



Agency and Otherness in Teresa Margolles' Aesthetic of Death

by Julia Banwell

Teresa Margolles, born in 1963 in Culiacán in northern Mexico, began her career as one of the founding members of the SEMEFO collective in 1990. This name, also the acronym of the *Servicio Médico Forense* organisation which collects unclaimed corpses and delivers them to the morgue, explicitly connects the artist's work with the contexts in which she operates: Mexico City, and the morgue, whose physical space thus becomes on the one hand a microcosm of the sprawling megalopolis that provides its backdrop, and on the other a challenge to the boundaries between public and private space as its contents spill out into the streets. SEMEFO's installations meditated upon the post mortem disintegration of the physical body, a phenomenon termed 'la vida del cadáver', the life of the corpse, which has continued to be the focus of Margolles' interest as a solo artist. This essay will refer to and build upon ideas in the theoretical fields of spectatorship and performance, applying them to possible readings of two works by Margolles. The ethical dilemmas around the use of human body parts in art, and the question of whether this potentially compromises the artist's social commentary, will also be considered.

Much of the critical work on the artist to date is concentrated on her commentary on historico-political events occurring in Mexico, such as the increase in urban crime and violence in the country during and since the 1990s, and her exposure of the laxity of institutions regarding the handling of human cadavers, circumstances which, as Cuauhtémoc Medina (2005) observes, made possible the artist's access to the restricted space of the morgue in the first place. Oriana Baddeley attributes the increase in interest in Margolles over recent years to broad cultural shifts such as the growth in popularity of fictionalised forensic representations of death seen in television programs such as the U.S.-produced C.S.I series, which are exported all over the globe. This, she suggests, may be taken as symptomatic of "our desire to find within the increasingly virtual world that surrounds us, some form of absolute reality" (Baddeley 2009: 76). Margolles' bodies, though, are not fictional, and she does not present the viewer with the odourless, sanitised version of real death brought to audiences worldwide by the shrewd marketing of Gunther von Hagens, whose



'plastinates' pose no threat of contamination. Margolles' works produce meanings by functioning on the metonymic plane. Metonymy, according to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) definition, is a process by which a part may not only stand for the whole but also provide understanding. In this way, an object such as a body part may function not only as a form of rhetorical shorthand, but also as part of a symbolic system by which meanings are transmitted. In Margolles' work, metonymy functions as a means by which the artist uses objects, such as body parts and residues (in the examples examined below, a human tongue, and human fat) to stand for bodies which were once living and whole and are now dead, fragmented and absent. These fragments, as will be shown, carry multiple potential meanings and engage the spectator in a complex and uneasy relationship with the artwork.

The geographical scope of Margolles' artistic work, in terms of both exhibition and production, has expanded from its origins in underground and non-official exhibition spaces such as La Panadería in Mexico City, to prestigious institutions across the globe such as Tate Liverpool (2006) and the Mexican Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. She is a transnational artist, using the internationally accessible language of conceptual art to comment upon a specifically Mexican set of circumstances. Coco Fusco examines the notion of intercultural exchange in Mexican art, which she argues is "a constant in the twentieth century rather than a product of the 1980s' multiculturalism or a program mandated by a foundation or a trade agreement" (Fusco 2000: 5), allowing artists to engage in dialogue across geographical borders and explore influences from outside their immediate cultural milieu. This openness is evidenced by SEMEFO's interest in the writings of Georges Bataille, which shifts their focus on death away from the stereotypically cheerful approach that has become associated with representations of death in Mexican visual culture, into an uncomfortable territory where the theme of death becomes a means, as Fusco puts it, to 'chronicle the social disintegration that is a by-product of an imploding economic order' (Fusco 2001: 76). Medina upholds this view, observing a shift in the artist's attention in spatial terms from the morgue into the streets, which, he suggests, "has happened because the space of violence ... now includes society as a whole" (Medina 2009: 89). *Sobre el dolor / On Sorrow* (2006), for example, uses fragments of glass originating from cars whose windows have been smashed, and left behind on the streets after the car is towed away and the crime scene has been processed. The morgue does not so much spill out into the streets, as inhabit them.

In all of her works, Margolles sets out to erode the supposed aesthetic distance between the spectator and the object being viewed, sometimes by means of direct physical contact with the raw materials used in the production of the work. The question of spectatorship is central to the perceived effect of an artwork in inspiring reactions (of discomfort, interest, pleasure, or any other potential emotion) in individuals who view it. The shock value is arguably greater if the perceived risk of direct contact with a disturbing object is higher, yet of course it may also be argued that it is easier to detach oneself from an overtly visually shocking scene. In general terms, Margolles' earlier work tended to focus on the filthy physicality of death and



decay, highlighting by sometimes highly confrontational means the inescapability of mortality and the materiality of the body, whereas in recent years she has employed other, more subtle means of communicating. As Kristeva states in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1987), the corpse is an expression of the abject. It is inextricably linked to our living bodies, and reminds us as individuals of our own mortality, provoking reactions of both disgust and fascination. Bodily residues and traces insinuate themselves into the body of the spectator through senses other than the visual, which is not only a highly efficient tactic by which to threaten any sense of security in one's ability to maintain distance from potential contamination or pollution by these materials, but also undermines the supremacy of the visual in the gallery space, thereby negating the possibility of maintaining a 'safe' distance. Photographs and visual recordings, though, by their nature both involve and distance the spectator, who becomes witness to events that happened in another time and place, yet is unable to participate in, or influence them: as John Ellis notes, "for the viewer, powerlessness and safety come hand in hand" (Ellis 2000: 11). If we follow this argument, it is 'safer', less risky, to watch a recording of a performance rather than being present at the event as it takes place. Philip Auslander (1999) has suggested, however, that the relationship between live and recorded performances is not necessarily oppositional in terms of the audience's expectations and ideas about authenticity, so that one form may be assumed to be vastly more prestigious than the other. He attributes this to the primacy of television as a medium for viewing performance. An argument may be made, then, that a performance viewed as a recording should not necessarily be assumed to be any less potentially thought-provoking than the same performance viewed as a live action, or a body part transported from the morgue to the gallery.

Lengua / Tongue, first exhibited in 2000, consists of a preserved pierced tongue which is displayed on a small stand. The tongue belonged to a young male heroin addict, and was obtained by the artist with the consent of the man's family, in exchange for the cost of his burial. Margolles explained in a 2004 interview the way in which she approached the man's family:

Hablé con la madre y quise pedir que me diera el pene, pero cuando iba a pronunciar la palabra pene me salió lengua. La madre, por supuesto, reaccionó indignada, algo completamente normal, mi trabajo fue convencerla para que el cuerpo de su hijo hable sobre las miles de muertes anónimas que la gente no quiere tener en cuenta. Finalmente me la dio y la llevamos a Bellas Artes que es, además, el lugar de los velorios de personajes célebres en México'. (Silva Santistéban 2004: 2)

The artist's exchange of money for the body part has some troubling ethical implications. Certainly, a funeral afforded the young man a far more dignified fate than burial in a mass grave (the final resting place of many of Mexico City's unclaimed corpses) and the artist's generosity in providing this is significant. However, the transaction is ethically complicated. Whilst it is true that the man's family agreed to the



exchange, they were compromised by their unfortunate financial situation. The organ has considerably deteriorated in condition – it is preserved to a certain extent but not with the almost indefinite effects of von Hagens' 'plastination' technique, which preserves corpses and body parts for thousands of years, yet it remains powerfully suggestive. This body part has strong erotic connotations, which are further reinforced by its presentation here as a fetish object, separated from the rest of the body so that the audience can focus upon it alone. The eroticism of the tongue is further enhanced by the fact that it is pierced, which gives it certain potency despite its deterioration. The other principal association of the tongue is with speech and communication. Its removal from the rest of the body is in this way metaphorically suggestive of silencing. The young man, as an economically disadvantaged individual and a member of a subculture (reportedly a heavily pierced and tattooed punk), evidences the uncomfortable social realities of poverty and social marginalisation, his tongue standing for people who effectively have no voice. There is also, here, a hint of fitting irony in the subversive act of exhibiting the organ in prestigious galleries, given the anti-establishment attitude characteristic of the punk subculture. The tongue, in this way, stands metonymically not just for the body of the man and the anonymous dead who, as the artist explained to the man's mother, mainstream society may rather ignore, but also for the typical, irreverent punk gesture, the two-fingered salute. This is a further ethical sticking point, however: the artist's agency is central here, and she is using another person's body to stick 'her' tongue out at the art establishment. This, despite the fact that the man's tongue has long outlived the rest of his body and is now 'speaking' to an audience, reinforces his powerlessness and underlines the fact that Margolles' artistic project is the reason for the organ's survival. The man is, problematically, speaking in her words.

The only reason we know that the tongue belonged to a man, is because we are told so. There is, though, nothing about the organ anatomically that specifically denotes gender, and, certainly, a pierced tongue could belong to either a man or a woman.



The fetish object is disconnected from its traditional association with looking at the female body, firstly because we know (or, at least, we are told) that this tongue belonged to a man, and secondly because, although both the tongue itself and the piercing are sexually suggestive, neither the tongue itself nor the piercing can be unequivocally associated with *either* the male *or* the female.

Teresa Margolles, *Lengua / Tongue*, 2002, Installation view, Die Zehn Gebote, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, June 19 - December 5, 2004, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
Photo: Teresa Margolles



Consequently the gender boundary is annulled by the tongue's potential association with any human body, and the artistic tradition of displaying female bodies is subverted.

Lengua is also open to potential religious readings. SEMEFO have denied that there is any religious tone to their artwork, saying "¿Religiosidad? La mayoría somos ateos" (Sánchez 1998: 134), and commented in relation to the work *Estudio de la ropa de cadáveres*, a collection of garments displayed on a light box, that the artefacts "no están colocadas como reliquia, sino como una presencia [...] de las minucias en la que persiste la vida de alguien que ha sido asesinado" (Sánchez 1998: 134-5). This statement is certainly also applicable to the physical traces present in *Lengua* and *Grumos*, and the parallels with Christian iconography are hard to ignore. Nike Bätzner points out that the tongues of saints have sometimes become holy artefacts "for their miraculous intercession, or, during the saints' lifetimes, for their silence, for instance in refusing to confess or betray even under torture" (Bätzner 2006: 175), suggesting that *Lengua* may be seen as a modern-day example. This connection is also made by Biesenbach, who refers to the tongue as a "secular relic" (Biesenbach 2002: 36), a symbolic object and the only remaining trace of the young man's physical body. Bätzner asks:

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

The tongue is a material, physical reminder of the economic and social inequalities that entrenched the young man's marginalisation and arguably led to the manner of his death, which Margolles wants the viewer to acknowledge. It is a fragment that metonymically represents a whole, and also many other bodies that remain entirely unseen. It is easy to understand why some critics have made the connection with religion, as many of Margolles' works, including the two discussed here, contain elements of ritual (body modifications such as piercings may be performed ritualistically, and in *Grumos* the fat is smeared in a highly suggestive ritualistic manner). This is not a religious life after death, though, but a secular one, not spiritual but physical.

The action *Grumos sobre la piel / Lump of Grease on the Skin* (2001) took place in a back street of Barcelona and is exhibited as a visual recording and still photographs of the performance. It involved the smearing of human fat collected by the artist from drums inside which human body parts had been boiled to separate the flesh from the bones in order for them to be studied by medical students. A similar action, *Ciudad en espera*, had been carried out in Havana in 2000, where the artist smeared fat onto the outside of various government buildings as an act of 'restoration' (127 *cuerpos* catalogue 2006: 206). The artist had originally planned to put the fat for *Grumos* near



the exit from the gallery at which her work would be exhibited, but later changed her idea. She explains that:

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

We see Mohamed take off his shirt, and then the fat being applied to his arms, shoulders, back, chest and stomach by a pair of surgical glove-clad hands, which are all we see of the artist as she smears the substance onto the man's naked torso. The fact that the action is not viewed 'live', first hand, is significant. Amelia Jones has noted a shift that occurred in body art during the 1990s, towards the use of 'technologies that multiply and fragment the body across spaces' (Jones 1998: 200). To view the recording of the performance is to watch an action that took place in another location, at another time, physically removed from the space and time where it is watched. The spectator is excluded from participation in the action, as it has already taken place, but the camera's close focus on the body invites intimacy, even if only the distanced act of looking voyeuristically. The work poses no direct risk to individuals who watch the recording, and any danger of contamination by corporeal (that is to say, non-visual) contact with the fat as a reminder of bodily death is arguably diminished by distance and time. This is not to say, though, that the work is not unsettling or that its power is entirely annulled by its viewing as a recording as opposed to live. As Auslander notes, recorded performances benefit from a high level of cultural capital due to the prevalence of television in visual cultures. The medium by which this work is displayed and viewed, therefore, further complicates and nuances the uneasy relationship between artist, spectator, and artwork.

Grumos is extremely unusual among Margolles' art works in that it features a living body, and even more so in that we know the individual's name. Therefore, one of the ethical difficulties that complicate some other works such as *Lengua*, does not apply here (though others, as will be discussed, do). The human fat smeared onto Mohamed's body by the artist was obtained from the morgue. The question of permission for the use of body parts is



Teresa Margolles
Grumos sobre la piel / Lump of grease on the skin,
Barcelona, June 2001
4 color photographs
each 46.5 x 46.5 cm, framed
Courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich



pertinent, but fat is a residue rather than an actual body part or corpse, so it is impossible to trace the origin of the material back to an individual, identifiable body. This makes impossible any potential endeavour to gain permission from next of kin, since the process by which the disturbingly formless substance was separated from the body parts it once inhabited has erased any individual distinction between the bodies to which it belonged. As indicated by the artist, the action was done with the informed consent of her living subject. It is worth pointing out that the artist does not give any indication of whether Mohamed was paid to participate in the action, although Margolles did pay for a plane ticket for him, using the money the ACE gallery had given her, so that he could travel back to Morocco and receive medical treatment:

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

It is interesting that the artist comments on the 'risk' of working with human beings. Many of Margolles' works were produced directly from materials obtained from the morgue, a private space where she has permission to enter: a controlled environment. Here, in a back street of Barcelona, she is in an open and therefore risky environment. Her choice of a drug dealer is meaningful. It is fairly safe to assume that this occupation is comparatively high-risk and that the murder rate among drug dealers is proportionally higher than in the population as a whole. This work not only connects death to life in a wider sense, but also physically connects the two living bodies using a substance taken from dead bodies. The artist recounts the effect that this experience had upon her:

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

She and the man had, according to this account, become irreversibly linked to one another through an act of mutual poisoning. This is not an act of restoration, but one of destabilisation and transgression. The use of the word 'envenenamiento' also denotes pollution by physical contact with the corpse. Her apparent sympathy towards this man with whom she had worked, an immigrant from a Muslim country, living in Europe post-9/11, suggests that he was not simply an object of exploitation by the artist. There is, however, undeniably a power relationship at play between Margolles and her subject in the way that the action has been filmed: we see only the man's torso, in close-up, as the artist smears a substance onto his body. As she explains above, she smeared the 'remains of [her] misery onto his misery'.



There is no sense of exchange in this statement. It is therefore clear here, as it is with *Lengua*, that the artist's agency is central, and her domination of the scene obscures any sense of equality in the relationship between the two bodies. Margolles' domination of the scene and of the other's body is also powerfully erotic. The camera, through whose gaze the audience experiences the performance, fragments and fetishises his physical form. The man's semi-nakedness and the intensity of the focus on his body enhance the sensation of illicit voyeuristic pleasure. The artist's hand is gloved, adding a further dimension of kinky eroticism to the scene, with the dominant female artist performing an action upon the compliant, apparently submissive body of the exoticised male other. The power relationship between the two bodies, and the gloves worn by the artist, are also suggestive of a medical examination or treatment. The fat itself has a double meaning, on the one hand 'standing in' for the bodies it once inhabited, and also functioning in this space as a darkly subverted kind of massage oil, which, crucially, does not touch her skin, only his. The man's body is commodified and objectified by the artist's action and by the gaze of the camera and, later, by spectators. Death, as represented metonymically here by the fat, is also commodified, employed in the massaging of an exoticised racial other by the artist. This, therefore, is only a partial poisoning, and the idea of 'union' belies the complexity of the relationship between the bodies present at the scene and the bodies who witness it later as a recording.

The immigrant drug dealer represents the social abject; a reality which most of society shuns because of the unsettling association of illegal drugs with crime and urban decay. He is also racially other, occupying a marginalised position not only in terms of his choice of profession whose illegality is indisputable but as a member of a racial minority. The issue of immigration is one of the most polemical issues currently being debated in European countries. If the man is an illegal immigrant, he occupies a doubly marginalised position, representing the threat of the racial abject and playing on fears of pollution and decay of the nation, while the fat smeared on to his skin awakens our fear of corpse pollution, the actual *touching* of the living by the dead. In this piece, Margolles unites the two abjects, using the application of fat onto skin to combine these rejected elements of humanity. Corporeal and social waste are united. However, we contemplate from a safe distance, and there is no danger that we as spectators will be contaminated by physical contact.

To conclude, the two works examined above reveal aspects of Margolles' tactics for drawing the spectator into close contact with her subject matter, which is present in all of her work. The bodies and body parts the artist places at the centre of her works, witness the unsettlingly direct relation between violence enacted upon the body, and its result, death. These bodies leave behind traces and residues that now, by means of the artist's intervention, metonymically evidence their former lives and erase the distance between dead and living bodies.



Here, as in much of Margolles' work, we do not see whole bodies, only remaining fragments and traces. In *Lengua* a body part is displayed, and in *Grumos*, the absent (the fat as metonym for the corpse) is smeared onto the present (the living body). This act symbolically connects death to life through the physical contact between the fat and the skin, and serves to bring the corpses of individuals who had been murdered, forgotten, and ended up as fragmented bodies for use in medical studies, back into the social consciousness, but the relationship between the artist, her subject matter and the spectator is highly complex and unassailably problematic.

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