminiscent of the goals of the Mexican School, the muralists who depicted national heroes and patriotic tales of the Revolution on the public walls of the city.

One of the first urban street art collectives in Mexico, Suma created their first public art performances in 1976, engaging with contemporary problems such as unemployment, bureaucracy, racial inequality, and the consequences of Mexico's Dirty War. As their work developed, Suma began to focus on the topic of the disappeared, depicting the faces of those whose bodies had been disappeared in the pan-Latin American conflicts of the 1960s and 70s. Unlike the muralists, whose work was directly sanctioned and in fact commissioned by the Mexican government, the work of Suma was unauthorized. Because their subject matter often criticized governmental policies, their work was usually white-washed. However, process ruled over product, as the final painted image was less important than the collective act.

Speaking to the importance of the collective, the group created a signature consisting of the words "grupo" and "suma" with an eagle in the center of the logo. (Figure 15) The eagle recalls the same image used on the Mexican national flag, here repurposed to form a new national identity rooted in collectivism and the power of art to bring about progressive change.

Signing with the logo containing the word "group" fortified their rejection of individualism. "Suma" can refer to "addition" or "joining," again affirming the importance of collective action over solitary exploits. Using this logo, which references Mexico's heritage visually and the group's collaborative focus textually, to sign their work helped them achieve their goal of embracing the collective and rejecting the individualism that was in their view a plague to contemporary society. Rejecting the cult of genius was already a hot topic in contemporary art at the time, as seen in contemporary conceptual work such as Piero Manzoni's *Fiato d'Artista* (*Artist's Breath)*, a sculpture produced in 1960 and now housed in the Tate Modern that consisted of Manzoni's own breath secured within a red balloon that had been affixed to a wooden base. Manzoni's *Breath* playfully disrupted the art world's cult of the individual artist, seeing Duchamp's *Fountain* project taken to its extreme. Young Mexican artists found power in the collective practice of artmaking, not in individual genius.

One of Grupo Suma's most important works, which directly relates to our discussion here of the disappearing body, was *Tania la desaparecida*. For this project, the group painted the image of this emblematic figure on public walls near the intersection of Avenida de los Insurgentes y Calle Niza in 1978. Working collectively, Suma utilized spray paint and stencil to create a series of images of Tania, the disappeared guerilla fighter. (Figure 16)

Tamara Bunke Bider (November 19, 1937 – August 31, 1967), better known as "Tania the Guerrillera," was a communist revolutionary spy who played a prominent role in various Latin American revolutionary movements and in the Cuban government after the Cuban Revolution. She was the only woman to fight alongside Bolivian communist rebels under Che Guevara, and like el Che, she was Argentinean. A close confidant and comrade of el Che, her body disappeared in 1967, and it was later revealed in 1990 that she had been killed in an

ambush by Bolivian soldiers. The circumstances surrounding her death remain the topic of controversy. Apparently, the group was crossing a river during the ambush and her body washed away, only to be found days later by Bolivian officials, who then supposedly buried her in an unmarked grave, perhaps reminding the contemporary reader of the myriad unmarked graves dotting remote parts of Mexico as a result of cartel and border violence. In the 1990s, her body was located and sent to Cuba. But in the years immediately following her death, her disappearance, and especially the washing away of her body was unsettling to already agitated leftists. Like, Che, she became a martyr for the extreme leftist movement. And because of the absence of her body at the time, her death was considered by many to be one of the many "disappearances" of dissidents.[64]

Sumo's image of the disappeared Tania functioned as contemporary political commentary when her face was plastered onto Mexico City's walls in 1978. Clearly referencing the serialization of Pop art, the repetition of the image may remind viewers of the repeated images of the American icon Marilyn Monroe, though here the martyr was decidedly political. Repetition insisted that she be seen, that her disappearance be acknowledged publically and repeatedly. The graphic, linear quality, bright colors, and readability referenced Pop and the language of advertising, appealing to the mass of people inhabiting Mexico City's streets, often lacking in a formal arts education. The urban quality to the work referenced what in the 1970s and 80s would become mainstream urban culture. Suma effectively utilizes the language of both Pop art and contemporary popular culture, breaking with what Rupture artists were doing. All of these aesthetic choices make the work readable to a public that might not be well versed in the

[64] Ulises Estrada, *Tania: Undercover with Che Guevara in Bolivia* (North Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2005).

conceptual work of some of Suma's contemporaries like Proceso Pentágono. The message was clear, direct, and readable, demanding visibility for all the disappeared.

While Proceso Pentágono utilized the artist's body, as in *El Secuestro*, or other objects to stand in for the bodies of the disappeared, Grupo Suma's approach was decidedly more direct, though, I'd argue, still fit into the tendency to practice invisibility tactics, as the artists repeated a portrait, as though it were an indexical reference, that is, used to stand in for the whole of victims of violence in Latin America. Tania's image, repeated on public walls, stood for all victims of state violence and repression in Latin America during this period, and did so in a very public way, bringing the debate into the public sphere. Although the disappeared was made visible here, one figure stood in for many, an indexical reference to state violence against the body throughout the various dictatorships in the region in this historical moment. The image of Tania's face pointed to the numerous disappeared bodies without faces, without visibility, without documentation. Furthermore, at the time the work was made, the whereabouts of her body were unknown, so Suma was attempting to make visible what at the time was an invisible body. Utilizing invisibility tactics here, the artists attempted to negotiate the state imposed violence against the body. The image of Tania likewise made her immortal in a way, carrying her persona on, as per Susan Sontag's discussion of photography -- producing and publicizing the image of Tania conferred upon her "a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed."[65] In much the same way that taking a photograph – making an image – helps individuals to not only document but also make real an experience, making the image of Tania made real her absence.

[65] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), 11.

In addition to utilizing invisibility tactics, Grupo Suma placed emphasis on collectivity as an aesthetic strategy. To work collectively was to embrace collectivism over individualism as not only an aesthetic but also a political strategy, reaffirming a belief in the collective spirit against the State, a utopian ideal that Grupo Suma would argue at the time was a necessary one. Progressives in 1970s Mexico felt that the only way to stand up to a repressive government was to find strength in numbers. Collectivism, this essential component to art making in the 1970s in Mexico City, stood in contrast to the interior personal journeys that *Ruptura* artists took, often painting alone in their studios. Collaborative art production simply made sense for a group that was producing art in the street, using stencils to rapidly recreate an image in unauthorized spaces, and move on quickly before being detected. Like Proceso Pentágono, Grupo Suma's collective practice began in the incipient stage, moving through planning and execution of the final art object. Street art, by nature, also involved the general public in the process of meaning making, as art was brought into the everyday lives of the city's denizens. This sense of collectivity in public spaces continued to be a powerful statement against the rhetoric of individualism in the contemporary global sphere.

Employing the same methods used to create *Tania*, Grupo Suma created the bent over image of an unemployed man, which they repeatedly stenciled on public walls near the intersection of Calle Mississippi and the large avenue Reforma for their 1978 *El Desempleado* (*The Unemployed)*.[66] Again, the collective worked collaboratively, painting, using stencils, on the walls of public, shared spaces. As in the case of *Tania*, Grupo Suma made visible someone who was often difficult to see: the unemployed worker. The artists aligned themselves with the

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[66] The image was reproduced in 2007 as part of the exhibition *The Era of Discrepancy* that was held at the National Autonomous University's art museum, MUAC, as part of a project that attempts to recover this lost portion of Mexican art history.

workers' movements coalescing globally in the 1960s and 70s, and sought greater visibility for the plight of the working class. In fact, Shifra Goldman asserts that the artists conceived of themselves not as artists but "cultural workers," aligning themselves with the Left.[67] Violence came then not only in the actual disappearance of bodies and repressive military regimes, but in more subtle ways through the economic violence of capitalism. Worker's rights read into the narrative of state violence. Suma's *Desempleado* made visible, again through indexical reference, the often invisible plight of the contemporary worker. (Figure 17)

Though Grupo Suma was a small group of revolutionary artists practicing in the 1970s in Mexico City and not well known internationally, their legacy is felt in contemporary, post-NAFTA Mexico. Their influence can clearly be found in the work of Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca, also known as ASARO (Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca), an artist collective that came together in 2006, in the tradition of los grupos generation, in response to a repressive, conservative government in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. These artist-activists formed as a group in a summer in which, as usual, striking teachers gathered in the zócalo of Oaxaca, with demands such as a living wage and books for their students. They called for the resignation of then-governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, known as URO, who was accused of corruption and repression in Oaxaca, one of the poorest states with one of the largest population of indigenous people in the country. On July 14th of that year, when URO sent riot squads, shooting tear gas from helicopters, to disperse the crowds, a battle for the streets broke out. URO's efforts, meant to crush the demonstrations, backfired. In response to the events of July 14th the teachers' unions were joined by several local organizations that together formed the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, also known as APPO, (The Oaxacan Peoples'

[67] Goldman, 123-139.

Popular Assembly), vowing to re-take Oaxaca for the people and to halt their increasing marginalization. APPO fought back strongly, taking over the zócalo and the streets of the city center, setting up barricades to defend themselves from police. In August of that year, APPO took over radio and television stations and occupied the public university. Eventually, federal police were called in to end the conflict. By the end of the several-month standoff, many were dead, including students, professors, activists, and an American journalist.

In response to the turmoil in Oaxaca, ASARO's work began as a collaborative process of creating public art, often in the form of stencil and graffiti on the walls of the city.[68] Labeled "vandalism" by the official government, ASARO's work was swiftly painted over in an attempt to quell the political message it carried. In contrast, much non-political graffiti in the city was left alone. ASARO's work raised questions about the politics of public space, the role of art in effecting social change, and the ever-blurring divide between art, politics, and quotidian life. The young artists of ASARO worked in the same tradition as Grupo Suma, creating stencils and working in public spaces to create a visual language that was readable to the general public. (Figure 18) Though their work was surely informed by global street art tendencies, ASARO members, mostly poor art students, would have also been familiar with Mexico's local art history. (Figure 19) It is no coincidence that an archive of Grupo Suma's work resides at the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca. The Institute of Graphic Art in Oaxaca is a non-profit institution open to the general public, consisting of a library, archive, and community outreach program through the hosting of arts, poetry, and political events.

Grupo Suma's sphere of influence extends beyond Mexico's borders as well. Los Angeles-based Mexican-American artist Ramiro Gomez (b. 1986) has emerged on the LA art

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[68] Information on ASARO was collected during my fieldwork conducted in 2008 and 2009.

scene with his cardboard cutouts of undocumented workers, such as gardeners and nannies, that he placed on lawns and public spaces of the city's elite.[69] Though the context is different, the artist's aim is the same –to disrupt public spaces with images of the often invisible members of society. Like Grupo Suma and ASARO, emerging artist Gomez utilizes an object (cardboard cutout) in the image of the worker to stand in for the often ignored plight of the undocumented in the US. (Figure 20)

Another group of Suma's contemporaries, El No Grupo (The No Group) offered a dissenting alternative to the political project of the grupos generation through the use of humor, an emphasis on radical performativity, and the production of both solo and group work. In direct opposition to the collective ideology of the other groups, the members of the No Group produced individual works in addition to their collective projects. In one such example of solo work, Maris Bustamante (b. 1949) purchased a patent for the taco, memorializing the event in her 1979 performance *Patente de Taco (Taco Patent)*. (Figure 21) Along with the performative act of registering the patent, Bustamante produced large scale images of the taco, accompanied by slogans such as "Dare to commit an erotic act: eat a taco."[70] A self-described feminist, Bustamante "patented the Mexican cultural and culinary symbol to use it as 'a weapon for cultural penetration;' the artist utilized the taco's visual and formal image in a variety of ways, including erotic ones."[71] One of the few female artists to gain notoriety during the grupos generation, Bustamante's decidedly feminist solo work marked a shift in the largely male-

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[69] Lawrence Weschler, *Domestic Scenes, The Art of Ramiro Gomez* (New York: Abrams Books, 2016).
[70] Edward McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 68.
[71] "Maris Bustamante, *Patente de Taco*," accessed December 16, 2017, http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=23&e=.

dominated Mexican art world and set the stage for feminist artists working on the post-NAFTA era.

In addition to solo work, the No Group did produce some group projects. The No Group's first collective action consisted of participating long distance in the Paris Biennial. In 1977, for the exhibition that featured the participation of several of the Mexican artist collectives working at the time, the No Grupo artists sent to Paris life-sized cardboard masks, mounted on wooden handles and bearing their portraits, that visitors to the Biennial could wear as they saw fit, thus representing the missing artists and their missing bodies. (Figure 22) The masks, planted in a grassy lawn outside of the Biennial buildings, acted as stand-ins for the artists themselves.

Using humor as an aesthetic tool, El No Grupo worked between 1977 and 1982 through various new media, including installation, posters, conceptual objects, videos, and artistic moments, with their primary focus on non-objective art. Additionally, they produced artist books and mail art, in line with Fluxus tendencies. Group members included Maris Bustamante, Melquiades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez, and Rubén Valencia (all four, b. 1949). According to Bustamante, they took both their art and their sense of humor very seriously.[72]

A year after the Paris Biennial, the No Group continued to engage not only in political actions but also in aesthetic investigations, questioning the supremacy of painting in Mexico during the mid to late 20th century. In an attempt to highlight the anachronism of painting – in favor of aesthetic actions – and to demystify the figure of the artist, that long tradition of the artistic genius born during the Renaissance and proliferated until modern times, the No Group symbolically kidnapped the abstract painter Gunther Gerzso for their *Secuestro Plástico* (Artistic

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[72] Maris Bustamante, "El No Grupo," from the blog, *Arte y Historia*: "Consideramos el humor como algo muy serio, incluso fue una vía de interrelación y formó parte de nuestros eventos, a los que a partir de 1979 los denominamos "Montaje de Momentos Plásticos…" available here: http://www.artesehistoria.mx/blog/index.php/component/k2/item/565-el-no-grupo.

Kidnapping) in 1978. At the time, Gerzo, a willing participant in the staged kidnapping, was one of the most well-known painters in Mexico, and had been an award-winning set designer on numerous Mexican, French, and American films and a famous painter associated with the Mexican Surrealists. (Figure 23) No Grupo created a press release, reporting the news of the kidnapping, which they sent to newspapers. In the mock ransom letter, the artists asserted, "Comunicamos que el sr. Gunther Gerzo, ha sido secuestrado y que habiendo el decidido quedar con su captores, hemos acordado asesinarlo para ofrecerlo en sacrificio; morirá por sus piedras en lo alto del Templo Mayor de Palenque.... Su cuerpo quedará así en su bello Chiapas."

> (Author's translation): "We would like to communicate that Mr. Gunther Gerzso has been kidnapped and, having decided to stay with his captors, we have decided to kill him and offer him as a sacrifice; he will die on the rocks atop the Great Temple of Palenque, and thus his body will remain in the beautiful (state of) Chiapas."

This tongue-in-cheek action questions the preeminence of painting in Mexico, at a time when artists are experimenting with new media. Clearly, the work recalls Proceso Pentágono's earlier performance *El Secuestro*, linking the political concerns of the grupos generation to the aesthetic concerns of the No Group. One of the few female artists of the grupos, Bustamante introduced feminist critique to the contemporary art establishment in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, established Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Dust), a feminist art collective, with Mónica Mayer (b. 1954). Mayer, a Mexican conceptual and performance artist who studied at UNAM and Goddard College and participated in the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles, laid the foundation for feminist art practice in Mexico City, marking a significant transition at the end of the grupos period and setting the stage for the important feminist artists of the post-NAFTA era.

Through their collective practice, Mexican artists in the 1970s critiqued and denounced the repressive Mexican regime that controlled the country for decades and the restrictions on freedoms that the regime imposed. Los grupos were interested not only in experiments in collaboration but also in revolutionizing the interaction between artists and the public. They brought art out from the gallery onto the streets, where the public participated in the process in unprecedented ways, engaging in dialogue about contemporary political, economic and social circumstances.

Complementing their political critiques, the artists of the grupos generation reacted against what they saw as a stagnant artistic landscape, as well. Painting had been dominant for decades and had by now become stale. These young artists rejected abstract painting and much of their work came in the form of installation, performance, non-object based art, and street art. They took an anti-establishment stance, rejecting the art market and traditional and exclusive arts institutions.

Los grupos were not unified by one style in the traditional art historical sense. Instead, they were linked by their method of production. Through their collective work, these artists denounced the repressive military regimes all over Latin America at this time. In Mexico, they helped broaden and redefine mainstream art beyond the limits of the painting and sculpture that was taught at the Academy. Often times, they sponsored their own exhibitions, providing an alternative to state-sponsored art. By the 1980s, some of the grupos were somewhat absorbed by the state apparatus. In other cases, the collectives broke up due to internal disagreements or the demands of family life, among other reasons. But they left a legacy that serves as a model of action in the face of censorship.

The art of the grupos generation denounced repressive practices not only in Mexico but also in other Latin American countries. Likewise, during the 1970s and 80s, other Latin American artists were producing work that condemned the dictatorships erupting throughout the region. For example, Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer (b. 1937) created a series of photographs, *The Torture Series* from 1983-1984, of everyday objects that combine with text to condemn the Uruguayan dictatorship. (Figure 24) However, the images do not depict overt scenes of violence, nor are they openly critical of the government. Instead, body parts, like a finger wrapped in electrical wire, act as substitutes for torture victims, as indexical references to the government's underhanded practices. Rejecting shock value in favor of symbolic imagery, like that in Camnitzer's photographs and the work of the grupos, los grupos generation artists embraced a coded visual language that allowed for more subtlety and nuance, at a time when overt criticism of the government faced censorship.[73]

Concerned with suppression of artistic freedom, state violence, and disappearances, and informed by international developments in contemporary art, many Mexican artists in the 1970s turn to performance art and, in particular, collective art practices, often embracing invisibility tactics to make visible the dead and disappeared victims of institutionalized violence. Throughout the region, the body was already under attack by the government, as evidenced by the actual kidnappings, torture, and murders; in re-staging the events, the artists precipitate the disappearance of the body, emphasizing its absence. This work in the 1970s laid the foundations for more contemporary artists in Mexico, who work both within a global and a local context.

[73] For a discussion of censorship and art in Latin America, see: Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007); Camnitzer and Rachel Weiss, *On Art, Artists, Latin America, and Other Utopias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); and Elena Shtromberg, *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).

Chapter Three

Las Nobodies: Performing Testimony in the Borderlands

In this chapter, I examine the performance and land-based works of contemporary Mexican artists creating art centered on the topic of violence in the borderland region, particularly Ciudad Juárez, considering how these artists conceive of their work as part of the process of witnessing to the violence in the region. I look closely at the topic of violence against women, in particular, and at the different gendered responses that artists have based on their own identified gender, noting that female artists tend to engage with the topic of violence against women in Juárez in a very visceral way, utilizing their own bodies in their performances, and directly embodying victimhood as something personal, intimate. Meanwhile, male artists tend to engage, first, with the land as opposed to the body, and in doing so, approach the topic in a less visceral, more intellectual manner, many times resorting to a fascination with measuring and numbers as a way to rationalize the experience of the trauma inflicted on women's bodies. Through these different gendered responses, we can see that artists, while in some ways bearing witness to the violence against women, continue to reenact the same gendered hierarchies they may seek to oppose. In this case, male artists seek to somehow understand what cannot be rationalized, attempting to literally and figuratively dominate the figurative mother earth as a way to arrive at that truth, while female artists continue to do the gendered work of emotional healing for the nation.

My arguments are clearly inspired by feminist theory, especially the work of Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Judith Butler, and Susan Bordo. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Bordo's "mind/body dichotomy," or the notion of the body as

traditionally associated with women and the intellect with men, reminds us that the objectification of the female body has historically been used as a tool by men to commodify and control women's bodies.[74] Artists in Mexico seem to embrace this mind/body dichotomy. In general, female artists tend to utilize their bodies in their works, engaging with the topic of the murdered women on an intuitive level, while male artists rely on the intellectualization of current events surrounding the murder of women in Juárez. More precisely, many male artists practicing in Mexico focus their efforts on utilizing numbers as a way to approach, through reason, the violence enacted against the very bodies of women. When these male artists reduce the violence against women's bodies to numbers, they continue to enact this control over female gendered bodies, controlling the story of how to interpret said violence. In contrast, when female artists utilize their own bodies, they find agency through the bodily experience of representation.

Bordo also discusses the important role of race and class in the objectification of women's bodies, which can dictate how a woman's body is treated, a topic echoed in the writings of Judith Butler, when she asks (albeit in another context), "When is life grievable?"[75] In Butler's example, the bodies in question are those of people living in the Middle East, bodies often not grieved by Western publics. Likewise, many of the murdered women of Juárez are not grieved in a global context. In the case of Juárez, efforts have been made to understand whether indigenous women are victimized more than mestizas, but data remain inconclusive, as statistics are notoriously unreliable in contemporary Mexico.[76] Perhaps unwittingly, contemporary artists in Mexico continue to act out Bordo's mind/body dichotomy, further deepening the divide between women and the patriarchal culture that manages women's bodies. I ask, what if women

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[74] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 4.
[75] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (London: Verso, 2009).
[76] National Citizen Femicide Observatory, accessed July 10, 2016, http://observatoriofeminicidio.blogspot.mx/.

could, though, find agency in embracing that traditionally female realm of the body? Can the embodiment of violence reignite the artist's ability to bear witness to trauma and thus serve a redemptive function?

Additionally, I rely on Giorgio Agamben's theories on witnessing and testimony in order to understand what happens to the human body – in this body-focused medium of performance – in the borderland region. According to Agamben, "to bear witness is to place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead."[77] Put simply, to give testimony means to speak for those who cannot. Agamben's articulation of testimony and the figurative substitution it requires has become a central theme in the works of artists living in areas plagued by violence. In the case of Mexico, this has manifested in the development of a body of work by contemporary artists whose practices center primarily on the interchangeability of the physical body as a means of speaking out on behalf of victims whose voices have been silenced by *feminicidio*, cartel-related homicide, and institutionalized border violence.[78] Focusing primarily on art created after the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which permanently altered U.S-Mexico relations, this chapter traces the history of performative responses to violence in and around the "state of exception" that is Ciudad Juárez.[79]

Effective January 1, 1994, the US, Mexico and Canada signed a treaty to create a trilateral trade bloc, which eased tariffs among its members. However, NAFTA has suffered much criticism for its failure to protect the laboring classes on both sides of the border. For

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[77] Giorgio Agamben, "The Archive and Testimony," *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 161.
[78] In Mexico, the term "*feminicidio*" refers to the systematic killing of women in and around Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and other parts of the border region.
[79] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

example, NAFTA's passing promoted the growth of the maquiladora system in Mexican borderlands, which resulted, critics argue, in both US job losses and sub-par working standards for the impoverished Mexican laborers manning the factories. While, theoretically, a free trade area provides increased wealth for all parties, in reality, it does nothing to ensure equal distribution of that wealth.[80]

This border region must be considered within the context of NAFTA, which instigated US corporate reliance on the maquiladora system, which, in turn has fueled the internal migration of gendered labor -- often young, uneducated, poor women from rural Oaxaca and Chiapas, leaving behind families and support networks, rendered vulnerable. For over two decades, women have been murdered at an alarming rate around Ciudad Juárez, with an environment of impunity providing little hope of relief. In 2009, Ciudad Juárez was declared the "most violent city in the world," according to a study by the Mexican non-profit group Citizen Council for Public Security and Justice, which presented its report to Mexico's security minister in August of that year. The testimony of these victims is rendered visible by artists through the corporeal idiom of performance, and exposes the loss of countless human lives in the borderlands. Further complicating the scene, since President Calderón declared war on the cartels in 2006, these feminicidios have been increasingly overshadowed by cartel-related violence. Statistics of violent homicide in the region remain high.[81]

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[80] See for example, Laura Carlsen, "Under NAFTA, Mexico Suffered, and the United States Felt Its Pain," *New York Times*, accessed July 12, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/11/24/what-weve-learned-from-nafta/under-nafta-mexico-suffered-and-the-united-states-felt-its-pain.

[81] In 2009, Ciudad Juárez was declared the "most violent city in the world," according to a study by the Mexican non-profit group Citizen Council for Public Security and Justice, which presented its report to Mexico's security minister in August of that year. For further reading, see: Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and la Frontera* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011); Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and*

NAFTA's sanctioning of building factories on the Mexican side of the border for US corporations to manufacture products cheaply and then send them back for consumption in the US certainly plays a role in increasing the number of vulnerable populations of women in the borderlands. But, there are free trade agreements all over the world where feminicidio is not a problem, and there are other border towns that have a much lower incidence of violent crime. What is so particular about Juárez? What is it about this city that has created such violent circumstances that anti-feminicidio activist Marisela Escobedo can be gunned down in the streets (outside the state governor's office, no less), in front of a bewildered public, and that the murderers are never brought to justice?[82] Killed in 2010, Escobedo had become an activist after her own teenage daughter Rubi had been murdered by the latter's then-boyfriend in 2008. The suspect in Rubi's murder confessed to the crime, even indicating the location of the remains of Rubi's dismembered and burned body. Astonishingly, judges later released the suspect, a Zetas member, who is believed to be Escobedo's murderer as well. The Chihuahua state governor said that he would ask the congress to remove the corrupt judges from office. Though corruption is part of the answer, writer, journalist, and photographer Charles Bowden argues for the conscious choice on the part of cartels to utilize Juárez as a "laboratory," a place where they could practice violence -- territorial wars, transportation of illegal goods, and murder -- unencumbered by the

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the Ethics of Representation in Mexico (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2015); Kathleen Staudt*, Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2008); and Marie France Labrecque, "From Ciudad Juárez to the Highway of Tears: These Aboriginal Women Murdered with Complete Impunity," in *Cahiers Dialog,* n 2014-2, Montreal 2014.

[82] "Mexico murder protest mother Escobedo killed," *BBC News*, December 17, 2010, accessed January 17, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-12023345.

rule of law.[83] According to Bowden, Juárez served as a staging ground in the 1990s and early 2000s for the coming cartel violence so common in parts of Mexico today.

The US-Mexico borderlands, especially the area around Juárez, in Chihuahua, but also the states of Tamaulipas, Sonora, and Baja California Norte, have become a kind of "state of exception," and its denizens rendered to "bare life," notions set forth by Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben in *State of Exception* and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.[84] Agamben departs from Carl Schmitt's argument in *Political Theology* that the sovereign decides whether a situation is normal or an exception, and therefore decides when the law does and does not apply. According to Walter Benjamin in "Theses on Philosophy of History," this state of emergency, in which the law does not apply, has become the rule, not the exception.[85] Agamben argues that Benjamin's articulation of the rule, not Schmitt's exception, has become the true contemporary political reality. We are always in a "state of exception" now, at a time in which the law exists, but it has no meaning, since it can be suspended by the sovereign at any time. The law is "in force without significance."[86]

Under these circumstances, the denizens of the "state of exception" are rendered *homo sacer*, a notion borrowed from Roman law that refers to a life that "cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed."[87] Since the law can be suspended at any moment by the sovereign, all citizens lose the right to protection by the law. In the borderlands, then, we have all been abandoned by

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[83] Charles Bowden, *Juárez: The Laboratory of our Future* (New York: Aperture, 1998) and Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).
[84] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[85] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).
[86] Daniel McGloughlin, "In Force Without Significance: Kantian Nihilism and Agamben's Critique of Law," *Law and Critique* 20:3 (November 2009): 245-257.
[87] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 82.

the law; “we are all virtually *homines sacri*.”[88] Agamben’s definition of “bare life” is taken from Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle’s ideas about the *polis*. In addition to *zoe*, or natural life, referring to life in the home, there is the *bios politikos*, referring to political life, in public spaces. When natural life is exposed to the control of the sovereign, when it becomes susceptible to violence and death, then it becomes “bare life.” Bare life is “life exposed to death.”[89]

Although Agamben’s discussion is centered on the circumstances that allowed for the conception and existence of the concentration camp, these same conditions have allowed for the borderlands to become a similar type of “state of exception,” in which the government’s continued ineffectiveness at preventing increasingly gruesome attacks and the true sovereign -- the cartels themselves -- have rendered its citizens reduced to this state of “bare life.” Deprived of agency and basic human rights and silenced by the very real fear of retaliation (see the Escobedo case discussed above), individual citizens have become mere bodies. In this “conditio inhumana,” all boundaries, including those of the physical body, become precarious.

Agamben asserts, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, that since language is what allows humans into the public sphere, the *polis*, it is also that which allows humans to be rendered voiceless. Despite this precariousness, language, then, by inverse, is a space of potential; indeed, it is the only space where one can give voice back to the voiceless. For our purposes here, performance art in Mexico is this language, which can give voice back to the voiceless through substitutes or indexical references to the precarious body of “bare life.”

Considering art actions that emphasize, among other things, a privileging of indexical references to the body over the body’s actual presence and the use of the artist’s body as symbolic substitute, this text maps out the ways in which artists conceive of themselves as

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[88] Ibid., 115.
[89] Ibid., 88.

advocates for subjects stripped of agency as a result of this ever-present violence. Utilizing case studies of performances, I aim to locate the aesthetic and political potential of such practices within contemporary performance art. In an attempt to, like the artists, bear witness to the effects of this violence on the collective social body, I argue that, through this ghostly presence that highlights the body's absence, the trauma of physical violence is rendered most legible.

The visual arts have long been used in modern Mexico as an activist tool, and starting in the mid-1990s, Mexican artists have used performance to give voice back to the voiceless through indexical references to the precarious body of "bare life." Aesthetic projects have developed alongside political actions and, with the surge of cartel violence in the past decade, there has been an increase in public protests in Mexico, building on a long tradition of political demonstrations in Latin America. Anti-violence protests in city streets, public plazas, and universities increased in the capital city leading up to the presidential election in the summer of 2012. In one such instance, students protested against the outgoing conservative party, Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party), when the PAN's presidential candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota visited the Universidad Iberoamericana during her campaign. During Vázquez Mota's speech in a university auditorium, a student stood and held up a sign that read "60,000," referring to the then-estimate of casualties in the war on the cartels. The numerals, inscribed in red paint, appear as if formed from blood dripping from the text above, which reads "PAN," implicating the party's alleged involvement in the violent deaths of Mexican citizens. (Figure 25)

In another instance in which imagery was combined with text to convey a political message, a protestor lay next to a black cross on a city sidewalk in Mexico City, face covered and body adorned with paper signs. One sign, displaying text that is by now a popular trope, reads "NO + sangre" (No more blood), a trademark of the anti-violence movement in Mexico

today, and the other reads “Todos tenemos sangre en las manos” (We all have blood on our hands). The silent protestor’s hands are stained red, and the word “sangre” appears in red, again suggesting dripping blood. In these protests, blood becomes an indexical reference to violence against the body in Mexico. (Figure 26)

In Juárez, traditional marches against violence, in which women, families, and other members of the community take to the streets protesting post-NAFTA violence against women in the region, date back to the early to mid 1990s.[90] Another popular trope appears in these marches, a variation on the slogan “No más sangre,” in this instance “ni una más” (Not one more), and makes visible a refrain that is chanted by protesters at rallies. (Figure 27) In other cases, such as the 2011 “Caravan of Comfort,” which involved 20 busloads of protestors and activists led by Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, traditional marches and rallies are accompanied by symbolic and performative aesthetic moments.[91] During the “Caravan of Comfort,” pink crosses, yet another emblem of the anti-violence movement in Mexico that refers specifically to “las muertas de Juárez” (the dead women of Juárez), were set up to commemorate women who have been killed or disappeared while women, mothers or family members of the victims, knelt before the crosses and prayed. Public mourning functions as an act of bearing witness to the nature of bare life in the state of exception. (Figure 28)

Activists have been publically decrying violence against women in Mexico since the beginning of the feminicidio epidemic in Juárez. These protestors have traditionally used a clear, easily readable symbolic language, often involving simple or short text, blood imagery, and the

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[90] Ryan Bailey Patterson, “Resistance and Resilience: Politicized Art and Anti-Femicide Activism in Ciudad Juárez and Beyond” *Yale Historical Review* (Fall 2015, Volume V, Issue I), 114-131.

[91] Images of the “Caravan of Comfort” available via Getty Images: http://www.gettyimages.com/pictures/woman-prays-in-front-of-crosses-during-the-passage-of-the-news-photo-115794565#woman-prays-in-front-of-crosses-during-the-passage-of-the-caravan-of-picture-id115794565

pink crosses, to represent their cause. It is interesting to note that popular protesters often utilize the vernacular visual language of Catholicism (crosses and blood), while artists rely on a modern, global artistic language. Growing out of this tradition, politically engaged performance artists have also taken an interest in creating a new visual language to examine feminicidio in Juárez, often with coded messages, subtler than those expressed in traditional protests, in order to express their frustration, despair, and grief and to bear witness to the countless lives lost to violent conditions in the region. By now, activist art is a common theme in the international contemporary arts scene, and it is a trend among many artists working in Mexico.

Mexico City-born feminist artist, activist, and co-founder of the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual performance and exhibition space, Lorena Wolffer (b. 1971) allows her body to stand in for the collective victims of feminicidio in Juárez in her 2002 *Mientras Dormíamos (El Caso Juárez)*.[92] This action was presented in various locations between 2002 and 2004, including galleries and museums in Mexico, Finland, Wales, and the US. Wolffer says of her work that, in an effort to expose the brutality of violence against women in Juárez, she uses her body "como un mapa simbólico que documenta y narra la violencia en cincuenta de los casos, a partir de reportes policíacos," and that she makes visible "cada uno de los golpes, cortadas y balazos que estas mujeres han sufrido."[93] The artist's body, then, transforms into a vehicle for the representation of violence against women in Juárez, which has by now become institutionalized. (Figures 29-30)

The performance opens with audio news reports of the murders. Wearing a Dickie's style work suit and a hairnet, attire that recalls the uniforms of maquiladora workers, the artist enters a dark and relatively empty space occupied only by a spot-lit surgical table, sits on the table and

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[92] Lorena Wolffer, *While We Were Sleeping (The Case of Juárez)*, 2002.

[93] She uses her body "like a symbolic map that documents and narrates the violence in 50 of the cases, (information gathered from) based on police reports," … "each one of the blows, cuts and gunshots that these women have suffered." Author's translation. Personal communication, interview with artist.

then strips, panties dangling vulnerably from one leg. In the morgue-like environment, the artist, after donning latex gloves, uses a surgical marker to delineate on her exposed body all of the mutilations these women suffered, as if she were the collective victims. Her actions are slow and systematic, allowing the audience time to reflect on each wound. The missing bodies are manifest via the artist's body and each wound is made visible through the harsh black ink. As Wolffer marks her body, the spectator views the physicality of the marking and can imagine the original wound, provoking a visceral reaction. Once the body is marked, Wolffer sits stoic and still, allowing the onlooker to view the symbolic devastation, until she eventually dresses and leaves the space.[94] The artist's body functions as symbolic substitute, facilitating her own and the audience's witnessing of the crimes.

Visually reminiscent of Hannah Wilke's 1975 "self-scarification" performance *SOS* or, perhaps even more apt, Wilke's last photographic series of self-portraits *Intra-Venus*, in which the artist documents her own suffering as she was dying from lymphoma, Wolffer's performance calls into question society's fear of and sterilization of images of death. In Wilke's *SOS*, which was performed in Paris in 1975, the artist had bystanders chew gum and then place it on her body in what she called a process of "self-scarification." According to the artist, these scars represent the pain of the holocaust. Wolffer, like Wilke, marks up her own body in a moment of witnessing to the pain of others. (Figure 31)

In a much later work, *Intravenus*, Wilke documents her own suffering, while dying of cancer, with photographic self-portraits that were published posthumously. (Figure 32) The visual similarities between Wilke's and Wolffer's works are apparent, especially in the color palette, the positioning of the body and the exposed breast, the evocation of the sterile hospital or

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[94] Video of performance available for viewing in the archive of the contemporary art space Ex-Teresa Arte Actual in Mexico City.

morgue environment, and the signs of sanitation, such as the gloves or the surgical tape. (Figure 33) Both images critique society's desire to sanitize death. Through the latex gloves, the surgical marker and the hospital-like setting, Wolffer sterilizes death for us, desensitizing us to the pain of the nameless victims, as the news reports that played at the opening of the performance do. Death becomes clean, anonymous. Yet, the physical presence of Wolffer's body reactivates their suffering; their phantom pain reappears, becomes visible through Wolffer's embodied presence, and the invisible is made visible, allowing the spectator, in viewing, to witness as part of a public spectacle of grief.

In engaging with her body to practice public mourning in *Mientras Dormíamos*, Wolffer recalls Susan Bordo's mind/body dichotomy. Bordo asserts that the mind/body dualism presented by Plato and reiterated by Descartes (mind = male and body = female) is a false dichotomy. Based on this false dichotomy, women have historically been relegated to the realm of the bodily, which is read as a base prison that limits enlightenment and truth, while men take domain over that truest self, the mind. In engaging with her own body as a visual statement against the violence in Juárez, Wolffer engages Bordo's notion and subverts the Cartesian tradition, finding agency in the bodily realm. Wolffer's private body, the symbolic substitute for the myriad deceased, becomes a source of power, a decidedly public way to process grief and tragedy. Could this performance be read as a reclaiming of the power that had been taken by the patriarchy through not only violent acts against the female body but also the ghettoization of the body itself?

Wolffer glides between the mind and the body, navigating between both intellectualizing and emoting during the performance. The performance begins with the voice of a male newscaster citing data from crime scenes, thus including the so-called masculine realm of the

facts and figures of the mind. The sound bites are moving, sometimes recounting horrific details of crimes. However, the realm of the mind cannot bring the public to true understanding. Catharsis is the only way through, and for Wolffer, to truly mourn the dead, it must be felt bodily. She embraces her body as the site of public mourning. Traditionally, mourning has been a feminized act. Instead of simply falling in line with prescribed gender roles though, Wolffer embraces private grief as having redemptive value in the public arena. Only once the artist engages with her own body can the public arrive at true understanding.

Likewise, male artists are limited by the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. However, the falsehood of the mind as the location of truth is revealed through an examination of several of the male contemporary artists creating land art and performative works in reaction to the violence against women in Juárez. In contrast to Wolffer's very corporeal testament against the increasing body count in the borderlands, Argentine-born, Mexico City-based artist Enrique Ježik (b. 1961) dumped a truckload of animal body parts, which he had obtained from the municipal slaughterhouse, off a cliff outside of Juárez for his 2009 action *Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica*.[95] (Figures 34-36)

The action, documented with photographs later exhibited in a gallery, was part of the Proyecto Juárez, in which curator Mariana Davíd invited artists to come to Juárez to create new works that take issue with the topic of border violence. The project, site-specific and research-based, took place over the course of several years, beginning in 2006, and centers around the complicated socio-economic conditions of the Chihuahuan borderlands. According to the curator, this border area is of interest because, in addition to being a smuggling route since the colonial era, it has become, since NAFTA, synonymous with the neoliberal model in the past

[95] Enrique Ježik, *Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material*, 2006. Action for Proyecto Juárez.

decade, and, ultimately, evidence of the failed "war on drugs."[96] It is problematic that no artists living and working in the borderlands were invited; all artists who participated are based in Mexico City, or even as far away as Madrid. Local artists surely exist and were certainly engaged with the topic at the time in the borderlands; one example amongst a plethora is the urban photographer Jorge Arreola Barraza.[97] Moreover, despite the major role that women artists have played in work that relates to the violence in the region, Davíd perhaps inexplicably invited only male artists to participate, which she explains as a way to "address the concept of patriarchy in a context where traditional male values such as strength, success, and security are presented in an exacerbated fashion."[98] Perhaps she thought this could be a way for male artists to reject this hegemonic discourse, though her choice seems to unfortunately perpetuate the myth of the superiority of the male gaze, particularly since the participating male artists created works that do nothing to dismantle Descartes's mind/body dichotomy. Why female artists were not invited to participate remains ultimately unclear. Through their choice to focus on measuring and statistics -- that is the Cartesian realm of the mind, the artists chosen to participate present a perspective on violence in the region that renders the victims anonymous, mere numbers, six cubic meters, to be exact.

For his contribution to the project, Ježik used a dump truck to drop "organic material" off of a cliff outside Juárez in honor of victims of violence. This "organic material" serves as indexical reference to the absent bodies, victims of violence in Juárez. Ježik dehumanizes the Juárez victims, literally using animal parts in their place. An homage to Robert Smithson's 1969

[96] Curator Davíd's statement is available on the Proyecto Juárez website: http://www.proyectoJuárez.org.mx/.
[97] More information on Jorge Arreola Barraza can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1xt5UuJPjQ.
[98] Curator Davíd's statement is available on the Proyecto Juárez website: http://www.proyectoJuárez.org.mx/.

Asphalt Rundown, Težik's action refers to the bodies being dumped in the desert, often showing signs of sexual assault before their abandonment. (Figure 37) *Seis metros cúbicos* is a kind of aesthetic gesture, grown out of action painting and abstract expressionism that, as the matter oozes and drips down the landscape, doubles as social commentary. The sight of these bloody body doubles is disgusting; it repulses and sickens us – as should the violence we have all accepted as inevitable – ultimately causing us to wonder: What happens to this mass of organic matter? Is it left to biodegrade? And what does this imply about the bodies left in the desert to rot? Hoping for transcendence, can we re-imagine this rotting as a return to the earth?

In contrast to Wolffer's work, Težik uses other objects to stand in as symbolic substitutes for the collective victims, and his actions literally mark the landscape. Though there is a performative aspect to the work and the action is documented in photographs that were ultimately displayed as the finished artwork, there is a strong land art component to Težik's *Seis Metro Cúbicos*. Land art has been historically dominated by male artists. In fact, the seminal environmental art exhibition, *Earthworks*, at Virginia Dawn Gallery in 1968, exclusively exhibited male artists.[99] That said, as contemporary art historians begin to demonstrate, despite these structural challenges, female artists have produced earthworks since the 1970s.[100] Some artists, like Ana Mendieta, have been able to bridge the gap between land and the body.

While Wolffer's performance engages the artist's own body – in fact *is* an embodiment of the violence – Težik, perhaps because of his lack of a female-gendered body, must rely on

[99] Jane Catherine Wildy, "The Artistic Progressions of Ecofeminism: The Changing Focus of Women in Environmental Art," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* Vol. 6, Issue 1 (2011): 54 – 65.
[100] The 2008 exhibition at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, New York, *Decoys, Complexes, and Triggers: Feminism and Land Art in the 1970s* tells the story of prominent female land artists including Lynda Benglis, Agnes Denes, Jackie Ferrara, Suzanne Harris, Nancy Holt, and Michelle Stuart. Suzanne Boetteger's article "Excavating Land Art by Women in the 1970s, Discoveries and Oversights" in *Sculpture* magazine in November 2008 presents the untold history of female land artists in the 1970s.

"mother earth" to serve as the female body upon which the violence is re-enacted, a concept developed by ecofeminists in the 1980s.[101] Grown out of the heroic gesture of abstract expressionism, land art has long been the domain of male artists, "mother earth" serving as the canvas upon which the heroic male artist acts out his primal gestures.[102] In enacting this gesture of marking the earth with the indexical reference to bodies, Ježik stains the earth, leaving the bloody animal carcasses to rot. The visible remains further victimize the dead through the process of subjugating their bodies to the confines of the rational. Measuring the weight or the mass of the bodies of the dead women of Juárez appears to be a uniquely male phenomenon. Also striking is the scale of the works produced by male artists. While female artists have tended to create more intimate works using their own bodies, most of the male artists working in the area, and certainly all of those included in Davíd's project, created purposefully massive artworks. The monumentality of the male artists' representations drowns out the subtle statements of the female artists.

Other male artists produced monumental land art works for the Proyecto Juárez that demonstrate a cerebral approach to violence in the region. Well-known Madrid-based artist Santiago Sierra (b. 1966) created a site-specific art action for Proyecto Juárez. Sierra's *Sumisión (antes Palabra de Fuego) [Submission (formerly Word of Fire)]*, from 2006-2007 consists of fifteen-meter deep pits that spell out the word "sumisión," excavated in an empty field in the Anapra region on the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez. (Figures 38-40) Anapra, a working class neighborhood, is not fully integrated into the city, lacking municipal garbage disposal, and some

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[101] See: Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990); Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978); and Judith Plant, ed., *Healing The Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989).
[102] Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).

residents are without proper plumbing and electricity. The site was chosen for its proximity to the US-border wall, as the word "sumisión" is meant to be read from the north, and the role that its poor residents play in supporting the local *maquiladora* system. Initially, Sierra had intended to fill the letters with combustibles and set the word afire but was impeded by local officials (hence the name change). *Sumisión* is meant as a critique of the unequal relationship between the US and Mexico and functions, in particular, in defense of the low-wage workers manning the factories in the region, who in turn line the pockets of the wealthiest. Sierra's work, again utilizing the familiar language of land art, means to pay homage to the human cost that is a result of violence in the region. However, it fails to present the human perspective, opting for a cerebral account of systematic and economic violence.

In an even more intellectualized interpretation of violence in the region, Mexico City-based artist Artemio's 2009 *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)* pays homage to the women killed in the region since the early 1990s. (Figures 41-44) Artemio (b. 1976) collected official numbers, which likely do not account for the total number of women actually murdered and disappeared: 485 women had reportedly been killed since 1993. The artist multiplied the number of bodies by 55, using an average weight of 55 kilograms per woman, to come up with the sum of 27 tons. For *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)*, the artist had 27 tons of dirt excavated from the Chihuahuan desert, outside Ciudad Juárez, and transported by truck to a gallery in Mexico City, where the mountain of dirt was displayed. Again, victims of violence are rendered anonymous, reduced to numbers and a pile of dirt. Artemio's pile of dirt, as in the case of Ježik's organic material, is carefully measured, in an attempt to calculate with feigned (or at least

impossible to quantify) exactitude, the masses of dead women in Juárez. [103] For these male artists, suffering is not a personal, redemptive encounter but instead is communal and measured.

It is important to note that Mexican contemporary artists are creating works that obscure the identities of the victims, while in other parts of Latin America both the public and many artists seem to want to expose individual identities. Consider, for example, *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in Argentina, who protest the disappearance of their children during the dictatorship of 1976-1983, marching with photographs of their missing loved ones in hand. (Figure 45)

Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz (b. 1951) features the faces of the disappeared in his 1995-2002 project *Aliento (Breath)*, a comment on Colombia's own bloody, violent years. (Figure 46) *Aliento* consists of a series of small mirrors, about 8 inches in diameter, hung at eye level. The viewer is invited to breathe heavily, fogging up the mirror and revealing faces of the deceased, culled from obituaries. When faced with the mirror, the viewer sees herself and the faces of Colombian *desaparecidos*, obligated to encounter the visage of the dead. Yet, as the viewer's breath fades from the mirror, so do the faces of the deceased. Although the artist uses vestiges of the body here, as the portrait does appear momentarily only to quickly disappear again, leaving no trace, this figuration of the victims of violence, giving a face to and therefore naming them, varies from the large-scale public mourning of the male artists invited to participate in Proyecto Juárez. Where artists in Mexico produce piles of material, mimicking the massive piles of bodies, Muñoz creates an intimate portrait of the individual, and one that the viewer can't help but see herself in.

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[103] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45.

Some of the difference may lie in who is dying. In South America, particularly in Chile and Argentina, many of the disappeared were academics, upper middle class political dissidents, or children of the educated, elite classes. In contrast, in Mexico, though the killing may seem indiscriminate, most of the dead are poor, disenfranchised, vulnerable, female *maquiladora* workers. Even when turning from *feminicidio* to cartel violence, the class lines persist. Many cartel and gang members, likely the highest percentage of the casualties in the ongoing cartel violence, come up from the lower classes in Mexico, often out of a seeming lack of alternatives in a country where unemployment is rampant and the few jobs available are low paying. We might consider who we are allowed to grieve. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asks, albeit here in reference to alleged enemies of the state in the post-911 world, "What are the cultural barriers against which we struggle when we try to find out about the losses that we are asked not to mourn, when we attempt to name, and so to bring under the rubric of the 'human,' those whom the United States and its allies have killed?"

In Mexico, then, part of the problem is that we are asked not to mourn the nameless dead. The elite classes are relatively safe, while politicians feign concern for faceless masses of the dead poor. Perhaps this is why the victims are faceless in much Mexican art, because they are like Primo Levi's *Muselmann*, the precarious figure between life and death. Victims in Mexico, the poor and disenfranchised, are so insignificant to the state, Agamben's sovereign, that their lives are not worthy of grief on a personal, individual level. Many female artists in Mexico are trying to bridge the gap between private grief and public mourning.

Male artists creating work in Juárez tend to create large monumental works that attempt to understand violence in the region through an intellectual approach, often measuring and counting as ways to quantify the dead. Ježik counts out six cubic meters of animal body parts

that stand in for the deceased women and Artemio quantifies a pile of dirt, based on the massive weight of the bodies of the victims. Though these strategies are in line with what female artists are doing in that they practice figurative substitution, male artist's approach represents an attempt to understand violence in the region through a rational approach, as if counting and measuring could somehow heal the trauma of violence in Juárez. Many female artists, instead, attempt to heal that trauma through a more intimate, personal, and decidedly corporeal approach to their work, conceived of as a practice of grieving.

In a return to the artist's body-as-symbolic-substitute model, emerging artist Nayla Altamirano (b. 1981), like Wolffer, uses her own body to take on pain and suffering on behalf of silenced victims. Altamirano, a lawyer-turned-performance artist, has dedicated much of her life to the protection of indigenous communities in rural Mexico and to environmental conservation. It is not surprising then that advocacy permeates her artistic practice. In her 2011 performance *Las Nobodies*, Altamirano makes visible the invisible agony of women who are raped, often by *coyotes* entrusted with facilitating their safe passage, while crossing the border into the US [104] (Figures 47-51)

As the artist tells it, she was participating in humanitarian aid at the border when she came across women's brassieres hanging from mesquite plants in the Sonoran Desert. These bras, she would come to find out, served as trophies of the sexual abuse their former owners suffered. In the first component of the performance, which is documented on video, Altamirano walks three kilometers along the border collecting the bras and sprinkling salt on the plant to cure the wound, a natural healing practice. She undresses and then wears the bras, figuratively taking on the victims' physical reminder of pain. She wears the bras as she legally passes into the

[104] Nayla Altamirano, *The Nobodies*, 2011. Video documentation available at: http://vimeo.com/27545858.

US with her visa, stopping to explain to the border patrol officer that she is bringing, for her "sisters," her "hermanas," something that they have lost along the way, "their power, their innocence, their dignity, freedom, dreams..."[105]

In the second component of the performance, as the video of her border walk is projected behind her on a screen, Altamirano enters the performance space, undresses, and dons the bras, hereby substituting her own body for the bodies of the collective victims. For both Wolffer and Altamirano, the act of bearing witness requires that the women *bare* their naked, vulnerable bodies, symbolically becoming vulnerable like the victims of violence they reference.

Altamirano then removes each bra, one by one, and washes it in an act of cleansing solidarity. Through the act of washing, which references all sorts of culture-specific beliefs on the redemptive power of cleansing, the aesthetic moment becomes emancipatory. In this moment, the bras become the signifiers for the victims. Here, the artist and the spectators are witness not only to the violence but also to the cathartic process of healing through cleansing. Like Wolffer, her own body is the sign, and, yet, like Ježik, she simultaneously substitutes an object, the bras, for the absent victims, thereby producing the ultimate cathartic substitution.

That Altamirano conceives of her work as a healing practice is significant, as she assumes the role of healer on behalf of the state. Female artists tend to engage viscerally with the topic of violence against women in Juárez, utilizing their own bodies in their performances, and directly embodying victimhood in a very personal and intimate way. Meanwhile, male artists tend to engage, first, with the land as opposed to the body, and in doing so, approach the topic in a less visceral, more intellectual manner, many times resorting to a fascination with measuring and numbers as a way to rationalize the experience of the trauma inflicted on women's bodies.

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[105] Nayla Altamirano, personal communication, in-person meeting, June 2012.

Through these different gendered responses, we can see that artists, while in some ways bearing witness to the violence against women, continue to reenact Cartesian mind/body dualism. While male artists seek to somehow understand what cannot be rationalized, attempting to literally and figuratively dominate the metaphorical mother earth as a way to arrive at that truth, female artists continue to do the gendered work of emotional healing for the nation. Embracing the gendered work of grieving subverts traditional power dynamics.

In employing the figurative substitution that Agamben endorses by exchanging their own bodies or other items for the absent bodies of victims, contemporary female artists in Mexico highlight that same absence, making it even more visible. The audience, ever a participant, in turn sees what was once invisible, now able to witness to the tragedy. Beyond witnessing the tragedy – in which we are all complicit, we, as spectators, are also witness to the redemptive power, and, in this, to the aesthetic and political potential of the healing process, sprinkling salt in, to heal the wound. Though rubbing salt in a wound can be painful, it can also speed up the healing process. As evidenced in these performances, which are a testament to the transformative power of witnessing as an aesthetic project, art's potential transcends death.

Chapter Four

Bloody Body Doubles:
Narcoviolence, Cleansing, and Redemption

On a balmy Venetian summer day in 2009, a mop glided across the floor of the Palazzo Rota Ivancich, which, for the moment, had been transformed into the Mexican Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennial. A handful of individuals silently, perhaps solemnly, mopped the floors of the exhibition space. The visitor viewing the scene may have wondered if she had somehow arrived too early to the show, a possibility supported by the lack of visible artworks on display in the space. Rather than a pre-exhibition cleaning, however, the act of mopping the floor comprised a performance component of a work by Teresa Margolles, Mexico's official submission to the biennial.[106] In *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?,* family members of victims of Mexico's drug violence spread a mixture of water and their dead relatives' blood across the building's centuries-old floors. The blood, originally spilled in the ongoing cartel-related hostilities in Mexico, dries and thickens with each passing day, as visitors literally walk over the remains of the dead. The victims' bodies are absent, yet ghostly traces remain.

This project for the Venice Biennial represents Margolles's mature work, which utilizes indexical references to the body, favoring traces of the body over the image of the cadaver itself. In contrast, Margolles's earlier work, such as her series *Autorretratos en la morgue (Self-Portraits in the Morgue)*, and *Tarjetas para picar cocaína (Cards to Cut Cocaine)*, often includes the image of the cadaver, generating little more than shock value. (Figure 52) In this chapter, I argue that Margolles's early work, in directly and forcibly implicating the viewer in

[106] Cuauhtémoc Medina, ed., *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Mexico City and Barcelona: Editorial RM, 2009).

the act of looking at the very visible dead, falls short. In utilizing the visibly dead body, the images are matter of fact, the meaning obvious. There is nothing to talk about, as the meaning is clear. In *Autorretrato en la morgue*, Margolles holds the dead body of a child as she looks boldly at the viewer. (Figure 53) Like Manet's *Olympia*, her gaze is defiant, aggressive. She holds the cadaver, presenting the body to the viewer, demanding engagement. The body is just as visible in *Tarjetas para picar cocaína,* which likewise feature cadavers of individuals killed because of the drug trade. However, despite these powerful images, these early works do not achieve Margolles's aims of changing behavior or even promoting dialogue. In fact, drug users simply proceeded to use the cards to cut their cocaine, undaunted by the gruesome images on the cards, as documented in photographs that Margolles took and displayed with the cards.

The Venice biennial project, which belongs to her later more mature works, is deceptively subtle. Margolles removes the body in favor of indexical references, resulting in work that is ultimately more successful precisely because of this absence. Furthermore, she removes herself entirely from the image. No longer self-portraits, her work involves the work of others. Family members of victims and assistants do the work of mopping, sewing, modeling. The removal of the self makes the work less personal, and perhaps more open to possibilities and to a wider audience. Margolles's mature work is more nuanced and thoughtful and because of these subtleties, and therefore promotes more dialogue. These works force the viewer to ask the question that Margolles so powerfully presents in Venice: What else could we talk about?

Outside of the Palazzo Ivancich, the Mexican flag, flanked by those of the European Union and the city of Venice, hangs from a balcony above the doorway on the canal-side of the building. (Figure 54) Upon approaching the Mexican Pavilion, visitors may not have noticed the Mexican flag, as it was obscured, saturated in mud and blood from cartel-related crime scenes.

This was the first of Margolles's conceptual interventions at the site. On the stage of an international exhibition, world powers fight, however politely, for the cultural supremacy of their nations. The one artist chosen to represent Mexico has taken the national symbol—the flag—and completely obfuscated it. The flag is a symbol of the new, modern Mexico, after the Revolution of 1910, the Mexico of *tierra y libertad* (land and liberty), presumably for all, a cause for which citizens fought so very hard and which, in many ways, has now been forfeited, as control of the country has been transferred into the hands of drug cartels.

Passing under the now-unrecognizable flag, the visitor enters to witness the sporadic mopping in various, otherwise empty rooms of the Venetian palace. (Figure 55) In a back room hang large blood-soaked textiles. (Figure 56) At a certain point during the exhibition, Margolles removed the textiles to utilize them for another component to the performance, involving embroidery. (Figure 57) For this aspect of *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Margolles's assistants, working outdoors at various public sites around Venice, sewed *narcomensajes* (narcomessages), taken from *narcomantas*, into the blood-soaked textiles with golden thread, juxtaposing the high (gold) with low (blood). In the ongoing drug cartel wars, cartels are known to leave "narcomessages," often warnings, on signs attached to a corpse, or left near a corpse or body parts. The content of the message usually refers to the cartel responsible for the death of the victims and includes threats of future violence if their supremacy is not respected. *Narcomantas* are the large signs, often of poster board, paper, sheets or other cloth, upon which these narcomessages are left. The blood for the fabrics, like the rest of the blood used in this project, was collected, according to the artist, from cartel-related crime scenes in the northern region of Mexico.[107] Margolles and her assistants combed local news sources for crime scenes and also

[107] Cuahtémoc Medina, ed., *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Barcelona and Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2009).

relied on her contacts within law enforcement and forensics in order to locate the crime scenes. She then traveled to the sites, where she collected the blood and, sometimes, other fragments, left behind after the crime scene investigations were completed.[108] Originally trained as a forensic scientist, Margolles utilized her research skills to locate her materials, essentially scavenging for her medium, referencing Brazilian artist Manuel Barrio's garbage aesthetic and certainly recalling the traditions of Arte Povera artists.

There is something heroic about using blood to soak large cloths that essentially served as the canvas upon which the textual work is affixed, as if in a nod to artists like Helen Frankenthaler soaking her canvases with diluted paint. In this case, however, blood has replaced common house paint as the new, experimental material. To be sure, other contemporary artists from Marc Quinn to Andrés Serrano, and earlier Joseph Beuys, Piero Manzoni, or Andy Warhol, have used blood and other bodily fluids as a medium. Furthermore, the use of bodily fluid as artistic medium was not a departure for Margolles herself, who, in her 2001 *Vaporización* (*Vaporization*), cycled water that had been used to wash corpses in the local morgue through an artificial fog generator, creating a haze that enveloped Ace Gallery in Mexico City. Blood naturally references death and dying, but here, for Margolles, blood directly refers to the absent bodies of those who have died in Mexico's cartel wars. Blood becomes the signifier for the missing body, functioning as a kind of *memento mori*. Barely visible traces of the body heighten the phenomenological reaction in the viewer, eliciting a corporeal and visceral response despite the body's absence.

The base -- not because blood is worthless but because the dried blood of a dead person is superfluous -- material of blood is juxtaposed in Margolles's *narcomantas* with the gold thread.

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[108] Ibid.

Gold is one of the most valuable substances on the planet. In Christian iconography, gold symbolizes the glory and eternal promise of heaven, where a good Catholic goes after death. Are the victims of Mexico's cartel violence beneficiaries of that golden, heavenly promise? Gold is a symbol of religious glory, political power, or economic value and, fundamentally, cartel violence comes down to economics -- cartels trade blood for gold. It is no accident, then, that Margolles chooses gold thread for her *narcomantas*.

Like the blood used to mop the floors, the text of the narcomessages is also scavenged, collected by Margolles from newspaper accounts of their appearances at crime scenes. These messages, often scrawled onto large white sheets, are found near dead, mutilated, or decapitated bodies left in public places like plazas or roadways, meant to inspire fear among the public. (Figure 58) The messages are left, along with the bodies, as threatening warnings to the general public. Once the messages were embroidered, the large bloody fabrics were re-hung inside the Palazzo Rota Ivancich. One such narcomessage reads:

ver, oír y callar
hasta que caigan todos tus hijos
así terminan las ratas
para que aprendan a respetar

(Author's translation)

Look, listen, and shut up
Lest all your children fall.
This is how rats end up,
So, learn some respect.

These texts, more than mere warnings, are meant to solidify new unofficial laws unilaterally enacted by the cartels. Mexican cartels control the country's major distribution networks including much of the nation's roads, neighborhoods, and local businesses, particularly in the northern border region. They stay in power through both intimidation and promises of

wealth for new members—prisons in Mexico can't even contain them once they're captured.[109] In a way, it could be said that cartel leaders are Mexico's unofficial politicians. According to Walter Benjamin in "Critique of Violence," violence itself has two functions: law making and law preserving. Cartels are the new lawmakers. The violent lawmaker is what Benjamin calls "the great criminal," whose "means are repellent but also arouse secret admiration of the public," likely for their disregard of social rules.[110]

In addition to the cleaning and embroidering, Margolles staged several other performances that took place throughout Venice before and during the span of the biennial. For example, Margolles had jewelry made of broken glass from drive-by shootings, the image of the so-called patron saint of *narcotraficantes* Jesús Malverde figuring prominently in their designs, and hired models to display the narco-inspired adornments. Additionally, Margolles created and distributed to the public laminated cards for cutting cocaine that feature photographic images of corpses of those killed as a result of the drug violence. The cards, originally produced in 1997, were reproduced for the 2009 Venice biennial. In the original iteration of this work, a photographic series entitled *Tarjetas para picar cocaína/Cards to cut cocaine* (1997-1999), Margolles documented drug users actually utilizing these cards for their intended purpose, despite the grisly images of cadavers on them, bodies belonging to individuals who may or may

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[109] In February of 2012, a prison riot, in which 44 people were stabbed or beaten to death, served as a cover in which at least members of the Zeta cartel escaped from a prison in the northern state of Nuevo Leon. All of those killed were members of the Zeta's rivals, the Gulf cartel. The warden and at least 18 prison guards had been either bribed or threatened to facilitate the escape. This event was widely reported in international news. Similar events in which prison officials facilitated the escape of cartel members have been occurring in Mexico since 2009. See, for example, Tracy Wilkinson "Mexico prison riot was cover for jailbreak, officials say," Los Angeles Times, February 21, 2012, accessed March 8, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/21/world/la-fg-mexico-prison-break-20120221. Perhaps the most high-profile incident involved the elaborate, second escape of El Chapo Guzman in 2015.

[110] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume One (1913-1926)*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of University of Harvard Press, 1996).

not have been connected in some way to the drug trade. One such card depicts the charred corpse of a toddler, caught in the crosshairs of cartel gunfire. In this context, the cards were intended to cause drug users to consider the ramifications of their drug consumption on the lives of all Mexican citizens. By reproducing them in Venice in 2009, Margolles underscores a common trope of her work, which is the irrelevance of the guilt or innocence of the dead whom she references. In an interview featured in the exhibition catalog, Margolles stated, “I don’t care if we’re mopping with the good guys or the bad guys. I’m merely bearing witness to a retelling of the facts: thousands of dead and hundreds of children killed in the crossfire.”[111] Indeed, is one body worth more than another? Do certain lives merit more or less justice than others? In the face of these concerns, Teresa Margolles emphatically asks, “What else we could talk about?”

The question begged by the title of Margolles’s Venice performance is a good one, and one with which Mexican citizens grapple with increasing frequency as the drug war rages on. In many parts of Mexico, bodies continue to disappear on a daily basis—at times reappearing decapitated in the plaza or hanging headless from an overpass—the result of political developments that have caused cartel violence to worsen dramatically in recent years, beginning in part with former president Felipe Calderón’s declaration of war on the cartels in 2006. Trouble was already brewing, however, when the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) took power from the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) in 2000 with the election of Vicente Fox to the presidency, followed six years later by Calderón. The PRI had ruled Mexico for 71 continuous years, and drugs were already moving easily through the country in those years. Many in Mexico speculate that drug lords had deals with government officials, at the local and federal levels, to

[111] Taiyana Pimientel, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Teresa Margolles, “Conversation,” in *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City and Barcelona: Editorial RM, 2009), 89.

pass drugs quietly and discretely through the country from ports of entry, north to the major markets in the United States. When Fox took power, these deals became null and void. Cartel leaders saw an opportunity, a power vacuum that organized crime quickly filled. Cartels rewrote the rules and began to take over, terrorizing the country with violence. Since the PRI returned to power in 2012, public speculation contends that the federal government, desperate to quell violence, entered into new agreements with cartels, who continue to fight each other over territory.[112] According to a September 2015 report, more than 60,000 people have been killed as a result of the ongoing cartel violence.[113] More recent data puts the death toll at over 150,000 with over 25,000 people disappeared.[114] Though most casualties are likely members of the cartels, soldiers, or police officers, a number of innocent and otherwise uninvolved people such as toddlers and university students have been slaughtered.[115] Adding to the body count are the countless individuals who dare to speak out against cartels and the Mexican government, accused by many in the public of being in cahoots with the cartels. The depth of corruption is made most apparent in the 2014 disappearance and believed murder of 43 students from a teacher's college in Ayotzinapa, at the hands of the city's mayor. Many in the public believe that corrupt politicians are so in bed with the cartels that they are by now impossible to untangle. People who are speaking out against the violence are at increasing risk. In 2011, the son of renowned poet

[112] Though current president Enrique Peña Nieto is part of the PRI, he has denied that his administration has returned to this pattern of agreement with the cartels, stating "Let it be very clear: There will be no deal, no truce with organised crime." Raf Sanchez, "Mexico elections: Enrique Peña Nieto pledges a new era," *The Telegraph*, July 2, 2012, accessed March 19, 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/9370859/Mexico-elections-Enrique-Pena-Nieto-pledges-a-new-era.html.

[113] "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts," *CNN*, updated December 19, 2016, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/02/world/americas/mexico-drug-war-fast-facts/.

[114] Jason Breslow, "The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War," *PBS Frontline*, July 27, 2015, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/.

[115] Arthur Brice, "Death Toll," *CNN*, August 3, 2010, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/08/03/mexico.drug.deaths/index.html.

and journalist Javier Sicilia was killed; since then, Sicilia has become one of the vocal leaders of the *No Más Sangre* movement.[116] Sadly, Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists.[117]

Teresa Margolles (b. 1963) may be especially invested in exploring the sociopolitical impact of cartel violence on Mexico as a result of her background, having been born in Culiacán, Sinaloa, perhaps currently the country's most dangerous territory. Born in 1963, Margolles's career did not follow the typical trajectory for most artists of her generation. Her artistic career began instead in the Mexico City morgue. Margolles studied art at the Dirección de Fomento a la Cultura Regional del Estado de Sinaloa (DIFOCUR), earned a degree in Communication Sciences at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and received a diploma in Forensic Medicine from the Servicio Médico Forense.[118] Trained in forensic science, Margolles began as a mortician by profession, beginning her artistic practice in the 90s.

In 1990 Margolles cofounded the performance group SEMEFO, which takes its name from the morgue Servicio Médico Forense.[119] The group began as an underground performance

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[116] In 2011, TIME Magazine named the protester as its "Person of the Year," and Sicilia was profiled in the accompanying "Profiles of Protesters" series for his work in organizing the protests of that same year.
[117] Multiple sources attest to Mexico's reputation as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, but here is one of many possible sources: http://en.rsf.org/report-mexico,184.html
[118] Biographical information taken from online artist databases, available at: http://www.artnet.com/artists/teresa-margolles/biography-links, and http://www.latinamericanart.com/en/artists/teresa-margolles/biography.html.
[119] I will not discuss her work with SEMEFO, the performance group active from 1990-1999. For more on her artistic endeavors with the group, see Amy Sara Carroll, "Muerte Sin Fin," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54:2 (T206) Summer 2010; Rebecca Scot Bray, "Teresa Margolles's Crime Scene Aesthetics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, 4 (Fall, 2011): 933-948; Cuauhtémoc Medina, ed., *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Mexico City and Barcelona: Editorial RM: 2009); Medina, "Recent Political Forms: Radical Pursuits in Mexico/Santiago Sierra, Francis Alys, Minerva Cuevas," *TRANS>arts.cultures.media* 8 (2000): 146-163; Medina, "SEMEFO: The Morgue" In *The Mexico City Reader*, ed. Rubén Gallo, trans. Lorna Scott Fox and Rubén Gallo, 309–26 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and Medina, "Zones of Tolerance: Margolles, SEMEFO and Beyond," *Parachute Contemporary Art Magazine* 104:10-12 (October, 2001): 32-52.

group, with its first exhibition in 1993.[120] Soon after, Margolles soon began creating work on her own. In 1999, she participated in an artist exchange program between Mexico and Colombia. Her early works include self-portrait photographs with cadavers she was preparing for burial in the morgue and the aforementioned *Vaporización* (2001), the performance/installation project in which the water used to wash corpses was vaporized into a gallery space, leaving visitors to breathe in the remains of the dead. In her 1998 *Autorretratos en la Morgue (Self Portraits in the Morgue)*, Margolles poses with cadavers she had been entrusted with washing and preparing for burial. Amy Sara Carroll asserts in "Muerte Sin Fin," that Margolles's *Autorretrato en la Morgue No. 5*, a self-portrait of the artist with the dead body of a child, takes on a quasi-religious quality, recalling a gruesome Madonna and Child device, or perhaps a modern-day pieta.[121] These readings make sense in a predominantly Catholic country like Mexico, whose visual culture is replete with images of sacrifice. Margolles's 1998 self-portrait with a cadaver, a color photograph, features the artist, dressed in a white lab coat and dark rubber gloves, holding the dead body of a young girl. The setting, suggested in the title, appears to be a morgue, indicated by tiles dirtied with visible blood. The space is shallow, the artist and cadaver pushed up in the foreground, heightening a sense of claustrophobia and anxiety.

Refiguring the classic Mary with dead Christ, Margolles holds the child like a modern Mexican pieta. References to Christianity are subtle but surely relevant to the largely Catholic Mexican audience. In re-figuring the Madonna, Margolles takes on the role of mother, as a personification of Mexico, mourning the loss of her children. Like the suffering Christ of colonial Mexican crucifixions, the child's suffering is highlighted by her nakedness, which deprives her of dignity yet highlights her vulnerability, her humanity. The child's arm hangs

[120] "Teresa Margolles," accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1013.
[121] Amy Sara Carroll, "Muerte Sin Fin," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54:2 (T206) Summer 2010, 110.

limply, exaggerating the lifeless quality. The body itself appears to be covered in blood, and some areas even burnt. This is an image not of the peaceful afterlife but of an agonizing death, fraught with physical suffering. The body of this child, tortured and marked, stands in for the bodies of the deceased, a signifier of victims of cartel violence in Mexico.

One questions the ethics of displaying the body so crudely. As the child comes from a family of little economic means, Margolles agrees to pay for a proper burial for the child, in exchange for their consent to photograph her dead body. Does one have to consent to this use of the body in order to obtain a proper burial for one's child? Positioned in the foreground, Margolles looks out at the viewer directly, implicating us in the act of looking at the dead body and defiantly demanding our disgust in turn. Yet, as the image is difficult to look at, we want to turn away. Margolles's piercing gaze implores us to action but what can our looking do? Is looking enough?

What power relations are implied in our looking? The photograph is taken from above, positioned so that we look down on Margolles and the child's body. From this angle, the artist presents the body, so that its visibility is heightened. Moreover, the viewer, positioned above, takes on a voyeuristic role. It is as if Margolles looks up at a surveillance camera, out to the viewer, broadcasting this private death to the public sphere. Surely this positioning has to do with domination, power, and control. The child has no control over her body, here, and the viewer has the power to examine violence yet at a safe distance, behind the camera. The power of the drug trade controls the body politic in Mexico, and through the image, the body is twice dominated.

Here, Peggy Phelan's notions on the visible body come into play. In *Unmarked*, Phelan rejects representation as the sole Truth. Instead, representation, here the photographic self-

portrait, limits the body, fostering surveillance and fetishism. In contrast, performance opens spaces for alternative modes of presentation, causing sight and memory to work and allowing for multiple Truths through invisibility and ambiguity. Photography begets a copy but performance resists representation. Phelan asserts that "without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control. Performance resists the balanced calculations of finance. It saves nothing. It only spends."[122]

Margolles's *Autorretrato en la morgue* carries less weight with the viewer, as the body is too visible. The image is shocking yet does not move beyond shock value. In Margolles's later works, we see that, through invisibility – and thus the rejection of the fetishizing surveillance of representation – the performance of grief works against those in power, those in control, against the system and its purveyors of violence.

The performance of grief is part of the healing process and requires the activation of bodily traces. Aligned with the history of conceptual and performance art, Margolles's work focuses on traces of the body as a tool for communal healing. Joseph Beuys's 1969 *Pack* installation features 20 wooden sleds, packed with felt military blankets, flashlights, and animal fat typical of traditional Tartar healing practices that symbolically reference the artist's perhaps legendary rescue after his plane went down over Crimea during the Second World War.[123] In the magical, myth making, healing tradition of Beuys, Margolles's photography, installation, performance, and video find their primary source materials in remnants of the human body—blood water, body fat, body oils, and other items found at crime scenes. The trace of the human

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[122] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.
[123] Viola Michely and Claudia Mesch, *Joseph Bueys: The Reader* (New York: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007).

body becomes her artistic medium, occupies all space, surrounds her audience the visitor, and is absorbed into the his or her body. Bodies mingle, life and death becoming inextricably linked.

Margolles's engagement with the corporeal is in line with performance art as her predecessors conceived it in the 1970s. In these early years, performance artists were interested in implicating themselves in violent actions against their own highly visible bodies. In Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, briefly discussed in Chapter One, Schneemann pulled a long scroll out of her vagina and read a sort of feminist manifesto from it. A powerful feminist statement, *Interior Scroll* was, among other things, a firm rejection of the male gaze and of the female body as object of desire, and an affirmation of interior female power.[124] In another entanglement with the highly visible body, in 1971, Chris Burden had his assistant shoot him in the arm, and, in 1975, he had himself nailed, as if crucified, to a Volkswagen Beetle.[125] Self-abuse has become a tool of the performance artist and a way to make visible the institutionalized violence in contemporary societies.

Unlike some of her counterparts, Margolles, though has no interest in self-inflicted wounds.[126] Instead of enacting actual violence against the self, she makes violence visible through indexical references to the now-absent body. Intuitively recognizing the power of the invisible, she turns away from the body, asking whether the trace of the body can reveal its frailty more effectively than a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the arm.

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[124] See: Kathy Odell, "Fluxus Feminus," *TDR*. MIT Press. 41 (1): 43–60, and Robert C Morgan, "Carolee Schneemann: The Politics of Eroticism," *Art Journal*, 56 (4): 97–100.
[125] "Chris Burden," Gagosian Gallery, accessed August, 25, 2016, http://www.gagosian.com/artists/chris-burden/.
[126] Many performance artists continue to submit their body to seemingly unbearable conditions in their practices. Take, for example, Marina Abramovíc's (2010) *The Artist Is Present* at the New York Museum of Modern Art, in which the artist sat in a chair for seven hours a day during the entirety of the retrospective exhibition.

While in some of her earlier works the body is clearly visible, Margolles's performances in Venice exercise the power of invisibility. In place of the absent body is its arguably most sacred residue. Since the blood used in the mopping is mixed with water (an adjustment prompted by Italian laws meant to protect historic buildings), the trace of the body becomes barely visible to the spectator. As the layers of blood thicken, the viewer is eerily reminded of the human impact of the cartel violence without needing the image of corpses or actual piles of bodies. Cleansing with blood is effective because, in a way, it rejects voyeurism—the viewer does not need the image of a cadaver—and it simultaneously invites the fetishism of the reliquary residue. The sight of the residue may prove more powerful than the sight of the cadaver itself, in one sense more palatable yet also more profound in its absence, as images of piles of the dead have become commonplace in contemporary media. Though the dead bodies are absent, other bodies remain visible. There is a certain degree of voyeurism in watching the individuals, family members of victims of violence, in the act of mopping. The notion of spectatorship, of viewing a performance, further complicates ideas of the visible. That visibility is problematized; the body returns to the performance, though it is neither that of the artist nor her subject. The spectator engages in the "performative quality of all seeing."[127]

The reception of Margolles's work has included some very pointed criticism. To be sure, actions such as filling a room with vapor made from water ostensibly used to wash cadavers and mopping a floor with a mixture of water and blood purportedly taken from victims of cartel violence inevitably raise public health concerns. Before entering *Vaporization*, visitors had to sign a waiver with the following disclaimer, "P.S.I. renounces all responsibility for any physical, mental, or emotional damages caused to the undersigned once he/she enters the installation."[128]

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[127] Phelan, 127.
[128] Carroll, 107.

More importantly, however, the use of the remains of the dead raises deep ethical concerns. What does it mean to use the remains of another human being's body as the medium for a work of art? Some critics have called this type of work "violence porn." Others lament that, at best, Margolles is taking advantage of people who had already been made victims once before in the loss of their loved one. Did she pay the actors in *What Else Could We Talk About*? Or did she just finance their trips to Venice and the performances without providing other compensation? Reports vary, and the questions remain. In another instance, for *Lengua (Tongue)* in 2000, Margolles exhibited the tongue of a dead teenage boy. According to Bray, Margolles "negotiated with the teenager's family and offered to pay for the son's burial expenses (providing a casket) in exchange for the tongue"[129] What of the ethics here? Do poor families who cannot otherwise afford a casket need to surrender part of the body of the deceased in order to merit a dignified burial?

Similar ethical concerns persist in other works by Margolles. In an untitled work, commissioned in part by and exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from October 2010 to 2011, Margolles produced a series of concrete benches.[130] Again, the material used to construct the sculptures, which recall Henry Moore's abstracted reclining forms, includes liquid used to clean dead bodies, victims of the continual violence. Who decides who has the right to use the trace of the deceased? Is Margolles at liberty to unilaterally procure these materials?

For Margolles, concerns around the ethics of her practice seem to be of secondary importance to the potential social power embedded in the form of her works. In particular, she appears to ascribe symbolic meaning to the act of washing and cleansing, as evidenced by her engagement with these themes in several of her aforementioned works. An insistence on the

[129] Bray, 935.
[130] These benches will be discussed again later in the chapter. See Figure 66.

redemptive power of these actions abounds in cultural history, from religion to literature. A relatively common belief states that cleansing can lead to salvation. Nearly every major religion includes some form of ritualistic and redemptive washing of the body (parts or whole) into its practice. For example, in the Catholic vesting prayers, washing redeems and removes "all stain." During a Catholic mass, the priest recites "*Da, Dómine, virtútem mánibus meis ad abstergéndum omnem máculam…*" ("Give strength to my hands, Lord, to be cleansed of all stain…"), while washing his hands.[131] The priest is metaphorically redeemed through the physical act of cleansing, and so is able to help others cleanse, absolving them of that "stain": sin. In baptism, water washes away original sin. Foot washing is important in Eastern Orthodox Catholicism and among many Baptists. Likewise, in Judaism, ritual washing of the body restores purity. Cleansing with water is a vital practice in Islam too: full body cleansing should be performed before formal worship. Sweat lodges called *temescales* (in Nahuatl *temazcalli*) were used in ancient Mexico by indigenous peoples and continue to be used for cleansing rituals in most parts of Mexico today. There are references to the redemptive power of cleansing in the Bible, Torah, and Koran—references too numerous to document here.[132]

Benefits are amplified through their ritual or repetitious enactment. For Margolles, mopping functioned as a ritual, practiced daily throughout the duration of the exhibition in Venice.[133] Margolles's cleansing metaphorically redeems the victims, their families, us as spectators, even entire populations from the plague of violence. Perhaps the violence itself is somewhat redemptive. In some ways, violence against the body can lead to salvation. Take, for example, the Catholic concept that Christ's sacrifice of his worldly body redeems all of

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[131] "Washing of Feet and Hands," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913).
[132] Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 365.
[133] Pimiental et al., 89.

humanity. While these artists are not overtly religious individuals, in an overwhelmingly Catholic nation like Mexico, these fairly well-known cultural beliefs might inform their work. Theoretically, this ritual cleansing serves to absolve us of our collective guilt. Cleansing figures prominently in Margolles's earliest work. Her first self-portraits with cadavers grew out of her own work of actually washing the bodies of the deceased. It can be said perhaps that her artistic work has its roots in this ritualized cleansing. These connotations associated with cleansing are surely called to mind in the work of Margolles and other contemporary performance artists who are responding to themes of violence in Mexico.

It is not surprising that many of her contemporaries engage in ritualistic acts of cleansing against violence in their performance work. Artist Lorena Wolffer, whose work is discussed in Chapter Three, best known for her performances enacted in solidarity with the murdered women of Juárez, ritualistically bathes herself in blood in an early work entitled *Báñate* from 1992. (Figure 59) For this performance, Wolffer uses blood, signifier of death, to sensually bathe herself, rubbing blood all over her nude body, and evoking for the spectator the image of a bikini-clad mud wrestler. This ritual cleansing elicits simultaneous reactions of both repulsion and excitement in the spectator. Washing something with blood though, whether it be a body or the floor, fails to really cleanse. Perhaps it only further muddies it. Like Margolles, Wolffer makes use of something considered dirty to cleanse. In "Blood for Money: The Value of the Bleeding Body in the Performances of Michael Mayhew, Ron Athey, and Teresa Margolles," Lisa Newman reads the blood that Margolles uses to clean the floor as a reminder of our interconnectedness, linking the spectator with the dead victims:

> The release of blood exposes the hidden "life-force" and private internal world of the body, and speaks to the shared substance of our mortality, which supersedes Otherness and valuation through corporeal generosity. While the unique encoded history of blood asserts the body's individual history and agency, when extended into the world, it also

references the larger disparities of socio-political validations of bodies and lives in cultural margins.[134]

It should be noted that doubts have been raised about the authenticity of the blood that Margolles utilizes in her biennial performances. I would argue that, whatever the gossip, the source of the blood is irrelevant. Like Piero Manzoni's feces, the material is less important than the concept.[135] More interesting questions revolve around the ethics of taking the blood of another individual and using it as an artistic medium. Is it the artist's right to simply take another, albeit deceased, person's blood? What are the ethics of this? Despite these concerns, Margolles's references to cleansing line up with trends amongst her contemporaries in Mexico.

Other contemporary Mexican artists are also concerned with the redemptive value of ritualistic cleansing. Young performance artist Niña Yhared (b. 1977) acts out a symbolic body cleansing in her work *Lavadora de Cuerpos*, originally performed in 2005. (Figure 60) Both *Bañate* and *Lavadora de Cuerpos* were performed at alternative arts space Ex-Teresa in downtown Mexico City in 1992 and 2005, respectively.[136] According to the artist, the performance not only deals with violence against women, but also refers to state violence against the body politic.[137] In the work, which Yhared calls an "act of solidarity," she literally washes a symbolically dead body, covered in dirt and painted-on wounds. The ceremonial cleansing is offered as a gift to the body, to her fellow human being. Emerging artist Nayla Altamirano, whose work is also discussed in Chapter Three, also included ritualistic washing in her performances. Altamirano ritualistically washes the brassieres of rape victims that she has

[134] Lisa Newman, "Blood for Money: The Value of the Bleeding Body in the Performances of Michael Mayhew, Ron Athey, and Teresa Margolles," *Theater Annual* 66: 2013, 21.
[135] In 1961, Piero Manzoni supposedly canned and sold his feces at the price of gold. Scholars debate the veracity of Manzoni's claim, but none of the tins has ever been opened.
[136] DVDs of both performances are available to researchers in the Ex-Teresa's performance archive.
[137] Comments from artist are taken from personal communication with the artist in February 2011.

collected along the US-Mexico border, symbolically cleansing the victims in hopes of redemption. (Figure 61)

What sets Margolles's work apart from that of artists like Wolffer and Yhared, who perform cleansing rituals in their work, is her reference to domesticity. The Venice project includes washing, embroidering, and jewelry-making, actions traditionally confined to the realm of the feminine in Western culture. That Margolles hires assistants to complete these actions (instead of performing them herself) empowers the Mexican domestic worker, elevating that work to the level of fine art.[138] As many high-profile contemporary artists hire assistants to help complete their art actions, it is no surprise that Margolles does not do the work herself. But more than this, her works involve a community of participants. Involving family members of the deceased to complete the cleaning serves as a cathartic action against grief. These individuals also function in the place of the dead, reanimating the empty spaces with their real life bodies. This ritual activates the space as sacred, and individuals performing domestic work here function as spiritual healers.

Narcoculture is ritualized in other areas of Mexican culture. While the majority of the population abhors narcos, there is a segment of the population that glorifies narco lifestyle. Evidence can be found in narcoballads, which regale the listeners with tales of illegal activities, much like gangsta rap of the late 1980s and early 1990s in US urban centers. For some, the narco's disregard for law and human life betrays ultimate freedom. Just as armed revolution against a tyrant or dictator is justified, so must some (of course, delusional) narcos justify their own actions, even though their ends involve neither justice nor the common good. Instead, their

[138] Several components of Margolles's performance are undertaken by the artist herself; from the conception of the work to the collection of the source materials like blood and broken glass, Margolles is involved in all aspects of the work's production, even if relying on assistants at times.

objective is power. And to gain that power, they make new laws through violent murders and decrees in the texts of their narcomantas. As Benjamin asserts, "lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence."[139] And "power, more than the most extravagant gain in property, is what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence."[140]

Uninterested in justice for the weak, narcos want—even more than money and fame—power. And they associate, perhaps mistakenly as Phelan would argue, power with visibility. The more visible and gruesome their crimes, the better. The more murders they can sign their name to with their narcomantas, the more power they manifest visible. In a way, the extent of violence is testament to their power; as Medina indicates, "the production of corpses is on such a scale that the warehouses of good and evil can no longer contain them."[141] Yet, their power is precarious.

A demonstration of the precarious power of guns is clear in Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas (Shovels for Guns)* project.[142] (Figures 62-65) In 2008, Reyes (b. 1972), in conjunction with the municipal government of the city of Culiacán, Margolles's aforementioned dangerous hometown, offered to collect any weapon that citizens wanted to surrender in exchange for coupons for household electro domestic items. According to the artist, "1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act."[143] Once the weapons were collected, they were crushed and then melted down. With the melted guns, Reyes had the same number (1527) of shovels made. The shovels were distributed to art

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[139] Benjamin, 240.
[140] Benjamin, 241.
[141] Medina, 24.
[142] For more information, see "Palas por Pistolas," accessed December 27, 2016, http://pedroreyes.net/palasporpistolas.php.
[143] Ibid.

institutions and public schools, where adults and children engaged in the action of planting 1527 trees. According to Reyes, "This ritual has a pedagogical purpose of showing how an agent of death can become an agent of life."[144] Trees have been planted with these shovels, made of former weapons, in Culiacán and later in other cities around the world, including Vancouver, San Francisco, Paris, Lyon, Marfa, Texas, and Denver, Colorado. More recently, for *Imagine* in 2012, Reyes has used the metal of melted weapons from Ciudad Juárez to make musical instruments that were then played in performances in Gwangju, South Korea, Istanbul, and London. In line with trends in contemporary art in Mexico, Reyes makes objects that create something aesthetically pleasing out of something formerly used to commit violent acts. Guns disappear into the musical notes. There is redemptive value in doing something positive, making something positive out of a negative. In *Palas por Pistolas*, Reyes recalls Margolles's cleaning. Trees planted with the newly formed shovels work to clean our air, and perhaps metaphorically our world of the damage of violence.

How can we judge the success of a work of activist art? What power does art have to actually change social conditions? Was *Tarjetas para picar cocaína/Cards to cut cocaine* a failure since people went ahead and used them to cut cocaine? And is the mopping more successful? Offering more than an aperture in the dialogue, the act of mopping with blood allows for an inversion of the conventional belief in a correlation between power and visibility.

Performance provides a visible mnemonic device for the spectator. But sometimes, memory does not need that which is visible, and absence then becomes more compelling than presence. In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan critiques the ideology of the visible, employing Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist theories in order to facilitate multiple readings—just as there are

[144] Ibid.

innumerable ways of seeing—of various case studies of performance art, exposing its ability to present the unrepresentable.

She rejects the structuralist binary opposition in which the visible is associated with power and the invisible with impotence. Here, she delves into the central questions of her work: Does a Subject need to be visible in order to be powerful? Or does the invisible have a certain power? Phelan "attempts to find a theory of value for that which is not 'really' there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative real," and seeks a reconsideration "of a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable." Phelan is quick to point out that this is not the same as "calling out for greater visibility of the hitherto unseen." In fact, Phelan questions the "assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power." [145] Phelan continues:

> I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see is in every way related to what one can say. In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other. Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The 'excess' meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change. (Although rarely in the linear cause-effect way cultural critics on the Left and Right often assume.)[146]

The act of representation, then, makes possible multiples ways of seeing/reading. Representation's "failure to be totalizing" opens up a space for seeing the invisible, and for "psychic resistance" to the so-called "Real," allowing for a reinterpretation (or rejection) of that Real, hence possible transformation in the Subject and eventual political change. According to

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[145] Phelan, 1.
[146] Phelan, 2.

Lacan, Phelan asserts, the Subject constantly attempts to return to the (Lacanian) Real (or what Phelan calls the "primal scene"), an act that is destined to never be realized. However, it is the Subject's purpose to constantly seek to satisfy this Lacanian desire. This grasping for the Real allows for more nuance than does visibility. The problem with the politics of visibility, according to Phelan, is the "belief that representations can be treated as 'real truths' and guarded or championed accordingly." She worries about the "dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives trolling the borders of museums, movie houses, and mainstream broadcasting," because "both sides believe that greater visibility … leads to enhanced political power."[147]

Phelan wonders if "what one sees" is indeed "what one is?"[148] In discussing a video installation by artist Adrian Piper in a window on Broadway in New York City, Phelan asks if race, like Butler's gender, can also be performative. Being, like seeing, is performative, and identity cannot "reside in the name you can say or the body you can see."[149] Instead, identity is only identifiable through the Other. Thus, in any declaration of identity, there is always loss: there is loss of not being the Other, while simultaneously being dependent on the other for the definition of one's own identity. Though, undeniably, as Phelan asserts "in looking at the Other, we seek to re-present ourselves."[150] When we as spectators watch the mopping, we understand ourselves as not-them. Being alive is being not-dead. In doing so, we also implicate ourselves in their suffering and in the violent deaths of their loved ones.

The act of mopping is the victim's suffering made visible. In the introduction to *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Phelan relays a childhood incident in which she cut

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Phelan, 65.
[149] Phelan, 13.
[150] Phelan, 21.

out of her science book an image of the human body. Like "the loss of the pop-up model," which, Phelan writes, "revealed the anatomy of the body more fully than the drawing"[151] itself, the body's absence from the scene of the mopping renders the loss more visible.

More than visible, it is made public. Janelle Reinelt, in her review of Phelan's text in *Theatre Journal*, writes that "while *Unmarked* asserted the value of the unmarked over the visible, *Mourning Sex* utilizes the visible to achieve a relationship of mourning and grief with what is missing, what underlies what-it-is-that-one-wants-to-see."[152] Reinelt argues that, in both texts, for Phelan, "the vanishing point and the viewing point are similar, and that the 'centrality of the single perception … is fortified through the experience of its loss, just as the endless process of establishing psychic identity is punctuated by its loss' (Phelan, 25)."[153]

The emphasis shifts, then, from voyeurism to the relationship between the mopping individuals and that reliquary residue. The family members step into the grief process, cleansing as act of redemption. In experiencing the loss of others, we experience and understand our own loss as well as our own complicity in the loss of others. The act of cleansing with the blood of their relatives is a form of public mourning and a necessary redemptive action. Witnessing the mourning, the spectator too mourns and partakes in redemption. The act of washing becomes a symbol for a catharsis on a much larger scale, as if able to heal a nation.

This action of cleansing extends into Margolles's other work as well, as evidenced in her cement benches – the water used to produce the cement having been used to cleanses dead bodies – commissioned by LACMA in 2010. (Figure 66) Visually reminiscent of Marco Rios

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[151] Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.
[152] Janelle Reinelt, "Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories" Review in *Theatre Journal* 50:4 (1998): 547.
[153] Reinelt, 548.

and Rubén Ochoa's *Rigor Motors*, low-rider coffins, exhibited at LACMA's *Phantom Sightings* in the 2008, the work is more than a pair of apparently uncomfortable benches. *Rigor Motors* directly links Chicano car culture with death. (Figure 67) In contrast, Margolles's aim is subtler, the connection between the material, the visual, and the metaphorical not apparent upon first sight. Armed with the knowledge that the water used to produce the cement comes from the morgue, the viewer understands the message in a visceral way. The viewer's body literally touches an object that had been used in a ritual with dead bodies, and thus the viewer's body mingles with that of the deceased.

Further engaging with remnants of the body, Margolles exhibits another apparently invisible art work when she smears the windows of the Museum of Modern Art (MAM) in Mexico City with sweat collected from teenagers from northern Mexico. In *A Través*, the viewer once again enters an empty room, the only evidence of some intervention on the part of the artist is that the window view has been obscured by a greasy substance. For this project, Margolles visited her hometown Culiacán, Ciudad Juárez, and Queretaro, where she distributed 150 T-shirts to be worn daily by adolescents, with the aim of collecting their sweat. Upon returning to Mexico City, Margolles smeared this remnant of the body all over the windows of the Gamboa Room at the MAM, complicating the minimalist, modern space. Other than the sweat, the room remained empty. This empty space refers to the empty spaces left by the young people of Mexico who have died and continue to die in the ongoing drug war. The sweat somewhat obscured the view out the floor to ceiling windows onto the pacific Chapultepec Park from December 2011 to February 2012. According to the curator, Josefa Ortega, Margolles intended for this sweat to reflect light and therefore symbolize "the life energy that is lost day by day in Mexico because of

the death of young people."[154] Margolles views the youth population as particularly vulnerable in the drug war, an idea supported by evidence. According to a study prepared by the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico and submitted to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC), between 25,000 and 35,000 young people under the age of 18 have been recruited by criminal organizations. It is also estimated that one third of deaths linked to the fight against organized crime were under 30 years.[155] For *A Traves*, Margolles has moved beyond not only the shock value of the visible cadaver but also the gruesome matter of blood itself. The use of the trace of the body can transcend, becoming more and more subtle. The more subtle the trace becomes, the more successful it is as a strategy of resistance.

The Mexican public practices strategies of resistance, as evidenced in the numerous vigilante groups that have emerged during the ongoing violence and with emblematic figures like Don Alejo Garza Tamez, who died standing up to the Zetas in November of 2011. When cartel members came to confiscate his rancho, he refused to acquiesce, killing four and wounding two cartel members, before they eventually murdered him with a grenade.[156] A new hero in the drug wars, Don Alejo stands as an example of the vulnerability of the cartels' very visible power.

Like Don Alejo, artists like Margolles stand up against violence, albeit in less visible ways. While local political and economic circumstances are important, especially considering the ever-changing relationship between Mexico and the US, Margolles's work can serve to help understand an evolving art practice worldwide. Perhaps the language of art, because it can

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[154] Josefa Ortega, *A Traves*, Labor Gallery, accessed December 16, 2017, http://www.labor.org.mx/en/a-traves-teresa-margolles-museo-de-arte-moderna/.
[155] Laura Toribio, Claudia Solera y Leticia Robles de la Rosa, "Up to 35 thousand children work for drug cartels in Mexico" *Excelsior.com.mx,* November 16, 2010, accessed December 16, 2016, http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/11/up-to-35-thousand-children-work-for.html.
[156] Nick Steinberg, "The Monster and Monterrey: The Politics and Cartels of Mexico's Drug War," *The Nation*, June 13, 2011, accessed December 27, 2016, https://www.thenation.com/article/monster-and-monterrey-politics-and-cartels-mexicos-drug-war/.

disguise critique and thus promote nuanced dialogue, can be more successful than overt aggression in resisting contemporary violence. As globalization continues, art will continue to adapt to changing conditions, and while the global body is met with increasing violence, artists turn to an increasingly symbolic language. As the body, the tool of the performance artist, evaporates, the practice itself evolves, finding power in invisibility. Invisibility frees the subject from the gaze and in that space, the subject is free to act in ways outside of the strictures of society. The image of the body is unforgettable but its absence may be even more haunting.

Chapter Five

Conclusion:
Invisibility Tactics in Latin America and Beyond

Contemporary artists in Mexico have responded to state violence, border violence, and narco-violence with performance and conceptual art that employs invisibility tactics, which refers to the artists' use of indexical references to the body to highlight that body's absence and therefore make that body's wounds even more visible. Dating back into the 1970s and continuing into the 2010s, a trend has emerged amongst many contemporary artists in Mexico that aims to highlight violence against the body through the removal of that body and its replacement with indexical references. Sometimes in the form of other objects, like women's brassieres or garbage bags wrapped in rope, other times as remnants of the body, in the form of bodily fluids like blood for example, and still other times in the form of the artist's own body, these indexical references to the victims render the harm more visible than do graphic images of violence. The body's traces highlight its very absence, rendering the invisible body even more visible.

With the aim of examining these invisibility tactics, my dissertation, "Body Traces," focuses on post-NAFTA developments in performance art in Mexico and their roots in the decade following the global protests of 1968, as young, politically motivated artists reconceptualized their work. Chapter Two, "*Agruparse o morir:* Artist Collectives in 1970s Mexico City," posits the project of these artist collectives as a local, Mexican precedent for the work of artists in post-NAFTA Mexico. "*Agruparse o Morir*" traces the development of the performative work of Proceso Pentágono as well as their conceptual installations of the 1970s. In addition to collaboration in the artistic process, los grupos artists experimented with genres, working in performance, conceptual art, and street art, and shared a renewed belief in the artist as

cultural worker, harkening back to post-Revolution Mexico. After documenting the conceptual and performative work of Proceso Pentágono, this chapter documents the street art of the collective Grupo Suma, whose spray paint and stencil work in the 1970s serves as a precedent for more contemporary street art in Mexico, especially in the southern state of Oaxaca. The work of Grupo Suma, like Proceso Pentágono, confronts the topic of disappearances of political dissenters in Latin America, as seen in their public paintings of the then-missing Argentine guerrillera "Tania" Tamara Bunker Bider. Grupo Suma utilizes the medium of street art as a method to reach a larger audience, painting their images on the walls of the streets of the capital city so as to influence the non-museum going public with their political message. The chapter closes with a look at the No Grupo, who offered a dissenting alternative to the serious political project of the grupos generation through the use of humor, an emphasis on radical performativity, and the production of both solo and group work.

Through their collective practice, Mexican artists in the 1970s critiqued and denounced the repressive Mexican regime that controlled the country for decades and the restrictions on freedoms that the regime imposed. Los grupos were interested not only in experiments in collaboration but also in revolutionizing the interaction between artists and the public. They brought art out from the gallery onto the streets, where the public participated in the process in unprecedented ways, engaging in dialogue about contemporary political, economic and social circumstances.

Taking the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 as a crucial historical and artistic moment, Chapter Three, "*Las Nobodies*: Performing Testimony in the Borderlands," examines the performance and land-based works of contemporary Mexican artists creating art centered on the topic of violence in the borderland region, particularly Ciudad

Juárez, considering how these artists conceive of their work as part of the process of witnessing to the violence in the region. In responding to gender violence in the borderlands, this chapter notes that female artists respond on a more intimate, personal level, often utilizing their own bodies as stand-ins for victims of violence, as evidenced in the work of Lorena Wolffer and Nayla Altamirano. Meanwhile male artists, such as Enrique Ježik and Artemio, respond to the feminicidios in the borderlands on a monumental level, often in the form of massive earthworks. This chapter also considers the ritual aspects of performance art, reading female artists' figurative substitutions as redemptive actions that heal the nation in the wake of the violence.

Chapter Four, "Bloody Body Doubles: Narcoviolence, Cleansing, and Redemption," considers art actions that function as redemptive rituals, in this case looking closely at cleansing in the performances as a metaphor for washing away the sins of the nation. In the third and most recent case study, the body continues to disappear in the face of the increasing violence of the Drug War. "Bloody Body Doubles" traces a shift in Margolles's work, from her early work that highlights the shock value of graphic imagery to her eventual embracing of the remnant as a more powerful visual language. Chapter Four not only examines the work of Margolles but also looks at other performance and conceptual art in Mexico that deals with the use of symbolic cleansing actions. For example, I survey Wolffer's *Bañate*, in which the artist washes her own body in blood, Niña Yhared's symbolic corpse cleaning, and Altamirano's use of intimate laundering in *Las Nobodies*. Cleansing is read as a symbolic action that works to heal the nation of the wounds of narcoviolence. These artists utilize objects and body doubles to stand in for the absent body, making corporeal trauma visible through their performances. Artists in Mexico activate the body double through the domestic act of cleansing and in invoking domesticity, symbolically heal the trauma of narcoviolence. This ritual functions as a feminist act, one that

empowers the artist through the transformation of objects. The locus of change lies at the heart of feminized work.

Margolles's conceptual endeavor represents the culmination of a project taken up by Mexican artists decades earlier -- the erasure of the body in contemporary Mexican performance art. My dissertation traces this history, utilizing three case studies to illustrate the gradual refusal of the body as a necessary element to performance. Instead of performance art that is contingent on the figure, many contemporary Mexican artists conceive of a practice without the corpus, some substituting body parts for the whole while others employ objects as symbols of the corporeal.

Growing out of this global history but also responding to local precedents – as evidenced in Chapter Two, artists in Mexico exemplify a shift away from the highly visible body in performance art. Utilizing an increasingly symbolic language, Mexican artists hide, obfuscate, remove or substitute other items for the body, in a seemingly contradictory effort to make visible its erasure. Mexican artists symbolically re-enact violence against the body, instead of enacting actual violence against the self, as if in ritualistic acts of redemption.

Intuitively recognizing the power of the invisible, early Mexican performance artists employ invisibility tactics. They turn away from the body, understanding that the absence or trace of the body can reveal its frailty more effectively than a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the arm. Proceso Pentágono literally removes the body in *A Nivel Informativo*; Lorena Wolffer allows the parts of the body to stand for the whole in *Mientras Dormíamos*; and, in *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?,* Teresa Margolles needs only the trace to stand in for the body itself. In all these examples, the Mexican body slowly disappears, until it evaporates into thin air, like the blood on the floor of Palazzo Rota Ivancich.

“Body Traces: Performance Art against Violence in Contemporary Mexico” represents an important contribution to the field of Mexican art history. Chapter One introduces what I call invisibility tactics, the tendency to utilize indexical references to the body in art about the circumstances of the body in contemporary Mexico, a trend that has yet to be discussed directly in the literature on contemporary Mexican art. Chapter Two builds on the work of several young and mid-career scholars who are working on compiling comprehensive histories of the grupos period in Mexico, providing a focused analysis of these invisibility strategies at work. Uniquely, my dissertation posits the collective art practices of the grupos as a local precedent for later 21st-century art in Mexico, especially in the fields of feminist performance and street art. Chapter Three looks to art related to border violence, a hereto understudied field of Mexican art history and an area where much further research is needed. In this chapter, I present some of the first close readings of the work of feminist performance artists such as Lorena Wolffer and Nayla Altamirano. Furthermore, my discussion of ritual cleansing as a redemptive act in Mexican performance art is unprecedented. Chapter Four spotlights art related to narcoviolence, focusing primarily on the mature work of Teresa Margolles, who is one of the most well-known artists on the international scene. Though Margolles is one of the most studied artists in contemporary Mexico, my focus on the removal of the body from the performative realm and, in particular, the discussion of the healing power of cleansing and the harnessing of domesticity as a source of agency are distinctive contributions.

Certainly, the work done here is preliminary, as there is still much work to do in terms of research, analysis, and synthesis. Larger histories of performance art in Mexico and in Latin America in general are needed. I can envision two books coming out of this project. The first will look at the links between the collective practices of los grupos, especially Grupo Suma, and

street art collectives in 21st century Oaxaca, linking the idea of art as social protest as a distinctively Mexican, local tradition. In addition to ASARO, there are several other artist collectives that merit documenting and theorizing. The second project I envision looks toward a comprehensive history of feminist art practices in Mexico in the last 20th and early 21st centuries. This is certainly an area that is ripe for more research and writing. This project will focus primarily on feminist theories and performance art, looking to Maris Bustamante and Mónica Mayer as powerful antecedents to 21st century performance artists. I would look to expand on the analyses presented here and include other pertinent artists such as conceptual artist Minerva Cuevas and cabaret performer Astrid Hadad. While is it central to fill in missing links of Mexico's unwritten art histories, it is also imperative to understand the global connections beyond Mexico. What are the implications of these local practices beyond the borders and outside of the Americas? Where else can we look to understand the development of contemporary performance and conceptual art?

Coda

When PRI candidate Enrique Pena Nieto won the presidency in 2012, it is fair to say that many people in Mexico hoped this change in party would mean real change on the ground. Unfortunately, when looking at violence in the country today, little has changed since the transfer of power.

Where can one look to for hope in the dark? Can Colombia serve as an example for Mexico? Since 1948, the federal government, guerilla forces, paramilitary groups, and crime syndicates have been engaged in a low intensity asymmetric war in Colombia known as *La Violencia*. Corruption and involvement in drug trafficking have been major factors in the ongoing violence in the country, which saw the death of over 200,000 Colombian citizens, including 45,000 children, and the world's second largest internal displacement of persons.[157] In August, 2016, Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos proclaimed an end to the five-decade long drug war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, also known as FARC, after the federal government signed a peace deal with the group. Announced in Havana, Cuba, the ceasefire was negotiated over a period of several years and was later ratified by Colombia's congress and senate in November of that year. Despite the rosy outlook, many parts of Colombia have little hope for actual relief or an end to such a lucrative business as the drug trade.[158]

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[157] National figures were cited by UNICEF. For more information, see the Historical Memory Group's 2013 report "'Enough Already!' Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity," (in Spanish), published by The National Center for Historical Memory's (NCHM). Available here: http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2013/bastaYa/bastaya-colombia-memorias-de-guerra-y-dignidad-2015.pdf.

[158] For more on the potential changes following the peace treaty in Colombia, see Elizabeth Dickinson, "Colombia's war just ended, a new wave of violence is beginning," *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2016, accessed December 27, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/25/colombias-war-just-ended-a-new-wave-of-violence-is-beginning/.

In the face of the profitable drug business, the Colombian government has introduced efforts to minimize the trafficking of illegal narcotics over the last several decades. The *Plan Colombia*, implemented in 1999, took the expensive and largely ineffective route of spraying coca fields in the region. This strategy was replaced in 2006 with a focus on interdiction, including busting up production labs and going after cartels, which caused a supply shock on the international drug market that coincided with the rise of cartel-related violence in Mexico. More recently, Colombia has approached the problem as a matter of public health, perhaps one of the most effective lessons that Mexico and the US might take from the aftermath of the Colombian *Violencia*.[159]

Responding to the trauma of violence in her country, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958) has engaged with invisibility tactics similar to what we have seen in Mexico. In one of her most famous installations, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, installed in 2002, Salcedo suspended 280 wooden chairs from the new Palace of Justice building on the 17th anniversary of the siege of the same building by M-19 guerillas and the government's counterattack in 1985, which left over 100 people dead, including 12 supreme court justices, and 11 missing.[160] (Figure 68) Salcedo lowered the chairs into place over the course of 53 hours, the exact time of the siege and counterattack, "marking the absence of each person at the approximate time the autopsy said that each person or group of people had died."[161] The chairs here function as indexical references to the people killed during the turmoil. The ghostly presence of these otherwise everyday objects, recontextualized

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[159] For more information, see "Colombia, Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2015," *Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito*, July 2016, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2016/Julio/Censo_Cultivos_Coca_2015_SIMCI.pdf.

[160] For more information, see Thomas Marks, "It's the job of both artist and museums to reevaluate the past," *Apollo, The International Art Magazine*, May 31, 2016, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.apollo-magazine.com/its-the-job-of-both-artists-and-museums-to-reevaluate-the-past/.

[161] Ibid.

here and juxtaposed against the massive marble structure, make the tragic events even more palpable, despite the absence of the body. *Noviembre 6 y 7* attempts to heal the trauma of violence in contemporary Colombia by making visible the absence of the body.

We can look to other parts of Latin America to see similar trends in the visual arts. Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo (b. 1974), like Salcedo, sought to heal the trauma of the years of civil war and violence in her country in *¿Quién puede borrar las huelas? (Who can erase the traces?)*. (Figure 69) In this 2003 performance, Galindo walks from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace in Guatemala City, carrying a basin of human blood and stopping every now and then to leave along the path her bloody footprints. According to the artist, the performance was done "en memoria de las víctimas del conflicto armado en Guatemala, en rechazo a la candidatura presidencial del ex-militar, genocida y golpista Efraín Ríos Montt" (in memory of the victims of armed conflict in Guatemala, in a refusal of the presidential candidature of the ex-military, genocidal and leader of the military coup Efraín Ríos Montt).[162] Montt had seized power in 1982 and, despite his role in the Guatemalan Civil War, ran, albeit unsuccessfully, for president in 2003. In 2012, Montt was formally indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity.[163]

In Galindo's performance, the traces of the artist's body, in the form of her own bloody footprints, stand in for the collective victims of violence, much like Margolles's bloody traces or Wolffer's markings on her own body. These invisibility tactics are a pan-Latin American trend in the contemporary visual arts. We might look to other parts of the world to find commonalities. Indeed, as violence threatens humanity from Aguascalientes to Aleppo, we can count on artists to

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[162] Regina José Galindo, artist's website, accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.reginajosegalindo.com/.

[163] Kate Doyle, "Justice in Guatemala," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring 2012), https://nacla.org/sites/default/files/A04501039_10.pdf.

continue responding to global patterns and to aid society in the process of mourning, memorializing, and, perhaps even healing from trauma.

Figures

Figure 1. Gaeta-Springall Architects, *Memorial a las victimas de violencia en Mexico* (*Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico)*, 2013, steel slabs, Chapultepec Park, Mexico City, approximately 12 meters tall.

Figure 2. *Estela de Luz (Pillar of Light)*, 2012.

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RESPIRAMOS AIRE MÁS COCHINO QUE EN LA CDMX PÁGS. 8 Y 9

EL GRÁFICO

EL PRIMER DIARIO DE LA MAÑANA

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TRIPLE EJECUCIÓN

RIVALES LOS BAJAN DE CAMIONETA Y LOS ASESINAN, EN TLATLAYA; POR UNO OFRECÍAN RECOMPENSA. PÁG. 3

Retratan doctores agonía de Margarito PÁG. 27

JUEZ: SÍ, A EXTRADITAR AL CHAPO PÁG. 13

Figure 3. *El Gráfico*. Cover image from May 17, 2016. Image source: El Gráfico’s Twitter.

Figure 4. Student Protests in Plaza de Tlatelolco, 1968. Image source: Twitter.

Figure 5. Maquiladora in Mexico, 2007. Image source: Wikipedia.

Figure 6. Proceso Pentágono, *El Secuestro*, action presented on a street near Bellas Artes, in Mexico City, during the exhibition "A nivel informativo" (On an Informational Level), 1973. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

Figure 7. Gunther Gerzso, *Figure in Red and Blue*, 1964, oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm, Mary-Anne Martin Gallery.

Figure 8. Jose Luis Cuevas, *Self-Portrait*, lithographic print on paper, 1968, 66.04 x 50.8 cm.

Figure 9. Rufino Tamayo, *Children's Games*, 1959, oil on canvas, The Met Museum, New York, 130.2 x 194.9 cm.

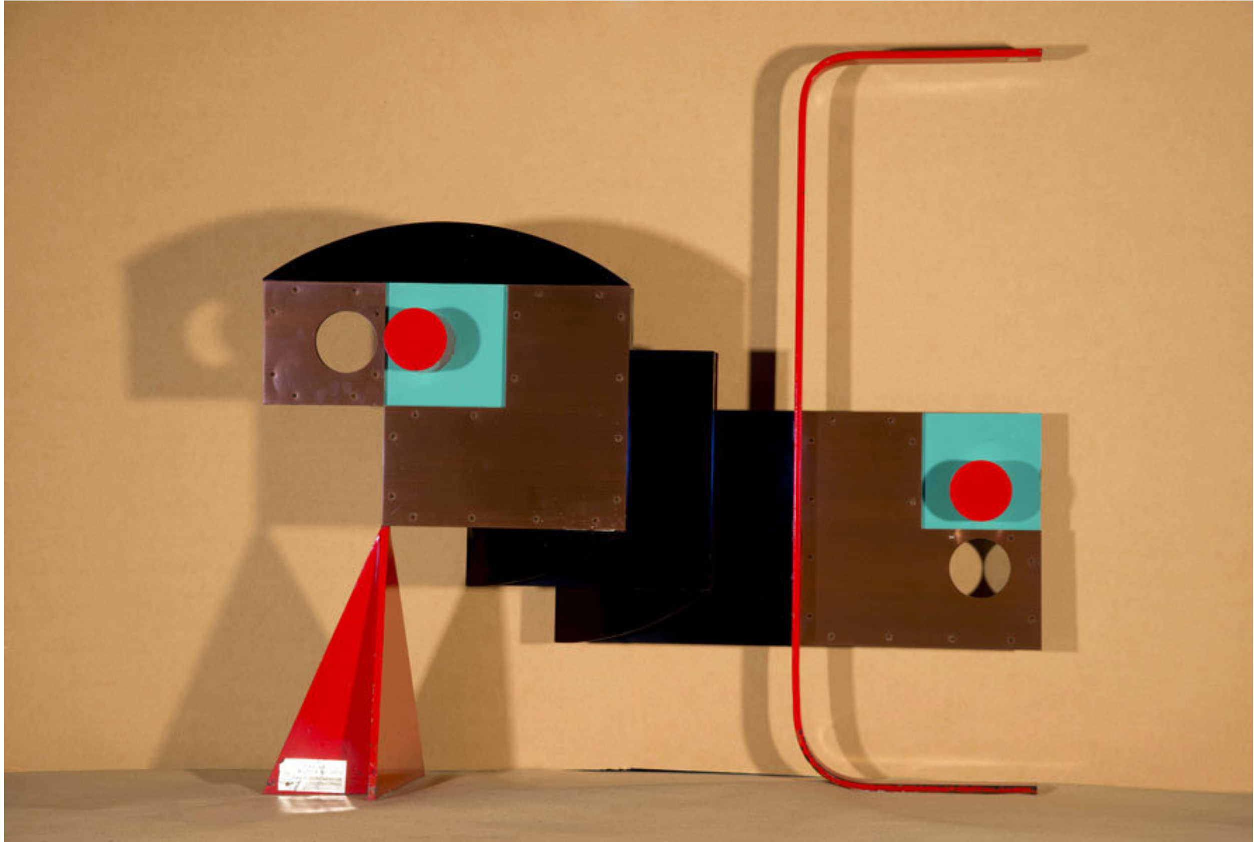

Figure 10. Manuel Felguérez, *La Energía del Punto Cero* (*The Energy of the Origin Point)*, 1973, polychrome iron and copper, Archive of the Academia de Artes, Mexico City, 90 x 100 x 35 cm.

Figure 11. First Group Meeting at Centro Proceso Pentágono, 1979, images courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Mexico City. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

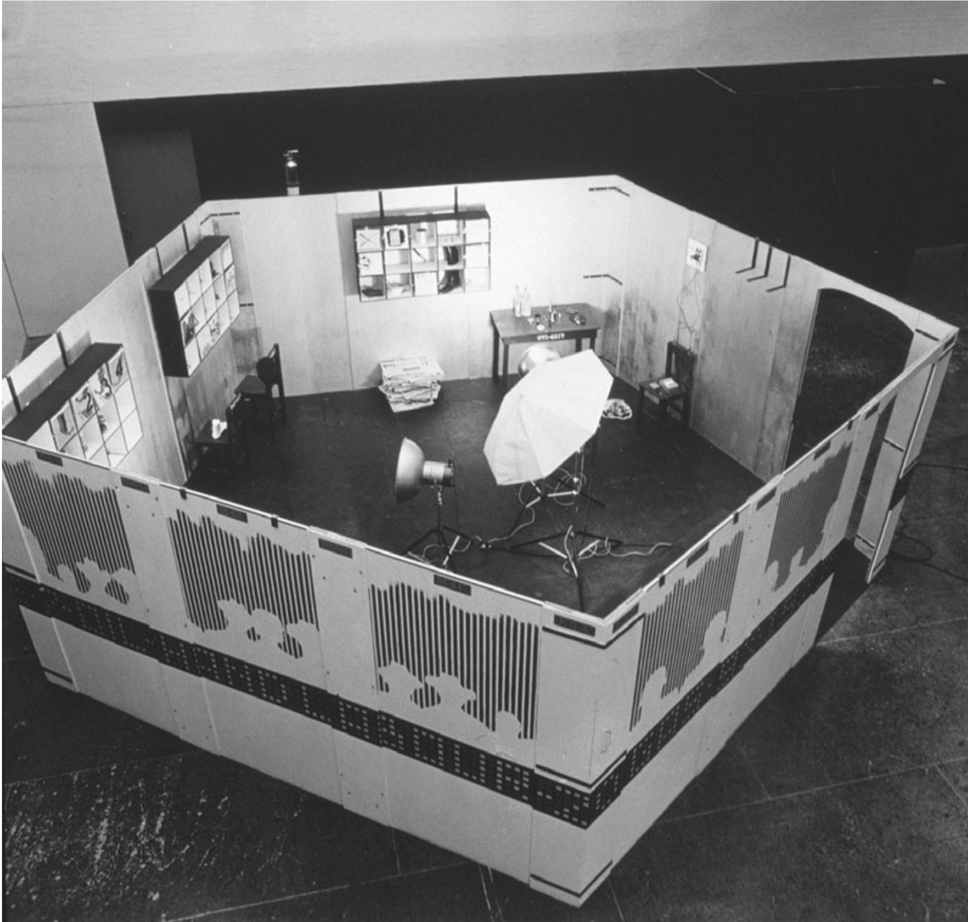

Fig.12-13. Proceso Pentágono, *Pentágono,* 1977. Installation presented at 10th Paris Biennial.

Figure 14. Proceso Pentágono, *Proceso 1929*, 1978. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

Figure 15. Grupo Suma's Group Signature, as seen on a flyer for an exhibition, printed on repurposed lottery tickets. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

Figure 16. Grupo Suma, *Tania la desaparecida*, 1978, intersection of Avenida de los Insurgentes y Calle Niza, Mexico City. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

Figure 17. Grupo Suma, *El Desempleado* (*The Unemployed)*, 1978. Reproduced in 2007 at Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Mexico City. Image source: MUAC.

Figure 18. Grupo Suma in action, film still, 1978, courtesy of
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkteoYTrp6g.

Figure 19. ASARO in action, Oaxaca City, Mexico, 2015. Image courtesy of the artists.

Figure 20. Ramiro Gomez, *Bel Air Hotel*, 2013 acrylic on cardboard, current location unknown, approximately life-size.

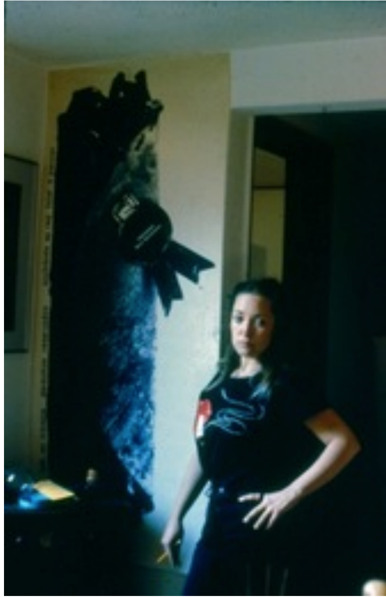

Figure 21. Maris Bustamante, *Patente de Taco* (*Taco Patent*), 1979. The artist standing with the life-size image of the taco patent. Photo: Alfredo Núnez and Rubén Valencia.

Figure 22. No Grupo, cardboard masks sent to the Paris Biennial X, 1977, approximately life-sized. Photo taken on lawn outside exhibition space, Paris, France. Image source: Debroise, *La Era de la Discrepancia*.

Figure 23. No Grupo, *Secuestro Plástico*, 1978. Image courtesy of MUAC.

Figure 24. Luis Camnitzer, Uruguayan Torture Series, 1983-1984, 4-color photo etchings, each 70 x 50 cm, Alexander Gray Associates.

Figure 25. Anti-PAN student protest at Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, June 2012. Image source: Twitter.

Figure 26. Anti-violence protestor, Mexico City, 2012. Image source: Twitter.

Figure 27. Traditional march against violence, Juárez. Image source: Twitter.

Figure 27. “Caravan of Comfort,” Juárez, 2010. Image source: Twitter.

Figures 29-30. Lorena Wolffer, *Mientras Dormíamos (El Caso Juárez)/While We Were Sleeping (The Juárez Case),* 2002. Audio: Rogelio Sosa. Photos: Martín L. Vargas. Images courtesy of the artist.

Figure 31. Hannah Wilke, *SOS*, 1975. Image source: Wikipedia

Figure 32. Wilke, *Intravenus*, 1994. Image source: social media.

Figure 33. Wilke, *Intravenus*, 1994, and Wolffer, *Mientras Dormíamos*, 2002.

Figures 34-36. Enrique Ježik, *Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica (Six Cubic Meters of Organic Matter),* 2009. Images courtesy of the artist and Galería Vermelho.

Figure 37. Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969. Image source: Wikipedia.

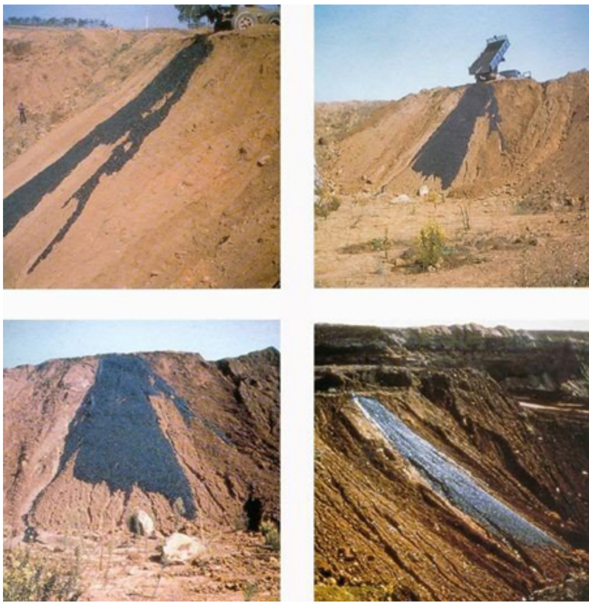

Fig. 38-40. Santiago Sierra, *Sumisión (antes Palabra de Fuego) [Submission (formerly Word of Fire)]*, 2006-2007. Images courtesy of the artist.

Figures 41-44. Artemio, *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 45. Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, October 2006. Image source: social media.

Figure 46. Oscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (*Breath*), 1995, 7 metal mirrors, screen-printed with grease, diameter: 20 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

Figures 47-51. Nayla Altamirano, *Las Nobodies*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 52. Teresa Margolles, *Tarjetas para Picar Cocaína/Cards to Cut Cocaine*, 1997-1999. Installation: 2 photographs, 12 cards.

Figure 53. Teresa Margolles, *Autorretratos en la morgue* series, 1998.

Figure 54. Margolles, *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?*, 2009. Unrecognizable, blood-soaked Mexican flag seen between the flag of the European Union and the Venetian flag.

Figure 55. Teresa Margolles, *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?*, 2009. Family member of victim mopping with blood in performance component to artwork.

Figure 56. Teresa Margolles, *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?*, 2009. Blood-soaked cloths before narcomessages are embroidered.

Figure 57. Teresa Margolles, *¿De qúe otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?*, *Embroidery*, 2009. Embroidery component to multi-faceted artwork, joint activity/performance in public spaces, in Venice, Italy, 2009.

Figure 58. Image of a narcomessage on a *narcomanta*, attached to a corpse, presumably in Mexico. Image sourced from: http://meridius27.blogspot.com/2012/11/now-12-dead-bodies-found.html, accessed Friday March 28, 2014.

Figure 59. Lorena Wolffer, *Bañate*, 1992. Courtesy of Ex Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City.

Figure 60. Niña Yhared, *Lavadora de Cuerpos*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 61. Nayla Altamirano, *Las Nobodies*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

Figures 62-65. Pedro Reyes, *Palas por Pistolas*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 66. Teresa Margolles, *Untitled*, 2010. Cement benches. Commissioned by Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND) and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Photo author's own.

Figure 67. Rubén Ochoa and Marco Rios, *Rigor Motors*, 2004-2008. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Kristine Thompson.

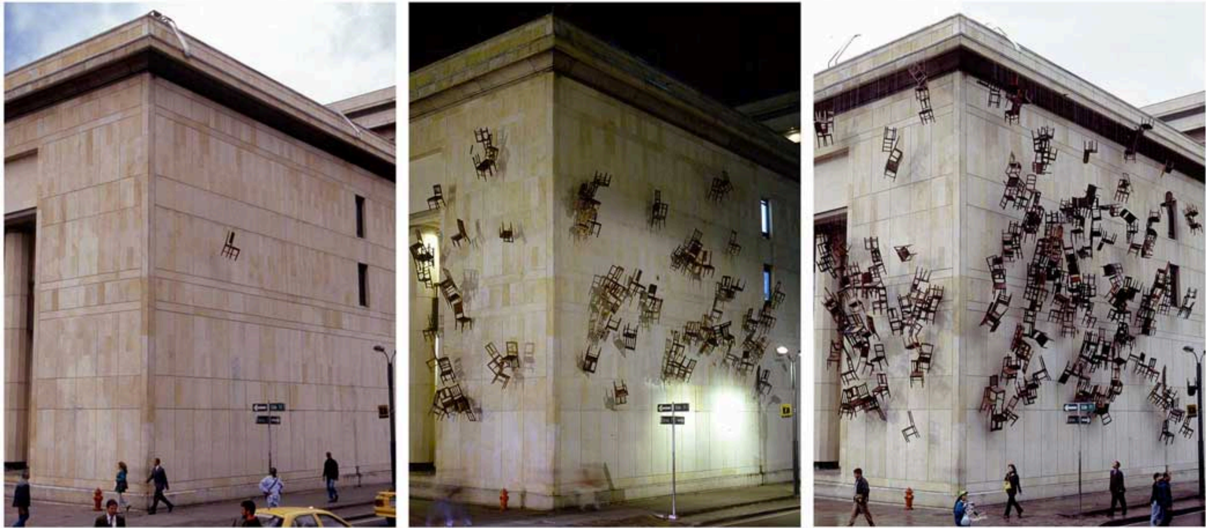

Figure 68. Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002. Image via Art21.org.

Figure 69. Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huelas?*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

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