Traces of Identity: Portraiture in the Work of Teresa Margolles

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TRACES OF IDENTITY: PORTRAITURE IN THE WORK
OF TERESA MARGOLLES

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TRACES OF IDENTITY: PORTRAITURE IN THE WORK OF TERESA MARGOLLES

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by

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Teresa Margolles, born in Culiacán, Mexico, is a socially engaged conceptual artist whose work examines the causes and consequences of death from the 1990s to the present in her home country. Margolles’s work has been largely discussed in the context of death and violence, and this thesis expands upon this literature by including the concepts of identity and portraiture. By examining how Margolles’s installations, sculptures, and photography use material remains to display identity and memorialize victims, this thesis argues that Margolles not only creates memorials, but also portraits of the fallen victims.

Using the frameworks of portraiture, the index, and materiality in three distinct bodies of work, I demonstrate how Margolles’s use of traces of bodily materials from the nameless unclaimed corpses who appear daily in the Mexico City morgue moves beyond a focus on the corpse itself and in turn gives symbolic voice to the forcibly silenced, ultimately addressing the larger social implications of the corpse. This thesis demonstrates both that the impact of Teresa Margolles’s work goes beyond “corpse art” as well as the possibilities of portraiture in contemporary art. The artist seeks to bring to public awareness the sociopolitical issues in Mexico by creating conceptual portraits that do not simply represent the body, but activate its material remains.
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This is dedicated to the strong women

in my life.
INTRODUCTION

On the gallery wall, 1400 hand-made ceramic tiles form a large grid of small patches of varying flesh tones. Each brick, with its subtle variations in color and form, was created with mud extracted from the Rio Grande which was then processed in Ciudad Juárez on the border of Mexico and the United States, and was finally transported to Berlin. The objects that comprise this installation embody the journey of those it strives to represent. Mexican artist Teresa Margolles sculpted, baked, and burnished each brick individually with the critical incorporation of the material traces left behind in the river of the thousands of Central American migrants who attempt to cross the border into freedom. As many drown every day on this journey, their existence disappears, their memories are forgotten, and only minimal traces remain. Bringing attention to those who fall into oblivion daily, and those who face a traumatic experience of escape, Margolles creates a memorial to the nameless many who have lost their lives on this border, as well as those who have struggled to survive, in her 2017 installation *La Gran América* [Fig. 1]. In confronting the viewer with the physical traces bodies have left behind, the artist fights against their forgetting and memorializes their struggle. Though the work appears as a unified whole composed of identical pieces from afar– as a crowd of people might appear in the distance– in closer sight each brick is slightly individualized. Each brick represents a person– a name, a face, and a life that fights against dematerialization.

1 Peter Kilchmann Gallery, email communication with Annemarie Reichen, November 16, 2018.
Margolles, born in Culiacán, Mexico in 1963, is a socially engaged conceptual artist. Her work examines the social causes and consequences of death, taking violence and the corpse as her primary points of interest and addressing these themes with a minimal aesthetic. Margolles works with the material remains of silenced victims to present death to the viewer in a subtle, yet disturbing way. In her installations, sculptures, and photography, simple and poetic forms carry the weight of the situation at hand. She demonstrates how social injustice leads to violence and can end in victims being taken as collateral damage, merely becoming nameless statistics. In her work she forces the viewer to confront the circumstances of the drug war in northern Mexico and erects memorials to the dead. She exposes misfortune, tragedy, systemic injustice, and the harsh and violent reality of daily life in Mexico be reflecting on social strife and trauma.

Margolles’s work came into being at a critical moment in Mexican history. The period after the election of President Carlos Salinas in 1988 witnessed an increase in crime and violence connected to the trade of narcotics, and the 1990s became a decade marked by political and economic turbulence in Mexico including the signing of NAFTA, economic crisis, and political assassinations. One such assassination was that of Luis Donaldo Colosio, a presidential candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party who was shot at a campaign rally in 1994. According to Rubén Gallo, the 1990s in Mexico “was the most tumultuous in Mexican history since the Revolution ended in 1920.” More recently, this violence has continued into the 2000s and has not shown signs of improvement. The declaration of the war on drug trafficking by the Mexican government occurred in 2006. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in violent incidents

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in Mexico in 2007 and that number jumped to over 5,000 in 2008.\(^3\) Violent crimes associated with the drug war has made death a part of the everyday life of Mexican citizens, and consequently the number of bodies entering the morgue grows each day.

Drug violence, or *narcoviolencia*, remains an issue in Mexico today. Public acts of violence are carried out by both criminal organizations and representatives of the state, and their origin is the conflict produced by drug trafficking. *Narcoviolencia* terrorizes and divides the people of Mexico as corpses are left open to decay in the streets or are taken to mass graves. These killings are surrounded by an air of uncertainty—of how many people are dead, who they are, how they died, and who killed them.

Art in Mexico in the 1990s and 2000s sought to come to terms with these social issues as well as the progress, change, and innovation of modernity developing at the time in Mexico. The response was a production of experimental works that rejected traditional media such as painting, used found objects or cheap materials, and employed simple poetic forms focused on conceptualism.\(^4\) Well known Mexican artists created works during this time to reflect on the realities of living in Mexico City, examples including Gabriel Orozco’s *Chair with Cane* from 1990 [Fig. 2] and Francis Alÿs’ performance *Paradoxy of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* from 1997 [Fig. 3]. Focusing on the streets of Mexico, Orozco’s work explores relationships between mundane objects in the real world and in art. *Chair with Cane* was an intervention that the artist created in the street in which he repaired a street


\(^4\) Jamie L. Ratliff, “Visualizing Female Agency: Space and Gender in Contemporary Women’s Art in Mexico” (PhD diss., University of Louisville, 2012), 17.
vendor’s broken chair by replacing the seat with raw caning. Alýs’s work examines social and economic realities, and in his performance he pushed a large block of ice through the Mexico City streets on a hot day to reflect on the hardships of the Mexican laborer. The political turmoil and unmet promises of modernity gave way to artists exploring the social strife of underground economies and the urban working class. Margolles similarly draws on her experience of living and working in this environment, and focuses on the brutalities surrounding the Mexican drug war. For over fifteen years, her work has made these issues visible and challenges those in power to both justify their failures and heal the wounds left behind.

Margolles may not seek to answer the details to all the questions regarding the deaths, but she does attempt to bring them into awareness. The artist focuses her work on the drug war, and more recently, on related themes of displacement and migration.

To this existing analysis of death and violence in Margolles’s artworks, I add identity. In my thesis, I will argue that not only are Margolles’s works memorials, but they also function as non-iconic conceptual portraits of the fallen victims. Using the theoretical frameworks of portraiture, the index, and materiality– and discussing three distinct aesthetic periods of her practice– I will demonstrate how Margolles’s use of traces of bodily materials from the nameless unclaimed corpses who appear daily in Mexican morgues moves beyond a focus on the corpse itself and in turn gives symbolic voice to the forcibly silenced, ultimately addressing the larger social implications of the corpse. In the majority of her works, the materials used range from water used in morgues to clean corpses, blood, glass, suture threads, but the corpse itself is not visually displayed. In a similar vein, revealing a name is not important to the works

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6 Ibid.
7 Banwell, 5.
either, but instead visibility and memorialization of the person’s existence is what matters. Only recently has Margolles begun the incorporation of photography into her practice, which does not discredit the interpretation of her previous installations as portraiture, but rather further emphasizes her interest in Mexican identity, as I will argue in my third chapter. Following this introductory chapter, my thesis will be divided into three chapters that each focus on a distinct body of works and are uniquely connected to the concept of identity—whether visually, symbolically, or theoretically. Throughout her practice, I will demonstrate, the body and its death are ingenuously present by way of corporeal materials, and as such the individual and collective identity of the victims’ lives and circumstances that ended them are represented. By demonstrating the presence of portraiture in the works of Teresa Margolles, my thesis will allow us to expand our contemporary understanding of what portraiture as a genre can encompass.

Margolles’ interest in the causes and consequences of death can be traced back to her training as a forensic pathologist. In addition to studying art, Margolles received a degree in the science of communication and forensic medicine at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM). While working in the Mexico City morgue, she was a founding member of an artist collective titled SEMEFO, the acronym for the Mexican coroner’s office—Servicio Médico Forense or Forensic Medical Service. The group was an underground experimental art group which devoted its work to exploring the aesthetics of death, specifically the corpse, and created performance and installation work commenting on death in Mexico. Since the disbanding of the group in 1998, Margolles has been working as an independent artist who still explores death and violence with the use of forensic materials. Believing that the morgue reflects society, with its drug, crime, and politically-related deaths, she aims to make viewers

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8 Banwell, 13-14.
aware of the problems in Mexico. By exhibiting internationally, she forces both local and distant viewers to both cope with the losses experienced or take responsibility for the crimes that have occurred.

In 2009, Margolles was selected to represent Mexico in the 53rd Venice Biennale with her exhibition What Else Could We Talk About? [Fig. 4]. In an international setting, Margolles demonstrated how a fascination with death was reflective of the Mexican experience of being surrounded by violence, yet also how the Mexican drug war is acknowledged as a global issue. She highlighted the failings of her country, the extreme death toll of Mexicans affected by narco-politics and living in a war zone, in a 16th century Venetian palace. Her primary intervention in the almost empty palace was having a single person slowly mopping the floor with rags soaked in blood and mud taken from crime scenes—essentially performing an act of cleaning that is never complete; an attempt to erase a memory that cannot be forgotten. In addition to her exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Margolles’s work has been seen in international exhibitions, both solo shows and group shows such as Global Feminisms in 2007 at the Brooklyn Museum and Visceral Bodies in 2010 at the Vancouver Art Gallery. These exhibitions have resulted in extensive catalogues containing essays on the crusade against drugs in Mexico and violence on the border, with the central recurring argument being that “the memorial to the dead has been a central feature of Margolles’s art for more than a decade, and it revolves more around human beings who no longer exist than about death as a universal theme in the history of art.”

Margolles’s work has also been discussed in more encompassing studies

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of both contemporary Mexican art and women artists such as *Contemporary Art Mexico* and *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium.*

In addition to these catalogues, in 2015 Julia Banwell completed the first and most extensive monograph to be published on the artist, titled *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death.* Banwell explores a range of artworks from the artist’s beginnings with SEMEFO to the present, focusing primarily on theoretical perspectives of death and how Margolles approaches the representation of death as she responds to traumatic events. Banwell discusses the social and aesthetic dimensions of Margolles’s practice, especially as they expose the effects of violence on the individual and social body. Though Banwell provides a comprehensive discussion of a majority of Margolles’s works, the five chapters of the monograph center on the theoretical, cultural, and ethical perspectives on the display of death. Banwell continually returns to the death aesthetic as the central focus of Margolles’s oeuvre, and in doing so she overlooks varying aspects of the artist’s practice, especially that of the visual and material display of identity.

The author’s writing is rooted in theories of abjection, therefore eliminating rather than asserting the element of subjectivity that can be seen in Margolles’s work.

Overall, the trend in scholarship concerning the artist’s work is a focus on the representation of death, and specifically the corpse itself, and abstraction of the body. With my thesis, I will add to this literature the artist’s engagement with portraiture. I extend the

10 Hossein Amirsadeghi, Catherine Petitgas, Ursula Verea Hernandez, Tanya Barson, Daniel Garza Usabiaga, and Maria Minera, *Contemporary Art Mexico,* 2014. This comprehensive volume highlights over seventy artists and forty institutions and key figures that have played a critical role in contemporary Mexican art. Teresa Margolles is featured as one of the most influential figures whose work “presents a socially critical hybrid of minimal abstraction and politics.”


established notion of Margolles’s work as memorial to that of a display of identity of the victims through a conceptual portrait. The reference to portraiture is only briefly mentioned in relation to certain works such as Papeles (2003), a group of 100 sheets of watercolor paper that appear like painted abstract works, but have actually been used to absorb blood and other organic material traces of the dead, hence becoming portraits of whose materials they have subsumed. Therefore, my thesis will be the first study to discuss at length the element of portraiture apparent in Margolles’s practice. Larger studies on portraiture including Richard Brilliant’s Portraiture and Shearer West’s Portraiture will be used as a theoretical basis to understand not only the role of portraiture in the history of art, but the engagement with likeness, self-fashioning, construction of identity, and relation to the viewer in Margolles’s works. According to Brilliant, portraits are “art works, intentionally made of living or once living people by artists, in a variety of media and for an audience,” and though the physical appearance is a component of the work, the rest of identity is “conceptual and must be expressed symbolically.” More important to my research, however, recent studies on conceptual portraiture such as Portrait by Jean-Luc Nancy as well as the exhibitions Face-Off: the Portrait in Recent Art and This Is a Portrait If I Say so: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today, provide the framework for contemporary understandings of the complex subject, primarily with a concentration on photography and American art, but touching on conceptual approaches to the portrait that avoid conventions of representation. These studies demonstrate how portraiture has been a site of artistic experimentation in recent years, with focus no longer on likeness, but on metaphorical representations of self, which is how I aim to demonstrate Margolles engages with the tradition of portraiture.

As discussed by Anne Collins Goodyear, “with the advent of Fluxus, Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual art, which embraced new types of subject matter, new methods of engaging the viewer, and new formal strategies, came new ways of understanding and representing identity through portraiture.”¹⁴ Recent forms of portraiture challenge the mimetic portrait and offer new ways to frame pressing questions about how we understand ourselves and others. Works including Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991, Roni Horn’s Asphere, 1988-90, and Janine Antoni’s Butterfly Kisses, 1996-99 all evoke the nonvisible human presence, whether of the artist themselves or another person, through materials and indexical marks. Byron Kim’s Synecdoche, 1991-1998, serves especially well to include Margolles into this narrative, with the work’s apparent visual similarity to La Gran America and its shared portrayal of varying pigments of different bodies to compose a whole. The birth of conceptually engaged practice of pictorial abstraction allowed new ways to capture and describe identity, developing a mode of portraiture that veered away from resemblance to allow for new possibilities for originality.

Chapter one, “Conceptual Portrait”, will discuss Margolles’s sculptural works as they use the indexical trace of human remains to present the physical bodies of individuals, rather than a figurative representation. In this chapter, I will introduce the concept of the indexical trace in Margolles’s works as I will argue that these formally minimal works carry personal significance in their materiality and in turn are not mere objects, but representations of victims of violence. Moreover, the replication of multiples in a serial manner that these works formally share further drives the display of many individuals of a community. Beginning with Catafalco

¹⁴ Anne Collins Goodyear, Jonathan Frederick Walz, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Dorinda Evans, This is a Portrait if I say so: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today (New Haven: Bowdoin College Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2016), 5.
(1997), a negative relief cast created by draping plaster-soaked sheets over corpses, Margolles demonstrates an early interest in portraiture as she extends the funeral mask tradition to an entire body. Creating this cast forms a relic of the deceased and a trace to be memorialized. This chapter will then focus on the works Papeles and La Gran America, which I discussed previously, as primary examples of how Margolles does not just represent the general fact that violence and death are critical issues on the border, but brings attention to the fact that lives of specific individuals are what have been ended. La Gran America and Papeles similarly make use of the index as theorized by Charles Sanders Peirce in order for mud bricks and watercolor papers to be not just objects of resemblance, but of having a physical connection to the individuals, in turn making them present in the gallery in which the works are displayed.

Chapter two, “Ephemeral Memorial,” will trace back to the artist’s early career as a morgue technician and establishment of the artist collective SEMEFO. I will then focus my discussion on the artist’s creation of an ephemeral memorial to victims with her installations such as Vaporización (2002) and En el aire (2003) and relate the dichotomy of absence and presence in her works to artists such as Doris Salcedo who similarly engages with the monument in her practice, for instance with her installation Palimpsesto. As visitors enter into the gallery in which En el aire is installed, there is a joyful atmosphere recalling the carefree nature of childhood, playing with the fleeting presence of soap bubbles. However, these bubbles have been created with the water used to clean bodies in the morgue, quickly changing the reaction of visitors upon their realization. The bubbles inundate the air and ultimately land on the skin of those who occupy the space. The trace of the dead penetrates the living, and visitors are unable to escape the presence of those whose bodies have disappeared from society. Margolles is interested in what she terms “the life of the corpse,” referring to what happens to
the physical body after its death. However, in working with the corpse, she is most interested in the memories and traces of life that remain in the deceased. Here, the material trace is used as a way to evoke the presence of the victims in the museum setting. Working with the ephemera associated with the corpse of the victims is an attempt to prevent them from becoming invisible, and though I acknowledge this may be the body of works most difficult to associate with portraiture, I argue that the physical encounter and connection with the remains of the deceased replicates the personal affect a viewer encounters with a portrait.

Chapter three, “Photographing Disappearance,” will discuss Margolles’s recent work that has consisted primarily of portrait photography. Her series *Pistas de Baile* (2016) shows transgender sex workers standing on the remains of dancefloors of demolished nightclubs in Ciudad Juarez. The series is the artist’s first work to represent people in photographic portraits and exemplifies her longstanding interest in identity. Additionally, the series *Pesquisas* (2006) is a mural that depicts the faces of thirty missing women from the 1990s onwards that have been plastered over the streets of Ciudad Juarez and have slowly become a part of the urban landscape. Her photographs will be contextualized with reference to the work of Rineke Dijkstra and Philip-Lorca diCorcia whose large-scale color photographs similarly suggest a display of identity during transformative periods of life, through honest, unsentimental, and revealing portraits. With this chapter, Margolles’s works will be situated in dialogue with contemporary photography, the most obvious display of her theoretical interest, and will allow for an alternative reading of her more well-known sculptural installations.

To conclude, Teresa Margolles’s work is an attempt to confront the loss of life of nameless unclaimed corpses in Mexico, through her sculptures and installations. As curator Cuauhtémoc Medina eloquently notes, “Margolles places us in a tough, tense, intractable
negotiation, both intellectually and emotionally. The referent violence does not provide us with any context, since it features on a quasi-dematerialized level… It mixes up social knowledges, absorbs them, scatters them, and returns them to dust.” Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate that the impact of Margolles’s work goes beyond “corpse art” or simply the display of violence and the grotesque. The artist seeks to bring to public awareness the gravity of the sociopolitical issues in Mexico and memorialize fallen victims. I argue that she does so by creating material portraits that do not simply represent the body, but activate its material remains, incorporating real traces of human presence in order to prompt an affective response.¹⁶

¹⁵ Margolles, Medina, and Pimental.
¹⁶ As Brian Massumi and Eve Sedgwick have theorized, affect does not necessarily denote a personal feeling, but an autonomic impingement upon the body that comes prior to the mind’s subjective thought. Affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity that precedes emotion. In this sense, the activation of material remains in Margolles’s works and their encounter with the viewer is one of force, prior to emotion.
Chapter 1

CONCEPTUAL PORTRAIT

One of Margolles’s earliest works *Catafalco* [Fig. 5], is a sculpture that was created in a similar manner to a funeral mask. Death masks have historically been created following one’s death to preserve likeness, later taking on a devotional role or serving as reliable documents for posthumous portraits by sculptors.\(^\text{17}\) Taking from this tradition, Margolles provides us with imprints of the bodies of two individuals, the absence of their physical form alluding to the forgetting of dead people who are not “distinguished.”\(^\text{18}\) The sculpture, formed by draping plaster soaked sheets over a copse to create a negative-relief cast, was an early signifier for the artist’s interest in portraiture. However, in this work it is not a name or likeness that affirms existence, but material evidence. The plaster cast shows the impressions left behind once the body is removed. Every curve and crevice of the individual’s features marks the surface of the plaster, and the body leaves a physical trace of skin cells. A catafalco, or catfalque, is known as a framework that supports the coffin of a distinguished person during a funeral, however, here the individuals who were used to make the sculptures were not distinguished figures, but anonymous people who draw attention to the social inequalities that persist even upon death, as the only thing preventing the forgetting of the individual is the sculpture.\(^\text{19}\) The artist does not

\(^\text{17}\) Musée d’Orsay, “Masks, from Carpeaux to Picasso,” (Paris: Musée d’Orsay, 2008).
\(^\text{18}\) Banwell, 103.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
necessarily use the actual body parts in her work, and the names of these two individuals are not revealed, however the unique facial and body features imprinted onto the plaster affirms their existence and their suffering.20

Similarly imprinting the remains of dead bodies, Papeles [Fig. 6] are sheets of watercolor paper that have been washed in the runoff from autopsy rooms– absorbing water, blood, fat, and other organic materials as they are washed off the corpses. Each of the 100 sheets of paper that belong to the work are produced using the materials from a different corpse, contributing to the individuality of each sheet. The residues stand in for the missing bodies, each paper now functioning as an anonymous portrait of the dead. All 100 sheets, with their varying shades of brown and red, appear like abstract painted watercolors until the materiality is known.

Margolles evidently displays an interest in the human body and what it is subjected to through life and death. This interest culminates in her non-iconic conceptual portrait works. As opposed to photographic images representing the likeness of a person which traditionally come to mind when defining portraiture, Margolles denies the expected representation of a human figure and opts for minimal non-iconic materials to serve in place of a person’s image. I argue that Margolles employs the medium of sculpture and installation to create her “portraits” because with the community she is advocating for, the materials that comprise her works are more important than the image of the person whose life has been ended. Though photographs are often perceived as “direct emanation from the real,” with the inclusion of material remains in her sculptures there is a physical presence of the subject in the work rather than solely a visual presence, which should equally serve the function of a portrait– to represent a person.21

20 Ibid.
With this approach, Margolles ties portraiture to more challenging themes of violence in Mexico and uses the abject to eliminate the viewer’s boundary between life and death.

The artist’s practice draws on the history of religious relics and images of death, exhibiting human remains as has been done by Christians since the Middle Ages for remains of saintly martyrs in order to preserve the spirit embedded into the matter. However, in her works, she does not allude to the sanctity of the body nor praise its qualities. Margolles and SEMEFO have denied that there is any religiosity to their artwork. Additionally, Margolles does not simply put the gathered materials on display, but transforms them and puts them back into daily life by being in a social space. As such, her works cannot necessarily be considered relics.

Though she is allowing this tradition to inform her work as she highlights the destruction of life by preserving its remains, what she is creating is not a relic.

Margolles focuses on the traces and indices left behind by dead bodies. As Charles Sanders Peirce describes, indices are one of three classifications of signs, and they serve to show something about their referent by maintaining a close, physical connection. The index leaves a trace and remains as a witness for the actual object which is absent. As such, the index is the most forceful type of sign because an icon or a symbol does not depend on a compulsive or causal link to its referent. As Margaret Iverson notes, the index carries a shock by changing perception and heightening attention. Additionally, art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss

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23 Margaret Iverson, “Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace: Involuntary Drawing” Tate Papers no. 18 (Autumn 2012).
defines an index as “that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples.”  

In this vein, Margolles’s installations function as indices. By soaking fabrics with the body fluids of people who have been murdered, each watercolor sheet transforms into a trace of the deceased individual because of the physical connection. Similarly, the installation that was discussed in the introduction, *La Gran America*, incorporates human traces that have been left behind on the land into each unique brick. In turn, these works become both sacred and abject due to their materiality and as they represent the individuals of whose lives only remain material traces.

These two works similarly employ a grid format and repetition of multiples in which similarly to Byron Kim’s *Synecdoche* [Fig. 7], multiple individual pieces are represented as parts of a whole. This method serves to form a conceptual group portrait for the larger community of individuals it represents. There are evident similarities between *Synecdoche* and *La Gran America* which allows Margolles’s installation to be discussed in the realm of portraiture in the same manner as Kim’s. Whereas Kim’s installation is composed of numerous representations of different skin color patches to bring attention to race, Margolles uses physical remains of her subjects’ bodies to also compose a grid of varying earth, or flesh tones. Juxtaposing these simple forms to address a gruesome issue, Margolles aestheticizes human remains to induce a visceral response in her spectators. Though addressing different communities, the two artists’ multiple panels are used to serve as a metaphor for a larger population.

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25 Goodyear, 110.
127 Cuerpos [Fig. 8] is a sculptural installation that is made up of 127 autopsy suture threads from the morgue in Guadalajara, Mexico, which were all used during the stitching process of the corpses, and therefore absorbed body fluids of unidentified nameless corpses whose lives ended violently. In this work, each thread represents a body whose life is gone but material presence remains. The unified 35-meter thread consisting of 127 shorter threads knotted together crosses through the longitude of the museum space at waist height, representing perhaps a border, a path of a journey or a flat lining heartbeat.

Each thread is intended to represent an individual that has been silenced by violence and therefore forgotten. These small fragments remind the viewer that all we know about the individuals being referenced is that their lives ended in violent circumstances in Mexico and their bodies were taken to be autopsied. “Knotted to form one strand, they act as the secular remnants of nameless human beings, commemorating a community of victims while enacting a touching defiance.” As the threads are of varying pale and red browns as well as varying textures and lengths, it emphasizes that they are conceptual portraits for the 127 individuals that were stitched by these threads. Even further, the catalog for the exhibition Teresa Margolles: 127 Cuerpos in 2007 at Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen contains an image of each of the 127 threads. One photograph of the unified work does not suffice to demonstrate that each thread holds a unique form and represents a distinct individual. As the 127 smaller threads are unified, the work brings together the unknown individual histories of people on the fringes-

26 Zeppetelli, 40.
28 Zeppetelli, 40.
29 Zeppetelli, 87.
victims of violence, drug dealers and addicts, suicides, women victims of rape and murder— and speaks to their unity.  

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines portraiture as “a representation or delineation of a person, especially of the face, made from life, by drawing, painting, photography, engraving, etc.; a likeness.” Though this definition has evolved, portraiture is still commonly understood as a means “to represent something about the body and face, on the one hand, and the soul, character, or virtues of the sitter, on the other.” The representation of likeness has remained as a defining feature of a portrait, however, visual likeness is not the only element of a work that makes it a portrait, and is by no means the most important either. The most essential characteristic of portraiture is to represent *who* a person is rather than *what* a person looks like. Though likeness may contribute to a representation of who a person is, a portrait is a representation that ultimately attains its artistic dignity is in its representation of the soul of the subject in place of the appearance.

The conceptual portrait has had a long history within Western culture, though it has received less recognition than documentary or imitative portraits. As Melissa Feldman discusses concerning conceptual portraits, though some artworks do not appear at first to be portraits, artists working with the conceptual portrait such as Margolles “avoid conventions of representation by minimalizing artistic intervention” and as such, express character by nonconventional means. Following a tradition of undermining a mimetic representation and seeking a more cerebral engagement with identity, Margolles creates non-iconic portraits by 

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32 Goodyear, 8
34 Feldman, 10.
appropriating found materials. The artist maintains the integrity of the original material while the formal simplicity allows the material to speak for its referent, rather than displaying the artist’s interpretation of the victim’s appearance.

In Jean-Luc Nancy’s ontology of portraiture, he seeks to understand relations between the subject and the portrait, and though the portrait is largely discussed in terms of painting, Nancy’s theories concerning portraiture are applicable to Margolles’s practice as well. Nancy discusses how the portrait can either tend towards likeness or suggestiveness and states that the role of portraiture is to recall the person after absence from either distance or death. A portrait gives presence to what is absent and as such, the portrait immortalizes.

If Nancy describes a portrait as “either faithful, precise, serviceable for identifying an “individual,” or else it is powerful, expressing dynamics by means of which “somebody” advances and withdraws,” the works by Margolles discussed above should be classified as conceptual portraits that fall into this second category as they seek to immortalize the presence of the dead. An individual’s presence in a portrait can exist either in faithful and precise representation or in distant, yet forceful suggestion. Margolles uses the bodies of both identified and unidentified unclaimed corpses found in Mexican morgues to create non-iconic conceptual portraits using the material remains of the bodies. Portraits serve to engage with ideas of identity– identity being what encompasses the “character, personality, social standing, relationships, profession, age, and gender of the portrait subject.” In discussing the nature of authenticity and identification, Nancy states “anonymity and banality have in some way come to

35 Goodyear, 62.
36 Nancy, 29.
37 Nancy, vii.
38 West, 11.
constitute an essential dimension of the portrait as soon as it has less to do with a morphological likeness than with a true semblance or verisimilitude that would be the expression or appearance of the essential form.” In this sense, regardless of whether the corpses are identified and whether that information is given to the viewer, the true semblance of the victims being represented lies within the material remains being used in Margolles’s conceptual works and is communicated to the viewer through its affective potential.

As is the tradition with contemporary conceptual portraiture, Margolles rejects not only the depiction of likeness, but also the employment of paint on a canvas in favor of sculpture and mixed media. For example, David Hammons is another artist who similarly creates portraits from found materials that carry a cultural significance. The materials he uses come directly from the communities they are used to represent. In creating a bust portrait of 19th century railroad worker John Henry, he uses a railroad tie, a rock, and hair from a barbershop in Harlem.

In addition to the materiality, using the system of multiples proves to be equally successful in alluding to both individual and group portraiture. It becomes clearer in works such as Papeles, La Gran America, and 127 Cuerpos that each individual entity—whether it be a sheet of paper or a suture thread—represents one person, especially when we know that the remains from only one person were used for each individual piece. As these smaller papers or bricks either visually or physically connect to the others displayed in the group, a collective group portrait is also formed. These remains now not only represent the individual whose life was lost, but also are representative of the people who form this community in Mexico of having fallen victim to the same crime, whether it be related to drugs, gender, or political

39 Nancy, 95
40 Feldman, 48.
violence. The collectivity of individual yet similar pieces functions to demonstrate the larger entity to which these individuals belong, therefore integrating portraiture to the larger causes of death in Mexico. As Margolles demonstrates in her work, portraiture is a means of describing identity as a whole, not solely appearance. Above all, portraits aim to get close to the people they are representing.
Chapter 2

EPHEMERAL MEMORIAL

The content of Margolles’s work has remained consistent throughout her practice— a focus on the violence, police brutality, discrimination, and drug-related crimes on the northern border of Mexico. The backbone of her practice lies in her beginnings working in the morgue and erecting “powerful memorials to the dead,” paying respect to the victims who no longer exist.\(^41\) With SEMEFO, Margolles formed part of an artist collective that began a dialogue between death and art.\(^42\) She became interested in what was happening inside the morgue and how it reflected the situations that were occurring outside. Particularly, the collective explored the social, political, and economic dimensions of death and how these elements are not eradicated after life.\(^43\)

Margolles’s work is driven by her interest in investigating what she terms “the life of the corpse,” referring to what happens to the physical body after its death. However, in working with the corpse, she is most interested in the memories and traces of life that remain in the deceased, rather than the physicality of the cadaver itself. Working with the ephemera associated with the corpses of the victims is an attempt to prevent them from becoming

\(^{41}\) Margolles, Wolfs, and Ragaglia, 102.
\(^{42}\) Adriana Miramontes Olivas, Teresa Eckmann, Irasema Coronado and Scott Sherer, “(En) Countering Gender Violence and Impunity: The Art of Teresa Margolles and Regina Jose Galindo,” (PhD diss., The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2012), 38.
\(^{43}\) Rebecca Scott Bray, “Teresa Margolles’s Crime Scene Aesthetics,” South Atlantic Quarterly 110, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 934.
invisible. She focuses on the lost and forgotten rather than the surviving heroes, and as such, takes a stand against their oblivion.

With this in mind, her work has been discussed in the context of memorials. It has widely been argued that Margolles creates a memorial to the victims she addresses in her work, and it has been explicitly connected to the funerary monument. However, I argue that Margolles’s work is more in line with the ‘counter-monument’ as defined by James E. Young. As Young describes, monuments traditionally attempt to substitute the process of remembering for a physical memorial, thus springing a greater desire to forget. The monument displaces memory altogether. However, the counter-monument aims “not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passerby but to demand interaction.” In Margolles’s work, the bodies of the victims are never displayed in their entirety, only material traces of their lives and the crime sites at which they died are incorporated. Therefore, with these minimal materials and ephemera of the body that were witness to the crimes, Margolles fights the physical memorial and focuses on the simultaneous absence and presence of the victims. The activated material remains provoke the viewer and demand interaction by transforming the gallery into a space to pay respect to and remember the dead.

Another related issue at hand in Margolles’s practice is how to commemorate the victims of an event that should not be commemorated. She still aims to provoke a ritual of mourning but

46 Ibid., 277.
faces the challenge of alluding to violence without stylizing it. Contrary to a majority of memorials where names are listed, the name of the victim is not important to Margolles. The fact that these victims remain nameless further drives the mass casualty of crimes in Mexico and the fact that so many victims fall into oblivion. It exposes the effects of violence on both the individual and social body. Margolles brings this issue into visibility, and memorialization of the larger community is addressed. The victims remain nameless even through their remembrance so that the dehumanization of death is reinforced. In her discussion on gender violence at the border, Adriana Miramontes Olivas argues that “Margolles does not present each personal identity; she presents the problem as a whole” with her quiet yet powerful installations. As Olivas emphasizes that fact that Margolles’s subjects remain nameless, she denies the presence of personal identity. I argue that as opposed to this statement, identity is still conveyed in a figurative sense as it is intricately tied to the causes and consequences of the represented violence. During a lecture given in conjunction with the *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, Teresa Margolles spoke about the installation *En el aire* and explicitly stated that for her, as should also be for her viewers, “each bubble is a body.” If Margolles intends each singular element of her installation to represent a deceased individual, and strives for these specific bodily remains to be incorporated in her work, then it is evident that the artist does aim to represent identity.

The 2003 installation *En el aire* [Fig. 9] which was exhibited at the artist’s first large-scale European solo show *Muerte sin fin* at Frankfurt’s Museum für Moderne Kunst in 2004, is

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48 Banwell, 14.
49 Miramontes Olivas, Eckmann, Coronado, and Sherer, 3.
50 Ibid.
a prime example of how the artist repurposes traces of human remains by transforming them into art. Glistening, delicate, and recognizable forms float in the exhibition hall. They are soap bubbles, reminiscent of naïve childhood pleasure of playing in a playground, and children who visit the exhibition laugh and are mesmerized by the delicate fleeting forms that disappear as they dissolve at first contact with their skin. The bubbles are simply made by water, soap, and a bubble machine— but the water used was taken from the Mexico City morgue and its previous function was to clean corpses. What are apparently cheerful and pleasant forms were created with water that touched and cleaned the physical remains of people who suffered violent deaths, therefore the water contains “the life of the corpse” embedded into it. Further emphasizing the morbid reality of these bubbles, we recall that the bubble has long been used as a *memento mori* in the history of art, serving as a reminder of the impermanence of life.51

*En el aire* is an installation that immediately transforms pleasure into disgust as the visitors learn about the material that it is comprised of. The pleasure brought on by first encounter of the playful form is quickly disrupted by the recognition of remnants of dead bodies penetrating their pores. As the bubbles come out of the bubble machine and into the space of the gallery, they fill the space, then disappear. They land softly on the bodies who inhabit the space and their journey completes as they softly pop to expose miniscule, ephemeral particles of a past life that is consequently absorbed by the spectator’s living skin.

Similarly, *Vaporización* [Fig. 10] contains the equivalent of one body in the form of vapor, as said by the artist.52 Using vaporized water taken from the Mexico City morgue for this installation as well, Margolles fills the room with a fog so thick that the otherwise empty room

appears full of an opaque air. Margolles was inspired by the natural flow of water as it rinses the corpses, runs through the drain and sewers to empty in the canals of Mexico, evaporates with heat and then returns to touch people in the form of rain. She transferred this natural process into a museum space, where the public walks through, touches, and breathes in this water. The materiality of this work allows the visitors to interact with it through multiple senses. The installation is not purely visual, rather it is experiential. Visitors walk into an intimate experience that allows tactile contact with the work itself, and therefore with traces of unspecified human remains, in turn allowing them all to become witness to the physical and psychological transformations of the body at the end of its life.

Returning to Margolles’s statement that “each bubble is a body,” this idea emphasizes that although likeness is not represented through either the bubbles or the vapor-filled room, the material trace of the absent body is an equally powerful alternative to visual representation and can equally define a sculptural work as a portrait. Each bubble is a portrait of the dead whose particles create it, even if the form exists only momentarily. In the same pattern as human life, the bubbles exist in time and space from the moment of their creation from the bubble machine to the moment of death upon their destruction. The materials that comprise of these installations were once witness to human injustices in Mexico. With these two installations, Margolles allows the viewers, the currently living individuals, to now bear witness to the afterlives of the material remains of victims.

Margolles is not the only artist who uses materials rather than figural representation to address the identity of individuals who have suffered from political violence. Doris Salcedo is one such artist whose installations also often function as memorial by using the trace left behind by the dead. For example, in the series Atrabiliarios [Fig. 11], Salcedo recuperated shoes that
once belonged to women who had been tortured and killed from mass graves. She inserted several pairs of these shoes into cavities in the wall, then covering them with semi-opaque layers of animal fiber stitched to the wall with a thick black thread. These works function as portraits of the disappeared victims of Colombia’s civil war and serve to question the disappearance. Something in between relic and fetish, these shoes are material signifier for the absent body.

Similarly, in *Palimpsesto* [Fig. 12], Salcedo creates an installation that serves as a memorial for the people who have drowned in the Mediterranean and Atlantic attempting to emigrate their home countries. The names of these individuals appear temporarily, formed by drops of water on stone slabs. Though her work is typically related to the social and political conditions of her native country Colombia, here she reflects those problems in a different context, allowing her work to be relevant across time and place. Salcedo sees her work as an act of mourning similar to a funeral as she memorializes the names of the many men and women who died in search of a better life. Both Margolles and Salcedo address traumatic loss with their austere sculptures and installations, however, only Margolles forces the viewer to touch and breath in the molecules of the remains of the dead. Margolles uniquely exposes the viewer to death and resists against their disappearance by extending the life of the corpse.

Recalling a similar practice, Felix Gonzalez-Torres approaches identity in a similar manner. Gonzalez-Torres does not represent any form of likeness in his sculptural portraits, but rather depicts identity as fluid and changeable, therefore focusing on “the idea of the portrait subject as reconstituted over time.”  

53 One work in particular is a 175-pound candy spill titled “*Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)” [Fig. 13]. This sculpture is meant to represent his partner

53 Goodyear, 103.
Ross Laycock when he was at a healthy weight of 175 pounds, before his battle with AIDS. As viewers are invited to pick off a piece of candy from the sculpture and consume Ross’s body, gallery attendants replenish the candy to maintain the ideal weight, and as such, the body is constantly present yet always changing. Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Teresa Margolles both utilize materials that are not stable nor singular, as they demonstrate how the sculptures and the identities that are represented within the materials retain a living, changing presence that alludes to both the resilience and fragility of life.

Essentially, the content of Margolles’s works lies in their materials. As the artist herself describes the primary material she works with to be “death,” the depth of the subject matter is revealed by her choice of materials that are taken from the urban environment and from corpses themselves, such as water, mud, body fat, and blood. She transforms death into something tangible. Margolles sources her materials from the body’s physical remains, and works with this ephemera associated with death to reveal a “radical realism” that demonstrates the inner secret rather than outer appearance of death. As Margolles gathers her materials, it has been said that she embarks on a process of sacralization of human remains by transforming them into art, alluding to the corruption and indolence in Mexico’s law enforcement, as well as the socio-political implications of bodies being left behind by violent deaths. Rather than sacralization, however, Margolles transforms these remains into a secular portrait as opposed to a religious relic.

The final products of her installations are often ephemeral—disappearing bubbles and permeable vapor. Even further, the concepts she represents are ephemeral as well. Death is

54 Margolles, Wolfs, and Ragaglia, 100.
55 Ana Romandía, “Semefo 1990.” Artes e historia de México (October 2011)
revealed to the viewer tangibly, yet it is beyond reach. The physicality as well as the signification of her work inhabits an ephemeral space—existing between visible and nonvisible, life and death, presence and absence. The ephemeral material shows us that our lives are also fragile. The deceased victim and its remaining corpse are materially present yet absent in form. Margolles’s minimal, aesthetically sophisticated works are an attack on the body of both the previous giver and the present consumer.

As we have seen thus far with the works En el aire and Vaporizacion, the installations are not what they appeared to be at first sight. The formal clarity of the final installation clashes with the reality of the materials used. The actual victims are not shown, as the body is never presented on its own or in its entirety, however they are still the primary focus of her work as they are presented indexically. In addition to the organic materiality of the body, Margolles’s works rely on the imprint that serves as the testimony. As such, her work serves as an index for those who are no longer present. The material trace and index in her work can be considered a singular memorial for the anonymous lives who have been lost and serve as a way of grieving these lives that were previously considered ‘ungrievable.’ According to Judith Butler, “an ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all” according to operations of power.

Additionally, the materiality of these works is what physically affects the viewer, forcing them to actively participate in her installations. These works demonstrate a “fundamental immateriality, a tracing of death, and the peculiar convocation of a public around that death, in a

57 Margolles, Uzel, Garcia, Zeppetelli, St-Gelais, and Morales, 102.  
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play of engagement and disgust, dashed hopes, and thwarted expectations." As the materials penetrate the viewer, they immediately affect the living body, then later instill emotion in the body as they come to a realization of what they are consuming. These installations are more than simply a retelling or representation of events that caused suffering, they are a purposeful activation of the inanimate remains in order to construct a portrait of the deceased.

Finally, I would like to further emphasize Margolles’s attempt to memorialize the victims through their remains with a discussion of the work *Lengua* [Fig. 14]. One of the most important consequences of death that Margolles is interested in exploring in her work is how it affects the family members that the deceased leave behind. She thinks about the people whose lives have been shattered after their loved one is killed. Though her work falls into the category of political art, Margolles prefers to focus attention on the social and emotional effects rather than the political. For this reason, Margolles focuses on granting dignity to the corpses and inform viewers about the specific individuals who have died. She does address the social issues present in Mexico that have led to this, but using this context as a background the primary attention is given to the actual lives that have been lost. While Margolles works in the morgue, she speaks with the families of those who have been killed, when they come to identify the bodies. The majority of the families she encounters do not have money to pay for a proper burial, therefore Margolles proposes that they give the corpse to art rather than science. For *Lengua*, Margolles exchanged money for solely the pierced tongue, to the mother of the young male who lost his life to a heroin addiction. With this money, the young man could have a

proper burial rather than being relegated to a mass grave, and with the tongue, Margolles’s work could speak for the countless youth who faced a similar fate in Mexico.

Through her sculptures and installations, Margolles highlights how victims of drug violence, political crimes, gender discrimination, and other such social issues in Mexico become voiceless after death. Fighting against the anonymity of a mass grave to which most of these unidentified corpses are relegated to, Margolles creates counter-monuments and establishes a place and time for the memorialization of these victims. Though often considered controversial to include bodily remains in a museum space and have it come in contact with visitors, her installations crucially address the stigma of death by fusing the beautiful and horrific.
Chapter 3

PHOTOGRAPHING DISAPPEARANCE

Ciudad Juárez, located on the northern border of Mexico, is a hotbed of violence, with one such phenomenon in particular being femicide, or the brutal murders of hundreds of women. Recently, this has resulted in women, as well as other minorities and low-income residents being forced out of their living and working environments in the city center as authorities attempt to reconstruct Ciudad Juárez. The population that Margolles engages with in her series *Pistas de baile* created in 2016 is transgender sex workers. These women are one of the populations that have been forcibly removed from the city center with the demolishing of the night clubs at which they once worked. Shifting away from portraits of the dead to portraits of the living, in this chapter I will discuss Margolles’s advocacy for this community through her practice, and will argue that the *Pistas de baile* and *Pesquisas* series exemplify the artist’s longstanding interest in the identity and justice of her subjects, which is performed here through the medium of portrait photography. Additionally, I will further emphasize her interest in portraiture by demonstrating how Margolles’s photographs can be situated within the context of contemporary portrait photography.

In the series of photographs, *Pistas de baile*, transgender sex workers stand atop the remains of what once were dance floors of nightclubs in Ciudad Juárez. These demolished nightclubs are the venues where these women worked. Now not only experiencing discrimination and hate crime, these people have also been forced to leave the city as they no
longer have a place of employment. With this series, Margolles worked closely with the people
she photographs, learning about their personal situations and difficulties. For the photographs,
Margolles marked the exact location of the dance floors with water, and then allowed her
subjects to become part of the ruined landscape.62 The remaining dancefloors emerge from their
surrounding rubble, serving as symbols for both the current conflict against gender fluidity and
expressive sexuality, but also as a reminder of their past life.

This photographic series exemplifies the artist’s interest in conveying the identity of her
subjects to the viewer. As part of this project, she interviews her subjects and gathers
testimonies to further convey their identities beyond the photographs. La Gata was one of the
women photographed in this series. After her collaboration with Margolles, she was murdered in
Ciudad Juárez at the age of 32. As part of the exhibition catalog for *Teresa Margolles: Mundos*,
held at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Montreal in 2017, homage was paid to La Gata’s
life through three testimonies. In La Gata’s own testimony, she recounts memories of what
being gay was like during her childhood. Working as a waiter in Zacatecas is where she first
met a transgender woman and began dressing as a woman, feeling beautiful with the change
from man to woman. La Gata’s friends Gaby and Bertha both spoke about La Gata to
Margolles, describing her natural beauty and assurance, but also the harsh reality of facing
illness and ending up on the street before she was brutally murdered.63

What boldly stands out in each of these photographs is the confidence the sex workers
exude as they reaffirm their presence in the midst of this destruction. For example, in *La Gata
sobre el club Las Vegas* [Fig. 15], La Gata stands tall, arms akimbo, wearing a scarlet red dress

62 Teresa Margolles, Jean-Philippe Uzel, Emeren Garcia, John Zeppetelli, Thérèse St-Gelais, and Lourdes
63 Ibid., 82-83.
that commands attention. She is dressed in attire for evening work— all the way down to her black stilettos— yet she is twice displaced both outside of the night club and into the broad daylight under the Mexican sun. Her current life is precarious, which in the words of Judith Butler is “the condition of existing under a condition politically induced, in which certain populations suffer with deficient social and economic nets of support and remain differently exposed to violence, violations, and death.”

The precariousness of the situation depicted, and vulnerability of the woman’s life, is caused by the Mexican authorities’ demolishing of the nightclubs and failure to acknowledge the humanity of those whose lives are now jeopardized.

However, though the present condition of the lives of people like La Gata is vulnerable, they fight this precariousness with their resilience. The photograph demonstrates La Gata in a position where she is unable to act— both in the sense of her work and in fighting the destruction by authorities— yet she is not silenced and her voice is being projected through the image by her body language. She fights to maintain control of her own life. She may be exposed and vulnerable as the last person standing in the destruction, but she will not allow for the erasure of a site to result in the erasure of her being.

Rineke Dijkstra provides a contemporary take on portrait photography, as she photographs “those on the brink and in the midst of significant personal transitions.” Dijkstra demonstrates empathy towards the subjects of her images, which creates an obvious parallel to Margolles’s photographs. Dijkstra’s most recognizable series, Beach Portraits, taken from 1992-2002, captures children and teenagers across Europe and North America posed on the beach and gazing directly at the camera. The adolescents display a self-conscious attitude, yet

their body language reveals a further layer about their inner characters. For example, in Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA, June 24, 1992 [Fig. 16], the young woman dressed in coral swimwear and accessorized with silver rings on her finger also wears an insecure, slightly worried, look on her face and a reserved, contrapposto posture. Though her name is not given to the viewer, as she stands against a low horizon in front of the distant waves rolling to shore, attention is drawn to every detail of her expression and pose. In front of a setting that is representative of renewal, these adolescents present themselves as simultaneously self-assured yet inquisitive.

Dijkstra often photographs single subjects over extended periods of time in order to highlight their transformations through life. Her perspective on photography is clear— it is always a direct response to reality. She photographs people and believes “the camera is a way to connect with people and to find out who they are and how I relate to them. In the end, it’s all about recognition and reflection.” Margolles, while still seeking to convey the true identity of her subjects through their expressions, does so by allowing the setting and spoken testimonies to be incorporated to the raw quality of her images. In a similar fashion as Dijkstra, intimacy— in a sense of close relation or familiarity— is present in her photographs, demanding the attention of viewers and asking us to locate our common humanness with the subject on the other side of the photograph. As we look at the woman standing tall on the illuminated fragment of a dance floor in Pista de Baile de la discoteca “La Madelon” [Fig. 17], we see a fearless figure standing firm against the destruction of her surroundings, just as La Gata stood above her fallen nightclub. In her sleek head to toe black outfit, the woman gazes directly at the camera, establishing eye contact with the viewer and allowing us to feel a direct contact with another person. The tiles that once served as a dance floor have been wet in order to be illuminated in the image, but

66 Dijkstra, Phillips, Blessing, and Adrichem, 14.
surrounding this fragment are dirt and debris, with the only nearby structures being desolate, seemingly abandoned buildings in the distance. These artists both seek to connect the viewer to the image by way of ethics and personal connection to the subject and Margolles especially aims to instill in the viewer a sense of responsibility for the oppression viewers are bearing witness to.

Employing a similar technical approach to his photography is Philip Lorca diCorcia, especially in his early work of intimate images of family and friends. DiCorcia traditionally presents his viewers with imagined narratives of daily life, a precisely scripted moment with an unfolding narrative in a cinematic, large scale format, to be developed by the viewer. Though the context of diCorcia and Margolles’s work vary and Margolles contrastingly does not obscure information from the viewer, both artists focus on life in their immediate surroundings. As Peter Galassi notes, diCorcia “saw social meaning in the weight of individual lives, viewed as if from within.”\(^67\) The connection is more apparent in one series where diCorcia set out to photograph outside of his intimate world and began photographing people who frequented the Santa Monica Boulevard area of Los Angeles.\(^68\) The majority of these people consisted of prostitutes, drug addicts, and drifters, for example Christian Valentino, 23 years old, Ontario, California [Fig. 18]. When considering solely the formal, visual characteristics of these two artists’ work, there are apparent similarities in their working methods of focusing on the central full-body figure expressive of their own being while using highly saturated street scenes and significant surroundings to further contribute to the establishment of the identity of the subject.


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 50.
These artists fall into a documentary tradition of photography. As they explore contemporary existence, their apparently simple images capture everyday life. Their stance is paradoxically distant from yet interested in the subject, allowing an authentic and dignified portrayal while avoiding sentimentality. The goal is to consider the severity of the situation at hand, but not with a photojournalistic emotion-provoking approach.

In larger scope, when considering the genre of portraiture, the representation of likeness has consistently been identified as the primary and most important characteristic. While likeness clearly plays an essential role in the photographs discussed here, there is an element of identity beyond likeness that these artists attempt to convey. As Margolles represents in both her photographs as well as in her sculptural works, likeness is not the only element necessary for portraiture and for representing identity. Margolles uses her artistic authority to give a voice to the marginalized through her poignant and revealing portraits. These transgender women are on the fringes of society. Yet through these photographs and interviews, individuality and presence is granted to those who are usually either ignored or criticized. These portraits are not concerned with beautifying the subject in an unrealistic way, rather revealing both the physical and emotional reality of the subject. The women are depicted as resilient, standing tall as emblems of resistance to municipal authorities who have torn down what they consider to be the seedy areas of the city.69

Another one of the few figurative works by Margolles that similarly utilizes photographic images of women in Ciudad Juárez is Pesquisas (Inquiries) from 2015 [Fig. 19]. However, the images in this piece are not taken by Margolles, rather they are appropriated from the streets of the city. Pesquisas is a wall installation comprised of photocopied portraits of

69 Margolles, Uzel, Garcia, St-Gelais, Morales, 85.
women who have disappeared in Ciudad Juárez from the 1990s to the present. A photograph of the missing woman as well as information about the victim is included, both of which begin to fade over time, in turn allowing these discolored images to become one with the urban landscape. Though the local government has attempted to prohibit the posting of these images, they have continued by the efforts of family members. The melancholic work refers specifically to patriarchal violence and police complicity.

In Pesquisas as well as Pistas de baile, Margolles does not necessarily confront the issue of death, however in a similar vein, what she deals with is disappearance. Disappearance of women, of career, of a home, of a life. The viewer sees what is destroyed or lost in society even beyond the destruction of infrastructure. Though they may be oppressed, these women are not faceless.

Interestingly, the urban landscape plays an equally crucial role in both series. In Pistas de baile, the women are photographed in such a way that they are becoming part of their surrounding landscape, while in Pesquisas, the photographs of the missing women become part of the city’s landscape as they begin to wear away. There is a common element of deterioration that the artist focuses on, suggesting both the deterioration of the lives of the women and the deterioration of the city itself. However, as the Pesquisas become diluted and disappear into the city walls, leaving only a memory behind, the opposite is true as the dance floors are illuminated to command attention in Pistas de baile. A relation between brick and mortar to the body is established, and it becomes apparent how time and urban interventions have had a negative effect on both. As Angela Marques and Angie Biondi write about the Pesquisas series but can

Margolles, Uzel, Garcia, St-Gelais, Morales, 24.

also be applied to *Pistas de baile*, “Their physical vulnerability—declared, denounced—would also reveal the vulnerability of the subject, of women, who seek to assert themselves, even as victims, legitimate and unrecognized, in the eyes of the other. Their faces and their lives are placed in these photographic works in order to function as a summons, a call, an appeal to their existence and condition.”

Just as contemporary photographers practice in their work, Margolles carefully constructed portraits that reveal the realities of the people or communities represented. However, Margolles goes further underneath the surface to supplement her images with spoken testimonies, allowing the marginalized people in the photographs to serve as emblems of resistance. The series discussed in this chapter are only a small part of Margolles’s oeuvre, however they offer a unique perspective for reading her larger body of work as conceptual portraiture and emphasize her interest in the photograph being for something greater that is behind the image. Margolles continually focuses on rescuing disappeared lives by making the personal political and instilling in the viewer a sense of ethical responsibility towards the social injustice being represented.

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72 Marques and Bondie, 293.
CONCLUSION

In today’s social environment, both in daily life as much as art, we are concerned with our identity. Whether it be personal emotional identity, social and professional identity, cultural identity, or ancestral identity. The work of Teresa Margolles connects to this preoccupation, but additionally reveals an identity we, as viewers of her work, are largely unfamiliar with. Margolles integrates otherwise unknown people into the networks of portraiture that structure our lives. Using identity both in her photographs as well as in her sculptures and installations, the artist is able to reach a public audience in order to convey a sense of identity of victims of social injustices in Mexico and gives the victims a platform to be properly recognized.

In Margolles’s work, a raw identity is distinctly expressed to the viewer through the use of portraiture, the index, and materiality. She seeks to make the invisible issues visible, and properly acknowledge those who have fallen victim to violence even when left anonymous. In addition to rendering this identity visible, Margolles also preserves it for the future, allowing the power of even nameless portraiture to speak to future generations. Her work is both realistic in its materiality and conceptual in what it seeks to represent but overall unified by its uncompromising honesty and intimacy. Going against conventions of representation, Margolles’s work is elegantly simple at first glance, yet often causes an affectual response by its raw materials that stand in for representations of the deceased and the socially marginalized.

A focus on dehumanization and death has continually defined Margolles’s oeuvre, however, I have argued that beyond death there is an obvious presence of identity and
portraiture, whether figuratively in photography, or conceptually in sculpture and installation. With her primary focus being on the deceased corpse, Margolles’s work is more than just about what happens to the body after death. It is an attempt to properly recognize the individual and bring attention to the social issues at hand that have led to such death. With the inclusion of the physical presence of the dead body, Margolles questions its greater social and cultural implications.

Margolles’s works are more about what they do rather than what they look like. The installation, sculptures, and photographs are primarily devoid of explanation or narrative, and therefore though they may not lead to an easy understanding of the work, they function by producing an affect in the viewer. The works assault the viewers’ senses with a visceral force of raw materials, then later draw in empathy with the intimacy of the subject matter in order to touch the viewers’ emotions. Margolles refuses us from becoming passive spectators, demanding viewers’ attention through precarious conceptual portraits that are constantly facing an instable life with the possibility of disappearance.

A conceptual take on memento mori and identity in a contemporary context, Margolles aims to “talk about murdered people, voiceless bodies, those who are forgotten with impunity, about absence and fear, and most of all the grief of their families.” The artist shifts from a visual to a visceral tradition in art, and in doing so, she memorializes victims of poverty, criminality, segregation, and drug violence. Rather than focusing attention on the desubjectifying forces of absence and death, the presence of the individual in Margolles’s work must be recognized as a representation of identity.

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73 Teresa Margolles: 127 cuerpos, 10.
74 Teresa Margolles: 127 cuerpos, 170.
FIGURES

Fig. 1 — Teresa Margolles, *La Gran America (The Great America)*, 2017, 100 cobblestones made with mud extracted from the Rio Grande, each brick: 9 x 9 x 4 cm, installation: 4.15 x 8 m, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
Fig. 2 — Gabriel Orozco, *Silla con Bejuco (Chair with Cane)*, 1990, silver dye bleach print of installation, 47.6 x 31.4 cm., Christie’s Auction House, London, England.
Fig. 3 — Francis Alýs, Paradoxy of Practice I (Sometimes Doing Something Leads to Nothing), 1997, performance by the artist using a block of ice, Mexico City, Mexico.
Fig. 4 — Teresa Margolles, ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? (What Else Could We Talk About?), 2009, performance in Palazzo Rota Ivancich, Venice, Italy.
Fig. 5 — Teresa Margolles, *Catafalco (Catafalque)*, 1997, plaster cast mold of autopsy corpse with adhered organic material printed on gypsum, 83 x 45 x 18 cm, exhibited at Brooklyn Museum, New York.
Fig. 6 — Teresa Margolles, *Papeles (Papers)*, 2003, fabriano paper soaked with water that was used to wash corpses after autopsy, 70 x 50 cm each, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
Fig. 7 — Byron Kim, Synecdoche, 1991-1998, oil on wax on plywood, each panel 25.4 x 20.32 cm., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Fig. 8 — Teresa Margolles, *127 Cuerpos (127 Bodies)*, 2007, 127 surgical suture threads, 3350 cm, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
Fig. 9 — Teresa Margolles, *En el aire (In the Air)*, 2003, bubbles made with water from Mexico City morgue, dimensions variable.
Fig. 10 — Teresa Margolles, *Vaporization (Vaporization)*, vapor created with water from Mexico City morgue, dimensions variable.
Fig. 12 — Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsesto*, 2013-2017, dimensions variable, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid, Spain.
Fig. 13 — Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991, candies individually wrapped in multicolor cellophane, variable dimensions with ideal weight 175 lbs., The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
Fig. 14 — Teresa Margolles, *Lengua (Tongue)*, 2000, pierced tongue of a murdered teenager, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland.
Fig. 15 — Teresa Margolles, La Gata sobre el Club de Las Vegas, 2006, color print on cotton paper, 45 x 64 cm.
Fig. 16 — Rineke Dijkstra, *Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA, June 24, 1992*, 1992, chromogenic print, 167 x 140 cm., The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
Fig. 17 — Teresa Margolles, *Pista de baile de la discoteca “La Madelón” (Dance Floor of the Club “La Madelón)*, 2016, color print on cotton paper, 45 × 64 cm.
Fig. 18 — Philip Lorca-diCorcia, *Christian Valentino, 23 years old, Ontario, California*, 1992, color photograph, 50.5 x 60.7 cm.
Fig. 19 — Teresa Margolles, *Pesquisas (Inquiries)*, 2016, color prints of posters photographed on the streets of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, portraying women who have disappeared, from the late 1990s through to the present, 303 x 705 cm, Peter Kilchmann Gallery.


Margaret Iverson, “Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace: Involuntary Drawing” Tate Papers no. 18 (Autumn 2012).


