

Teresa Margolles: Death in Venice... Literally

By

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Javier Espino Ruiz Sandoval

Abstract

In 2009, Teresa Margolles represented Mexico at the Venice Biennial. Her exhibition, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, consisted of nine works that caused a controversy in Venice and the art world in general, as they incorporated contentious objects made with disturbing materials such as blood found in public sites in Mexico, where narco-murders occurred. This MRP seeks to understand the dynamics of this exhibition, especially its conceptual and visceral evocation of death and violence. By analyzing *What Else Could We Talk About?* through the frames of abjection, nationalism/globalism, and the critique of luxury, I seek to elucidate why the works were considered shocking, yet also fascinating, to viewers. I also aim to explore the relevance of Margolles' cultural formation in Mexico in her choice of death and violence as principal themes, along with the implications of the exhibition as a commentary on contemporary Mexican politics and society.

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Dedication

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Introduction:

Wars, accidents, riots, murders, injustice, and political struggle are just a few of the main news topics that bombard individuals in today's society. People have become desensitized to the shocking and appalling images presented by national and international media day after day. Not only are these images effortlessly accessible through sources such as YouTube, blogs, movies, newspapers and magazine articles, their effect is compounded by constant repetition. What happens, then, when violent acts and death, even those distant, become so intimate as to become part of one's everyday world, one's personal reality?

In 2009, Teresa Margolles represented Mexico at the Venice Biennial. Her exhibition, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, consisted of nine works – all of which were completely conceptual, presenting no images nor spectacle – that caused a controversy in Venice and the art world in general, as they incorporated contentious objects made with disturbing materials such as blood and shattered glass found in public sites in Mexico, where narco-murders occurred as a result of drug trades commanded by Mexican landlords. Suddenly, the Mexican embassy was held to be a promoter of violence, death and murder. This Major Research Paper seeks to understand, explain and theorize the subject of *death* and *violence* through Teresa Margolles' *What Else Could We Talk About?* I seek to elucidate what is so shocking yet so appealing about death and violence. Why are societies fascinated yet disgusted by these subjects? What relevance does Margolles' cultural formation in Mexico have in her choice of death and violence as principal

themes? And what implications does her work have as commentary or critique upon death and violence in Mexican society?¹

Before I introduce the general conditions of the exhibition, let me elaborate on the connotation and meaning of the subjects of violence and death in the history of Mexico. Even though Mexico is a nation with a rich culture and prosperous traditions, it is often considered to be a country where violence and death are inordinately prominent. Mexico's violent history could be said to have existed since its formation. During the time of the Aztec Civilization (14th Century), mass ritualized executions were routinely performed as part of the native Mexican civilization's sacred religious acts.² In the following years of colonialism, the Aztecs were conquered by Spanish troops commanded by Hernán Cortes. This entailed slavery, atrocious murders and a massive culminating massacre, resulting in today's Mestizo culture (mixed native and European heritage).³ Four centuries later, the Mexican revolution of 1910 took place. This revolt consisted of a major sociopolitical struggle between socialist and populist groups lead by revolutionary generals Pancho Villa, Francisco I. Madero and

¹ After being born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and living most of my life in Mexico City, I received a BFA in art history and became interested in contemporary art. In 2009 I was asked to work at the 53rd Venice Biennale, for the deinstallation of the American Pavilion, which presented Bruce Nauman's *Topological Gardens*. Once in Venice, I visited Teresa Margolles' exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?* at the Mexican Pavilion. Margolles' works not only impacted me on an artistic and cultural level, but given the relationship between my national background and the drug-related crimes occurring in northern Mexico, I found myself shocked and appalled, yet mesmerized by the tremendous and powerful information conveyed through her pieces. As the result of this encounter, *What Else Could We Talk About?* completely resensitized my perception about the political problems that exist in Mexico today, and what ought to be done. The decision to write an interpretative paper arises from my personal concerns and preoccupations with Mexico's situation, both nationally and artistically.

² Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

Emiliano Zapata, against dictator Porfirio Diaz. After many were murdered, the country found peace in 1920.⁴

However, nine decades later, violence and death continue to tarnish Mexico's reputation through spectacular murders organized by drug lords and state forces that happen all across the country. This specific problem emerged from the narcotic trade in the north of the country, near the border of the United States and Mexico, where drug-lords fight each other for territory and clients. These violent cases affect innocent civilians, such as women, children, elders, and infants.⁵ In the catalogue for the exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Art historian and writer Ernesto DiezMartinez Guzman elaborates: "In Mexico [in] 2008 there were between five and six thousand deaths ascribed to drug-related violence."⁶ Because of the daily repetitiveness of these violent incidents, this scenario has sadly become habitual and almost socially accepted. In addition, every civilian is affected by this problem, as Guzman explains: "Today's death[s], whether they are 'guilty' or 'innocent,' or 'good' or 'bad,' whether they're *narcos* [(drug-lords)], cops or 'civilians,' whether they're just 'working people' or 'gangsters,' all receive the same treatment [...] they're just numbers, statistics, columns, diagrams. Nothing more."⁷ These crimes comprise daily execution

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-50.

⁵ Ernesto DiezMartines Guzman, "We Ate Something that Went Down Wrong," *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*,105.

spectacles – bloody fights between gangs, kidnappings, and recently random shootings in public places.⁸

For this Major Research Paper I will focus on the notion of death in Margolles' exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?*, especially as it relates to the subjects of abjection, nationalism/globalism, and critiques of luxury, subthemes that are then related to Latin American critical theories. The first segment of this research paper describes in detail Margolles' works within the exhibition; it then it is followed by three sections divided accordingly to specific themes. The first section addresses abjection and disgust, as the central premise within the pieces of Margolles' exhibition, for this I will utilize George Bataille's theory of death, which prevails as the central argument of his book *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality*. My second topic relates to the issues of globalization and nationalism that develop through various aspects of the exhibition. For this I will draw from Latin American theorist and critic Gerardo Mosquera's *Beyond the Fantastic*, along with two specific articles by critics Carolina Ponce de Leon and Mari Carmen Ramirez that center upon Latin American discourses that infuse the political, socio-economic, and historical issues within the visual arts. For the third and final topic I will create an argument about the exhibition's notion of luxury and wealth, which ultimately became significant within the context of the city of Venice, intercalating the past and present with notions of immigration and the

⁸ *Ibid.*,101.

display of goods. For this I will concentrate on the theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini's text *Modernity After Postmodernity*.⁹

Political Art: Speaking without Words

In Mexican visual culture, political art is an established tradition going back to the revolutionary era of the 1920s. Mexican modernism, also known as the Mexican golden Age, occurred from the 1920s to the 1950s, and included great masters such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco characterized this artistic era.¹⁰ These artists created a number of significant political masterpieces influential not only to Mexican artists but internationally as well. Mexican political art during this period, however, often referred specifically to the events of the Mexican Revolution. In the catalogue *Mexican Modern: Masters of the Twentieth Century*, former director of Museum of Modern Art Mexico Luis-Martin Lozano explains, "Mexican artists attempted to express the cultural reality of their time."¹¹ In this context, their artistic performances relied on painting, sculpture and murals. Director of CONACULTA (National Counsel for the Culture and the Arts) Sari Bermudez explains that "while comprising a

⁹ My decision to include these specific theorists and critics was based on their proximity and relationship, not only to the issues of death and violence but also to Mexican culture. Even though they were born elsewhere, Mexico reflects prominently in their works. Bataille was born in France, but his necropolitical studies included examples from Mexican culture. Mosquera was born in Cuba, and Mexico has served as the ground for many of his artistic-curatorial practices. And Canclini was born in Argentina, he moved to Mexico in 1990, where he currently works and lives.

¹⁰ Bill Richardson, "Foreword," *Mexican Modern: Masters of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Luis-Martin Lozano and David Craven (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), 7.

¹¹ Luis-Martin Lozano, "Mexican Modernism: 1920-1950," *Mexican Modern: Masters of the Twentieth-Century*, ed. Luis-Martin Lozano and David Craven (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), 15.

[limited] variety of styles, [these artists] establish[ed] an intense dialogue that our complex aesthetic identity raised.”¹² While these artists were interested in giving Mexico identity and vitality, their political interpretation remained pictorial.

Like modernist artists, Teresa Margolles continues the tradition of political art in Mexico. Unlike them, however, she uses conceptual and visceral means, rather than purely representational ones. For Margolles, political art may be presented in any media, but it is in her installations and interventions that may have the most potent impact on the viewer, not only because of the three-dimensional, immersive aspect, but also because of the involvement of and interaction with the viewer. Her significance in the contemporary art world is distinctive: she includes real blood, body parts and objects procured from crime scenes as the principal themes of her works mainly address the body, women’s rights, burials, violence and death. Her practice of political art – non-representational, non-pictorial, and non-traditional – is unusual because it engages explicitly on a literal level.

In relation to its violent past, the scene in Mexico today is amenable to the creation of political art about different problematic issues and general themes such as violence, political repression and war that manifest throughout most contemporary art.¹³ Mexican contemporary art, then, is both evolutionary (stemming from its colonial value), and revolutionary (seeking change), in the

¹² Sari Bermudez, “Preface,” *Mexican Modern: Masters of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Luis-Martin Lozano and David Craven (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), 9.

¹³ Mariana Botey, “Toward a Critique of Sacrificial Reason: Necropolis and Radical Aesthetics in Mexico,” *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 140.

sense that art has the power to explain, educate and alter the problems faced by the country. In this respect, German artist and theorist Joseph Beuys explains: “only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle [and] to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.”¹⁴ While a besieged society serves as the subject matter, art provides the materials and the metaphoric impetus for change. Teresa Margolles is no exception. While her art practices revolve around death, they are completely political and recuperative.

Teresa Margolles: Calling Code Blue

Teresa Margolles is one of the most important artists in the last decade to focus on death and violence. Born in 1963 in Culiacan Sinaloa, Mexico, Margolles earned a BA in communication sciences at Dirección de Fomento a la Cultura Regional del Estado de Sinaloa (DIFOCUR). She later was awarded an MFA diploma in forensic medicine from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM). After becoming a mortician, in 1990, Margolles – along with Juan Luis Garcia Zavaleta, Carlos Lopez and Arturo Ángulo Gallardo – created the group *Forensic Medical Service* (SEMEFO). For two decades, the group has provided forensic medical services to the Mexican community.¹⁵ SEMEFO’s main objective is to study the unrecognizable cadavers that are found in crime scenes throughout

¹⁴ Joseph Beuys, “I Am Searching for Field Character,” *Utopias*, ed. Richard Noble (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 114.

¹⁵ “Culture Base,” culturebase.net, February 4, 2012.

Mexico and provide a possible identification. Its employees include experts in forensic dentistry, anthropology and photography.¹⁶

Besides Margolles' collaboration with SEMEFO, she also has had a practice as a solo artist since the early 1990s when she attained international recognition. Among her many successes, Margolles was awarded the *Creative Youth Award* by the Mexican organization *National Fund of Culture and the Arts* (FONCA) in 1994 and 1996; in 2001, 2002 and 2003 she became part of the National System of Art Creators (SNCA) committee to stimulate artistic creation and culture. She has been invited to participate in numerous exhibitions and biennials such as the Goteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (2003), the Prague Biennial II (2005), and the Liverpool Biennial (2006), and ultimately she has received many prizes such as an honorable mention at the Northwest Biennial of Culiacan in 2001.¹⁷ Margolles' unique works have positioned her as one of the most prolific, significant and critical artists of the moment, perhaps not by the market value of her pieces but by her artistic integrity and relevance to vanguard aesthetics of the contemporary art world.¹⁸

Her success, however, has coincided with the escalating drug and gang-war confrontations and the accompanying death toll occurring on the border between Mexico and the United States. These events have allowed Margolles to

¹⁶ For more information about SEMEFO see Cuauhtemoc Medina, *Semefo* (Madrid: Turner, 1989) and Cuauhtemoc Medina, "Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO and Beyond," *Parachute*, 104 (2001), 32.

¹⁷ "Art Facts," artifacts.net, February 13, 2012.

¹⁸ For more information on Teresa Margolles' latest work see "MAM - Museo de Arte Moderno (Museum of Modern Art Mexico)," mam.org.mx, May 3, 2012.

transform her necrophilia practices into socio-political commentary. In this manner, her forensic and artistic backgrounds merged into the hybrid practice under which she works today.¹⁹ Most of her works (and what she is most known for) trace back to the morgue, which also serves as her studio, where most of the research, recollection and the contextualization of her pieces happen. By using this space, Margolles works with the available resources provided by the processing of unidentified cadavers, such as water used to clean the bodies, artifacts associated with the criminal scenes where the bodies were found, tools used to examine the bodies during the autopsy, and parts of the corpses themselves, including blood, skin and hair. Once the materials have been gathered, the artist transforms them into sculptures, installations and exhibitions, which she later presents in art institutions, that elaborate on the relationship between crime and violence within modern cities.²⁰ Margolles' conceptual practice thus interrogates Mexico's social and violent crime-issues, as well as introduces them into an international art context.²¹ While Margolles' artistic methods are fully conceptual, they support the idea of violence and death in relation to the Mexican heritage that has characterized its history.²²

¹⁹ Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Materialis Spectrality," *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 18.

²⁰ Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 25.

²¹ Taiyana Pimentel, "Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel," *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 85.

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

The Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennial 2009: A Conceptual Mortuary

Although the political works of Margolles reference specific situations of violence and death in Mexico – involving the death of drug lords, governmental figures and civilians – her pieces often call attention to international political problems, not only through issues surrounding immigration, but also through the subject of death and violence all around the world.

In 2009, curator Cuauhtémoc Medina was invited to organize the Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennial. He opted for a Mexican-based artist who would address issues specific to Mexican society, as opposed to previous years that featured international collaborations and artists living abroad. Previous choices for the biennial had included Gabriel Orozco, who, by being represented by New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, participated in the Biennials of 1993, 2003 and 2005; Carlos Amorales, who showed in 2003 by presenting a piece for the group exhibition *We Are the World* for the Dutch Pavilion; and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a Canadian-Mexican artist, who was chosen to represent Mexico in 2007. The list of artists also includes Leonora Carrington (1986) and Rufino Tamayo (1950) among others; nonetheless Mexico was represented through collaborations with other countries and as special guests' appearances. Teresa Margolles thus became the first resident artist ever to represent Mexico in an individual national pavilion at the Venice Biennial.

Medina chose Margolles as the most appropriate artist because she dealt with the major issues affecting the country over the past decade.²³ Medina explains: “I thought this could only be valid if it translated into sending something that wasn’t just for show, but rather, would transmit the sense of conflict and friction that has been a part of local artists’ activities on the global circuit, that is why I decided to work with Teresa Margolles.”²⁴ The title for the exhibition – *What Else Could We Talk About?* – referenced a popular criticism of the public discourse on drugs death and violence of Mexico. That is, it is an ironic conversation starter that points out the all-too-evident political problems that needed to be addressed.

Mexico is a country that was integrated into the Venice Biennial only a few times in the last quarter century. Because of the lack of space, it was featured within other pavilions. To give a general idea of how the Biennial is comprised let me present some basic information: A biennial is a space for dialogue and exchange of artistic and cultural practices. The exhibitions within a biennial allow for major artists, curators, designers and architects to display contemporary works. Biennials happen every two years, and can be both national and international, as they expand their localities (local characteristics)²⁵ within a global sense in order to consolidate an international art economy.²⁶

²³ Medina, “Materialis Spectrality,” 29.

²⁴ Pimentel, “Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles,” 83.

²⁵ Hou Hanru, “Towards A New Locality: Biennials and ‘Global Art,’” *Manifesta Decade*, ed. B. Valderlinden and E. Filipovic (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 57.

²⁶ Ivo Mesquita, “Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials,” *Beyond the Box*, Ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 63.

Given that the concept of locality is incorporated into the biennial, biennials are designed to function as a meeting space viewed from a global context by setting an international ground for the participants.²⁷ There are hundreds of biennials all across the world; nonetheless, the most important one is the Venice Biennial.²⁸ Created in 1895 as an economic strategy for the reunification of Italy that occurred in 1861, this biennial was the first biennial and has since set the standard thereafter. It was placed in the city of Venice due to its prominence as a tourist destination, given its compelling architecture and cityscape.²⁹ Today Venice not only hosts a biennial on art, it is also the site of other important festivals, such as the Venice Film Festival, and the Architecture Biennial.³⁰

With a total of seventy-seven pavilions, the Venice Biennial is divided today into four different venues. First there is the *Giardini*, a garden that locates twenty-nine permanent National Pavilions that belong to the oldest participant countries. These include the United States, Spain, Germany, U.K., and Switzerland, among others. The second venue is the *Central Pavilion*, residing within the *Giardini*; it is the space where educational activities, individual projects and general information are located. The third one is the *Arsenale*, which is a military warehouse in the middle of the city. It presents the works of other countries later added to this massive event. Last but not least are the temporary

²⁷ Hanru, "Towards A New Locality," 57.

²⁸ Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution," *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 44.

²⁹ Mesquita, "Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials," 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

off-site international pavilions, which are spread around different *palazzos* and *piazzas* throughout Venice.³¹

Margolles' installation, *What Else Could We Talk About?* was presented in an off-site international pavilion. It consisted of nine conceptual pieces presented in the interior of a sixteenth-century Venetian palace called Palazzo Rota-Ivancich, located in the central streets of Venice near Piazza San Marcos, and one intervention piece located on the exterior of the American Pavilion that is located in the center of the Giardini venue. The pieces within the pavilion filled every space of the palazzo. The first piece presented in the exhibition was *What Else Could We Talk About? Cleaning* (2009) (Figure 1), a performance in which Mexican volunteers mopped the floors of the palazzo, every day at exactly 4:00 pm, during the entire six months of the biennial.³² The significance of the piece became noteworthy when it was announced that the water used to mop the floors was mixed with blood and the remains of the dead from different crime scenes back in Mexico.³³

In this manner, not only did the palazzo gain an unpleasant and uncanny ambiance, but also a singular odor, which was enhanced by the warmth of the Venetian summer. The process of this piece relied on the use of a rag with which Margolles first cleaned the blood off the streets and bodies in Mexico, which was

³¹ For more information on biennials and the Venice Biennial in particular, see Jordine Seijdel, *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2009), Sarah Thornton, *Siete Dias en el Mundo del Arte*, trans. Laura Wittner (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2009), and Elena Filipovic, Van Hal Marieke and Solveig Obstevo, eds., *The Biennial Reader* (Norway: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

³² Pimentel, "Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles," 90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

dried, and later re-moistened to be used to mop the floors in Venice.³⁴ Margolles wanted to enhance the general conditions of fatality and violence occurring on the streets of Mexico, as she explains: “mopping up [the] victim’s bodies [...] I don’t care if we’re mopping with the good guys or the bad guys. I’m merely bearing witness to a retelling of the facts: thousands of dead, and hundreds of children killed in the crossfire.”³⁵ Here she reanimates the individual who washes the bodies and cleans the streets after more than six thousand people have been murdered in one year on the streets of Mexico.³⁶

The second piece, *What Else Could We Talk About? Flag* (2009) (Figure 2), consisted of a single blood-stained fabric-sheet originally used to cover a cadaver at a crime scene. The fabric sheet was placed onto a pole, transforming it into a flag. The flag was placed on the exterior of a window of the second floor of the palazzo over a canal, exposing it to physical changes and transformations and deterioration that flags regularly suffer because of weather conditions. Because of its position, the piece represented Mexico’s national identity, and symbolized the political situation under which the Country was/is going through.³⁷ For the Venice Biennial, pavilions are instructed to present their national flag on their exteriors, in order to identify the country. In my opinion this piece was extremely powerful given by the fact that blood and murder, in effect, became the emblems for the Mexican state.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

What Else Could We Talk About? Narcomessages (2009) (Figure 3) was an in-situ work-in-progress in which several blood-covered sheets, similar to the one used in *Flag*, were embroidered by a handful of volunteers. The volunteers spent the entire time of the biennial sewing different phrases onto the sheets with threads of gold. These phrases were taken from drug-related-messages left at the crime scenes, such as:

SEE, HEAR AND SILENCE
UNTIL ALL YOUR CHILDREN FALL
THUS FINISH THE RATS
SO THAT THEY LEARN TO RESPECT

Once the messages were finalized, the volunteers placed the sheets on the walls throughout the interior of the pavilion (Figure 4).³⁸ The aim of this piece was to imitate the magnificent murals that most likely existed inside the palazzo during its original inhabitation by Venetian aristocracy. In a way, *Narcomessages* created a contradictory juxtaposition between the luxury of what once was a sixteenth-century Venetian palace and Mexico's twenty-first-century conditions.

The exhibition also incorporated pieces from an earlier series entitled *Account Settling* (2007), which had been originally exhibited at the Museo Experimental el Eco in Mexico, and at Galería Salvador Diaz in Madrid.³⁹ The series consisted of twenty-one different jewelry pieces made out of shattered glass from different violent crime scenes in northern Mexico. They were put together with gold by a jeweler for the ultimate creation of earrings, rings, necklaces, and

³⁸ Medina, "Materialis Spectrality," 48.

³⁹ Pimentel, "Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles," 96.

bracelets.⁴⁰ These items were not only luxurious but they recreated the fashion and symbolic characteristics of a Mexican drug lord's accessories.⁴¹ These items meant to resonate with the idea of "greed, [and] desire representation."⁴² As drug lords become desensitized by the killings around them, their attention focused on their own economic well-being and satisfaction.

For the Venice Biennial, Margolles intervened with one of these jewelry pieces. She relocated it inside a specially-installed safe built inside the palazzo, transforming this shattered-glass bit of jewelry into an artistic installation.⁴³ Margolles named this piece *What Else Could We Talk About? Score-Settling* (2009) (Figure 5). Given that the notion of luxury was crucial to the original construction of the palazzo, the significance of this installation became evident as the artist gave a functional value to the original and revived a forgotten architectural feature.

The fourth piece in the exhibition was *What Else Could We Talk About? Table* (2009) (Figure 6), a simple concrete furniture piece made to accommodate one or two people. Margolles created it by combining different fluids such as dirt, concrete and the blood found at an execution site back in Mexico.⁴⁴ This furniture work served as an interactive piece with which the visitors could freely use. The interesting detail of this piece involves its heaviness and its bold shape, which

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ For more information on *Score Settling*, see "Teresa Margolles: 21 Scores Settled / Malverde's Jewelry," *artpulse* magazine.com, <http://artpulsemagazine.com/teresa-margolles-21-scores-settled-malverdes-jewelry>, accessed May 3, 2012.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Medina, "Materialis Spectrality," 34.

seemed to be part of the original palazzo. Once the origins of the materials in the structure were revealed to visitors, mixed feelings of loathing and aversion were generated. This piece resonated against the high level of luxury, comfort and extravagance of the original palazzo.

For the fifth piece, *What Else Could We Talk About? Sounds of Death* (2009) (Figure 7), Margolles created an audio loop, which was recorded during the collection of bodies at various execution sites.⁴⁵ This audio piece was presented in the back stairwell originally used by servants, rather than the more ornate one used by the aristocrats who owned and resided at the palazzo. This piece was constantly active, reminding the audience of how dangerous the streets of Mexico actually are. Audio pieces are relatively rare at the Biennial, and can often register a greater impact because of their unexpectedness. In contrast to the carless and hence quiet streets of Venice, the piece created an unpleasant echo and theatrical atmosphere because of the narrow and metallic construction of the staircase.

What Else Could We Talk About? Recovered Blood (2009) (Figure 8) was located in the exit hallway. It consisted of a thirty-five foot, mud-impregnated, fabric-sheet displayed alongside a stone wall. The sheet was originally used to cover and carry the bodies of executed persons found in the wetlands of a Mexican desert. After transferring the corpses, Margolles dried up the sheet, transported it to Venice, and restored it with water to recreate the original state in

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

which it was found.⁴⁶ *Recovered Blood* not only shocked visitors with the physicality of the bloody object from a murder scene (similar to *Narcomessages*), it also presented visitors with the visceral experience of blood. In a way, this piece, along with *Cleaning*, evoked the sense of abjection that blood often inculcates.

The last of the pavilion pieces, *What Else Could We Talk About? Card to Cut Cocaine* (2009) (Figure 9), consisted of plastic cards distributed at the exit of the pavilion. While on the one side the cards depicted information about the exhibition and the Biennial, including opening and closing hours and the location of the palazzo, it also read “Card to cut cocaine,” and depicted the image of a corpse found in the desert after a drug-related crime. The artistic concept of this piece was extremely powerful: it addressed the contradiction between the drug-related social problem through a repulsive image, and the purpose of the item itself that promoted the use of cocaine – the same cocaine that was the presumed reason for the murder of the individual.⁴⁷ Cuauhtémoc Medina points out the logic of Margolles’ practice: “I believe there’s a level where these operations are ‘homeopathic’, in a sense of homeopathic that at certain times [...] intervene in a social conflict using the same materials as the conflict.”⁴⁸ The cards were given away to anyone who visited the exhibition; today they serve as a commemoration of the show.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁷ Pimentel, “Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles,” 97.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In the above works, Margolles invited visitors to experience every space within the palazzo. Separate from the Mexican off-site pavilion yet equally strong as the previous pieces, was Margolles' *What Else Could We Talk About? Embassy* (2009) (Figure 10), an intervention situated at the American pavilion located in the main area of the Biennial Giardini. The intervention consisted on three blood-stained fabric sheets, placed on the pavilion's exterior, covering its front doors and windows. The piece took place before the Biennial began, and it now consists as a photographic edition. The intervention contemplated the link between the deaths in Mexico and the drug use in the United States. Mexico's violent northern border problem is thus integrally connected to the United States.⁴⁹ In this matter, the issue of nationalism and globalization come into play as a main subject matter of the piece.⁵⁰

Despite the conceptual success of *What Else Could We Talk About?*, turmoil ensued because of three major issues: the first problem was characterized by the aversion and abjection created by the use of blood. The second reflected the potential chaos and disarray that existed between a national (Mexican) perspective within the biennial's international grounds. And the third manifested because of the contrast between different characterizations of luxury and wealth within the exhibition. I will address each of the issues in the three sections below.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁰ For other essays and more information regarding the exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?* see Elmer Mendoza, "Every Time I See A Map Of Mexico I Feel Like Painting It Black," in Cuauhtémoc Medina, ed., *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 114-129, and Antonio Escotado, "The Pharmacological Crusade: Twenty Years Later," In Cuauhtémoc Medina Ed. *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, S.A de C.V, 2009), 114-129.

The Subject of Death and Violence: Mexicans Killed... in Venice

Abject art is characterized by the notions of disagreeable substances and materials and has been significant to the art world since the early 1900s. Art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss explains in her essay “Inform without Conclusion,” abjection is a term often used throughout Bataille’s works. She explains: “Bataille was devising still another model of social cohesion under the rubric ‘Attraction and Repulsion’.”⁵¹ However, the most influential theorist on the abject is French literary theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In *Powers of Horror*, she described abjection as a negotiation between the self and slimy substances, yielding bodily aversion to things such as blood, excreta, and mucous membranes.⁵² Kristeva explains, “The abject is not an object [...] nor is it an object [...] The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to.”⁵³ She continues, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection [...] [The abject] is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object [...] Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady.”⁵⁴ In this manner, Margolles’ pieces speak directly about the abjectness of death through the remains of corpses.

⁵¹ Rosalind Krauss, “Inform Without Conclusion,” *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, Ed. Soya Kocur, & Simon Leung (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 396.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 397-398.

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

My first research angle thus focuses on visitors' response to *What Else Could We Talk About?* Even though the exhibition received mostly positive responses, Margolles' decision to focus on the physical presentation of abject and disgust through the use of blood and "anti-hygienic" materials generated negative comments and accusations. *What Else Could We Talk About?* was criticized by many, including students, professors, journalists and art critics. These negative reviews included Syracuse University professor Luis Castañeda, who questioned Margolles' "commitment to confronting systemic violence through aesthetics might have a political efficacy beyond the boundaries of art discourse"⁵⁵ or *Frieze* Associate Editor Christy Lange who accused the artist of faking the legitimization of *Cleaning*. She elaborates:

My award for most underwhelming off-site pavilion would go to Teresa Margolles' Mexican Pavilion [...] My major problem with the work is this: if any of the rules are bent over the course of the six-month exhibition – the blood not real or the buckets filled with ordinary tap water, then the work loses its efficacy and authenticity [...] any deviation cheats the audience and makes the whole work disingenuous.⁵⁶

Criticisms went as far as referring to Margolles as a person who "instead of being talented [was] sensationalist," according Mexican critic Avelina Léspér.⁵⁷

My argument here relies on the idea that as abhorrent as this exhibition may have been, the same disgust and abjection was also the reason why it was extremely powerful. I want to argue first that the exhibition represents a sacred

⁵⁵ "CLACS: Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University," clacs.as.nyu.edu, April 10th, 2012.

⁵⁶ "Frieze Blog," blog.frieze.com, April 10th, 2012.

⁵⁷ "Avelina Léspér Blog," avelinalesper.com, April 10th, 2012.

space that needs to be respected as such; and secondly, that it is necessary to explicate the subject of death in order to understand how and why the exhibition was so appalling and yet so compelling.

To fully comprehend Margolles' use of death, it is important to trace its past in Mexican culture. Death is a complicated subject, mainly due to the variety of preconceptions provided by different cultural backgrounds. In many cultures, death is the highest point of spirituality, in others it is the greatest fear. In Western culture, however, even though death is often associated with violence, it is also associated with the sacred. More importantly in Mexico, death often recalls a sense of patriotism, pride and nationalism given its relevance to the country's history, as previously discussed. Mexican culture has embraced *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead), as it represents a pre-Columbian celebratory anniversary which praises and venerates the dead. In it Mexican writer poet and diplomat Octavio Paz explains that "death is a mirror which reflects the vain gesticulations of the living [...] death defines life."⁵⁸ He continues: "the opposition between life and death was not so absolute to the ancient Mexicans as it is to us [today]."⁵⁹ In this matter, some Mexicans celebrate death as a celebratory living process. Unavoidably, and nonetheless, because of Mexico's conquest,⁶⁰ death is also associated with Catholicism, which today presents the most practiced religion in the country.

⁵⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

As part of Mexico's colonial heritage, religious burials have been the main form of interment. From this point of view, burials exist for two reasons. The first was to save the dead corpse from animals and other creatures attracted by putrefaction.⁶¹ The second was to venerate and pay respect to those who were once loved. Aside from cremating the corpses, today the burial tradition prevails. It follows, then, that if a buried corpse is respected, cherished and valued, whether from religious reasons or personal ones, then Margolles' exhibition – filled with the residue of unidentified corpses – worked in some degree as a burial site, where the remains of the deceased remain. If “the conventional burial is the sign of a taboo concerning death,”⁶² then one could say that the palazzo itself served as a Mexican burial site where death prompted taboos from the visitors.

George Bataille describes his theory of death as an attempt to understand the connection between the themes of taboo, transgression, and human nature. Rather than ignoring the natural characteristics of such themes, Bataille lectures on the importance of their acknowledgement in order to fully understand what is often ignored and dismissed in regards to human needs and secret desires. He habitually relates death to eroticism, as the sexual attraction to the subject. In this paper I use Bataille to address eroticism as the blunt attraction and desire societies have in regard to death. He refers to three types of attraction between the death and eroticism: religious, emotional and physical. His aim was to show that through these three types of attraction, one could accept and understand death and

⁶¹ Bataille, *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality*, 46.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

eroticism as normal and natural, and thus learn to substitute the isolated separation of being with a sentiment of profound union. Bataille understands death and eroticism as the hub of human experience ultimately yields contentment.⁶³

My second argument focuses then on the idea that visitors' reactions in relation to the abject images, odors and sensations of the installation were merely habitual. It would have been beneficial for visitors to approach the exhibition with an open perspective –rather than the one that Western culture socially conditions – so that their original standpoint reflected their personal views of Mexico along with their own issues of trauma rather than having community influenced narrative of the country determining what is right and what is wrong. To elaborate on this argument I want to focus on Bataille's writings about death. Bataille's theory suggests that the domain of desire exists within the domain of aversion, whether it is manifested through curiosity or not. As a result of this merging a natural breach develops, in which one confronts societal regulations considered to be wrong or immoral, which is what Bataille refers to as the domain of violation or taboo.⁶⁴ If we consider this to be accurate, then it is evident that part of visitors' fear relate directly to a kind of curiosity to understand the subject. In this manner Bataille explains that “the most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being.”⁶⁵ In other words, death becomes critical to a living being because of the certainty that

⁶³ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

it will eventually happen, and yet causes uncertainty because of the lack of knowledge about the aftermath. This is why it is irrelevant to focus on the outcome of the corpses. Rather, I want to suggest that the importance of this subject matter occurs within the spectrum of the living beings that experience a death-related event, in this case Margolles' exhibition.

In this context, when someone dies, the corpse is no longer identified as a being, rather is classified as "nothing at all."⁶⁶ For the survivors, fear fixates on the decaying corpse itself; the corpse turns out to be less than nothing yet reaches another level in which it turns out to be worse than nothing, and thus gives rise to disgust. Nonetheless, the chances of interacting with a corpse are minimal in today's society. Hence the fears are mostly symbolic.⁶⁷

In contrast, Margolles' exhibition provided a close proximity between corpses and visitors. *Card to Cut Cocaine*, *Table*, *Recovered Blood* and *Cleaning* demanded or encouraged interaction with its residue, and thus enhanced the feelings of repulsion by visitors. According to Bataille, "the desire of touching the dead was doubtless no greater in former times than it is today [...] the taboo on murder is a special aspect of the universal taboo on violence."⁶⁸ From this perspective, Margolles' pieces not only represented the abject but the taboo of violent crimes. In a popular event such as the Biennial, where thousands of

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

people's first instinct was to touch and break the law of the museum comportment, this happened with reservation and hesitation. Nonetheless, it still happened.

In this context, *Card to Cut Cocaine*, *Table* and *Recovered Blood* incited a secret desire within the domain of aversion, or taboo, and the symbolic fear of nothingness, through the use of blood and abject images. *Cleaning*, on the other hand, enhanced another quality of Bataille's theory. In his writing he suggests that the sense of disgust and abjection belongs to a learning process and that when the connection between absence and the smell of putrefaction are present, there is an absence which Bataille calls "the void of death," or "the void of horror."⁶⁹ In this way, Bataille makes an excellent point when recalling the nature of acceptance and rejection. For *Cleaning*, the void of horror is infused into every wall, every corridor, and every corner of the palazzo. The smell thus surpasses the idea of blood. Visitors cannot help but to perceive the sense of putrefaction, of blood and repulsion.

Moreover, Bataille argues that the effect of disgust and aversion that the void of death has on the viewers is socially conditioned. He argues how it is through a learning process that society teaches individuals to be attracted to certain stereotypes and disgusted by others:

'We are born between feces and urine' [yet when we are older] We imagine that is the stink of excrement that makes us feel sick. But would it stink if we had not thought it was disgusting in the first place? We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to pass on to our children the aversions that make us what we are, which makes us human beings to

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

begin with. Our children do not spontaneously have our reactions. They may not like a certain food and they may refuse it, but we have to teach them by pantomime or failing that, by violence, that curious aberration called disgust, powerful enough to make us feel faint, a contagion passed down to us from the earliest men through countless generations of scolded children [...] the realm of disgust and nausea is broadly the result of these teachings.⁷⁰

If death is seen as an abhorrent subject matter similar to feces, then death resembles a natural living process and we ought to believe that people in essence only fear the unknown because of a tradition passed on by previous generations. In this sense, the “horror and fear” presented through smell are ultimately conditioned and the horror of the corpse becomes a symbol of violence, whether it represents a contagion, a traumatic reminiscence, or a threat about one’s future.⁷¹ In addition, this subject matter only represents a danger for those left behind.⁷²

Margolles’ fascination with death and the abject also comes from a place of concern and preoccupation regarding the current socio-political situation in Mexico. To some degree, her job in the morgue has desensitized her. It has also pushed her artistic performance to extremes. *What Else Could We Talk About?* not only provided an impressive installation display, it also offered a confrontational subject in order to effectively make visitors comprehend the gravity of the problem in Mexico. The relevance of the four “abject” pieces directly relates to Margolles herself, almost as much as any other Mexican citizen. The cultural and catastrophic formation of Mexico today has reached a point in which death and

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 46.

violence are considered banal. This is why as the exhibition progressed, Margolles' primary goals were to resensitize not only individuals in Mexican society, but also everyone who witnessed the exhibition, in order to catalyze a political response.

Death and Violence in the Venice Biennial: A Bloody Blow to the Façade

For this second section, I focus on Gerardo Mosquera's book *Beyond the Fantastic*. Here, Mosquera offers a selection of theoretical discourses in the visual arts within Latin America encompassing political, socio-economical, and historical issues brought forward in the late 1990s.⁷³ In the section, "Out of The Mainstream," Mosquera gathered a handful of texts regarding the cultural adversities under which Latin America has suffered in its shift to political independence, which has had implications for the international circulation of Latin American art.⁷⁴ Margolles' pieces *Flag* and *Embassy* exemplify Mexico's need to resolve national and global issues that have led to its current social, economic and political difficulties.

Two articles are germane to this section. The first one is "Trails for the Noble Savage," written by Colombian independent curator and critic Carolina Ponce de Leon.⁷⁵ In this article, Ponce de Leon points out the critical processes under which Latin American cultures go through in order to be recognized, as she tries to locate Latin American art outside the basic situation of class, gender and

⁷³ Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

race. She focuses on the shift between Latin American art and multiculturalism that have occurred in the last decades characterized by the “tribalization” of art in general and political art in particular.⁷⁶ In the second article, curator and critic Mari Carmen Ramirez, who regularly publishes on issues of identity, politics and the power of Latin American representation, explores the relationship and struggle of Latin American communities and artistic representations within international mainstream contexts, such as the United States.⁷⁷ *Flag* and *Embassy* correspond aesthetically to Mexico’s social and violent crime issues.⁷⁸ While Margolles’ artistic practice is conceptual, visceral and phenomenological, it is also political, especially in these works where violence becomes Mexico’s national emblem and a direct relationship is set up to other countries, such as the United States.⁷⁹

One of Mexico’s main and current problems is presented by the drug-related violence taking place along the border with the United States. The core of this crisis remains the voracious American demand for drugs. As a result, in 2008-2009 President Felipe Calderon and the Mexican government launched a political reform initiative, in which the military forces’ main objective was to reduce and control drug-related crimes such as execution killings, bloody wars between gangs, kidnappings, and random shootings. Reuters reports that “About 50,000 people have been killed in Mexico in the past five years since President Felipe Calderon

⁷⁶ Carolina Ponce de Leon, “Random Trails for the Noble Savage.” In Gerardo Mosquera ed. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 225.

⁷⁷ Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic*, 341.

⁷⁸ Pimentel, “Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles,” 85.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

launched an offensive against drug gangs.”⁸⁰ This situation reflects Mosquera’s similar take on criminal violence, when he states in the introduction of *Beyond the Fantastic* that “liberation led to dictatorship, torture, ‘disappearances,’ [and eventually] criminal violence.”⁸¹ The deaths in this country then, have only increased, because of two factors: firstly through the wars between Mexican soldiers and drug-cartels, secondly through the deaths of the thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire.

On the one hand, Mexico’s problems arise because of an internal war between the government, drug lords and gangs. On the other, its problems are more global, since the issues are caused by the troubling relationship between Mexico and the United States. First I will focus on Margolles’ *Flag* as it represents Mexico’s internal problems, as well as portraying an alienated nation within the realm of the Biennial.

One of the main difficulties for Mexican artists has been to escape the constraining image of “the other” and to be recognized as successful internationally on their own terms. Carolina Ponce de Leon explains that “‘tribalization’ and political correctness are two sides of the same coin and constitute a challenge for any artist or curator bound to face the following dilemma: how to set himself or herself free from the expectations of ‘otherness’ placed upon them [...] and on the other hand how to make the specific difference

⁸⁰ “Reuters American Online News Magazine,” reuters.com, February 25, 2012.

⁸¹ Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic*, 11.

between the type of art he or she does or shows and [Eurocentrism].”⁸² Even though Ponce de Leon focuses on the modern and the postmodern eras, otherness is an issue that is still present today, especially within the biennial circuit. In this context, I think that by creating *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Margolles exemplified a struggling Latin American country trying to fit into the international political and artistic scene.

To have a individual pavilion representing Mexico at the Venice Biennial for the first time was extremely significant, not only due to its critical relevance to the art world, but also because of the prominence given to Margolles’ political work in an international context. With this exhibition, the Venice Biennial created the possibility for Mexico to rise above geopolitical stigmas that were mostly determined by its neighbor – the United States.⁸³ Positioning the Mexican pavilion beyond of the Giardini and the Arsenale replicated Mexico’s outsider status in the international scene. While internationally renowned Mexican artists have existed for decades, 2009 became the year in which they became recognized in regard to the Biennial. This experience allowed for a whole new level of communication, in which Mexico’s national voice became heard and acknowledged. As Ponce de Leon asserts, “Contemporary art’s new system of representation and new politics of difference have combined in order to create access to more effective levels of communication that are close to society at

⁸² Ponce de Leon, *Random Trails for the Noble Savage*, 225.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 227.

large.”⁸⁴ In this regard, through Margolles’ works, Mexico’s problems became integral to the broader global spectrum of the biennial.

Each pavilion at the Venice Biennial represents a different nation, and every one (with the exception of those presented in the Arsenale) bears their national flag on the façade of its building. By replacing Mexico’s flag with a bloody sheet, Margolles denounced Mexico’s bloody circumstances, literally. Mexico’s national flag consists of three vertical stripes (green, white and red). In addition, located in the center of the flag is an image of an eagle standing on a *nopal* (prickly pear) eating a snake. While the tricolor stripes represent Mexico’s sovereignty gained from the independence war of 1810, the emblem portraying the eagle represents the image of what the Aztecs witnessed when they reached the lake of Tenochtitlan – where Mexico City is located today – before settling.⁸⁵ *Flag*, not only altered the national emblem of the eagle and folkloric colors into a bloody insignia, but with it, the artist changed the pavilion’s national façade.⁸⁶ Ponce de Leon explains, “Latin American art is faced with creating a new cultural topography and with diversifying the preconceived parameters [...] within which is placed.”⁸⁷ In this context, the Mexican Pavilion became a zone of convergence for conceptual, critical and aesthetic commentary. In *Flag*, death became the

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 228.

⁸⁵ For more information on the historical events on the flag of Mexico, see Susan Toby Evans, *Ancient Mexico & Central America: Archeology and Culture History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 448.

⁸⁶ Pimentel, “Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles,” 96.

⁸⁷ Ponce de Leon, *Random Trails for the Noble Savage*, 226.

primary subject of Mexico's national identity's façade,⁸⁸ its national symbol, and a totem with a connection with its ancestral past, yet one that also instantiates the country's current problems.⁸⁹ The dead of history were now speaking on behalf of Mexico's national identity.

If *Flag* represented Mexico's internal political situation, the intervention of *Embassy*, in which the U.S. is specifically targeted, directed attention to Mexico's lack of recognition from its powerful neighbor and by extension, the rest of the world. Latin American art has struggled to be accepted on the international scene since the nineteenth century. One of the major reasons for this struggle is the proximity of Latin American countries to the United States, and the subordinated status accorded to Latin American countries during the era of colonialism. In this context Ramirez explains:

The reason why exhibitions are such contested vehicles for the definition and validation of Latin American art in the USA are deeply embedded in the neo-colonial legacy that has shaped US/Latin American relations since the nineteenth century [...] despite the North American fascination with the exoticism of peoples south of the borders, US policies towards them have been characterized by attempts to undermine their sovereignty through outright intervention, exploitation of resources financial manipulation and racial discrimination.⁹⁰

Until recently, North America has been the primary force in shaping Mexico's national, cultural, political and artistic identity. Which is why I want to suggest

⁸⁸ Pimentel, "Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles," 99.

⁸⁹ Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 24.

⁹⁰ Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Beyond 'the Fantastic,' Framing Identity in US Exhibitions of Latin American Art." In Gerardo Mosquera ed. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 229.

that through the intervention of *Embassy*, Margolles indicated Mexico's restructuring regarding its global relationship within North America.

In an attempt to break down the stigma of exoticism and colonial stigmas within Latin American art, Latin American artists and curators have tried, throughout the last century, both to incorporate formal European and American practices within their own, and to present their works in international contexts such as the United States. These artists included Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros who adapted the technical forms of Cubism and Futurism into their works.⁹¹ Several decades later, exhibitions perpetuated the same aim. Ramirez explains how exhibitions such as “*Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1987 [...] and *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Artists and Sculptors*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1988,”⁹² just to name a few, focused on the development of the modern art tradition, the mainstream of Latin American art and formal trials of the avant-garde. In contrast to these exhibitions, Margolles circumvented the emphasis on formalism and explored the socio-political conditions of Mexico in the international arena. Rather than being subsidiary, she positioned Mexico as an innovative centre for vanguard art in the context of a globalizing art world.

Globalism emerged in the early 1970s, as the process by which societies and cultures became increasing by integrated through trade, political and global

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹² *Ibid.*

networks.⁹³ Art curator and critic Hou Hanru explains that “[g]lobalization is a necessary first step in the process of expanding the global economy and its related effects.”⁹⁴ By expanding different national artistic practices and art-related events throughout the world, more countries have the opportunity to develop their internal economy and to gain artistic recognition. If we consider the biennial as a meeting-international space, and any visitor of *What Else Could We Talk About?* as an “outsider,” then we have to contemplate the visitor as a “conceptual exile.” This exile, according to curator and critic Simon Sheikh, becomes part of “an exodus from the current state of affairs.”⁹⁵ Given that the Venice Biennial offers a meeting ground for every nationality, then every visitor becomes a foreigner when attending the exhibition.

In this respect, *Embassy* was incorporated into a global context within the biennial spectrum.⁹⁶ Biennials are designed to function as meeting spaces, when viewed from a global context, thus setting a common, equalized ground for participants. According to Hanru, biennials are often seen as “‘non-home spaces’ [that are] constantly changing and evolving in-between space.”⁹⁷ An international biennial becomes the ground designed for the dialogue and exchange of ideas, economy and politics; needless to say, the world of economy and politics are incorporated into this arena.

⁹³ John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2005), 3.

⁹⁴ Hanru, “Towards A New Locality,” 58.

⁹⁵ Simon Sheikh, “Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility: Questions for the Biennial,” *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times*, ed. Jordine Seijdel (Rotterdam: NAI, 2009), 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

Geographically speaking, the translocation of Margolles' pieces within the Biennial leads to an international circuit – between Mexico and the United States – with two interpretations: the first one represents the artistic evolution of Mexico within the ground of the biennial, and the second interpretation is characterized by the metaphorical reading from the angle of global politics.

An important factor to note is the “illegality” of the creation of *Embassy*. Even though the piece exists now as a documentary image, the intervention occurred when the pavilions were closed and before the Biennial began. This allowed Margolles to appropriate the exterior of the American pavilion without permission. This action resembles the circumstances under which thousands of Mexicans undergo to reach the United States, secretly, before anyone notices. In this respect the growth of Mexico's national identity and the aspirations of its independence became increasingly relevant in the evolution Western culture. Art critic Gerardo Mosquera explains: “the increased migratory movement, along with the consolidation of Latin American communities in the United State, and of Latin Americans from one country in another, have all contributed to this ‘liberation of identity.’”⁹⁸ And it is where the border-cultural problem begins.

One may ask, what is the need to move from one's own nation, such as Mexico, where rich cultural values infuse one's personal identity, to another country, such as the United States, where one becomes a minority, judged and attacked? For me, the answer is presented in a rational process that divides into

⁹⁸ Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 13.

three stages. The first stage is marked by *the existence and differences between two social classes* within Mexico: the rich and the poor. While a small percent of the Mexican population (the rich) are privileged with an income that allows them to enjoy a standard of living comparable to first-world privileged classes; other much larger percent of the population ranges from “the poor” living with minimum wages, to the “very poor” lacking all opportunity to overcome their situation and develop a full life as individuals.

This leads to the second stage, with the *growth of capitalism in Mexico*, in which the rich gain control of national and multinational corporations creating monopolies where lower classes are forced to work under conditions fully outside their control, sometimes leaving them in a survival mode. The third stage, is characterized by a growing conscience in all levels of society of *the need of better education, “better” job opportunities and a “better” life*; in this stage the very poor become aware of the option, and sometimes actually forced both by the economic conditions and the violent situation, to leave their country or even worse work for drug-cartels.

Throughout the years, debates and questions have been raised regarding the juxtaposition of dissimilar cultures within international communities. In this matter, professor of modern languages, literature and Latin American studies at the University of Miami explains that “the pursuit of legitimacy for claims to represent a community adequately, that is, to exercise cultural property rights with

respect to community experiences and resources, is certain to produce tensions.”⁹⁹ Consequently, a large number of North Americans, especially in the border states, argue that Mexicans cross the border in order to steal and take over their jobs, and thus creating a highly negative and discriminative image of them. For this I want to suggest that these allegations are unwarranted, given the fact that Mexicans that cross the border illegally take jobs which are not wanted by the North Americans, most of them related to agricultural practices that demand long hours of considerable physical exertion under the extreme weather conditions, with limited water and food, often underpaid. Other jobs consist of working in kitchens, and cleaning services often for minimum wages – even so, better than Mexican minimum wage. The truth is, however, that these kinds of jobs have made possible the prosperity of not only these workers’ families back in Mexico, but also large American companies. Hence Mexicans support the structural base of these multinational companies.

In my opinion, the creation of *Embassy* sustains the idea of a possible reorganization of internal processes between the United States and Mexico.¹⁰⁰ In this context, and through this piece, Margolles creates the possibility of an interaction and internationalization between the United States and Mexico allowing not only for the interactions between two societies, but also between very different social groups. These interactions, in my opinion, may culminate

⁹⁹ George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 296.

¹⁰⁰ Nestor García Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity.” In Gerardo Mosquera, ed. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 46.

with the recognition and sympathy from one social group to another. In addition, no repercussions ensued for Margolles' transgression. This replicates the null political reaction that the United States regularly affords to the thousands of people being murdered across its border.

Whether *Embassy* was noticed or unnoticed, due to the short period of time in which it was presented, Margolles' presence itself in the Biennial was notorious. Up until 2009, the artistic representation of Mexico in the Biennial had been largely unaccredited, as Ramirez explicates: "Unlike Eastern or Native American indigenous cultures, Latin American culture, by reason of its colonial legacy is inscribed in the western tradition and has always functioned within its parameters."¹⁰¹ For example, Mexican artists who previously represented Mexico at the Venice Biennial were not completely Mexican, or their pieces served to support the presentation of other nations. Ramirez underscores this point when she remarks that Latin American artists are "deprived of a real place in the social structure of the dominant culture, [they] can find a signifying system only in the nostalgic remnants of the collective identity that ties them to their past and their origin."¹⁰² In this respect, Margolles demonstrated that it was possible to accomplish a progressive goal in a generally conservative global environment.

If death, violence and political problems are banal to the rest of the world today, it may be deduced that one of Margolles' objectives was to resensitize not only an American audience but also the rest of the world to horror that occurs in

¹⁰¹ Ramirez, "Beyond 'the fantastic,'" 231.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 239.

the northern Mexico. With *Flag* and *Embassy*, Margolles affected individuals attending the Mexican Pavilion or who witnessed the intervention (or its documentation) at the American pavilion. In the catalogue for *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Margolles explains her motivation: “I never think about provoking a ‘contamination,’ nor do I try to make it so people get contaminated. I want people to get involved.”¹⁰³ This political involvement, informed by Margolles’ cultural background, encouraged and stimulated viewers to get involved within the subject matter and possibly do something about it.

Even though it is impossible to extract the exact numbers of visitors whose perceptions changed, Margolles’ curriculum works as an indicator of both her artistic progress and the validation of her work within the art world since the 2009 biennial. While Margolles’ individual exhibitions include *Teresa Margolles* at Los Angeles Country Museum of Art (LACMA) in Los Angeles, California (2010), *Bancas* at Sala de Arte Publico (SAPS) in Mexico City (2010), and *Frontera* at Museum fur Moderne Und Zeitgenossische Kunst (MUSEION) in Bolzano (2011), her group exhibitions include *What Next for the Body* at Arnolfini in Bristol England (2010), *How to Philosophize with a Hammer* at White Box in New York City (2011) and the 29th Biennial of Graphic Arts of Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana (2011), to name just a few.¹⁰⁴ It is apparent that Margolles international exhibitions have increased significantly in

¹⁰³ Pimentel, “Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles,” 89.

¹⁰⁴ “Art Facts,” artifacts.net, February 13, 2012.

the past three years. Needless to say, *What Else Could We Talk About?* may have been the reason.

Death and Violence: Luxurious Travel and Lodging in a Palazzo

My third theme focuses on the spatial organization of *Narcosettling*, *Account Settling* and *Sound of Death*. The display of these three pieces in the building of the sixteenth-century palazzo presented a simultaneous placement/displacement between violence and the luxury, Mexico and Venice. I will argue, through Nestor Garcia Canclini's writings, however, that these pieces' arrangement provided a metaphoric and perhaps cynical representation of Mexico's underprivileged conditions that are both contrasted and conjoined with Venetian prosperity and affluence. In *What Else Could We Talk About?*, the visual arrangement allowed for metaphoric portrayal and revival of the luxury of the city, the palazzo, and the contemporary art world.

It is impossible to ignore the importance of the placement and the display of these three pieces within a Venetian environment. Since the early sixteenth-century the city of Venice has been characterized by its beauty, wealth and luxury. Lying on a lagoon and divided between three rivers: Brenta, Sile and Piave,¹⁰⁵ the city is a major focal point because of its favorable maritime location, its production of glass artifacts and other commercial merchandise, not to mention

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Shaw-Kennedy, *Venice Rediscovered* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1978), 16.

representing a key center for the visual arts in Europe.¹⁰⁶ With multiple canals and narrow streets, numerous palazzos, churches, fountains, piazzas and intimate architectural landmarks throughout the city, it is a picturesque destination. Venice is divided into eight different quarters: Cannaregio, Santa Croce, San Polo, San Marco, Dorsoduro, Giudecca, Castello and Sant' Elena. Some more than others have become tourist attractions. For example, the most recognized and popular district is San Marco – this main principal square and St. Marks basilica draw millions of tourists every year.

Margolles' exhibition was presented and located in one of the palazzos of this specific quarter. This palazzo is Palazzo Rota Ivancich, constructed by Jacopo Sansovino in the sixteenth century (1486-1570). Even though the palazzo is empty today, it maintains the original architectural structure and still belongs to the Ivancich family.¹⁰⁷

What Else Could We Talk About? integrated the luxurious architectural design of the palazzo into the exhibition. The walls that once contained resplendent murals and paintings were now hung with the bloody fabric sheets of *Narcosettling*; the safe that once served to protect important personal items was now the home for the broken-glass jewelry of *Account Settling*; and the back stairs that once were used by servants and cleaning people were now filled with sounds of the crowds witnessing the collection of corpses and their autopsies in *Sound of Death*. I argue in this section that the placement and displacement of these three

¹⁰⁶ "The Times UK," thetimes.co.uk, February 20th, 2012.

¹⁰⁷ "Holiday Blog from Easyjet," holidayblog.easyjet.com, February 20th, 2012, Web

specific pieces unite Mexico and Venice in more than one way: from the experience of the streets, to the manufacturing of glass, to the recreation of expensive tapestries.

In this regard, my first argument relies on the idea that even though Margolles' conceptual pieces were created with a critical purpose, their installation enhanced their significance. For this exhibition, the artist and curator worked with a space that had been previously chosen by the coordinators of the Biennial; it was only after they arrived in Venice that they designed the exhibition layout, as Medina explains: "It was only in Venice that the modifications were begun."¹⁰⁸ While the curator and the artist wanted to ensure that the building of the pavilion coexisted with the artworks, they decided it was best to keep the nature of the building intact and even to accentuate the rawness of the space. Medina continues: "Teresa made the radical decision to get rid of those structures and carry out the work so as to keep the relationship between artwork and building the most direct it could be."¹⁰⁹ Instead of emphasizing the pieces themselves, Medina decided to focus on the aesthetics of the empty space of the pavilion, considering the space, the pieces and the visitor's experience as a totality.¹¹⁰

A specific architectural plan guided visitors through *What Else Could We Talk About?* In this manner Margolles and Medina intermixed the auras of the

¹⁰⁸ Pimentel, "Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel and Teresa Margolles," 95.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

luxurious venetian Palazzo with the artworks. Critic and philosopher Boris Groys explains that “the author of an art installation is [...] a legislator that gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules which the community has to submit.”¹¹¹ This decision allowed the visitors to enter and experience not only the magnificence and wealth of a historical sixteenth-century Venetian palazzo and the tumultuous environment of contemporary Mexico, but also Margolles’ very own personal atmosphere dictated by her artwork. For Boris Groys “the space of an art installation [...] is the symbolic private property of the artist.”¹¹² From this perspective, the exhibition undermined the autonomy of the modernist viewer and changed it into a turbulent and personal experience.

One of the theorists who emphasizes on the importance of Latin American art in regards to the artistic global scenario is Nestor Garcia Canclini. He is the author of books such as *Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico* and *Hybrid Cultures*, and is currently a researcher and professor at the Metropolitan University of Mexico.¹¹³ In 1990 Canclini wrote *Modernity After Postmodernity*, a text that served as an introduction to his widely read *Hybrid Cultures*. In this text Canclini theorizes upon the general framework of the sociocultural situation of Mexico and the rest of Latin America during Modernism from a postmodern point of view, and the relevancy of postmodern movements to Latin America in

¹¹¹ Boris Groys, “From Medium to Message: The Art Exhibition as Model of a New World Order,” *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times*, ed. Jordine Seijdel (Rotterdam: NAI 2009), 62.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic*, 339.

order to reorganize the subject of tradition between the past and the present.¹¹⁴ Even though Canclini wrote his article more than twenty years ago and focused on the pragmatic of the “modern and postmodern” moments, he emphasized the nature of the relationship and acceptance of Latin American countries within a global context. From this perspective I will suggest that *What Else Could We Talk About?* – created in an era in which social, economic and the political problems define the reputation of Mexico – in fact, serves as a pragmatic example by which bringing death and violence back to former colonizing nations (that form the core of the Biennial today) creates a cogent reciprocal relationship.

I will focus first on *Account Settling*, as the glass presents indisputable similarities to Venetian glass reproduction. On the one hand, the glamorous glass objects created in Venetian islands of Murano and Burano attract millions of purchasers every year. This is one of the city’s main sources of income; the merchandise comprises chandeliers, vases and jewelry sold throughout the city. Margolles’ *Account Settling* portrays the Mexican equivalent – a representation of what Mexican drug lords tend to wear. Ensnared within a vault in the palazzo, Margolles’ jewelry, made from broken glass found at crime scenes, ironically referenced Venetian ornaments once housed in the same place. *What Else Could We Talk About?* addressed both the working-class artisans who create Venetian glass artifacts in factories and the dispirited individuals who were killed in

¹¹⁴ Nestor García Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity.” In Gerardo Mosquera, ed. *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 20.

Mexico and thus essential for the creation Margolles' glass pieces. It also addresses today's narco-Mexican aristocracy's luxurious lifestyle and the historical Venetian aristocracy's wealth. This representation allows for the understanding of the relationships and differences that may exist between two very distinct social classes, and the significant level of discrimination which often culminates in murders.

Secondly, how can this romantic city's structure, which allows for no motor vehicles and features a preternatural quietness, be ignored? *Sound of Death* is significant not only because it presented the noise of despair and anguish from individuals who witnessed the violent crimes and dead bodies on the streets of Mexico, it also presented the sounds of cars and motors passing by the crime scene. By alluding to the sounds that tourists seek to escape, a trenchant critique is offered. The effectiveness of this piece rests not only in being able to identify the events being recorded, but also in the contrast to the luxury of being able to travel to one of the most expensive city of Europe.

Last but not least, *Narcosettling*, the most notorious piece, featured the sheets that covered dead bodies and were placed them onto walls in the palazzo that once held lavish tapestries. The blood of Mexican persons now overtook the glamour and wealth once displayed in the palazzo. The similarities and disparities of these three pieces within the palazzo created an interesting comparison between two different worlds. On the one hand Venice stands as one of the most expensive cities of Europe, a city that radiates artistry, glamour and luxury. On the other

hand, Mexico, through the eyes of Margolles, remains as underdog country, which is currently going through a traumatic period, one in which death and violence prevail.

Mexico's cultural identity, however, has now been fully recognized, for three reasons. First, because an artist with the stature of Margolles has been given the opportunity of portraying Mexico's socio-political situation as it really is today, without hidden messages or restrictions. Secondly because Mexico's cultural identity is enhanced by the opportunity of presenting an artist in a single pavilion in one of the most important and global events in the world. The Venice Biennial allows for the outstanding appreciation and recognition of the best contemporary artists of the world. In this context *What Else Could We Talk About?* resonated with the idea of having Margolles travel back to Europe in order to enhance the importance of Mexico and to call attention to its present problems. In comparison with the postrevolutionary situation of Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, Canclini elaborates:

For many artists [involved] in postrevolutionary change forced a questioning of the divisions created by uneven and dependent developments: cultured art against popular art, culture and work, avant-garde experimentation and social awareness.¹¹⁵

In a way, the artistic social changes of the modern world were reflected in the contemporaneousness of Margolles' exhibition. The evolution of Mexico's artistic world became evident. In addition, as the aesthetics of the palazzo that once

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

contained privileged art, it now contained elements of the contemporary world, and through Margolles' efforts works as a forum for social awareness.

Thirdly, Mexico's cultural identity becomes fully recognized by the fact that Margolles readdresses the past, when wealth was extracted from its lands when it was once governed as a colony. Having in mind that "modernization" refers to a significant cultural change, Canclini explains:

The first phase of Latin America modernism was stimulated by artists and writers returning to their home countries after a time in Europe. It was not so much the direct, transplanted, influence of the European avant-garde that awoke the desire for modernization in Latin American visual arts but rather the questions raised by the Latin Americans themselves as to how to make their international experience relevant to developing societies.¹¹⁶

Metaphorically, Margolles brought back the economic goods that were once taken from Mexico, and thus changed Mexico's identification as a colonized country.

These three pieces best exemplify the artistic alteration and revolution of the socio-economic, socio-political and intra-artistic factors presented in the Biennial.¹¹⁷ The relationship between the symbolic luxuries, the luxury of the city of Venice, the luxury within the physicality of the exhibition, and the luxury of participating in the Venice Biennial contributes to Margolles' violent pieces serving a unique and eminent place in today's art world.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ For a related article on Margolles by Nestor Garcia Canclini, see "Estudios Visuales Online Magazine," estudiosvisuales.net, May 3, 2012.

Conclusion:

What Else Could We Talk About? not only drew from Margolles' cultural formation and her personal concerns, it also provided a perspective onto Mexico's endemic problems, one that linked the past with the present. It seems that if death is so banal in Mexico today, one of Margolles' primary goals was to resensitize its citizens, and in that process to compel social progress, at least within the art world.

What Else Could We Talk About? resensitizes viewers to the presence of death and violence by confronting them with abject materials and reconditioning their initially abhorrent reactions. The first set of pieces, such as *Cleaning*, show how abjectness needs to be confronted, such that the exhibition space becomes a sacred burial place where the appreciation of the death may occur. In the second set of political pieces, *Flag* and *Embassy*, death and violence became the image of a national identity, as well as connecting Mexico's problems to foreign (US) causes. And in regards to the links between death and wealth, Margolles' jewelry pieces allude to the violent processes of colonialism that infuse Venetian (and by extension European) instances of luxury and glamour, in the art world and beyond. Margolles' interest in death and the abject comes from a preoccupation with the socio-political situation of Mexico. Her primary goal to resensitize those living in Mexico also extends to the international audience witnessing *What Else Could We Talk About?*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ For more information on Margolles' artworks and career, see Udo Kittelmann and Klaus Gerner, *Teresa Margolles – Muerte Sin Fin* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004), Heriberto Yopez, Nike Batzner and Patrizia Dander, *Teresa Margolles: 127 Cuerpos* (Dusseldorf: Walther König, 2007), and Alpha Escobedo, Leobardo Alvarado, Rein Wolfs and Teresa Margolles, *Teresa*

The ultimate purpose of this Major Research Paper was to understand, explain and theorize the subject of death and violence through Margolles' exhibition *What Else Could We Talk About?* Overall, the shocking content of this exhibition not only surpassed the conventional forms of pictorial representation, it also evoked and enhanced the multiple issues that Mexico continues to endure. Through nine pieces, six months, and a single exhibition in Venice, Margolles managed to articulate the major problems that confront Mexico today. From my personal perspective, Margolles presented a groundbreaking exhibition in the history of Mexican art. On this global stage of the Venice Biennial, she portrayed the critical conditions that Mexico needs to resolve, demonstrated Mexican artists' stature in the contemporary art world, and established the country as one integrally connected to the international scene.

Illustrations:



Figure 1. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Cleaning*, 2009



Figure 2. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Flag*, 2009



Figure 3. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Narcomessages*, 2009



Figure 4. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Narcomessages*, 2009

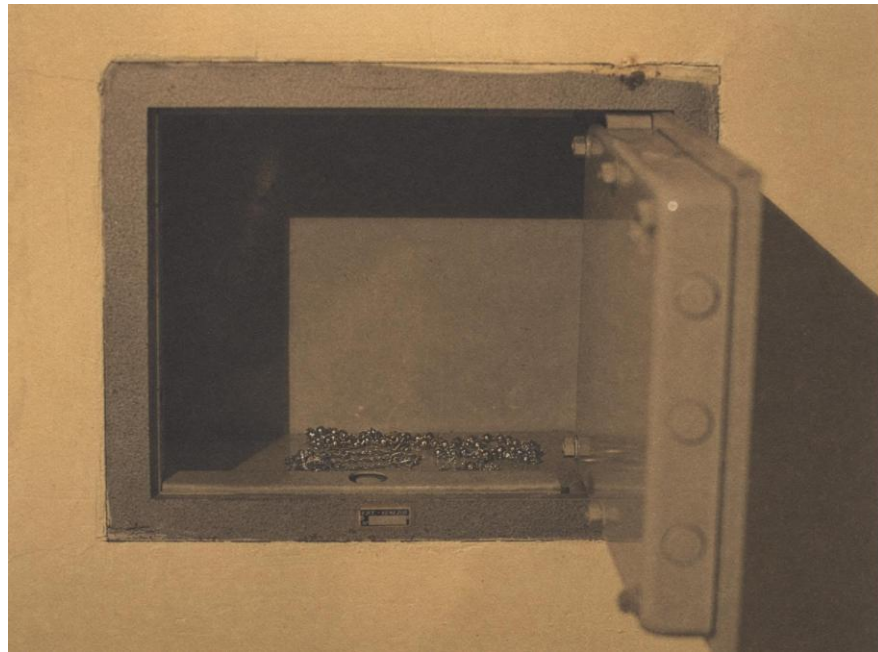


Figure 5. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Score-Settling*, 2009



Figure 6. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Table*, 2009



Figure 7. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Sounds of Death* (2009)



Figure 8. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Recovered Blood*, 2009

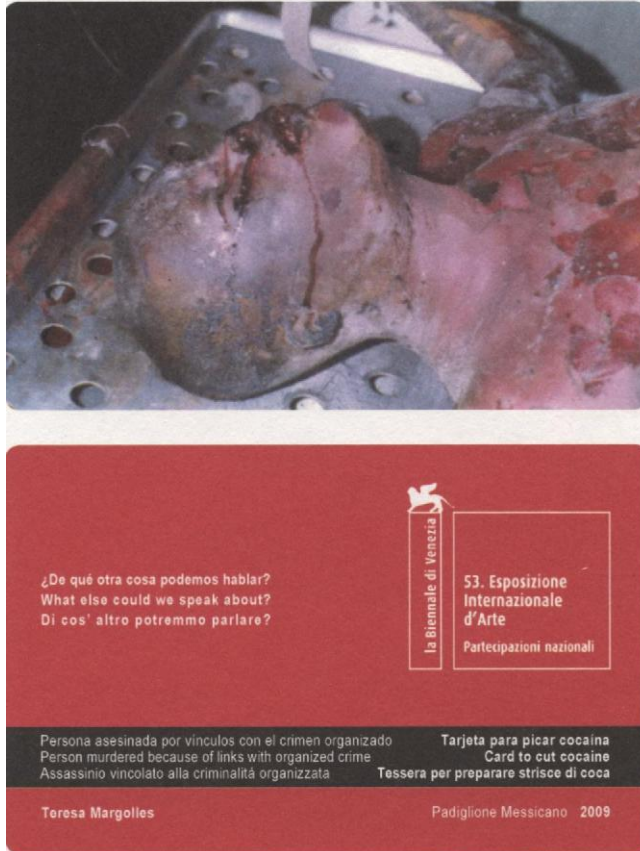


Figure 9. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Card to Cut Cocaine*, 2009



Figure 10. Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About? Embassy*, 2009

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(http://blog.frieze.com/postcards_from_venice_part_6_the_awards/)

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