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BLOODY BODY DOUBLES

performing testimony in the borderlands

Megan Lorraine Debin is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History at UCLA. She is completing her dissertation, "Body Traces: Performance Against Violence in Contemporary Mexico (1994–2012)." She received a CSW travel grant to present her research at the Center for Latin American Visual Studies, Third International Forum for Emerging Scholars at the University of Texas at Austin in 2012.

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performing testimony in the borderlands

BY MEGAN LORRAINE DEBIN

ACCORDING TO Giorgio 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."¹ 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, which has led to a reliance on what I call "invisibility tactics." 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*,² cartel-related homicide, and institutionalized border violence. Focusing primarily on art created after the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which permanently altered U.S.-Mexico relations,³ my project traces the history of performative responses to violence in and around the "state of exception"⁴ that is Ciudad Juárez.

This region must be considered within certain stipulations because of NAFTA, which instigated U.S. corporate reliance on the *maquiladora*⁵ system. *Maquiladoras*, in turn, have fueled the internal migration of gendered labor—often young, uneducated, poor women from rural Oaxaca and Chiapas who leave behind families

and support networks, rendering them vulnerable. For nearly a decade, women have been murdered at an alarming rate around Ciudad Juárez, an environment of impunity providing little hope of relief. The testimony of these victims is made visible by artists through the corporeal idiom of performance, and exposes the loss of countless human lives in the borderlands. Since then-president Felipe Calderon declared war on the cartels in 2006, these *feminicidios* have been increasingly overshadowed by cartel-related violence, further complicating the scene. Statistics of violent homicide in the region remain high.⁶

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, my larger project maps out the ways in which artists conceive of themselves as 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 the trauma of physical violence is rendered most legible through this ghostly presence that highlights the body's absence.

There is a strong tradition of anti-violence political protest in Mexico, particularly since the increase in cartel violence over the past seven years. 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 the borderlands, the cityscape of Juárez continues to be marked with traditional marches against violence, in which women, families, and other members of the community take to the streets to protest violence against women in the region. In some cases, such as the 2010 Caravan of Comfort, traditional marches and rallies are accompanied by symbolic and performative aesthetic moments. During the Caravan of Comfort,

pink crosses, an 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, presumably mothers or family members of the victims, knelt before the crosses and prayed.

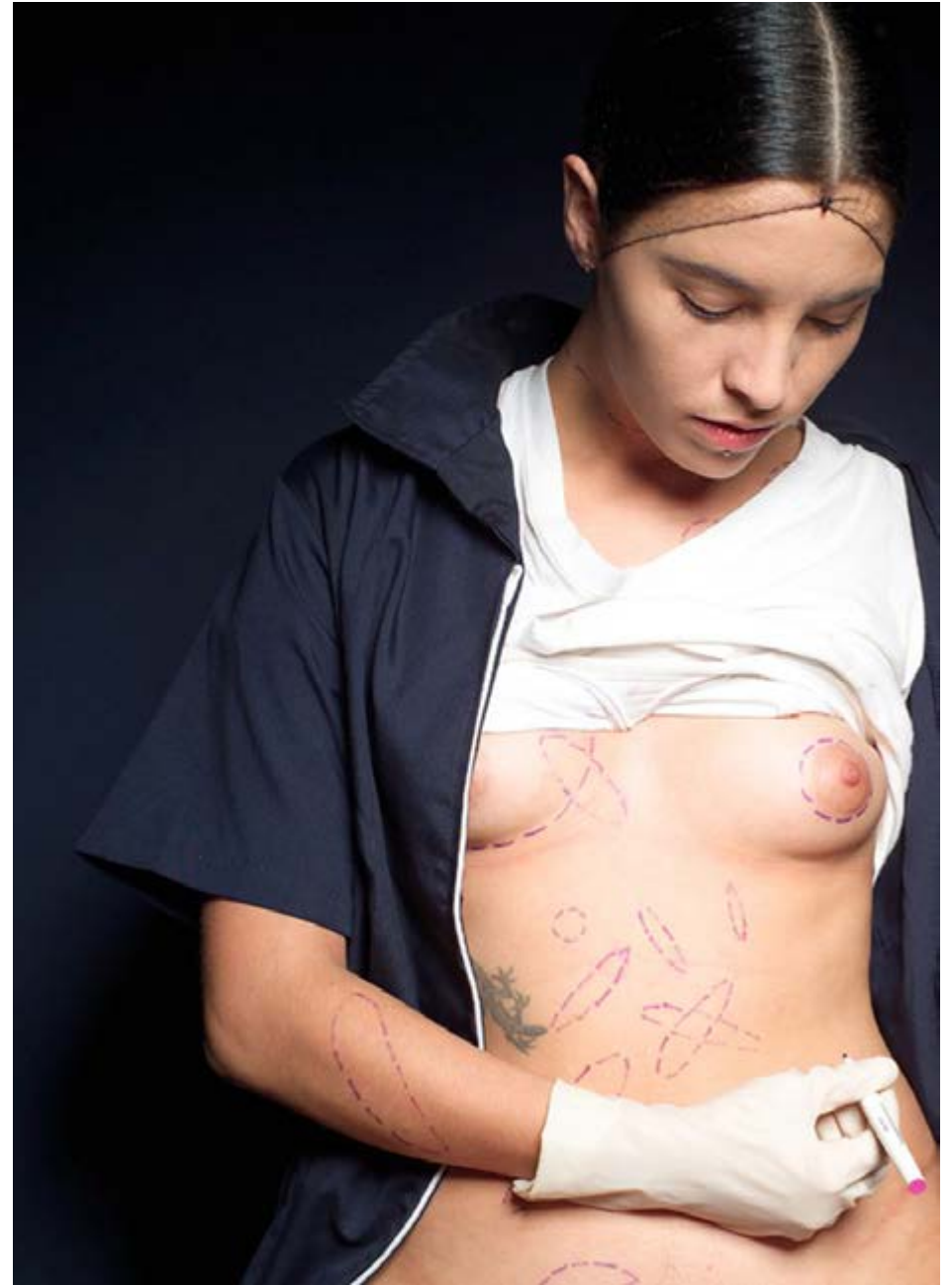
Politically engaged performance artists have also taken an interest in creating a new visual language, often with messages that are more subtle and coded than those in traditional protests, in order to express their frustration, despair, and grief and to bear witness to the countless lives lost to violent 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.

A Mexico City–born feminist artist, activist, and cofounder of the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual performance and exhibition space, Lorena Wolffer allowed her body to stand in for the collective victims of *feminicidio* in Juárez in *Mientras dormíamos (El Caso Juárez)* (2002).⁷ This action was presented in various locations between 2002 and 2004, including galleries and museums in Mexico, Finland, Wales, and the U.S. 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*.”⁸ The artist's body, then, transforms into a vehicle for the representation of violence against women in Juárez, which has by now become institutionalized.

The performance opens with audio news reports of the murders. The artist enters, wearing a Dickie's-style work suit and a hairnet—attire that recalls the uniforms of *maquiladora* workers—then sits on a surgical table and 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. Once the missing bodies are manifest via the artist's body, the brutality ripe for the spectator to experience viscerally, the artist dresses and leaves the space. The artist's body functions as symbolic substitute, facilitating her own—and the audience's—witnessing of the crimes (figures 1, 2).

Visually reminiscent of Hannah Wilke's 1975 “self-scarification” performance SOS or, per-



Figures 1, 2. Lorena Wolffer, *Mientras Dormíamos (El Caso Juárez)/While We Were Sleeping (The Juárez Case)*, 2002. Photos by Martín L. Vargas.

haps even more apt, Wilke's last photographic series of self-portraits, *Intra-Venus*, in which the artist documents her own suffering as she dies from lymphoma, Wolffer's performance calls into question society's fear 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 bearing witness to the pain of others. In her later work *Intravenus*, Wilke documents her own suffering while dying of cancer with photographic self-portraits that were published posthumously. 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 morgue environments, and the signs of sanitation, such as the gloves or the surgical tape. Both images critique society's desire to sterilize death. Through the latex gloves, the surgical marker, and the hospital-like setting, Wolffer sanitizes death for us, desensitizing us to the pain of the nameless victims as the news reports that play at the opening of the performance do. Death becomes clean, anonymous. Yet the physical presence of

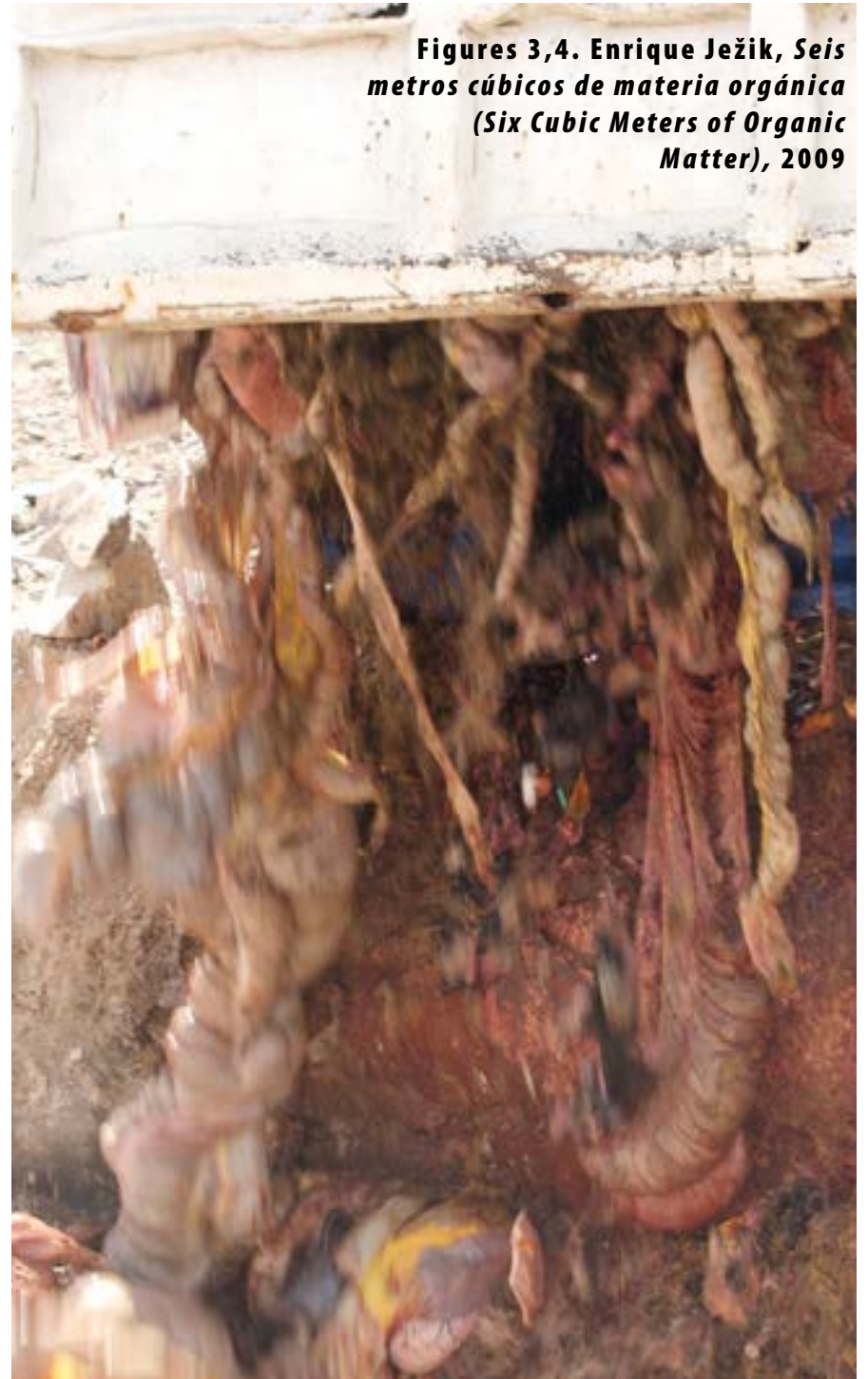
Wolffer's body reactivates their suffering: their phantom pain reappears, becoming visible through Wolffer's embodied presence, and the invisible is made visible, allowing the spectator, in viewing, to witness as part of a public spectacle of grief.

In another testament to the increasing body count in the borderlands, Argentine-born, Mexico City-based artist Enrique Ježik dumps a truckload of what he refers to as "organic matter" (animal body parts, which he obtained from the municipal slaughterhouse) off a cliff outside of Juárez for his 2009 action *Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica*⁹ (figures 3, 4). The art action was part of the *Proyecto Juárez*, in which curator Mariana David 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 centered around the complicated socioeconomic 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 evidence of the failed "war on drugs."¹⁰ Interestingly, despite the visibility of the major role that women artists have played in work that condemns violence in the region, David

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."¹¹ 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. Why female artists were not invited to participate is ultimately unclear. It is also problematic that no artists living and working in the borderlands were invited: all the male participants are based in Mexico City, or even as far away as Madrid. The artists chosen to participate present, in part through their choice to focus on measuring and statistics, a perspective on violence in the region that renders the victims anonymous, mere numbers.

In Ježik's contribution to *Proyecto Juárez*, "organic material" serves as indexical reference to the absent bodies, victims of violence in Juárez. An homage to Robert Smithson's 1969 *Asphalt Rundown*, Ježik's action refers to the bodies being dumped in the desert. *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 disgust-



Figures 3,4. Enrique Ježik, *Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica* (Six Cubic Meters of Organic Matter), 2009

ing: 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 reimagine this rotting as a return to the earth?

In contrast to Wolffer, Ježik uses other objects, namely the animal parts, to stand in as symbolic substitutes for the collective victims. While Wolffer's performance engages the artist's own body—in fact *is* an embodiment of the violence—Ježik, perhaps because of his lack of a female-gendered body, must rely on Mother Earth to serve as the female body upon which the violence is reenacted.¹² Though the subject matter is similar, it is clear that these artists' works represent to very different, even gendered, versions of invisibility tactics, used to understand violence against the female body. I would argue that they are two different gendered ways of interpreting violence against the body. I would argue that they are two different gendered ways of interpreting violence against the body.

In another contribution to *Proyecto Juárez*, Mexico City-based artist Artemio's intellectualized interpretation of violence in the region, *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)*, from



Figures 5, 6. Artemio, *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)*, 2009



Figure 7. Nayla Altamirano, *Las Nobodies*, 2012

2009, pays homage to the women killed in the region since the early 1990s. Artemio 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 Juarez)*, 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 work 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, even mathematical account of systematic and economic violence (figures 5, 6).

A return to the artist-as-symbolic-substitute model, emerging artist Nayla Altamirano, 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 to be expected, 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 U.S.¹³ (figures 7, 8).

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 U.S. 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..."¹⁴

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



Figure 8. Nayla Altamirano,
Las Nobodies, 2012

dons the bras, 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.

In employing the figurative substitution that Agamben endorses by exchanging their own bodies or other items for the absent bodies of victims, artists in Mexico highlight that same absence, making it even more visible. The audience, ever a participant, in turn sees what was once invisible, becoming able to bear witness to the tragedy. Beyond witnessing the tragedy—in which we are all complicit—we, as

spectators, are also witnesses to the redemptive power—and, in this, to the aesthetic and political potential of the healing process—of sprinkling salt in to heal the wound. Though rubbing salt in a wound can be painful, it can also speed up the healing process; so, too, do these performances function as a testament to the transformative power of witnessing as an aesthetic project.

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Photo credits: All photos are reproduced courtesy of the individual artist.

NOTES

1. Agamben, Giorgio. “The Archive and Testimony.” *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 1999. 161.
2. 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.
3. Effective January 1, 1994, the U.S., Mexico, and Canada signed a treaty to create a trilateral trade bloc, which eased import tariffs among its members. However, NAFTA has suffered much criticism for its failure to protect the laboring classes. For example, NAFTA’s passage made possible the growth of the *maquiladora* system in Mexican borderlands, which resulted in 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.
4. Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
5. “*Maquiladora*” is the term for manufacturing operations in Mexican free trade zones, where facto-

ries import material and equipment on a tariff-free basis for assembly, processing, or manufacturing and then reexport the assembled, processed, and/or manufactured products, sometimes back to the raw materials’ country of origin.

6. 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 same year.
7. Wolffer, Lorena. *While We Were Sleeping (The Case of Juárez)*. 2002.
8. 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.
9. Ježik, Enrique. *Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material*. 2006. Action for *Proyecto Juárez*.
10. Curator David’s statement is available on the *Proyecto Juárez* website: <http://www.proyectojuarez.org.mx>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. For a discussion of the debate on gender and land art between Lucy Lippard and Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, see Anne Creissels’s “From Leda to Daphne: Sacrifice and Virginité in the Work of Ana Mendieta,” in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, edited by Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron.
13. Altamirano, Nayla. *The Nobodies*. 2011. Video documentation available at: <http://vimeo.com/27545858>.
14. Nayla Altamirano, personal communication.