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Art as Dissent in the Midst of Mexico's Drug War

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Art as Dissent in the Midst of Mexico’s Drug War

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

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I dedicate this thesis to the four of you.

Lastly, I want to express that this thesis was written with the constant presence of my cousin Adriana Morlett, who was murdered in the midst of Mexico’s drug war. Until today, authorities have failed to find those responsible for her death. Adri: we miss you and will never forget you.
When I moved to New York in 2011 to pursue my graduate studies, I saw my hometown, Acapulco, Guerrero, once an almost paradisical Mexican seaside resort, suddenly turned into a frightening landscape in which disfigured bodies were found daily on the streets. By then, Acapulco, a city on the Pacific coast, had become a major port for the distribution of cocaine to its principal market: the United States. One year later, according to The Citizen Council for Security, Justice and Peace, Acapulco became the second most violent city in the world, with an alarming murder rate of 143 persons for every 100,000.1 Scandalous murder rates were not particular to my hometown, but to various cities throughout the country—a country suddenly experiencing a general state of violence that we now know as “Mexico’s drug war.”

Now, three years later, and with a new president in command (Enrique Peña Nieto) the situation of violence in Mexico has done nothing but worsen. The recent tragic events that took place this past September 26, 2014 at Iguala, Guerrero, have shocked the country like no other event since the 1968 student massacre at Tlatelolco. The murder of six citizens and the disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa teachers college, presumably handed over by the police to a local narco-gang called “Guerreros Unidos” on orders of the town’s mayor, reveal undeniable links between the narco-gangs and the State. Forty-two days after the students “disappeared,” Mexico’s attorney general gave a press conference in which he revealed that three of the gang members confessed

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murdering the students, burning their bodies, and placing the remains in plastic bags, which in turn were thrown in a nearby river. The remains are so badly charred that local forensics have not been able to confirm their identities and, to this date, the federal government cannot corroborate the death of the students.

This tragedy has spurred huge outrage – in Mexico and throughout the world. Since then, large-scale protests have taken place in various cities around the globe, demanding justice and publically expressing their anger against the Mexican government. Many artistic manifestations have also taken place in Mexico and abroad, as visual protests and open activism. Perhaps the most notable one so far is “Ilustradores con Ayotzinapa,” an initiative in which forty-three illustrators drew the portraits of each one of the forty-three missing students. Another notable intervention or performative action includes protestors emblazoning the central plaza of Mexico City (the Zócalo) with lit candles to take the form of the phrase “Fue el Estado” (It was the State) on a monumental scale directly in front of the National Palace and the Supreme Court of Justice, during a massive demonstration.

Although I would wish to explore the many and significant “visual protests” that have occurred in recent months, sadly I cannot address them because of time and space restrictions. I have devoted this investigation to the artistic strategies that occurred during Felipe Calderon’s six-year term (2006-2012) as a response to the overwhelming violence that started under his administration and disseminated throughout Mexico until the present day. My wish is that this thesis could help contextualize and comprehend new artistic initiatives that encourage us to reflect on the sinister deadly shift that Mexico has taken ever since 2006.

Introduction

It is not easy to locate an exact date when Mexico’s drug war originated. Since the 1970s the Mexican government has carried out military operations to tackle outbursts of conflict and has attempted to diminish the growing power of drug cartels. Many scholars argue that Mexico’s drug war (or “Guerra contra el narco,” as it is referred to in Mexico) began on December 11, 2006, when the country’s newly elected president Felipe Calderón (just ten days after he was sworn in as president) announced on national television a military mission against organized crime. This mission, called Operación Conjunto Michoacán (Joint Operation Michoacán), was composed of six thousand men composed of Federal police and Mexican military that entered Michoacán, the president’s native state, to fight the local cartels. It was the first of many confrontations between two powers: one legitimate power that wished to preserve the rule of law, and one illegitimate power that operated through organized crime and the dissemination of terror.

The balance of Calderon’s military campaign against “el narco,” which persisted throughout his entire six-year term as president (2006-2012) was under any criteria.

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3 Some specialists argue that it was President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) who paved the way to the drug war, when he commanded on June 12, 2005 (one year before leaving office) hundreds of soldiers and federal police to enter Nuevo Laredo (a city located at the Mexico-U.S. border) to quell the violence that had risen in the area. This was part of what Fox’s administration called Operación México Seguro (Operation Secure Mexico): a strategy that had the purpose to combat organized crime. A few months after, the president’s spokesman Rubén Aguilar acknowledge that the military strategy had been unsuccessful and that the violence was not going to be solved in the short term. For more on the history of drug trafficking in Mexico see Ioan Grillo, El Narco: inside Mexico's criminal insurgency (New York: Bloomsbury Press), 102. June 13, 2005. http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/128069.html


5 For the purpose of this thesis I will refer to “Mexico’s drug war” as the conflict that resulted from Felipe Calderon’s military campaign, the battles among criminal-gangs that followed, and the devastating violence disseminated almost contagiously throughout the country under his administration. However, this violence that burst into view during the presidency of Calderón has not diminished under the current administration of President Peña Nieto. The massacre of forty-three students of Ayotzinapa School evidences this. Also, the name “Mexico’s drug war” should not be confused with America’s term “War on Drugs,” which started during Nixon’s administration.
catastrophic. Suddenly a “few” sparse confrontations turned into thousands of “narco-related” murders. Like a snowball effect, Mexico unleashed a general state of violence, one in which many actors other than the criminal gangs and the military contributed to the escalating death rate. Far from being a drug war, it became an unfathomable “total war,” as expressed by critic Cuauhtémoc Medina. After a six-year span the dramatic increase of violence resulted in an alarming figure of approximately 121,000 deaths and 25,000 disappeared, a level of bloodshed that was not seen in Mexico since the Revolution (1910). Calderón claimed that the violence was the mere result of gangs “killing each other” in the attempt to control the drug business. The main media channels echoed and buttressed this sentiment. This official stance, however, did not account for the State’s own complicity in the violence, nor did it acknowledge widespread reports of the dissemination of violence beyond drug dealers’ geographies and drug-related conflicts. It also did not recognize the thousands of civilian victims: the journalists, students, immigrants, and innocent bystanders who were either killed or whose lives were violently torn apart as a result of the drug war.

Throughout this thesis I examine the complex and deeply perplexing subject of Mexico’s drug war as it had an impact on the artistic practice of contemporary artists. I

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6 As already pointed out by economist Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, when deducting the number of the victims resulting from “organized crime,” there was also a rise in the murder rate in Mexico. “Homicidios 2008-2009: La muerte tiene permiso,” Nexos (January 2011), http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=14089 [accessed April 26, 2013].
9 Such as the reports of scholars such as Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Javier Osorio and Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez.
argue that the dramatic increase in violence catalyzed a specific political turn—a strategic political antagonism—in contemporary art production in Mexico, causing artists to address directly the issue of violence in the nation. Nine contemporary art works and initiatives that opposed the official hegemonic discourse epitomize this phenomenon and are the focus of this thesis. Artists manifested this political turn, I contend, in three distinct ways: by looking to the “illegitimate” gory imagery of yellow journalism as source material to make visible the civilian deaths ignored by the mainstream press; by resignifying the meaning and representation of death in Mexican culture from a festive celebration to a critical engagement with the political violence embodied by the drug war; and by animating public displays of mourning and affect. All nine works that, I argue, are representative of this historical moment contributed to the effort to make visible the victims of the drug war, to uncover the systemic violence that was obliterating the country, and to express and animate social dissent.

This thesis is composed of three thematic chapters, each of which focuses on three different works of art. In chapter one, “Unmasking the Horrors: Exposing a National Crisis Through the Use of Sensationalist Images,” I investigate art works that took imagery of violent deaths from the sensationalist newspapers of the time. I argue these works expose an explosive national crisis that the government was trying to conceal. My analysis starts with Teresa Margolles’ PM (2010) [fig. 1], an installation that shows 313 covers belonging to one year’s printing of the sensationalist tabloid PM, which circulates in Ciudad Juárez, one of Mexico’s most violent cities. I then turn to Carlos Aguirre’s

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11 Nevertheless, many political art works and initiative have emerged since. During 2013, a large-scale exhibition curated around the subject of violence titled Visible Invisibilización (Visible Invisibilization), reunited in the city of Queretaro 27 artists that dealt with the issue of violence in the regions of Mexico and Colombia. And ever since the Ayotzinapa massacre, a great number of artists are rising to visually protest against the government and demonstrate their solidarity to the families of the victims through their art.
Mexican Landscape (Paisaje mexicano) (2010) [fig. 2], a large-scale mural that contains a recompilation of approximately 1,400 nicknames of drug dealers and hundreds of newspaper clippings of photographs of violent deaths from that time. Lastly, I examine Carlos Amorales’s The Language of the Dead (La lengua de los muertos) (2012) [fig. 3], which turns the close-up shocking photographs of the dead into characters of a graphic novel. I argue that by using depictions of violent deaths from the sensationalist media and incorporating them into artworks that circulated nationally and internationally, these works evidenced the horrors of the drug war that were muted in Mexico’s mainstream media.

Chapter two, “Sore Sights for Eyes: New Representations of Death in Mexican Visual Culture,” focuses on works that use dirt and actual bodily remains to make the victims of the drug war visible and speak of the decomposition of Mexico’s social fabric. I first analyze Teresa Margolles’ What Else Could We Talk About? (¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?) (2009) [fig. 4], a series of works and performances presented at the 53rd Venice Biennial that use body fluids taken from violent murders scenes in Mexico. Secondly, I address Artemio’s Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez) (Sin título [Retrato de 450 mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez]) (2009) [fig. 5], in which the artist gathered earth from the border city to represent the total average weight of 450 missing female factory workers. Lastly, I focus on Enrique Ježik’s Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material (Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica) (2009) [fig. 6], a variation on Robert Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown (1969) carried out in Ciudad Juárez, in which the artist dumped animal remains over a cliff. I contend that these three works, which invoke decomposition and fragmentation, create new allegorical images of
death that oppose both traditional representational strategies associated with Mexican depictions of the dead and Calderon’s official discourse regarding the drug war.

Finally, chapter three, “Not One More: Artistico-activist Practices in the Midst of Mexico's Drug War,” examines the ways in which art and activism intertwined during the last years of Calderon’s administration. I first address the urban initiative *Killer State/Freedom for the Dead* (“Estado asesino/Libertad para los muertos) 2010 [fig. 7], by Colectivo Democracia, which consisted of pasting a series of posters containing the phrase “Killer State/Freedom For the Dead” onto walls, lampposts, bridges, and other public areas in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez. These same posters were later used again during massive protests against violence. I follow with *The March of the Skeletons* (La marcha de las Calaveras) (2011) [fig. 8], conceived by Alejandro Jodorowsky who promoted a march to “heal” the Mexican population with people dressed as skeletons to represent symbolically the thousands of dead and disappeared. I conclude with *We Embroider for Peace* (Bordamos por La Paz) 2011 [fig. 9], an ongoing initiative formed by civilians (mostly relatives and friends of the victims) who gathered in public plazas to knit the names of the dead or disappeared onto handkerchiefs. By giving agency to the spectators’ and the victims’ families these works serve as “open” expressions of protest while encouraging public demonstrations of affect.

Although the works of these disparate nine artists present certain aesthetic similarities, such as the use of conceptual or participatory strategies, they do not form a group or a movement. The nine works indicate the ways in which diverse artists directly expressed political antagonism towards Calderon’s regime, his initiation of the drug war,

12 Similar to Las Madres and Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (Association of mothers and grandmothers of victims that were abducted during the Argentinian dictatorship) who protested against the dictatorship by publically displaying their grief.
and his false claim that this war was merely the outcome of gangs killing each other. The early twenty-first century is not the first time that artists in Mexico reacted against State practices, exposed social instabilities or demanded justice (as some did after the crises of 1968, 1985, and 1994, which will be addressed below). Yet this new specifically antagonistic political turn, in which artists reacted with a sense of urgency in view of the social collapse that the drug war brought, differed from past eras of artistic representation since it had to deal with a particular and brutal matter: massive death on a scale beyond the previous crises.

**Review of Existing Literature**

There is still not a comprehensive or a synthetic study on this recent art period, but literature in other fields has informed my work. The key issues of Mexico’s Drug War are explained in Victor Ronquillo’s *Saldos de Guerra* (2011)\(^\text{13}\) and Ian Grillo’s *El Narco* (2012),\(^\text{14}\) whereas the statistics of the perpetrated violence are clarified in many rigorous articles, such as Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo’s “La muerte tiene permiso” (2011).\(^\text{15}\) The historical context of Mexico’s violent imagery is described in Claudio Lomnitz’s *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (2005),\(^\text{16}\) while a focused study of the ritualization of narco-violence is found in Lilian Paola Ovalle’s “Imágenes abjectas e invisibilidad de las

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\(^{13}\) Victor Ronquillo, *Saldos de Guerra, las víctimas civiles en la lucha contra el narco* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2011).


victimas” (2010), and in Rossana Reguillo’s “The Narco-Machine and the Work of Violence: Notes Toward its Decodification.”

The broader literature regarding violence and art elicits issues related to my topic. First, is the definition of the term political, defined by Chantal Mouffe as antagonistic practices against the hegemonic discourse in her essay “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces” (2007). Second is the analysis of violent imagery in our hyper-visually oriented world, a thematic line explored by Susan Sontag in Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), and Judith Butler’s Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (2009). I will also use the concept of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva in Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection (1982), in order to frame my analysis of the imagery of violence published in Mexico’s newspapers. Last, are ideas of mourning and precarity examined by Butler’s Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (2006).

I also compare the works by Mexican artists to those created by artists under protest of military regimes in Latin America from the 1970s to the 1990s (such as works by Marcelo Brodsky, Eugenio Dittborn, The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and the Siluetazo initiative, among others.). My study has been informed by the literature on these works, including Martín Guerra’s “Perversión y estética de lo abjecto

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Several scholars and critics have attempted political analyses of Mexico’s art production from the 1960s to the present. Art historian Olivier Debroise and critic and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina were among the first to probe critically artistic practices in Mexico from 1968 to 1997 in their groundbreaking catalogue *La Era de la Discrepancia* (MUCA, Mexico City, 2007), which, although useful for its general history, does not go into depth regarding any particular artist or movement. Art critic María Minera has also been instrumental in investigating contemporary art in Mexico since the late nineties to the present. Her essay “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,” gives a general account of Mexico’s socio-political instabilities of the past decades. Mexico’s most renowned critic and curator, Medina, has published most widely on the political ramifications of contemporary Mexican art and has written directly about many of the artists discussed in this thesis. Several of his essays appear in high-profile exhibition catalogues such as *Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* (PS1, NY, 2001). His essay “Materialist Spectrality,” about the work of Teresa Margolles, has been essential for this thesis, as it creates an important theoretical and socio-political framework to analyze works in the specific context of Mexico’s drug war. My thesis expands upon Medina’s foundational

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23 Martín Guerra, “Poderes de la perversión y estética de lo abyecto en el arte latinoamericano,” *Guaraguao*, no. 34 (Summer 2010): 71-88.
work, as it incorporates many artistic strategies other than those used by Margolles, and incorporates new theoretical premises that are not acknowledged in Medina’s study.

**Contribution**

Despite the abundant literature on many individual artists covered in this thesis, especially Margolles, who has explored the topic of violence since the 1990s, some of the works analyzed here have not been reviewed before nor thoroughly examined. This thesis is also the first attempt to group together and examine several contemporary art works from different artists as specific reactions to the drug war and the state’s problematic policies and discourses related to the conflict. As such, it argues that the war had a much broader impact on contemporary artistic production in Mexico than has been recognized, and acknowledges that many artists, beyond Margolles, took on the war as subject in their work. It also brings together both “high” art and “civilian” public actions through the lens of political antagonism proposing that normative art historical categories cannot do justice to this topic. Moreover, while Mexico has a long history of state-sponsored oppression, it is rarely included in studies of post-war art and violence that focus on the military dictatorships of Brazil and the Southern cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) in the 1960s-1980s. Thus, my study brings Mexico into the existing literature on art and violence in the broader Latin American context. Additionally, my study contributes primary source information to the field through interviews with the artists discussed, Mexican art critics, and activists.\(^{27}\) Throughout this thesis I use a socio-historical methodology that allows me to explore the turbulent socio-political context of Calderón’s

\(^{27}\) Such as critics and curators like María Minera and Mariana David, and activists like Lolita Bosch.
regime, while drawing upon a vast array of political and representational theories such as
the aforementioned models of Mouffe, Butler, and Sontag.

A New Political Turn in the Arts in Mexico

The nine art works and initiatives examined in this thesis represent a political turn in
contemporary art in Mexico. As such, they manifest an urgency to criticize the main
issues of the drug war, such as the existence of thousands of victims unrecognized by the
federal government, the systemic violence hidden behind the gore imagery of the
murders, and the need for a public exercise of affect. It is important to state that these
artworks join a growing number of artistic and cultural initiatives from different fields of
art that have materialized awareness of these matters. As such, they join projects by
writers, designers, journalists, activists, musicians and film directors that exercised
instances of political resistance in their own ways. Thus the works described in length
here provide a small, but representative, sample of a collective artistic effort that has by
now transcended Mexico’s borders.

The political art works and initiatives described here participated in making
visible the subjectivity of their victims. This political turn also alludes to other political
turns that have occurred throughout Mexico’s art history when art responded to socio-
political instabilities of past decades. One prominent example is the committed aesthetic
activism that followed the student massacre perpetrated by the federal police in Tlatelolco
on October 21st, 1968, twelve days before the inauguration of the XIX Olympic Games in
Mexico City. As writer Carlos Monsiváis declared, this tragedy “put an end to official
culture, and the result of this collapse was a shift towards political action.” In the art field, artistic practices shifted towards collective work, giving birth to a dozen associations of artists that were later known as Los Grupos (the groups). Some of these groups, as scholar Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón has noted, were committed to explicitly political themes, as some of the artists were active in student brigades at the National School of Plastic Arts (ENAP) and La Esmeralda Arts School during the 1968 protests. Emblematic examples of these associations are Germinal, which created itinerant mural paintings to be carried in demonstrations, and Mira and El Colectivo, which conceived their work as part of an effective political strategy that could serve popular movements.

Another important political turning point in the Mexican art scene occurred after the earthquake that devastated Mexico City in 1985, a catastrophe captured by Enrique Metinides’ photographs, which caused the emergence of new forms of solidarity among the Mexican population [fig. 10]. In the days following the earthquake, civilians organized spontaneously to help remove the debris of fallen buildings, recover bodies, and look for survivors, believing the government had abdicated its responsibility to the people. María Minera argues that “on a par with the advent of a general awareness of the fissures in the structure of a state that had responded clumsily and far too late to the disaster, the opportunity arose to rethink art.”

One case is Francis Alÿs, who arrived

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29 Among them: Tepito Arte Acá, Proceso Pentágono, Mira, Suma, Germinal, Taller de Arte e Ideología (taí), El Colectivo, Tetraedro, Março, Peyote y la Compañía, No Grupo, Taller de Investigación Plástica (tip), and Fotógrafos Independientes.
from Belgium to live in Mexico in the aftermath of the earthquake. Perplexed by the failure of the authorities to repair the damaged buildings, he stuffed broken windows he found on his treks through Mexico City with pillows (*Placing Pillows*, 1990) [fig. 11]. Another example, Aldo Flores from the Salon des Aztecas, orchestrated in 1990 the occupation of the Balmori building, which had been in ruins after the earthquake and sentenced to demolition. Minera recalls, “nearly a hundred artists answered Flores’s call to take over the building through a variety of interventions that would capture the attention of the authorities and perhaps stop the demolition which, by the way, they succeeded in doing.”

Throughout the 1990s, Mexico experienced repeated crisis. On January 1st, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) arose in the state of Chiapas against the Mexican government. Three months later, the presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, from Mexico’s long-ruling political party, PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional/Institutional Revolutionary Party) was shot dead while campaigning in the border city of Tijuana. Soon after, the Secretary General of the same party, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, was also murdered presumably on orders by the President’s brother. Moreover, on December of that same year, just as President Salinas de Gortari was leaving office, the country experienced one of its most devastating financial crises. After all of these distressing events occurring in the span of one year, artists responded in many different ways: they used humoristic responses, conceptual strategies, direct and indirect criticism to the multiple social instabilities.

The art production of the 1990s in Mexico was so plural and extensive that it

32 María Minera, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,” 22.
includes many works that incorporated political criticism. Some works were bitingly critical, such as Daniela Rossell’s *Rich and Famous* (1994) [fig. 12], a series of portraits of Mexico’s most wealthy young females. Rossell herself is the daughter and granddaughter of members of the ruling political party, and therefore had unprecedented access to the most flamboyant and ostentatious homes in Mexico, where she was able to photograph her subjects (many of them her friends) posing trustingly to the camera, surrounded with their overflowing opulence. This series exposes the social inequalities of Mexican society, as many of these women posed glamorously with their maids often shown in the background, almost as if they were invisible. Another project that immediately responded to the political agenda was Vicente Razo’s populist/conceptual experiment, *The Salinas Museum”* (1996) [fig. 13]. This project consisted of a parasite museum consisting of dolls, masks, toys, and other hate imagery of former president Salinas de Gortari, who left the country in economic despair and became Mexico’s most hated former president. Razo displayed these popular expressions of “salinophobia” in his own bathroom, which visitors could access via appointment.34 Likewise, the political work done by the collective SEMEFO worked with materials of Mexico’s morgue, and will be examined in the first two chapters of this thesis.

Nevertheless, as noted by scholar Rubén Gallo, “most art produced during Salinas’s presidency (1988-1994) was entirely apolitical.”35 Medina also states that many of the works created in the 1990s “transformed what was brutal or groundless into a

34 Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Pseudomuseos: Sobre el Museo Salinas y otros ejemplos de la museografía parasitaria en México,” Conference that took place on April 27th, 2002 at Aula Magna of Centro Multimedia Centro Nacional de las Artes. This event took place within the frame of the symposium “Museo como medio: diálogos sobre lenguaje mueográfico y arte contemporáneo” organized by Pablo Helguera for the Guggenheim in NY and the CENART in Mexico City. http://www.micromuseo.org.pe/lecturas/cmedina.html

social sublime,”\textsuperscript{36} like the case of Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón’s piece \textit{A propósito} (1996) [fig. 14]. This work is an installation composed of 120 stolen car stereos obtained at Mexico City’s black market and a looped video projection documenting both artists stealing a car stereo. According to Medina, although \textit{A propósito} acknowledges the important social issue of urban violence, it does not firmly oppose it, but actually replicates it. A logic of “exploration/exploitation”\textsuperscript{37} exists in works like this, he says. I coincide with scholar Mieke Bal, however, when she argues that “art, multiple and indefinable as it is, cannot be reduced to any particular political meaning.” Political art therefore cannot always be reduced to its propagandistic or openly denunciatory definition. The art production of the 1990s was not completely apolitical, yet artists did not use open antagonism as one of their main tactics. For the most part, it was not openly denunciatory as I show in the case studies of works that were produced after 2006.

After 2006, artists decided to make their work explicitly in relation to the most critical event of the time, the drug war, and strongly opposed it. This new political turn coincides with the idea of the \textit{political} defined by Chantal Mouffe as “antagonistic practices against the hegemonic discourse.”\textsuperscript{38} This political turn in the arts in Mexico not only openly expressed dissent against state practices, but also made explicit the unprecedented scale of a crisis that was being experienced in the country: that of massive death; a case of humanitarian crisis. By placing the anonymous and unmourned dead bodies in the center of the artistic practices, this new \textit{political turn} was as macabre as its

\textsuperscript{36} Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Mutual Abuse” in \textit{Mexico City: an exhibition about the exchange rates of bodies and values ; a thematic exhibition of international artists based in Mexico City}, ed Biesenbach, Klaus, and Richard Mozska (Long Island City, NY: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002), 40.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{38} Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” \textit{Art and Research} 2. (Summer 2007), http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html [accessed November 1, 2013].
own social reality, reacting with urgency against the social collapse that the drug war brought.

**Mexico’s Drug War**

When President Felipe Calderón took office, he did so with very little popularity. On December 1, 2006, he was sworn into office while half of the members of Congress were heckling him, alleging an electoral fraud. Afraid of losing control of his presidency, he enforced an “an eye for an eye” military presidency, disseminating a strong confrontational discourse intended to show his enemies that he was not “playing around.” As noted above, eleven days after assuming the presidency he announced a military mission against organized crime. A year and a half later, on June 26, 2008, he declared: “We have undertaken a merciless war to liberate Mexico from the claws of crime, violence, and drugs.”39 This statement represents one of many times that the word war was used by Calderón, who constantly appeared dressed in military uniform alongside his troops, something that has not been seen since the 1940s, when civilian politicians took over from revolutionary generals.40

The aggression and scale of Calderón’s military strategy was never before seen in the country. According to journalist Ian Grillo, Calderón not only increased military presence in urban areas, but also boosted publicity for all his antidrug efforts, developing an aggressive rhetoric.41 “It was a war of good against bad, a fight against the enemies of

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39 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “hemos emprendido una GUERRA sin cuartel, precisamente, para poder liberar a México de las garras de la delincuencia, de la violencia y de las drogas.” Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, **Nexos**, (June 26, 2008) [http://redaccion.nexos.com.mx/?p=2571#sthash.SQKlPYiJ.dpuf](http://redaccion.nexos.com.mx/?p=2571#sthash.SQKlPYiJ.dpuf)

40 Grillo, **El Narco**, 113.

the nation; a battle in which you are with us or against us,” said Grillo.\textsuperscript{42} Actually, according to the Mexican sociologist Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, what “triggered” the crisis of violence was precisely the size and aggressiveness of the military campaign. In the “attempt of imposing law enforcement in the hard way, the agreements of local order broke, and now everyone has to protect what is theirs in the hard way,” he notes.\textsuperscript{43} Not only criminals but also thousands of innocent people fell victim to violent deaths. The government’s rhetoric, echoed by the main media, argued, however, that civilians deaths were “collateral damage” if not criminals involved with drug trafficking issues. During these turbulent years the administration ignored the many analyses that disclosed an increase in violence outside narco-related conflicts, such as femicides and aggressions perpetrated by the military. Besides, this violence reflected a state of \textit{precariousness} that affected the many people recruited by the narco-gangs, who offered security and the economic mobility that the government was unable to provide.

During the Calderón years, it became clear that violence not only escalated and expanded geographically but also rose to a \textit{new} level of cruelty. Massacres of civilians started to occur, one after the other. Perhaps the best way to portray the scope of these crimes is by describing one of them. On August 22, 2010, seventy-two undocumented migrants from South and Central America were murdered in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. Their bodies were found piled on the ground, legs and arms tied and their eyes blindfolded, and showing signs of torture. Presumably a narco-gang, “Los Zetas,” bore...
responsibility for the murder of the fifty-eight men and fourteen women who were simply passing through Mexico, hoping to get across the US border.\textsuperscript{44} Other massacres followed.

Taping people’s faces, burning their bodies, mutilating, or decapitating them were part of a new plethora of torture techniques utilized by the narco-gangs in a ritualization of violence intended to warn their enemies and citizens as to what happens when someone “gets in their way” or violates “the rules of the game.”\textsuperscript{45} A terrifying landscape of heads, torsos, arms, and legs remained; human body parts were dumped as “disposable mass” throughout the streets and roads of Mexico. “Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object,”\textsuperscript{46} says Judith Butler, and these new torture techniques exercised predominantly by the narco-gangs, or the narco-machine, as Rosanna Reguillo calls it, destroys the singularity of human beings by turning them into anonymous, suffering, fragmented bodies. In fact, as noted by the critic Rafael Lemus, the pile of unacknowledged and unmourned dead bodies became the most recognizable outcome of Calderon’s regime.\textsuperscript{47}

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\textbf{Mexico’s Drug War Dead}

\textsuperscript{44} There were many other massacres during Calderón’s regime that need to be mentioned, such as the case of August 25, 2011, in Monterrey, Nuevo León, were 52 men and women were killed in an attack to a casino. The massacres mentioned here are just part of many atrocities that occurred during this six-year term.

\textsuperscript{45} The techniques of torture known as \textit{encobijar, encajuelar, empozolar, trozar}, (etc.) are easily recognizable words by the Mexican population as most of them are taken from traditional Mexican dishes, and have served to trivialize the horror of these brutal acts in the media through the use of humor. Most of these deaths are characterized by presenting a loss of identity by mutilating, incinerating or disintegrating the body. More on this topic is found in Lilian Paola Ovalle, “Imágenes abyectas e invisibilidad de las víctimas. Narrativas visuales de la violencia en México,” \textit{El Cotidiano} 164 (Nov-Dic, 2010), and in Rossana Reguillo, “The Narco-Machine and the Work of Violence: Notes Toward its Decodification,” \textit{E-misferica} 8.2 (Winter, 2011) http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-82/reguillo [accessed January 3rd, 2014].


Although the reasons behind this sudden increase of violence in Mexico and its terrifying expressive manifestations cannot be understood easily, one can agree that a large part of Mexico’s population was living in what Judith Butler calls a state of *precarity*, a term that “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.”

“Each of us,” says Butler, “are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies.” Therefore the repetitive appearance of these vulnerable bodies in the public sphere represented a political liability for President Calderón, who urged the media to use an “appropriate distance” to represent this new kind of violent material. Certain bodies, states Butler, “are unacceptable for public consumption,” as there is a constant regulation of what is considered “real” and what is not in the public sphere, what will count as reality and what will not, what is representable and what is not. If Octavio Paz was right when he wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) that “death is a mirror which reflects the vain gesticulations of the living,” then these fragmented bodies exposed the radical state of vulnerability of life in Mexico. If *our deaths illuminate our lives*, then these neglected corpses became a mirror of Mexico’s dysfunctional political and judiciary system, which allowed a contagious spread of criminality throughout the country, and left thousands of crimes, related and unrelated to drug trafficking, unresolved.

Calderón’s administration was seriously concerned that images of the victims of the drug war were being disseminated and exported as new Mexican postcards to the world, “interfering” with the broader efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the

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49 Ibid.
Tourism Promotion Fund to broadcast Mexico’s “positive image” as an “advanced” State. As means to promote an image of a “stable” nation, the administration withheld information about how many “narco-fosas” (narco-graves) were unveiled,\textsuperscript{51} gave inaccurate numbers about the drug-war’s death toll, and urged the media to “give violence its proper dimension.”\textsuperscript{52} Hence, the representation of victims abandoned in the streets with signs of indescribable bodily suffering became a threat to the perception of government victory against drug trafficking, a menace to the perception of Mexico as a stable modern nation.\textsuperscript{53}

**Conclusion**

When the escalating number of deaths and massacres started coming to light, Calderón’s administration replicated an unbending discourse arguing that the military offensive should continue capturing the nation’s “enemies,” despite the fact that during the course of the war there were thousands of innocent civilians dying all over the country. This thesis argues that the artistic projects analyzed in the following pages aimed to destigmatize the victims of the drug war, those anonymous and unmourned dead bodies who became the central subjectivity in Mexican contemporary art production of the period of Calderon’s regime. By analyzing nine works in their social, political, and aesthetic contexts, I expose the ways in which art making and art activism responded to


\textsuperscript{53} For more on ACIV see the debate that took place on March 24, 2011 presented by Mexico’s leftwing news broadcaster and intelectual Carmen Aristegui:
http://culturadelalegalidad.wordpress.com/2011/03/24/mesa-aristegui-acuerdo-para-cobertura-informativa-de-la-violencia/
Mexico’s drug war to bring to light the innocent victims who were dismissed and made invisible by the government and its egregious claim that they were enemies of the state.
Chapter 1: “Unmasking the Horrors: Exposing a National Crisis Through the Use of Sensationalist Images”

Let the atrocious images haunt us.\textsuperscript{54}

Susan Sontag

During the six-year term of Felipe Calderón’s government, Mexico saw a death toll equal to that of the Balkan and Iraq wars. For Calderón’s administration, the massive numbers of dead were damning collateral damage, negative evidence that the violence got out of the state’s control. For several artists, the visual representation of the dead became a means to make evident an explosive national crisis.\textsuperscript{55} This chapter focuses on three works that confront the viewer with repetitive brutal images, taken mostly from Mexico’s sensationalist press, which explicitly portray the victims that died from violent deaths during Calderon’s administration. By taking and using imagery of violent deaths from sensationalist media, these three works exhibit the horrors of the drug war that were edited out or at least muted in Mexico’s mainstream newspapers, such as El Universal, Milenio and Excelsior.

The first of these works is Teresa Margolles’ PM (2010), an installation comprised of 313 covers belonging to one year’s printing of Ciudad Juarez’s sensationalist tabloid PM. Following is Carlos Aguirre’s Mexican Landscape (2010), a large scale mural containing a recompilation of approximately 1,400 nicknames of drug dealers and hundreds of newspaper clippings of photographs of violent deaths from Morelos’s sensationalist tabloids. Lastly, is Carlos Amorales’s The Language of the Dead

\textsuperscript{54} Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 65.
\textsuperscript{55} In 2008, 14,006 homicides were registered, and by 2009, the figure rose to 19,803; then, in 2010, increased to 25,757, and in 2011 rose to 27,213 intentional homicides. By 2012, the year of power shift in the federal level, there was a slight decrease in the number of homicides, as they were reported 26,037. In all, from 2007 to 2012 the number of violent deaths totaled 121,683 killings, according to figures officially recognized. “Más de 121 muertos: el saldo de la narcoguerra de Calderón,” Proceso, July 30, 2013, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348816 [accessed July 3rd, 2014].
(2012), which turns the close-up shocking photographs of dead Mexicans found online (mostly in the website elblogdelnarco.com) into characters of a graphic-novel.

These three works used photographic images (either directly or as source material) from sensationalist media outlets of victims of the drug war that are brutally graphic. I argue that in their “abjectness” they directly opposed the image of a stable country the government wanted to spread within Mexico and abroad. I contend that the artists’ strategic and specific use of tabloid imagery was a means to expose the ways in which mainstream media outlets censored coverage of the drug war. By recuperating the imagery of violent deaths not published in the mainstream press, these projects contributed in making visible both nationally and internationally not only the disproportionate quantity of death toll during the years of the drug war but the brutal “quality” of how people died. The contribution of these three artists lays not only in recuperating the violent imagery published in the ephemeral medium of tabloid journalism but also in asserting on replicating this violent imagery in a permanent medium such as a work of art.

Photography as Evidence

A longstanding tradition has used photography as a mean to raise awareness of tragedies. Sontag argues that “when there are photographs, a war becomes ‘real.’”56 The protests against the Vietnam War, for example, were mobilized by the fact that news images offered evidence of suffering and injustice. Photography also played an important role as “testimony” for the thousands of people that were tortured, killed, or forcibly disappeared

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56 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 104.
during the dirty wars in Latin America from the 1970s through the 1990s. For example, when Argentinian artist Marcelo Brodsky (b. Buenos Aires, 1954) came back to Argentina from exile in 1994, after having lived more than a decade abroad, he tried to locate his old classmates. Taking as his starting point the graduation photograph of the class of 1967 at the Colegio Nacional in Buenos Aires, he found out that 105 of them had been murdered or disappeared. His installation *Good Memory* (1996) [fig. 15] exhibits photographs and video of the intensive research he undertook. It includes a blown-up photograph of his eighth-grade class taken in 1967, in which he has circled 13 out of the 32 figures to indicate friends who, as adults, went into political exile or disappeared.

Artist Eugenio Dittborn (b. Chile, 1943) also used photography to denounce the thousands of political prisoners who were murdered or disappeared during the military dictatorship in his home country Chile. His *Airmail Series* [fig. 16], which he developed in the 1980s, consisted of drawings, clippings of police photographs, and newspaper articles pasted onto sheets of paper, which he later folded and airmailed internationally, “as means of addressing problems of isolation and censorship.”

Yet, it would be simplistic to inscribe directly the artistic practices of Margolles, Aguirre, and Amorales within the political-aesthetic tradition developed in some Latin American countries during the dictatorships of the 70s and 80s without addressing the

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57 The military dictatorship of Chile ruled between 1973 and 1990, after the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende was overthrown by a coup d’état. The military junta presided by General Augusto Pinochet employed “forced disappearance” as a state-terrorist practice and that led, ultimately, to the extermination of thousands of people. In Argentina over 30,000 people were tortured and killed during the Dirty War that started after the military junta in 1976, led by Army Commander in Chief Lieutenant General Jorge Rafael Videla, dissolved the Argentine Congress, and ended only in 1983. During that period, exterminating anyone in disagreement became routine. Some 10,000 people “disappeared,” or more precisely, were disappeared, considered a political or ideological threat to the military junta. For more on this matter see Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, (London: Zed Books, 1999).

The imagery of violent deaths, which are the starting point in the works of Margolles, Aguirre, and Amorales, circulated in Mexico’s press at the discretion of their own “editorial criteria”—which for the mainstream channels and newspapers always meant conservative coverage. After March 23rd, 2011, the main media (newspapers, magazines, and TV channels), lead by Televisa (the country’s principal TV channel), historically aligned with succeeding Mexican regimes, envisioned and brought to fruition an “Agreement for the Coverage of Violence” (Acuerdo para la Cobertura Informativa de la Violencia). This agreement proposed “common editorial criteria” for covering the drug-war’s violence, urging the media to establish “precise criteria for the diffusion of the images and photographs of acts of violence and terrorism that define when and how they should be published or diffused, in what spaces and how many times.”

To understand the political relevance of the works by Margolles, Aguirre, and Amorales, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the fact that Mexico was not dealing with extreme censorship, such as the one experienced in dictatorial and military regimes, these “editorial criteria” proposed by the ACIV were criticized by Calderon’s opposition as a strategy to control how the issue of drug-war violence should be addressed, and as a way for the media to disseminate the government’s rhetoric about

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59 The ACIV was displayed and signed by 715 newspapers, TV channels, radio stations and websites. But there were also important media that denied to sign and spoke against this agreement such as Reforma group, La Jornada newspaper, Proceso and MVS group.
60 The signing media should agree to: “not to interfere in the combat of delinquency,” not interviewing criminals, not presenting them as victims, and not becoming involuntary spokesmen of drug trafficking by sharing information that puts in risk the viability of operations against organized crime.” For more on this matter see Fabiola Martínez, “Pacto de medios para limitar información sobre violencia,” La Jornada, March 25, 2011, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/03/25/politica/005n1pol [accessed May 3rd, 2014].
Mexico’s violence. In this context, the works that will be explored here can be seen as ways to make the horrors of the drug war “visible” without any censorship, revealing not only evidence of a humanitarian crisis that Calderón’s administration and some mainstream newspapers sought to conceal, but also the level of cruelty that the perpetrators enacted, creating an escalated crisis.

The photographs taken and used by the artists mentioned here are not the artistic efforts of photojournalists that carefully covered the drug war with the hope of trying to “humanize” and contextualize the victims. The images were taken from local tabloids and websites that did not favor the integrity of the corpses, but the abject quality in them, following a traditional sensationalist aesthetic. The federal administration did not consider these sensationalist local tabloids a threat to their international agenda to project an image of a stable and “modern” Mexico, as they are not “respectable” sources of journalism. For the intellectual elites, they represent consumer-oriented news read by “the masses,” having a total lack of legitimacy. As most of these tabloids do not have an Internet platform and the Hemeroteca Nacional (Mexico’s database of newspapers) does not hold them in their archives, they are ephemeral media, generally not preserved. The imagery used in the following works, however, was taken for the most part from these sources. The images that will be analyzed below are images that captured without any censorship the mutilated bodies as they were found in the landscape, exposing that uncomfortable, impossible-to-look-at quality distinctive of sensationalist photojournalism.

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62 Such as the series Tus pasos se perideron en el paisaje by photographer Fernando Brito, which I will refer later in this chapter.
The particular “amarillista” (yellow or sensationalist) aesthetic, popular in Mexico among almost all local tabloids and that Margolles, Aguirre, and Amorales use as a starting point, began with Mexico’s “nota roja” (which literally means “red note”) journalism, devoted to chronicles of crime and violence. Although there are examples of “nota roja” journalism from the 1950s (such as Metropoliaca, Nota Roja, Policía and Prensa Policiaca), perhaps the most famous newspaper of this kind is Alarma!, circulating from 1963 until March 2014 and was exclusively devoted to covering Mexico’s scandalous crime and violent accidents. The front pages of Alarma! and other sensationalist tabloids usually had a “catchy,” even humorous, title in bold red letters that enthusiastically announced a crime. One cannot think of a better example than the famous Alarma! title “Violóla, matóla, enterróla” (“Raped her, killed her, buried her”). These sorts of “catchy titles” have been historically used in Mexico’s local journalism.

“Nota roja” journalism gave birth also to a particular, abject aesthetic. The abject is defined by Julia Kristeva as “death infecting life,” and is described as “what disturbs identity in a system or an order. It is what does not respect borders, positions or rules.” By the 1970s, according to Cuauhtémoc Medina, Alarma! photographs “overused the flash and a visual improvisation, getting closer to the aesthetic of instant photography than to the work of professional photojournalism.” Rather than “humanizing” the victims, everything was made for the “voluptuousness” –to borrow the adjective chosen by Carlos Monsiváis– of the photograph, and resulted in the overuse of visual close-ups emphasizing the corpses’ putrefaction. If anything, this aesthetic was involuntarily

65 Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Alarma! Crimen y circulación,” Polyester 2, no. 6 (Summer 1993), 23.
66 Monsiváis, Los mil y un velorios, 31.
inspired by war photographer Robert Capa’s famous statement “If your photographs aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough,” and took it to a whole new level.

For Judith Butler, the politics of a discourse are determined not only by what you show —what will count, what is perceivable and what is not— but also by how you show it. It is the how —she says— what affects our perception and thinking as well.” 67 In this sense it can be useful to examine the way in which the Mexican media covered some of the main massacres during Calderón’s period, and how that coverage contrasted with that of the “nota roja” newspapers at the same time, for example, the San Fernando massacre of August 22, 2010 mentioned above. When the seventy-two migrants were found two days after the killings, photojournalists of different newspapers did what they were used to doing: they took out their cameras and photographed the crime scene. The mainstream newspaper Excelsior covered the news on its front page for two days, August 25th and 26th, without showing any images of the massacre. El Universal published on its front page the air shot of the ranch and a blurred photograph of the only surviving victim. 68 El Reforma, a little bit more daring, published a distant photograph of the bodies. The sensationalist tabloid La Prensa, however, got closer, publishing a close-up image of the piled bodies in its front page, under the headline “¡Son Bestias!” In these latter photos, the camera was so close that the viewer can see signs of aggression on the victim’s faces and blood on their shirts [fig. 17].

For Calderón’s office, the circulation of images of violence meant a de-legitimization of his military campaign, a substantial reduction of his popularity in the

67 Butler, Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?, 71.
68 When asked in 2010 about his position on publishing images of violence, the editor of El Universal Cristano Rodríguez argued that there is a “professional ethic” to abstain from publishing violent images on the front page, that the paper should not to be too flagrant with images of violence, and that some images — showing people without heads, for example—are indeed not publishable. Cristano Rodríguez interview in “Fotografía y Violencia,” Cuartoscuro, no. 106 (February-March, 2011), 29.
country, and heavy criticism by humanitarian NGOs and the international community. The most efficient way for the government to change the perception of a drug war in which the murder rate and the profusion of violence were out of hand became the control of the press and the information that could be exported internationally. The easiest way that Calderon’s office found to dismiss any responsibility in the matter was by blaming the media for “amplifying” the problem. “One way a hegemonic understanding of politics is achieved,” argues Butler, “is through circumscribing what will and will not be admissible as part of the public sphere itself.”

Therefore, in a context in which state power attempted to regulate the perspective of a war, the political art of Margolles, Aguirre, and Amorales defies it, by exposing not the interpretation of the war broadcast by the state, but a plethora of sensationalist images neglected by the mainstream media and the politically correct intellectuals, who disdained them for their “tasteless aesthetics” and popular demographics. It is important to comment that the works of Margolles, Aguirre and Amorales circulated among the middle and upper classes who would generally disregard this kind of sensationalist tabloids, forcing this audience to be face to face with sensational journalism, to “see” this kind of violence that the more popular social stratus were daily exposed to.

It should be noted that the sensationalist tabloids are not “innocent” in any way; historically-speaking, they are not considered by scholars as politically subversive, but

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71 Except the important critique against the student massacre of 1968 written by Alarma! Editors. Here is an excerpt of the editorial: “there has been talk of conspiracy, of subversive intentions, of the intent to make the Olympic Games fail and, even, of political ambitions. But these are only words and rumors (…) Each and everyone has his own version. For the truth has not come to light. And this is very serious, since the pain of knowing that people have died and been wounded is compounded by the anguish of ignoring the reason for their sacrifice. The people have no guidance, and it’s not out of naiveté that we ask, even after so
as market-driven, following the well-known tabloid logic “if it bleeds, it leads.” Yet, within the context of the drug war some of the “nota roja” photojournalists felt that they were doing “the right thing” by daily covering the crime-scenes and by daily reporting them. For example, Nacho Ruiz, a photojournalist from Ciudad Juárez, said: “I’m just informing what’s happening, it’s up to the Federal Government to put a stop to the situation of violence.”72 The editors of extremely graphic online platforms like El Blog del Narco, created in March 2010, said that they were trying to “fill a void while the media and the government pretend that nothing is happening.”73

**Teresa Margolles’ Death Yearbook**

In the face of the government’s concern with the images published on the front-pages of mainstream newspapers and the forms these images would take,74 polemical artist Teresa Margolles (b. Culiacán, Mexico, 1974) strategically turned to the local tabloids in Mexico, collect their front-pages, which portray the dead without any sort of censorship. Margolles, who began her career as an artist with the collective SEMEFO75 (from the Spanish acronym for Forensic Medical Service), has taken the subject of death as her principal subject since the beginning of her artistic practice, which combines visual arts and performance, in the 1980s. Using organic materials such as animal and human fluids and body parts, she has made Mexico’s morgues and dissecting rooms her ateliers, and

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72 Nacho Ruiz interview in “Violencia y Fotografía,” Cuartosucro 106 (February-March 2011), 27.
after 2006, when violence intensified in Mexico she shifted her focus to the violence-ridden streets of Mexico. While working with SEMEFO in the 1990s, Margolles began appropriating conceptual strategies, “as if the group sought to revise art history from a necrophilic perspective,” according to Cuauhtémoc Medina. Her work was influenced by process art, conceptual art, and minimalism, yet always translated those influences into what Medina called “the third world’s dark social setting.”

Margolles’s *PM (2010)* is a result of collecting for one year the front pages of the Mexican afternoon local tabloid *PM*, which circulates from Monday to Saturday in one of Mexico’s most violent cities, Ciudad Juárez. When asked why she chose this newspaper, Margolles answered: “Because it is my vision of a local newspaper. It’s a popular newspaper, one that you’ll bump into constantly. It is my point of view. It is the view of the newspaper, but I chose it so that it can say what happened, one of the things that happened in that city.” Margolles first exhibited some of the recollected newspapers from 2010 inside plastic sleeves, as part of an exhibition titled “Irrigación” (Irrigation) at Museo de la Ciudad, in the City of Querétaro, Mexico, from Feb-April, 2011. Later she realized that what she wanted to do something more, a yearbook composed of the digitalized covers. She originally thought that the ideal format would be to have a physical yearbook printed and distributed freely in many parts of the world. Because she wanted to print 10,000 copies, but was unable to for economic reasons, she decided to put the already digitized covers on the wall of the exhibition space [fig. 1]. The work was

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77 Ciudad Juárez is a border city known to be Mexico’s murder capital and for experiencing a brutal wave of female homicides since 1993. During 2009 and 2010 Juárez's murder rate was the highest reported in the world.
exhibited first in both Berlin (at the 8th Biennale in the summer of 2012) and in 2014 it traveled to the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (Madrid).

The installation of *PM (2010)* makes a nod to conceptualist practices. 313 color photos of the covers are framed and installed stacked, creating a grid pattern that fills the white walls of the exhibition space. Margolles deals with the “every day” like, for example, On Kawara did with when he daily painted his monochromatic “date paintings” (which began in New York on January 4, 1966 and continued throughout his life) [fig. 18]. But the differences between these two series are substantial. On Kawara’s daily canvases contain a Zen passivity and a meditative element; in Margolles’s *PM (2010)*, on the contrary, confronts the viewer with words, pin-ups, and dead bodies. During 2010 at Ciudad Juárez, this news faced the city’s inhabitants on a daily basis. Margolles explains:

> It was what you got up to, what you coexisted with, what people in Juárez ate for breakfast before going to school. While you were sleeping, that's what was happening elsewhere. [The *PM* tabloid] is very popular, used to wrap the meat you take home, to build children's piñatas. Even if you don’t want to, you touch it; you see it. It is an impossible way to deny what is happening in society. It is a sensationalist tabloid but the number of bodies is real.  

Because during 2010 almost every day somebody died a victim of the Mexican drug war in Ciudad Juárez, each day the covers showed a crime scene, with alarming lines such as “There were 42 during the weekend” (“Fueron 42 el fin de semana”), “Shattered by stones” (“Destrozada a pedradas”), and “They killed six in twenty minutes” (“Matan a seis en veinte minutos”). On almost every cover the representation of the crime

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78 Translation mine from the original in Spanish: “Era con lo que te levantabas, con lo que convivías, con lo que la gente de Juárez se desayunaba para ir al colegio. Mientras dormías eso es lo que pasaba en otro punto. Es muy popular, sirve para envolver la carne que te llevas a casa, para armar las piñatas infantiles. Aunque no quieras, lo tocas, lo ves. Es una forma imposible de negar lo que está pasando en la sociedad. Es un periódico amarillista pero su número de cadáveres son reales.” Teresa Margolles in an interview with Javier Díaz Guardiola, Javier Díaz Guardiola (Blog) http://javierdiazguardiola.blogspot.com/2014/03/entrevista-teresa-margolles.html.
scene is displayed next to a photograph of a pin-up. For the local newspapers such as PM, “Poverty, crime, and the bloody rivalries of paramilitary gangs are always the day’s most important populist news items, next to recurring erotic advertisements. The paper turns each scene into a kind of obscure death porn, which is normalized through its constant repetition,” as noted by artist Artur Żmijewski and curator Joanna Warsza. 79

Despite Ciudad Juárez’s reputation as a very violent city, and it would not be surprising to find every once in a while, at the center of the front page of PM, a graphic color photograph depicting a crime-scene, one of the perturbing aspects of Margolles’s work is that she provides evidence as to how in 2010 murder was an everyday issue. 2010 was, until then, the most violent year of Mexico’s drug war, ending with 25,757 murders.80 By revealing one year of coverage of these violent events, Margolles’ PM (2010) can be seen as evidence that there was more crime to report than usual. Margolles argues that “that information is not lying, finally the bodies that it [the tabloid] shows, are part of the reality of Juárez. When violence is being denied and the talks about violence are decreasing, the information is there. It’s not a set, it’s people on the streets.”81

An editorialist for the left-wing national newspaper La Jornada, Luis Hernández Navarro, accurately wrote that Mexico had turned into a “nota roja” country. “It is not a matter of perception”, he argues, “it’s a matter of facts: violence has extended in unused levels and has reached all social extracts.” Hernández Navarro would have probably agreed with what was said by Gilbert K. Chesterton some decades ago: “as modern newspapers are conducted, the most honest and most important news is the police

According to Navarro and Margolles, it is not that the media “exaggerates;” it is that they are simply “reflecting” reality. “The press is no more sensationalist or shocking today than it was a few years ago,” argues Navarro, “it is reality which has changed and has made the criminal actions an everyday affair.”

Confronting Margolles’s PM, the viewer unavoidably faces the daily reportage of the executions utilized by the narco-gangs in its ritualization of violence. She displayed close-up snapshots of mutilated corpses, underexposed crime-scene images of corpses lying on the streets at night, a close-up of a dead body with a gunshot to the face, bodies in a car; an image shot from above of the headless body of a policeman being wrapped by forensic services, and so on and so forth, 313 times.

Margolles capitalizes on the repetition found in PM to create her forceful politicized message. When she exhibited this work in Mexico, Margolles mentioned that there were mixed reactions from the Mexican public. “On the one hand, viewers asked ‘what is your purpose if we already see what you’re showing us?’ but on the other hand they saw the importance in doing a recompilation of this.”

The overwhelming sensation of Margolles’ work comes from witnessing the daily repetition of these events, from the fact that the 313 unaltered front-pages are turned into an abject yearbook of Mexico’s drug war. It is interesting to pinpoint that both On Kawara’s and Margolles’s projects are

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83 Translation mine from the original in Spanish: “No es que los medios de comunicación exageren para pelear por la audiencia o para vender más ejemplares. Las primeras planas de los periódicos reproducen, lisa y llanamente, lo que acontece en las plazas públicas y en los sótanos del país. No inventan, reflejan. La prensa no es hoy más amarillista o escandalosa de lo que era hace unos años. Es la realidad la que se ha modificado y ha hecho de las acciones criminales un asunto cotidiano. Los medios no pueden ignorar este hecho. La prensa construye una realidad a la medida de su público, no la inventa.” Luis Hernández Navarro, “País de Nota Roja,” La Jornada, June 1, 2010, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/06/01/opinion/019a1pol [accessed July 1st, 2014]
maddeningly repetitive, but come to their subjects from different angles. Kawara generates, from the repetition of cold black canvases and white numbers, an existential void, while Margolles generates an overwhelming apocalyptic narrative. Both artists speak about possibilities of capturing a time-space continuum, yet Margolles inscribes a specific violent time and geography, unable to detach itself from the explicitness of a particular violent socio-political context that was being muted by both the government’s rhetoric and the main national newspapers.

Carlos Aguirre and the Current Mexican Landscape

During the same turbulent year in which Margolles collected newspapers from a local tabloid in Ciudad Juárez, Mexican artist Carlos Aguirre (b. Acapulco, 1948) did the same with two local tabloids from the state of Morelos, *El Alarma* and *El Extra de Morelos*. “*Amarillistas* [yellow or sensationalist] like many newspapers of the country, but representative,” says Aguirre, who, like Margolles, has worked with human remains and violent objects, such as axes and saws. Beginning his career in the 1970s as part of the group Proceso Pentágono, Aguirre belongs to a tradition of artistic activism, similar to that of his Latin American counterparts who criticized the military dictatorships and dirty wars of the 1970s and 1980s. He is part of a generation that responded to the political and social unrest that emerged in México in 1968, positioning himself later as an artist who emphasizes the tensions between economic, social, and political realities.

Aguirre’s *Mexican Landscape* [fig. 2], exhibited permanently at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City, is both a digital print and a hand made work.

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85 Interview with the author via email on July 7, 2014. The translation is mine.
86 Integrated by Felipe Ehrenberg, Victor Muñoz, José Antonio Hernández Amezcua and Carlos Finck.
First, there is a large-scale digitally printed vinyl mural (3 x 12 meters), that is a typographic compilation of approximately 1,400 nicknames of drug dealers taken from Mexico’s media. On top of the vinyl there are hundreds of newspaper clippings of photographs of violent deaths that the artist pasted manually with blue tape, creating a horizontal line. He did not manipulate, mediate, or alter the clippings in any way; they are just that: clippings of photographs of victims of the drug war, cut from two local sensationalist tabloids. If one gets close enough, one can see the offset quality of a newspaper, the lack of resolution of the image, the porousness of the paper; one can even still smell the ink.

The nicknames, first chaotically arranged in the artist’s computer, were printed on a large vinyl mural, one on top of the others, in different opacities of black ink. From a distance these tangled names look like a sort of indecipherable wordbook. When one gets closer, however, the words become clear: one can read the names of famous capos, such as “El Chapo” or “El Barbas,” printed in large bold letters, and lesser-known names, such as “El Harry” and “El Koreano,” in smaller fonts.

Aguirre’s overwhelming universe of drug dealers can be seen as a powerful interpretation of the narco’s strategic multiplication throughout Mexico’s geography. According to Reguillo, the narco-machine’s power relies on its unfathomable presence, on the fact that it is always strategically de-localizing itself. 87 In Aguirre’s own negative version of a Mexican Landscape, the narco-machine is multiplying and spreading to overtake the entirety of the country. Aguirre’s Mexican Landscape deliberately follows a traditional composition of a landscape, in which a horizontal line is used to enhance an

open view of the scenery, giving a sensation of vastness and continuity. This horizon is constructed by pasting hundreds of color photographs of violent deaths, following one editorial criteria: selecting “the most violent images” found, since, according to the artist, “these images correspond to the cruelty that has grown.” Here, one is again confronted with the abject reportage of sensationalist journalism: those hanged corpses, mutilated bodies, dead bodies abandoned in the streets; close-up photographs that look like forensic documentations of the crime-scene.

When in an interview I asked Aguirre if he “curated” the way the photographs were going to be distributed in the mural, he said that he was actually afraid of creating a “composition” out of them, and with the help of an assistant placed them carelessly along the horizon, one on top of the other, in a very uncomfortable grid of forgotten, unmourned bodies. Contrary to Aguirre’s framing of the dead, who are presented close-up and in angles that emphasize their abjectness, more “careful” representations of the drug war’s dead are found in the works of mainstream photojournalists, such as Fernando Brito. The images of dead bodies taken by Brito comprise the series Your Steps Were Lost in the Landscape (Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje) (2011), motivated by “the hope of trying to bring attention to the victims of the drug war.” The symmetrical framing and the landscape composition of the photographs bring a “fine art” quality that is hard to find in sensationalist photojournalism. In one of Brito’s images, for example, the body, captured by the camera at dusk and appears floating in a river, bathed by different tonalities of orange, blue and pink colors from the sky [fig. 19].

Brito works as a photography editor for the local newspaper El Debate of

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88 Interview with the author via email on July 7, 2014.
89 This photo series won 3rd prize at World Press Photo in 2011.
Sinaloa, another violent city in the north of Mexico. In an interview with *Vice* magazine he talks about how he realized that photographs in the papers do not withstand the test of time and wished to show what was happening in the world by taking his work to the galleries. After he takes a couple of shots for the newspaper, or, in Brito’s own words: “when I’m through with my tour around the body, getting the photos I need for the paper, I stand in a place where I will get the shot that I want.”⁹⁰ For his “artistic” work there is a level of aesthetization of the scene involved. Brito frames the bodies in such a choreographic relation with the landscape that there is, like scholar Jill Lane argues, “certain calmness” about the corpses “that defies the crisis that has occasioned them,”⁹¹ which is something that Aguirre’s *Mexican Landscape* avoids.

It is not easy, or even possible, to represent the suffering of others. Susan Sontag tried to explain her frustration with this topic in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, written after 9/11, and then again in her article “Regarding the Torture of Others,” written after the images of torture in Abu Ghraib prison were released. Aguirre’s strategy comes from a relentless wish to provoke the spectator by using the power of shock to convey his message of political antagonism. Realizing that there is an overabundance of sensationalist photographs, he creates a landscape from the most shocking images in which the vulnerability of the victims is exacerbated. The dead bodies, which in Brito’s images are framed in a way that are beautified, are presented in Aguirre’s work in their utmost abjction. One of Susan Sontag’s worries of the 1970s was that photographs have lost the power to enrage, to incite; yet the representation of the corpses appropriated by

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Aguirre are presented in such a way that one can say, using Kristeva’s words, that “recognizing them becomes a liability for the continuation of life.” And recognizing them, in their ultimate state of vulnerability, in their condition of dissolution as individuals, is exactly what Aguirre does.

*Mexican Landscape* is a representation of a death valley; it is Aguirre’s contemporary version of a Mexican landscape, opposing the celebratory and colorful landscapes of the Mexican valley by famous Mexican landscape painters, such as José María Velasco (1840 –1912) and Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl) (1875 –1964), the latter turning Mexican geography into a positive symbol of post-revolutionary national identity, and disseminating an idea of Mexico as a paradisiac, exotic place with deep blue skies, rich foliage and mighty volcanoes [fig. 20]. In Aguirre’s horizontal placement of the images of the dead a far more wretched image is implicit: that of a massive grave, a common image with which a contemporary Mexican viewer could identify.

**Carlos Amorales and the Indecipherable Language of the Dead**

For *The Language of the Dead* Mexican conceptual artist Carlos Amorales (b. Mexico City, 1970) created a photographic novel made of fifteen black and white prints of pages in which dead people, bodiless heads among them, speak to one another [see fig. 3]. This work comprises only images of the dead found in the Mexican press from President Calderón’s period, such as the journal *Proceso*, the website *El blog del Narco*, or even “darker” blogs that he found on the internet. From a distance it looks like a typical noir graphic novel, with its desaturated pages divided into several boxes with different

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characters interacting in each of them. But when one looks closely one realizes that the characters’ eyes are closed, their bodies are hurt and sometimes even turned apart, and some bodiless heads appear now and then. In fact, in this comic book the dead are the only “characters.” There are no witnesses, no people peeping around the crime scenes [fig. 21].

Amorales started collecting images from the Internet and choosing those in which only dead people appeared. As he explains, he also “selected certain images that function more as signs: the gunned cars, the broken glasses, etc.”93 Later, he printed the images and photocopied them to take away their color and make the photographs lose their realistic quality. This process is different from Margolles’ and Aguirre’s, since Amorales slightly alters the photographs by desaturating the images and adding enough contrast to resemble a more fictionalized aesthetic, similar to that of noir photonovels. The Language of the Dead was first exhibited at Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris, later at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, and will soon be exhibited in England, the Canary Islands, and Perú. The photographic novel has a limited edition of fifteen and is not intended to be distributed; it is exhibited as a graphic novel usually installed upon a stand that people can skim through, or “clipped” unframed directly to the wall (as in the case of the Museo Tamayo).

When the violence exploded in Mexico, Amorales was at a very peculiar moment in his career: he was in the midst of fragmenting his decade-long visual digital archive titled Archivo Líquido (Liquid Archive), which he had started in 1998 and which is comprised of a series of vector drawings [fig. 22]. This archive has been the core of his installations, videos, animation videos, and collages throughout his career. When

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93 Interview with the author via email on July 21, 2014. The translation is mine.
fragmented, the shapes of his *Liquid Archive* turn into abstract symbols that look like Rorschach cards that Amorales has turned into a codified alphabet. “This typographic system,” says Amorales, “allows me to construct abstract texts. Given the incomprehensible quality of the signs it occurred to me to do a photo novel about something that I also don’t get to comprehend: the violence that was unleashed when Calderón came to power.”

He used this senseless language for the living developed in the *Liquid Archive* fragmented work, throughout the photo novel as an alphabet for the dead. Accompanied by the speech balloons usually used in comics and graphic novels, the dead seem to be “speaking” among themselves, from a new dimension between reality and fiction.

*The Language of the Dead* could recall a cemetery, of that “other city” according to Foucault. But the cemeteries, these macabre spaces located outside the city borders, are generally considered to be “resting places,” and in Amorales’s photo novel the dead are coming back to life. More than anything the photo novel is a sort of scrap yard, says Amorales, a place “in which we only see mutilated or wounded corpses” living in a state of “limbo,” a place that does not belong to the living and in which these “images are wandering like lost souls.” A similar ghostly atmosphere appears in a book of poems written around the same time by the Mexican poet Luis Felipe Fabre, *Poemas de terror y de misterio*. If in *The Language of the Dead* the victims of the drug war emerge as new subjects, as these “lost souls” that come back to life in a space between reality and unreality, in *Poemas de terror y de misterio* something similar happens: the dead emerge

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94 Interview with the author via email on July 21, 2014. The translation is mine.
96 Interview with the author on July 21, 2014. The translation is mine.
as zombies in a state of the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,”97 which is the state in which Kristeva recognizes the abject:

A hand emerging from a grave
the hand of a corpse that in the end proves to be undead
or not quite dead: merely putrified:
the hand of a zombie:
the hand that emerges at the end of the film
to proclaim that the end is not the end:
there’s going to be a second episode98

Fabre and Amorales bring remind the viewer about the thousands of lives in that state of precariousness that for the political system are “are never lived nor lost in the full sense.”99 During Calderón’s term thousands of dead were never identified or were buried in mass graves. In The Language of the Dead they seem to be coming back to life spectrally in the photonovel to claim justice.

Amorales took inspiration from Jeff Wall’s Dead Troops Talk (1992) [fig. 23], a digitally manipulated photograph of an ambush of a Red Army Patrol that took place near Mogor, Afghanistan, in the winter of 1986, in which we can see dead soldiers conversing.100 Wall explains that when he first started to think about the idea of doing a

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97 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 4.
98 Translated by Amanda Hopkinson from the original in Spanish: Una mano saliendo de una tumba:
la mano del muerto que al final resulta que no esta muerto
o no tan muerto: solo putrefacto:
la mano del zombi:
la mano que sale al final de la película
para anunciar que el final no es el final:
habrá segunda parte.
Luis Felipe Fabre, Poemas de terror y de misterio (Oaxaca: Almadía, 2013), 37.
99 Butler, When is Life Grievable?, 1.
100 Unlike Wall’s work, in The Language of the Dead – apart from the slight technical alterations already mentioned– there is no digital manipulation; the images are appropriated as found. The language, as already noted, is incomprehensible to the viewer. This work can be understood as a reflection towards our
photograph of dead men conversing was in the 1980s when the Afghan war was current; then, says the artist, “as the war wound down and the Soviets withdrew, it all seemed to get forgotten. The sense that the war was forgotten attracted me.” Works such as *Dead Troops Talk* and those described in this chapter acquire a different value with time. As the wars are neglected and forgotten, these works become historic evidence of the atrocities. In this sense, these works confirms what the art theorist Boris Groys has stated about the double temporality of art: all of these pieces intervene in their present, visually commenting or criticizing their current social context, but they will also end up in an artistic archive that surpasses the present. He continued:

Artists always do their work not only for their own time but also for art archives – for the future in which the artist’s work remains present. (...) But artists do not work only within the public space of their time. They also work within the heterogeneous space of art archives, where their works are placed among the works of past and future. Art, as it functioned in modernity and still functions in our time, does not disappear after its work is done. Rather, the artwork remains present in the future. And it is precisely this anticipated future presence of art that guarantees its influence on the future, its chance to shape the future. Politics shapes the future by its own disappearance. Art shapes the future by its own prolonged presence.

In an interview I conducted with Amorales, the artist mentioned how he identified this work with Goya’s *Los desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War)* 1810-20 [fig. 24], a series of works that could be seen as a “visual protest” against violence, specifically the atrocities perpetrated during the occupation of Madrid by French troops during the Peninsular War (1807–1814). He used various sketches to narrate violent scenes, such as the depiction of a disfigured body found mounted on a

inci\footnote{Jeff Wall, interviewed published at the *MoMA* website, “Jeff Wall in his Own Words,” (February –May 2007), http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/jeffwall/ [accessed May 3, 2014].}capacity to articulate fully the new violence that occurred in our culture but also about the importance in trying to rationalize it, even if one fails.  
\footnote{Interview with the author via email on July 21, 2014.}
tree, and also included a brief caption which, rather than serving as a description of the event, functions as an expression of dissent by the artist: “This is worse,” wrote Goya below one of the prints. Amorales, contrary to Goya, does not use any verbal expression of dissent: the dissent is expressed by the victims of the violence, the dead, in a language that we, the living, cannot understand.

In the same interview, Amorales explained how he used to work on the series of *The Language of the Dead* at night, while his two little kids were sleeping, to protect them from encountering this violent content. The images, he confessed, affected his sleep, his dreams. He often woke up with a taste of blood on his lips and on his throat. He often woke up to the smell of blood. Day after day, he felt like waking up to a depressing hang over. He was haunted, and so are we.

**Conclusion**

The conceptual artists discussed in this chapter found a vehicle in the sensationalist media’s coverage of the drug war’s violence to make a political intervention. By using images published in these newspapers and the abject nature of their representation of the dead, Margolles’s, Aguirre’s, and Amorales’s works vividly communicate the extreme violence perpetrated by the narco-gangs in its clash with the Mexican official forces, information that President Calderón’s administration was trying to control and edit since the beginning and more strongly and directly, after the “Agreement for the Coverage of Violence.”

By selecting local newspapers such as *PM, El Alarma* and *El Extra de Morelos* the artists gave permanence to neglected and ephemeral mediums as they do not have digital platforms and whose surplus of copies is destroyed every three months. This kind
of tabloid escaped Calderon’s control because they not hold any international prestige and visibility, as they are not considered a legitimate source of journalism. By not only appropriating this violent material but also by insisting on repeating this ephemeral imagery within the permanent framework of an artwork, the artists are saying: this is the “new normal” in Mexico and must not be forgotten.
This chapter investigates three contemporary works of art, produced in the midst of the Mexican drug war, that used dirt and bodily remains to make the victims of the conflict visible in an allegorical way, while showing the decomposition of Mexico’s social fabric. The first of them, What Else Could We Talk About? [fig. 4] was created by Teresa Margolles and curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina for the 2009 Mexican Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennial, and consisted of a series of works and performances that utilized body fluids taken from scenes of violent murders in México. The second one, Artemios’s installation Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez) (2009) [fig. 5], gathered earth from Ciudad Juárez to represent the average weight of 450 missing female factory workers (maquiladoras). This work was exhibited at the Museo Carrillo Gil, in Mexico City (2010-2011), and the Center for Contemporary Arts Matadero, in Madrid (2011), alongside the third piece that will be explored here, Enrique Ježik’s Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material (2009) [fig. 6], a variation on Robert Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown (1969) carried out in Ciudad Juárez by dumping animal remains over a cliff.

**Mexican Concepts of Death**

Death has historically been identified as a symbol of Mexico’s national identity. Scholar Claudio Lomnitz argues that a positive association between Mexico and death emerged as such after the Mexican Revolution, when the post-revolutionary regime started to interpret revolutionary bloodshed as a necessary path toward a new society. In one of the most emblematic Diego Rivera’s murals at the Ministry of Education (1923-
24), for example, the artist depicts a Day of the Dead fiesta (“una fiesta de Día de Muertos”) in which a music band composed of skeletons plays, and people celebrate to its tune [fig. 25]. Moreover, as Lomnitz argues, by the 1940s, a large number of the key works of Mexican modernism “gave pride of place to Mexican intimacy with death.”

Among others, one can think of Frida Kahlo’s exaltation of suffering in her colorful canvases, which traveled in the 1950s around the world as emblems of Mexicanism, or of Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), perhaps Mexico’s most prominent novel, a story about a man who seeks out his father in Comala, a village populated only by ghosts. Then in the 1970s and 1980s, under the shadow of two populist administrations came a deliberate commercialization of the Mexican Day of the Dead, and its *ofrendas* (altars) and *calaveras* (skeletons) garnered international interest, yet were embraced as a very Mexican affair [fig. 26].

The three works explored in this chapter speak to a new meaning of death in Mexico, one that is far away from its historical playful attitude. They have one common approach: they address the dead body as residue, as remains, as a negative sign of Mexico’s identity. By invoking decomposition and fragmentation to reflect on the thousands of victims of the drug war, Margolles, Artemio, and Ježik propose new allegorical images for death and the dead. According to the art historian and theorist Craig Owens, an allegory occurs “whenever one text is doubled by another;” allegory is conceived as a supplement, as “an expression externally added to another

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 468.
expression.” 108 In this sense, it can be said that these three Mexican artists replace a favorable, festive concept of death with a somber and cryptic perception of it. Far from transmitting an image of a nation proud of its relationship with death, they create different allegories of death to depict an image of a failed and weak country, in contrast to the image of a nation “in control” that Calderon’s regime sought to promote. 109

**Teresa Margolles: Violence as an Everyday and Everywhere Process**

As mentioned above, Teresa Margolles has been addressing the issue of Mexico’s violence for the past twenty years. For the SEMEFO collective in which she participated, Mexico’s morgues were “social thermometers” in which one could get a sense of the country’s social degradation through its dead. With this idea in mind, during the 1990s Margolles Arturo Angulo Gallardo, Juan Luis García Zavaleta, and Carlos López Orozco created a series of shocking works that, in the words of Cuauhtémoc Medina “rubs our noses in the stark, shady reality of what it means to die in Mexico—a country where disappeared misery and violence go hand in hand with the inefficiency of the overburdened forensic, medical and legal systems.” 110 Artist Coco Fusco argues that those projects developed by SEMEFO helped shift the idea of death “away from the stereotypically cheerful approach that has become associated with representations of death in Mexican visual culture, into an uncomfortable territory.” 111

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110 Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Mutual Abuse," 44.
Margolles’s approach to death, with the group SEMEFO and later as a solo artist concerns not just one dead body, but also the dissolution of an entire community.\(^{112}\) Death, for her, is about “the social disintegration that is a by-product of an imploding economic order,”\(^{113}\) the neoliberal one, implanted in the country since the mid 1980s. 

*Tongue* (*Lengua*) [fig. 27] is perhaps Margolles’s most controversial work before the drug war exploded. First exhibited in 2000, this piece simply consists of a pierced tongue displayed on a stand. The tongue—the viewer is informed in the accompanying caption—belonged to a young man, a heroin addict, and was acquired by Margolles through an exchange: the artist consented in paying for the young man’s burial if the mother donated his son’s tongue for art purposes. The mother, like thousands of people in Mexico, could not afford to pay for a coffin and a burial for his son. Without Margolles’s offer, the young man would have been buried in a mass grave. The artist presented the idea to the mother, arguing that his son’s tongue would be able to speak metaphorically for the thousands of deaths that remained anonymous in the country. Purposely, *Lengua* was exhibited at Mexico’s Palace of Fine Arts (Bellas Artes), a politically-charged institution, which is reserved for funerals of notable people, such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, among other events.\(^{114}\)

Before Calderón period Margolles filled a room with coolers that could turn water from the morgue used for washing corpses into steam (*Vaporisation*, 2001) [fig. 28]. She also took soap bubbles water from the morgue and stirred them into the air, making an

\(^{112}\) Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Con el cuerpo difunto, no es que te acerques nada más a él. Es que te aproximás a toda una comunidad. El cadáver está rodeado de lo que fue, una colonia, un pueblo.” Teresa Margolles in an interview with Javier Díaz Guardiola, *Javier Díaz Guardiola* (Blog) http://javierdiazguardiola.blogspot.com/2014/03/entrevista-teresa-margolles.html


ethereal installation (*In The Air*, 2004) [fig. 29]. Yet, in 2006, when the violence in Mexico started to intensify, Margolles’s work changed. Rather than working with materials from inside the morgue, she concentrated on taking the materials from the streets, as the violence “spilled” throughout the everyday space and included “society as a whole,” as Julia Banwell has noted.\(^\text{115}\) Margolles explains her shift in these terms:

> On the street death becomes a public spectacle. And this transforms attitudes: children, housewives, people in the streets, suddenly ran into massacres, inevitably. The SEMEFO takes the bodies from the streets, but nobody is responsible for cleaning the streets. The blood dries, become dust, and even if you don’t want to, that blood falls into your face. In Juárez and Tijuana the wind is very normal, even if you thought, “this will never touch me,” “I have nothing to do with this,” the blood –turned into dust– hits you in the face. It was impossible to continue in the morgue because the reflection was happening outside.\(^\text{116}\)

Margolles’s understanding of violence is particularly acute in reference to Mexico’s situation. In her view, violence is not fixated on a specific geography; it is at the same time visible and invisible, and it spills, spreads and escapes the violated body. According to her, violence can erupt in the public or private domain. By shifting her focus from the actual bodies in the morgue to body parts left in the streets after violent deaths, she emphasized that the violence in Mexico became an “everywhere process.” In this sense she coincides with theorists like Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, who state that violence, as process, is cumulative and boundless. “It always spills over.”\(^\text{117}\)

\(^{115}\) Julia Banwell, *Agency and Otherness in Teresa Margolles’s Aesthetic of Death*, 46.

\(^{116}\) Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “En la calle la muerte se convierte en espectáculo público. Un ruido que se contrapone al silencio de la morgue. Y todo eso transformaba mentalidades: los niños, las amas de casa, la gente de a pie, de repente se topaba con masacres, aunque no quisieran. El SEMEFO se llevaba los cuerpos, pero nadie se encargaba de limpiar los restos. La sangre se secaba, se convertía en polvo y, aunque no quisieras, te caía en la cara cuando se levantaba. En Juárez o Tijuana el viento es muy normal. Aunque pensaras “a mí nunca me va a tocar”, “yo no tengo que ver con esto”, la sangre convertida en polvo te golpeaba en la cara. Era imposible continuar en la morgue porque la reflexión estaba fuera.” Teresa Margolles in an interview with Javier Díaz Guardiola, [Javier Díaz Guardiola (Blog)](http://javierdiazguardiola.blogspot.com/2014/03/entrevista-teresa-margolles.html)

Exhibited at the Rota-Ivancich Palace, which served as the Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, *What Else Could We Talk About?* was the result of a series of actions that reflected on the idea of violence as an everyday and everywhere process. During 2008, when Margolles began working on the exhibition in Mexico, the country saw 6,837 violent deaths related to drug trafficking and to the war declared by the government to the drug cartels. 118 Every time Margolles learned that a murder had just taken place, she would arrive with her team to “clean” the blood with large fabrics, or take the broken glass from the windshields of the cars involved in the shootouts that were lying in the ground.119 A few months later, the artist sent these materials to Venice. She shaped the broken glass into pieces of “narco-style” flashy jewelry and installed the large fabrics soaked in blood on the wall of one of the galleries to be viewed by all the visitors.

The fabrics, titled *Re recuperated blood* (Sangre Recuperada) [fig. 30], contained blood, dirt, dust, soil, and mud and were “rehydrated” with water from the Venetian lagoon before being hung inside the Palace. Some areas of the fabrics looked humid, as if they were sweating. Like *sudarios* or shrouds, these fabrics can be seen as those ancient pieces of cloth or burial sheets used to cover the faces of the dead. The action of “cleaning” the crime scene in which minutes before there was a victim lying down could be interpreted, as well, as a practice of “healing” the violated territory.

In addition, for the series *Embroidery* (*Bordado*) [fig. 31] Margolles invited volunteers to embroider in public “narco messages” with gold thread on another series of fabrics soaked in blood taken from violent events. Volunteers embroidered messages

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119 Most of these “interventions” took place at the north of the country, in cities such as Ciudad Juárez or Culiacán, were the narco-violence has been historically perpetrated.
such as “Ver, oír y callar” (See, hear, and shut up), “Hasta que caigan todos tus hijos” (Till all your children fall), “Así terminan las ratas” (This is how rats end), and “Para que aprendan a respetar” (So you learn to respect) on the streets of Venice during the entire duration of the Biennal. When a volunteer finished embroidering a narco-message, the fabric was installed on the walls of the rooms of the Palace. Alluding to Renaissance tapestries used as indoor decoration in aristocratic spaces and as symbols of power and wealth, these fabrics took on a new allegorical meaning, not embellishing a space, but reproducing a sinister death threat.

It is noteworthy that Margolles chose to display one of the blood-soaked fabrics in a far more strategic place: outside the Palace, taking the place of the tricolor Mexican flag [fig. 32]. Replacing a symbol of national pride with a bloodstained piece of cloth, Margolles not only took on the ongoing violence in the country as a subject of her work, but also linked it directly to the state, in the context of an international biennial focusing on national “achievements.” It was a provocative action that operated as a direct critique of Mexico’s federal power and its military campaign against drug trafficking, which brought years of massacres and liters of blood spilled in the streets.

By collecting the remaining blood of the dead bodies, Margolles created an almost invisible, yet phantasmagoric-like presence of the dead at the Mexican Pavilion. The palace became, in a way, a haunted house. Perhaps the most important work related to this “spectral” feeling was the one titled Cleaning (Limpieza) [fig. 33], an action that consisted in having a volunteer daily mopping the entirety of the floors of the palace with a bucket filled with water and blood taken from bodies that died from violent deaths in Mexico. All of the volunteers were relatives of the victims that came from Ciudad Juárez and Sinaloa to Venice to perform this action every day, until the end of the Biennial.
Since the floor was mopped daily, it always had an almost invisible layer of blood on top of it. Visitors inevitably walked in blood by just entering and moving through the Palace. The theatricality of the performance turned the viewer into an actor, into someone who walks through human blood and who becomes complicit in the cycle of violence. The “viewer” exited the Palace while involuntarily leaving invisible tracks of remains along the way, a track of Mexico’s dead throughout the streets of Venice, as a metaphor of the violence as an “everywhere process.”

Having a platform such as the Venice Biennial, with thousands of visitors from all over the world, Margolles’s *What Else Could We Talk About?* has become, in all probability, the most significant work about Mexico’s drug war violence. This exhibition, like no other, helped put forward the discussion of the Mexican dead in the national and international arena, while offering an image of death radically different from the one usually associated with Mexican tradition. Margolles’s work offered an opportunity for intellectuals and critics from around the world to write about what was happening in Mexico. In fact, the title of the project, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, already invited everyone to speak about the massive crimes committed in the country. Many Mexican and international academics, writers and critics responded to Margolles’s call writing positive reviews of the exhibition while criticizing President Felipe Calderón’s security policies, including articles by poet Luis Felipe Fabre, novelist David Miklos, José Manuel Springer, and academics Nicolas Frank, Jill Lane, and Marcia Godoy (NYU), and of course, the writers participating with texts in the catalogue such as Cuauhtémoc
Luis Felipe Fabre stated:

Mexico is beyond my comprehension. Maybe the mistake consists in wanting to approximate it by rational means. It is impossible to understand it. How to understand the evil, the cruelty, the degradation that characterize the moment that this country is going through? (...) Given the increasing wave of violence President Felipe Calderón (partly responsible because of its poor strategy in what he called "war on drugs") asks the media not to alarm society. But What else can we talk about?, so very rightly titled Mexican artist Teresa Margolles her exhibition at the last Venice Biennale. A brutally accurate installation made from materials that the artist collected from crime scenes mainly related to the narco.

Simultaneously, some conservative voices, devoted both to dismissing contemporary art in Mexico and to defending the official campaign against the organized crime, criticized Margolles’s work at the Venice Biennial. Popular right-wing journalists, such as Sergio Sarmiento, expressed concerns about a negative image of Mexico being exported to the most renowned artistic event in the world. In his article

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120 Almost all of these writers published their contributions in websites and personal blogs, as the practice of serious criticism has been disappearing from Mexico’s printed newspapers and magazines, and the few places that remain are giving place to a new reactionary wing of criticism which are openly “against” contemporary art or just decide to ignore it. Mexican art critic María Minera, former art critic for Letras Libres magazine, wrote in 2009 that in Mexico there is “the tendency, more and more extensive and blind, to dismiss contemporary art, as principle and in bulk.” María Minera, “Confusión y censura”, Letras Libres. August, 2009. http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/letrillas/confusion-y-censura [accessed, May 3rd, 2014].

121 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “México sobrepasa mi capacidad de comprensión. Tal vez el error consista en querer aproximarme por medios racionales. No es posible entenderlo. ¿Cómo entender el mal, la crueldad, la degradación que caracterizan el momento por el que atraviesa el país? (...) Ante la creciente ola de violencia el presidente Felipe Calderón (responsable en parte dada su mala estrategia en lo que él ha llamado “guerra contra el narco”) tira línea y pide a los medios de comunicación que no alarmen a la sociedad. Pero ¿De qué otra cosa podemos hablar?, así tituló muy atinadamente la artista mexicana Teresa Margolles su exposición en la pasada Bienal de Venecia. Una instalación brutalmente acertada realizada a partir de materiales que la artista recolectó en escenas del crimen principalmente relacionadas con el narco.” Luis Felipe Fabre, “Los SuperDemokraticos: De qué otra cosa podemos hablar?,” Ventana Latina, October 25, 2011, http://www.ventanalatina.co.uk/2011/10/%C2%BFde-que-otra-cosa-podemos-hablar-de-luis-felipe-fabre-los-superdemokraticos/ [accessed, May 3rd, 2014].

122 This conservative position has a fresh new voice, Avelina Lésper, who has a ferocious anti-contemporary art campaign, claiming it to be “a farce,” using similar arguments as the ones employed by the Nazi’s in the 1940s, like qualifying certain contemporary art works as “degenerate” in a series of articles. For more on Lésper and her conservative criticism see scholar Ramón Alvela, “Avelina Lésper, crítica de arte y prácticas artísticas,” Criticarte, (May, 2014), http://criticarte.com/Page/file/art2014/AvelinaLesperFS.html?=AvelinaLesper.html [accessed, June 3rd, 2014].
“Sin censura” (Without Censorship), published in the national newspaper *Reforma*, Sarmiento stated:

With support from the INBA [National Institute of Fine Arts], the SRE [Ministry for Foreign Affairs] Conaculta [National Counsel for Culture and Arts] and the UNAM [Mexico’s National University], Teresa Margolles presents in the Mexican Pavilion of the Venice Biennale since this June 7th an exhibition that is an empty space with remains of corpses and blood from narcoexecutions. […] Why do we want to spend money on “Vive México”, when we have “Die Mexico”?

“Vive México” was a campaign promoted by Mexico’s tourism board with television spots that depicted Mexico as a place “alive” and “safe to travel.” Among the scenes featured were Acapulco’s famous “Quebrada diving,” Mexico’s pyramids, kids running and smiling, impeccable blue skies, and sunny beaches, while a male voice says: “Make the world know that this is a great country that is alive and that has everything to give.” While those ads were running around the word, in Venice, Mexico was being represented as the opposite, as a “Dead Country.” Yet, what Sarmiento failed to remember is the fact that decades before, the idea of death was promoted by the State as a positive sign, as a folkloric and essential aspect of Mexico’s culture. So what really disturbed Sarmiento and other conservatives, was not that an artist was showing internationally the links of Mexicans with death. What bothered them was that the image

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123 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Con apoyo del INBA, la SRE, Conaculta y la UNAM, Teresa Margolles presenta en el Pabellón de México de la bienal de Venecia a partir de este 7 de junio una exposición que es un espacio vacío con desechos de cadáveres y sangre de narcoejecuciones. Se repartirán tarjetas para picar cocaína con fotografías de ejecutados. ¿Para qué queremos gastar dinero en Vive México, cuando tenemos Muere México?” Sergio Sarmiento, “Sin Censura,” *Reforma*, June 3, 2009.

124 “Vive México” was a campaign with publicity spots promoted by the Government during May, 2009, to reactivate Mexico’s tourism. It was an initiative presented by the president himself, asking Mexicans to promote Mexico as “a tourism destination full of life and attractions.” For more on Vive México campaign here: http://termometroturistico.es/vive-mexico-nueva-campana-de-promocion-para-reactivar-el-turismo.html

125 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Házle saber al mundo que éste es un gran país que está vivo y que tiene todo para dar.” To view the spot visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SGi-EP8Aug
of death was no longer festive, folkloric, and stereotypical. It was a resignified image—a brutal death that is everywhere and “always spills over.”

**Proyecto Juárez**

Ciudad Juárez, a border city and one of the main routes of drug trafficking, suffered a major social collapse with the arrival to Mexico of the neoliberal model, an economic model that David Harvey notes is “characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”\(^{126}\) and that took shape in Mexico with the 1994 NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement). A city subjected to rapid modernization, Ciudad Juárez was turned into a home of sweatshops, assembly industries or *maquilas*, which employed hundreds of young women with low salaries and poor labor conditions. “We all live in a state of vulnerability that belongs to the bodily life,” argues Judith Butler, a vulnerability, she goes on, “that becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.”\(^{127}\) Ciudad Juárez suddenly became a place in which life for women became extremely vulnerable.

In the early 1990s several women—many of them *maquiladoras*—started to go missing or to appear dead in the city or the desert. Many of the crimes committed were in tandem with extreme sexual violence. It is a general belief that the murders were perpetrated by drug traffickers or local police; yet, because authorities refused to investigate the cases in depth, these crimes towards women are still not resolved and have not stopped. In the words of the Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, author of

some the most important pieces on the issue, “these events imply a misogynistic furor that escalated from an isolated crime to a collective ravaging; especially in terms of the ‘copycat effect,’ in which imitators stalk victims and replicate the crimes. Impunity is the murderer’s greatest stimulant.”

The femicides in Juárez (a case that in Mexico is known as “las Muertas de Juárez”) started in the 1990s but have perpetrated until the present day. These assassinations became routine and part of what González Rodríguez has called the “normalized barbarism” that accompanied the drug war. In fact, since the beginning of the fight against the drug cartels, the femicides in Ciudad Juárez escalated alongside with the drug war’s violent peak. According to some figures compiled by González Rodríguez:

22 murders against women were committed in 2006, and at least 14 in the course of 2007. In 2008, the murders of at least 87 women were reported; 24 of them involved sexual abuse and extreme violence. In 2009, there were 164 murders of women and 306 similar murders in 2010. They died from strangulation, stabbing and gunshots. The brutality on their bodies was habitual. The rise of this type of violence coincides with the Mexican drug war and a boom in border insecurity.

In 2006, Mexican curator Mariana David organized a contemporary art laboratory in which thirteen national and international artists would work for a couple of months in Ciudad Juárez. Proyecto Juárez consisted of a series of residencies for artists –among them Artemio and Ježik, and a collective art show comprised works produced in the laboratory during the previous years. This exhibition, which traveled in 2010 to the Museo Carrillo Gil in Mexico City and in 2011 to the Center for Contemporary Arts.

128 Sergio González Rodríguez, *Femicide Machine*, (Los Angeles, Calif: Semiotext(e), 2012), 72.
129 Ibid., 7.
130 Ibid., 75.
131 Other artists were Arthur Zmijewski, Santiago Sierra, Yoshua Okón, Ramón Mateos, Colectivo Democracia, Iván Edeza, Jota Castro, Paco Cao, Gustavo Artigas and Carlos Amorales.
Matadero in Madrid, explored many topics regarding Ciudad Juárez, such as border identity, vertical power, nightlife, history and, of course, violence. The issue of violence emerged as one of the main topics of the show.

Few chapters in Mexico’s history are as obscure as the Ciudad Juárez’ femicides. Internationally they have provoked outrage, but with very few real consequences. By addressing or alluding to these “invisible” tragedies, artists hoped that they could perhaps provoke more protests and international denunciations, like the one exercised by The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) in November 2009, which condemned the Mexican government for violating human rights in cases of femicide in Ciudad Juárez.132 Both works analyzed below –created within the Proyecto Juárez laboratory– attempted to bring to light uncountable injustices perpetrated in Ciudad Juárez for the last two decades and intensified during the drug war.

**Artemio: Imagining the Absent Female Bodies**

Artemio Narro, known simply by his first name, has been part of the Mexican contemporary art scene since the 1990s. Born in Mexico City in 1976, he was one of the artists associated with La Panadería, one of the first alternative art spaces in the country.133 La Panadería was a hybrid space: at the same time it was a cine club, a cafeteria, an informal nightclub where underground rock bands and DJs would occasionally perform, and a gallery that exhibited works by emergent artists such as SEMEFO and Artemio (indeed, Artemio was in charge of programming the space for a

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132 The entire sentence can be read here: http://www.campoalgodonero.org.mx/sites/default/files/descargables-estatico/Sentencia_Campo_Algodonero.pdf

133 Founded in 1994, La Panadería was an art space alternative of official institutions, a household of art works that did not align with official discourses and aesthetic interests. Founded in Mexico City in 1994—a crucial year, when the signing of NAFTA occurred and the Zapatistas emerged—by artists Yoshua Okón and Miguel Calderón, in a building that was formerly a bakery.
couple of years). Like many of his generation, Artemio is a multidisciplinary artist who has worked with various formats, genres, and media, such as video, installation, sculpture, performance, action and so on. His well-known video piece *Rambo* (2001) [fig. 34], is an intervention in which he eliminated all the violent scenes of the 97-minutes long film *Rambo*, from which resulted a 15 minute video piece. Before the violence escalated in Mexico due to the drug war, he had previously worked around the topic of violence, but ever since he shifted his aesthetic interests toward issues of violence and power in a more consistent way.

The work *Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez)*, an action that took place in Ciudad Juárez in 2009, was Artemio’s contribution to Proyecto Juárez. It is a comment about the women murdered in the city. Yet, as the artist himself stated, it is also a “comment related to memory and the absence of memory” of violent events happening in Mexico. Artemio’s early idea was to make a hole in the ground of Ciudad Juárez, to make space for a common tomb, like the ones in which unidentified dead bodies have been deposited throughout the drug war. Later, he decided that the amount of soil extracted from the ground should total the amount of the weight of the number of dead women recognized by the federal government (450 women). Considering the weight of an average female in Mexico is 55kg, he calculated the total amount of soil to be extracted as 28,000 kg.

In order to configure the amount of dirt in kilos, Artemio utilized a mathematical equation purposefully dehumanizing. The cold effect of the equation mirrors the dehumanization of official figures themselves, which are abstract numbers that are unable

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to speak about the actual corporeal life that is lost. That is why he attempts to turn the
dead women into something tangible, something material that people could actually see.
His sought to bring back and visualize in an allegorical, yet material way what has been
lost, what has been hidden, the physical presence of the women that have been murdered
or “disappeared” in Ciudad Juárez.

To do so Artemio used not any soil but the soil of their own city: in which those
women used to walk to work, in which they would be later found dead—often their bodies
were dumped into the desert, like garbage, and sometimes they were found buried in the
desert. Besides collecting and showing all those kilograms of soil, Artemio aimed to
visualize the physical “void” that was left in the ground after excavating that heavy
amount of land. The caved hole—which measured 6.5 meters long, 4 meters wide, and 5
meters deep—evoked a wound in the city’s social tissue, a scar in its landscape, but also a
mass grave in which many anonymous bodies are thrown after having been violently
killed. Today the hole remains in Ciudad Juárez, already transformed by erosion and
other natural forces, whereas the soil has traveled to be exhibited around the world.

*Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez)* has been exhibited
in different ways. In its first exhibition, the earth was transported from Ciudad Juárez to
México City in two trucks and was displayed in the Museo Carillo Gil. There, the pile of
soil was placed in a corner of one of the white walls of the galleries, covering the corner
from floor to ceiling, creating a kind of a pyramid [fig. 35]. Later, the excavated soil
traveled internationally: first to Matadero, in Madrid (2011) and later to The Museum of
Modern Art, in Forth Worth, Texas (2013). The soil was placed differently in every
space, adapting to the exhibition’s architecture. In Matadero, lighting played a very
important factor in the installation, creating a solemn, silent, even church-like ambiance:
the pile was located at the center of an obscure gallery, and the only light came from above the piece, illuminating only the soil while generating a dark surrounding [fig. 36]. At The Modern, the work was exhibit almost identical to the installation in Museo Carillo Gil [fig. 37]. The installation and direct reference to body weight in Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez) allude to the work of Cuban artist Félix González-Torres. Before his death from AIDS in 1996, González-Torres created emotive minimalist sculptures by placing on the floor a pile of candy that matched the weight of his partner Ross, who died in 1991, and permitting viewers to eat the candy, which was constantly replenished [fig. 38]. Both González-Torres and Artemio borrow strategies from minimalist sculpture to make strong political statements. One sees in both artists’ works (and in Ježik’s work discussed below) an echo of Lucy Lippard’s and John Chandler’s ideas of “dematerialization” of art: that post-aesthetic quality, that non-visual emphases in the work.135 According to Lippard and Chandler, what matters is that the works of art become signs that convey ideas, not things in themselves but symbols.136

Within the Latin American context, the critic Luis Camnitzer has shown that “dematerialization was not a consequence of formalist speculation (…) it became an expedient vehicle for political expression.”137 This statement pertains to the three artists explored in this chapter: what matters to them is their allegorical turnaround, only acquired with the socio-political contextualization of the work.

137 Latin American artists such as Doris Salcedo, Oscar Muñoz, and Juan Manuel Echavarría, have also explored these formal strategies, gathering traces of people that have been forcibly disappeared or murdered by violent events such as the “dirty wars.”
Artemio’s *Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez)* was well received by critics when it was exhibited, and it also served as an excuse to express outrage about Mexico’s drug war. For example, the writer and journalist Alejandro Páez Varela (born in Ciudad Juárez) wrote in a review published in the national newspaper *El Universial* that the work was an “ungraspable tribute to the corrupted bodies, a resounding monument, I found, to the negligence of politicians and inoperable governments, useless, good for nothing.”\textsuperscript{138} Meanwhile, in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, the journalist Patricia Ortega Dolz accurately stated that the artist wanted to show “the protagonism of the figures versus the victims” as if the femicides could be resolved simply “by manufacturing data.”\textsuperscript{139}

Projects like Artemio’s *Untitled (Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juárez)* helped give the issue of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez a new relevance in the Mexican public discussion. Its allegorical power invites us to imagine the physicality of the absent female bodies that have been forgotten within the context of Mexico’s drug war, in which the high amount of daily dead bodies is so overwhelming that it becomes all too easy to forget the specific killings of women that began in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s and continues to the present, blended in with the systemic violence ravaging the entire country.

**Enrique Ježik’s Homage to the Victims**

\textsuperscript{138} Translation mine from original in Spanish: “Homenaje inasible a los cuerpos corrompidos; monumento rotundo, me pareció, a la negligencia de políticos y gobiernos inútiles, inservibles, buenos para nada.” Páez Varela, “Jennifer López y el arte en tiempos difíciles,” *El Universal*, October 20, 2010.

\textsuperscript{139} Translation mine from original in Spanish: “El protagonismo de las cifras frente a las víctimas (...) El feminicidio, parecía resolverse maquilando los datos.” Patricia Ortega Dolz, “Juárez, metáfora de un futuro”, *El País*, September 16, 2011.

Born in Córdoba, Argentina, in 1961, and based in Mexico City since 1990, Enrique Ježik has long invited viewers to reflect on the subject of human aggression. For more than a decade, he has been interested in the many manifestations of violence around the world. As the curator and scholar Daniel Garza Usabiaga has noted, Ježik has developed “a multidisciplinary body of work specifically dedicated to exploring and investigating the different shapes that violence can take, from its massive and organized form – as in the case of wars – to its urban manifestations, as well as in the small daily controlled mechanisms of surveillance systems.”

Ježik’s *Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material (Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica, 2009)* invites us to reflect specifically on the massive violence experienced during the years of Mexico’s drug war. When David invited him to contribute to Proyecto Juárez, Ježik decided to do a work in Ciudad Juárez “that could address the particular violence in that city but also the violence that was devastating the entire country.”

*Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material*, an action carried out in Ciudad Juárez, consisted of Ježik’s dumping over a cliff (using a dump truck) six cubic meters of animal remains – intestines and other animal organs that were previously collected from the municipal slaughterhouse. The action of dumping the remains lasted an instant, as they collapsed like a waterfall along the ground, leaving a trail of blood in their path. Yet, the action was captured by a camera that documented the process in several stages: the truck filled to the top with the remains, the instant when the truck released the remains, the

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141 Information given by the curator to the author in interview via Skype on October 2, 2014.
moment when the remains fell like a cascade, and, finally, the remains on the ground, abandoned and ready for the predators to find them and consume them.  

This action could be seen as a variation of Robert Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) [fig. 39]. In the 1960s Robert Smithson, alongside some of his contemporaries, drew away from the idea of art as an object to be displayed in a gallery or a museum, choosing, instead, to work directly with the landscape, expanding the possibilities of what art could be, or where art could happen. *Asphalt Rundown* was the first of a series of “pourings” or “flows” executed in 1969. Seeking an ephemeral work and distancing himself from object making, Smithson realized a series of actions that required pouring concrete or glue in different cities in the world. Performed in an abandoned gravel quarry situated on the outskirts of Rome, on October 1969, *Asphalt Rundown* consisted of a dump truck releasing a load of asphalt down the cliff. Smithson was interested in the interference of gravity, how it forced the matter down the cliff, creating a vertical black river that suddenly brakes into many arteries. One can literally see how the asphalt breaks apart into cracks and stripes that flow down the cliff by the irreversible gravity.

This action gave physical form to “entropy” which was a subject that preoccupied Smithson during that time.  

Entropy—an irreversible condition, the lack of order or predictability, the gradual decline of order into disorder—relates to the allegorical aim of *Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material*, as the term can easily be used to refer to Mexico’s

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142 This sequence can be seen in Enrique Ježik’s website: http://www.enriquejezik.com/sitejezik/obras/09seismetrosmateriaorganica/09seismetrosmateriaorganica.htm

143 In Robert Smithson’s words: “it’s a condition that’s irreversible, it’s a condition that’s moving towards a gradual equilibrium and it’s suggested in many ways. Perhaps a nice succinct definition of entropy would be Humpty Dumpty. Like Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again.” Robert Smithson, “Entropy Made Visible,” Interview of the artist with Alison Sky, (1973) http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy.htm.
political and social corrosion. Talking about entropy, Smithson presented an American political crisis, the Watergate affair, as an example of that kind of deterioration: “You have a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there’s no way that you can really piece it back together again,” he stated. In Mexico, the country’s deep involvement with drug trafficking and the violence that emerged suddenly embodied in a cascade of carcasses made a perfect example of entropy.

Robert Forti documented Smithson’s “pours” and turned Asphalt Rundown into a thirteen-minute color film, only completed in 1993. Unlike Asphalt Roundown, Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material is not exhibited as a video piece but as a still image. In the Museo Carillo Gil in Mexico City, the work appeared as a triptych of photographs in which one can see the progressive effect of the piece described above: the before, when the animal remains are still in the truck, the during, when the remains are falling down, and the after, when they have fallen [fig. 40]. In Matadero Madrid, a huge gallery space comprised of large industrial naves, the curator Mariana David decided not to frame the images, “as if they were images to be consumed in a white cube,” but to print one single photograph in a large format 3 x 2.10 meters of tarpaulin canvas, a heavy duty material used to cover objects or create tents, a rough material that draws away from the fine art format.

On Ježik’s website, below the work Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material a caption reads: “Reflection on the violence that prevails in Mexico and homage to its victims.” Ježik’s intentions could not be more straightforward. Despite the specific location for this action as Ciudad Juárez, Jezik demonstrates an explicit concern with

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145 Information given by the curator to the autor in interview via Skype on October 2, 2014.
Mexico’s political violence throughout the country. Cuauhtémoc Medina has correctly stated that this work easily serves as “an allegory of the violence in Mexico.” The pieces of bloody animal remains poured down the cliff could speak of the precarity of the lives lost from the Mexico’s drug war, the thousands of bodies that are thrown away and cannot be “pieced back” together.

Ježik engages a work from the past, Asphalt Rundown, to make a comment about the present. To do so he appropriates the formal principle of Smithson’s action and adds to it layers of political meaning related to the Mexican context. According to cultural historian and art critic Maurice Berger, allegory is “the process of retrospective association.” In Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material Ježik borrowed a simple mechanism from Smithson to create a new rundown, now filled with dead remains, which points retrospectively to the land art of the 1970s and to Smithson’s idea of entropy while creating a new image, a new allegory, for the Mexican critical situation.

The images that documented the bloody waterfall are very hard to look at. It is practically impossible to stare at them without feeling sick or a sense of repulsion. Perhaps these reactions show the effectiveness of Ježik’s allegory: what shocks is not just the image, that of the animal remains falling, but the link made in the mind of the viewer with the victims in Ciudad Juárez and in all of Mexico. An image is doubled by another one, yet much more shocking: above the actual image, a new one is created, one that talks about the thousands of people killed during the drug war, their bodies often dismembered and rarely mourned, simply thrown away in pieces in forgotten cliffs.

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Conclusion

The constant violence and not so sporadic massacres that have devastated Mexico during the last years have brutally distorted the idea of death in the country. Typically understood as a sign of Mexican identity and festively celebrated in the Día de Muertos, death lost whatever positive connotation it could still maintain, and became an everyday and everywhere issue, particularly cruel with those people that live precariously, like the women in Ciudad Juárez, reduced to cheap and disposable labor in a neoliberal and misogynist order. The three works explored in this chapter aim to comment on that systemic violence, and to do so they work in an allegorical manner, creating images that at the same time fight the stereotypical ideas on death and invite us to reflect about the faith of the thousands of bodies that have not been found or have been buried in pieces in the massive graves of a ruinous, decomposing country.

During the final stages of Felipe Calderón’s six-year term, artists and civilians converged to protest against the ineffectiveness of his policies against drug trafficking. At these public manifestations it was not easy to determine when art ended and activism began. One of the terms that can best define those actions in which art and activism amalgamate is “artistico-activist practices,” coined by Chantal Mouffe to describe the “kind of critical art that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”

By helping give agency to the “spectator” and voice to the victims’ families through participation in the public sphere, the three “artistico-activist practices” analyzed in this chapter served as “open” expressions of social dissent, directly demanding the government’s recognition, clarification, and resolution of the murders and disappearances. In 2010 the Spanish collective Colectivo Democracia pasted posters with the phrases “Killer State” (Estado asesino) and “Freedom for the Dead” (Libertad para los muertos) in public spaces around Ciudad Juárez for the urban action titled Killer State/Freedom for the Dead. In addition, months later, these posters were used during massive protests against violence. The following year, for The March of the Skeletons (La marcha de las calaveras) (2011) internationally–renowned Chilean-born artist and cult filmmaker, Alejandro Jodorowsky, asked people to march in Mexico City dressed as

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Calaveras, the skeletons used during festive Mexican traditions, such as the Day of the Dead, to represent symbolically the thousands of dead and disappeared of the drug war. Jodorowsky considered the performance a psychomagic\textsuperscript{149} act that intended to “heal” the Mexican population. Lastly, We Embroider for Peace (Bordamos por la Paz), an ongoing initiative that was started by Fuentes Rojas collective, has been disseminated by many other groups throughout the country and in several cities around the world. It consists of civilians –mostly relatives and friends of the victims– who gather in public plazas to embroider the names of the dead or disappeared onto handkerchiefs.

The open and unsuccessful military combat against organized crime united social activism and art in protest. During the Spring of 2011 (five years after the beginning of the drug war) the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad) publicly exposed massive civilian discontent. This movement was a civil response to the violence lived in the country as a consequence of drug trafficking. It started taking shape in April 26, 2011, soon after the murder of Mexican poet Javier Sicilia’s son, Juan Francisco, a 24-year old student. Devastated and irritated at the same time, Sicilia called on people to mobilize and mourn together publically, asking President Calderón to modify his strategy against the drug cartels and to recognize the existence of civil, innocent victims.\textsuperscript{150}

From Cuernavaca to Mexico City, in a route that has a distance of 80 km (50 miles) Sicilia, the parents of other victims, and thousands of civilians marched for three days in a peaceful protest. This “March for Peace with Justice and Dignity” took place on

\textsuperscript{149} Psycomagic, is the name that Jodorowsky uses to address his practice of spiritual healing that believes that in order for healing to occur it is necessary to exercise a concrete creative action in the real world. For more on Psycomagic see Alejandro Jodorowsky, Psicomagia (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela), 2004.

\textsuperscript{150} Juan Francisco Sicilia Ortega, a 24 year old student was found dead in a vehicle alongside with six other people in Temixco, Morelos. All of the bodies had tape in the face, the skull, the wrists and ankles.
May 8th, 2011. It started in Cuernavaca, Morelos, the site of Juan Francisco’s killing, with
500 people. When the group arrived in Mexico City’s Zócalo on Sunday May 8th,
Sicilia’s march had accumulated 65,000 people [fig. 41].151 When he arrived at the
Zócalo Sicilia took the microphone and said:

If we walked and got here like this, in silence, it’s because our pain is so great and
so profound, and the horror of where it comes from so immense, that we no longer
have the words to express it. It is also because through this silence we tell
ourselves, and we want to tell those responsible for the security of this country,
that we don’t want one more death as cause of this growing confusion that seeks
only to suffocate us, as they suffocated the breath and life of my son Juan
Francisco, of Luis Antonio, Julio César, Gabo, Maria del Socorro, of commander
Jaime and of many thousands of men, women, children and elderly killed
with such indifference and meanness that belong to worlds that are not and
will ever be ours; we're here to tell us and tell them that this pain of the soul in
our bodies should not be converted into hate or into more violence, but into a
lever that will help us restore love, peace, justice, dignity and the stuttering
democracy that we losing.152

The initiatives promoted by Colectivo Democratia and We Embroider for Peace
occurred within, or in contact with, the massive gatherings and events that the Movement
for Peace with Justice and Dignity originated, whereas Jodorowsky’s March of the
Skeletons echoed the format of these political marches but with a distinctive performative
and spiritual charge. All of these actions, however, directly demand the end of violence
provoked by the constant combat between state power and organized crime through

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151 Hanako Taniguichi, “La marcha nacional llega a su destino en el Zócalo de la Ciudad de México,” CNN
Mexico, May 8th, 2011 http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2011/05/08/marcha-nacional-movimientos-de-
migrantes-se-suman-al-reclamo-por-la-paz [accessed October 15, 2014].
152 The translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Si hemos caminado y hemos llegado así, en silencio,
es porque nuestro dolor es tan grande y tan profundo, y el horror del que proviene tan inmenso, que ya no
tenían palabras con qué decirse. Es también porque a través de este silencio nos decimos, y les decimos a
quienes tienen la responsabilidad de la seguridad de este país, que no queremos un muerto más a causa de
esta confusión creciente que sólo busca asfixiaros, como asfixiaron el aliento y la vida de mi hijo Juan
Francisco, de Luis Antonio, de Julio César, de Gabo, de María del Socorro, del comandante Jaime y de
tantos miles de hombres, mujeres, niños y ancianos asesinados con un descuido y una vileza que
pertenecen a mundos que no son ni serán nunca los nuestros; estamos aquí para decírnos y decirles que este
dolor del alma en los cuerpos no lo convertiremos en odio ni en más violencia, sino en una palanca que nos
ayude a restaurar el amor, la paz, la justicia, la dignidad y la balbuciente democracia que estamos
perdiendo.”
collective strategies of promoting the visibility of the victims and open expressions of affect.

**Colectivo Democracia’s Visual Protest**

The urban initiative *Killer State/Freedom For the Dead* [fig. 7] was a public action by Colectivo Democracia developed in 2010 in concert with Proyecto Juárez, a project conceived by curator Mariana David and whose proposal has already been explored in the second chapter of this thesis. This project was not the first in which Colectivo Democracia, comprised of Pablo España and Iván López, worked with interventions in the social sphere.\(^{153}\) Actually, according to them, the way they work “is very much related with propaganda and work in public space.”\(^{154}\) One of their early works, for example, is *Security on Site* (2003) [fig. 42] a panic room installed in the public space in which a citizen in an emergency situation can get inside and lock herself down. The user can only escape with the help of someone in the exterior, as the room only opens if both the person from outside and the one inside push the release button simultaneously.\(^{155}\) Thus, when they agreed to participate in a project in Ciudad Juárez, “it became natural for us to do a proposal that developed as an action in the public space,” said España.\(^{156}\)

Although very simple, the action *Killer State/Freedom For the Dead* had many stages. First, the artists designed the posters to be displayed throughout the city. The posters, with a simple white background, contained letters in black and red, traditional anarchist colors [fig. 43]. Noaz, a Spanish activist and graphic designer who consistently

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\(^{154}\) Pablo Espala, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014. The translation is mine.

\(^{155}\) Fore more on this work visit Colectivo Democracia’s website: http://www.democracia.com.es/proyectos/security-on-site/

\(^{156}\) Pablo Espala, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014. The translation is mine.
collaborates with the collective, designed the format, composition, and font of the posters, which were printed in 70 x 50 cm (27.5 x 20”) on newsprint paper. The phrases they chose to circulate, *Estado asesino/Libertad para los muertos*, could also be seen as a general anarchist protest, and were inspired by a particular event. The artists claimed that the denouncement did not originate with them but from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which, in November 2009, condemned the Mexican government for not complying with its duty to guarantee the human rights of Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, Laura Berenice Ramos Monarrez, and Claudia Ivette González, three female victims, two of them minors, of the femicide spree in Ciudad Juárez.\(^\text{157}\) When the members of Colectivo Democracia learned about this condemnation, they saw it as a perfect justification to use the phrase “Estado asesino” (Killer State), “not as a punk outburst but as a proclamation with institutional support.”\(^\text{158}\) The objective, they say, was to put out there in the streets that which every one already knew but with a juridical and legal background. As for demanding *Freedom for the dead*, this is what they hoped to do:

> We wanted to express the fundamental claim of the relatives of the disappeared. Demanding for the freedom for the dead, is nothing other than demanding the victims to be found, for their bodies not to be missing anymore, and in that way, for the corresponding legal actions to proceed, and for reparations to the families to be provided, if that is even possible.\(^\text{159}\)

In the second phase of this action’s Colectivo Democracia had the posters pasted in the public space by a group of workers hired by Proyecto Juárez. The anonymity of these people was important for the work not to be seen as “artistic.” The posters were pasted

\(^{157}\)The entire sentence can be consulted here: http://www.campoalgodonero.org.mx/sites/default/files/descargables-estatico/Sentencia_Campo_Algodonero.pdf

\(^{158}\)Pablo Espala, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014. The translation is mine.

\(^{159}\)Pablo Espala, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014. The translation is mine.
onto walls, lampposts, bridges, and other public areas in Ciudad Juárez, mainly in the areas Zona Centro, Pronaf, and Zona Comercial [fig. 44]. Many of them were removed by employees of the municipal police, since the action coincided with the Cumbre de Seguridad [Security Summit], a closed-door two-day summit in Ciudad Juárez in which President Calderón, the Governor of Chihuahua State (Cesar Duarte Jáquez) and other officials from both Mexico and the United States discussed issues related to violence on the border.160 When the local and national media arrived to cover the event, they found a city filled with posters that accused the State of being a murderer. “This,” says Pablo España, “supposed that the action had an important echo in the media, and it came to reflect the stance of many activists, giving them voice in the media while they spoke about the summit.”161

Among the press that covered the action was the local newspaper La Polaka, on October 11, 2010 noted that “guerrilla pamphlets appear throughout the city against the government one day before the presidential visit,” and called the action “an aggressive maneuver against the government.”162 While covering the summit, the national left-wing newspaper La Jornada also pointed out that in many streets of Ciudad Juárez, especially in the surrounding areas to the Camino Real Hotel, where the federal officials were accommodated, appeared several posters with the Estado asesino legend, and mentioned as well that the municipal police tried to take them down.163

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160 Among officials that attended are: Officer of Public Safety (Genaro García Luna), the ambassador of the United States in Mexico (Carlos Pascual) and the president of the Municipal Police (Héctor Murguía Lardizábal).

161 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Esto supuso que la intervención tuviera un eco mediático importante y que creemos que venía a reflejar la postura de muchos de los activistas contra las desapariciones, dándoles voz en los medios a la vez que se hablaba de Calderón.” Pablo España, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014.


163 Ciro Pérez Silva, “Arranca cumbre de seguridad en Juárez; hoy llega Calderón,” October 12, 2010,
The third phase of the work came when the documentation of the action was exhibited alongside with the rest of the artistic works commissioned by Proyecto Juárez. On the floor of the Museo Carillo Gil in Mexico City, Colectivo Democracia placed two piles of posters printed in a larger size: 70 x 95 cm (27.5 x 37.4”), for people to take home with them. Later, when the exhibition traveled to the Centro de Creación Contemporánea Matadero, in Madrid, a wallpaper filled with posters was added and in the same wall, the artist included newspapers clippings with the reaction of the press, and the condemnation by the International Court, giving the work far more contextualization.

But the action did not end enclosed inside the museum walls. One of the hopes of the collective was that the slogans could blend with Ciudad Juárez’s urban culture. To achieve this aim, Colectivo Democracia collaborated with local graffiti artists, who appropriated the message and reinterpreted it in their own way [fig. 45]. Furthermore, Colectivo Demoracia’s posters were also used in massive demonstrations, including when the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity organized another national mobilization in the Summer of 2011, this time called “La Marcha del Consuelo” (The March of Consolation), also led by Javier Sicilia. Thousands of people toured different cities throughout the country (Morelia, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Durango, Saltillo, Monterrey, Torreón), culminating in Ciudad Juárez on June 10th. The Comité de Resistencia Visual (Committee of Visual Resistance) of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, coordinated by curator Kerry Doyle, was in charge of endowing the movement with aesthetic tools for the Ciudad Juárez events. Through this committee, the social movement appropriated Colectivo Democracia’s posters and used them to protest for three consecutive days [fig. 46], marching from Ciudad Juárez’s City Hall to Juárez.


Monument, built in 1909 to commemorate the first centenary of Mexico’s independence and the most emblematic monument of the city, located in a park with the same name. It is noteworthy to say that for Colectivo Democracia, whose intentions “have always been to overflow the field of arts,”164 it was important that the posters circulated anonymously and not as “works of art.” By being part of this massive protest, the collective’s posters blended with hundreds of other handmade posters made by civilians.

Initiatives such as Colectivo Democracia’s and the ones described later in this chapter step beyond the modernist belief promoted by formalists such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried that “art retains its authenticity only by remaining within the circle of social disengagement,”165 reject the tradition of aesthetic autonomy, and escape the limitations of the conventional “white cube.” They all take place in the public sphere, while promoting civilian participation as essential for the realization of the action. For Chantal Mouffe, artistico-activist practices could take the shape of new urban struggles, like “Reclaim the streets” in Britain, an act that, during the 1990s, blocked the streets for cars and turned them into spaces of festive political demonstrations against capitalism [fig. 47].166 One can also find such practices around the protests against the thousands of murders and disappeared under military regimes in Latin America. Perhaps the most precise example is the Argentinian urban action called El Siluetazo, which occurred in 1983 as part of the mobilizations generated to protest against the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). This action consisted in delineating in cardboard

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164 Pablo Espala, interview with the author via email, October 30, 2014.
166 Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” 1.
the human form of people passing by and that literally “offered their bodies” as casts of anonymous missing persons, in an attempt to make visible the forced disappearances of the time. As a result thousands of silhouettes (therefore the name “siluetazo”) were later pasted on many walls of Buenos Aires demanding the return of the disappeared [fig. 48].

During the 1968 revolts in Mexico City, the students and faculty of the ENAP and the Esmeralda schools created visual images such as “banners, picket signs, posters, leaflets or stickers” as propaganda for the movement. In the words of scholar Alvaro Vázquez Mantecón: “these were also anonymous images, produced collectively with a pragmatic goal: disseminating the ideas and objectives behind the protests, using design to bring together different concepts in an efficient manner.” Actions like Killer State/Freedom For the Dead therefore echo the artistic spirit of 1968 and its Latin American counterparts, and are works that were meant to circulate within the public sphere to move well beyond the aesthetic, with the aim of merging with other similar political demands.

Alejandro Jodorowsky and the “Resurrection” of the Dead

When the multifaceted Chilean artist Alejandro Jodorowsky, an active user of Twitter for the past years, received the following tweet from one of his followers: “In Mexico, there has been more than 50,000 murders in five years. Is it possible to have a psychomagic act

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168 This public action took place in September 21 of 1983, from an original project by artists and professors Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Guillermo Kexel and Julio Flores. For more on this action visit: http://www.macromuseo.org.ar/coleccion/artista/e/el_siluetazo.html
for Mexico?” he responded: “We have to organize a march of exactly 50,000 people with skeleton masks screaming: Stop!”171 Quickly the word spread and The March of the Skeletons172 happened a couple of months later, on the rainy morning of Sunday, November 27, 2011. The attendance was not 50,000 as predicted but around 5,000 people—among them Jodorowsky and his two sons—who marched from the National University’s Olympic Stadium to Garibaldi Plaza, in Mexico City, wearing skeleton costumes and masks, or with drawings of skulls painted on their faces. Although conceived by Jodorowsky, The March of the Skeletons [fig. 9] was organized by civilians, mostly young Jodorowsky enthusiasts,173 who not only dressed as skeletons, but also carried black and white Mexican flags and demanded justice for the dead. When the participants reached Garibaldi Plaza, Jodorowsky hired a couple of Mariachis and people were invited to sing La Llorona, a popular Mexican song and folktale about a mother who cries for her dead son. Because the event took place in November 2011, the year when multiple caravans and marches took place around the country to protest against Calderon’s national security policies, this action blended with other political marches that were occurring during that time. It is precisely the indefinable aspect of the action, the fact that The March of the Skeletons is at the same time a performance, a political protest, a therapeutic action, and a fiesta, that links it to the other actions described in this chapter.


173 One of the promoters was Mexican singer Jessy Bulbo. The event was promoted massively via Faceebok, Twitter, with the use of this promo video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvKiEcuytdo [accessed March, 3rd, 2014].
Psychomagic is a form of therapy invented by Jodorowsky throughout his career. It is based on the belief that, in order for a person to heal herself and overcome a series of traumas, she or he needs to perform a specific creative action. Psychomagic has roots in Jodorowsky’s radical theater practice and is linked to his belief that “if art doesn’t heal you, it doesn’t work.” Usually, a psychomagic act is done individually. The March of the Skeletons was the first collective psychomagic event performed in Mexico. It consisted of symbolically “resurrecting,” in the streets of the country’s capital, the thousands of dead bodies murdered by the drug war, with the professed purpose of “healing and raising awareness about the violence plaguing the country.”

It is known that death has a “domino effect” that affects the living, the ones that “are left” alive, and that these living need to undertake actions in order to be “healed.” As expressed by Cuauhtémoc Medina, each family or community is a “net of affects”, and “each violent death produces a long-lasting trauma” in that net. It does not matter if the participants of The March of the Skeletons were actually “healed” (something impossible to verify); what is relevant here is the fact that Jodorowsky recognized a general sense of “affliction” in the population and that he developed an action to expose and express it. This mixture of political and aesthetic intentions turned this work into an “artistico-activist practice.”

Alejandro Jodorowsky was born in 1929 in Tocopila, Chile, where he belonged to theatre circles, and moved to Paris in the early 1950s, where he collaborated with mime

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175 “Marcha y habla por los que ya no pueden” (March and speak for those who can’t no longer) was the phrase used in the call for action video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyKIEcuYtDo
Marcel Marceau and expanded his artistic range. Actor, writer, caricaturist, stage director and spiritual guru, he is perhaps best known as the filmmaker of *Fando y Lis* (1967), *El Topo* (1970), and *The Holy Mountain* (1973), classics of the underground cinema circuit, and for the later creation of psychomagic theory. There was always a spiritual side in his work, as he became a disciple of the Japanese Zen master Ejo Takata, who taught psychoanalysts how to overcome “conceptual thinking.” In the words of Medina, Jodorowsky begun early to propose “a peculiar mix of Frommian psychoanalysis, post-Catholic spirituality, Zen Buddhism, alchemical esoterics and indigenous mysticism.” It was not until the 1980s that he began to dedicate himself almost entirely to reading tarot in cafes, to developing psychomagic, and to his own therapeutic school.

*The March of the Skeletons* resonates with those early theater-like events that Jodorowsky called “ephemeral-panic” (efimero pánico) acts and that he organized in the 1960s [fig. 49]. They did not follow any defined script and took place in non-traditional settings, such as empty lots, public plazas or a house in ruins.\(^{177}\) *The March of the Skeletons* like those panic-ephemeral acts, and similar to any performance, was an event that could only happen once, and the “spectators” were turned into actors. In Jodorowsky’s “ephemerals” the actors were to interpret their own drama, to expose their own “intimate enigma.” In those events, continues Medina “Jodorowsky envisioned a fusion of a fiesta and a show, a dissolution of the kind of theater that tries to identify the play with reality.”\(^{178}\)

Jodorowsy similarly asked the participants of *The March of the Skeletons* to engage in a sort of cathartic performance. As they were walking, he told them “to march

\(^{177}\) Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Psicomagia*, 27.

and speak for those who can no longer,” and to “move slowly, like if it were the dead who were walking.” The March of the Skeletons operated like a symbolic ritual, hoping to “resurrect” the dead and give them the opportunity to scream and complain. In this sense, this action was somehow similar to El Siluetazo, in which one silhouette at a time would make visible the wound inflicted in the Argentinean population by the forced disappearances. In the words of scholar Martín Guerra Muente:

It was an effective method of generating surprise and apprehension for that faceless regard, for that interpellation that was made from the silence of a silhouette without a name. The body of the protester, instead of the body of the disappeared, as live support for the elaboration of the silhouette is the main feature of the Siluetazo. Similarly, in The March of the Skeletons this new protesting body took the place of a body that had been expelled and silenced by the drug war. The main difference between these two works is that there was a certain “silence” to the silhouettes, while through the march Jodoro was asking to resuscitate the “voice” of the victims. 

Most of the skeleton-like costumes were created manually through body painting (white face and black circles around the eyes and nose, and a delineated jawbone) [fig. 50], while other participants used plastic skeleton masks to cover their faces [fig. 51]. Other brought the usual Halloween skeleton costumes: black jumper with the white skeleton drawn [fig. 52]. Many of the women painted themselves as Catrinas (or “Elegant Skull”) adding flowers and some color motifs in their design [fig. 53]. This variety of

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179 The translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Hay que avanzar lentamente como si los muertos andaran.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqJGpJEx0
180 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Esos cuerpos que comenzaron a poblar las paredes de los espacios públicos no pudieron pasar desapercibidos, puesto que cada silueta era la marca de un cuerpo expulsado. Fue un metodo eficaz de generar extrañeza y aprensión por esa mirada sin rostro, por esa interpellacion que se hacia desde el silencio de una silueta sin nombre. El cuerpo del manifestante en lugar del desaparecido como soporte vivo de la elaboracion de la silueta es el rasgo del Siluetazo.” Martín Guerra Muente, “Poderes de la perversión estética de lo abyecto,” Guaraguao 34 (2010), 82.
181 Ibid.
costumes from the participants not only added a certain theatrical significance to the march but also gave it a biting political commentary. They signified a reemergence of the traditional Mexican *muertos* imagery, common in Mexico’s festive Day of the Dead, but offered a political redefinition of it. As expressed by the writer and art critic Luis Cardoza y Aragón, in the beginnings of the twentieth century the skeleton became “Mexico’s national totem,” adopted by the caricaturist José Guadalupe Posada in his daily illustrations “as a sign of truth and a very particular truth: the universality of death proved the fundamental equality of man.” Posada’s now famous “dressed-up skeletons” were used then to exercise a critique of the Porfrian regime (1876-1910), characterized by its political authoritarianism and social inequality [fig. 54].

*The March of the Skeletons* brought back Posada’s idea of the skeleton as sign of equality of men. By having people from different ages and social classes gathering together at the march to represent the dead—and not *any* dead but the ones who have died violently from the drug war—the action embarked on a campaign of de-stigmatization of the victims. By offering their bodies as vehicles of the dead, the participants challenged the government’s and press’ discourse about the dead, which stated that they were just “collateral damage,” or criminals “fighting each other.” In this sense, and maybe involuntarily, Jodorowsky’s work inscribed in the campaign already started by Javier Sicilia—a campaign that fought to re-signify the dead as people that, like anyone, deserve mourning.

**We Embroider for Peace and the Politics of the Affect**

Perhaps of all the artistico-activist actions originated in Mexico during President Calderon’s administration, none of them became as enduring and consistent as the *We
Embroider for Peace project [fig. 9]. Since 2011, this collective has been embroidering on handkerchiefs the names of the drug war’s victims, including details of how they died or messages of love from their mourners. The greatest achievement of the growing collective, which now comprises twenty-nine different groups of embroiderers around the world,\(^{182}\) has been helping to reconstruct the victims’ subjectivities, portraying them as persons who deserve to be mourned, who are loved and missed, rather than criminals or “collateral damage,” as the government insisted on portraying them. Until today, family members and friends of the victims, together with men, women, and children who sympathize with the cause, gather to embroider at kiosks, plazas, and other public spaces all over Mexico.\(^{183}\) Additionally, through different social media platforms, these organizations have been able to spread the word about their mission, and handkerchiefs have been sent to different locations throughout the world, such as Mozambique, Argentina, and Spain. Given the lack of a public memorial for the victims of the drug war, these handkerchiefs, exhibited as clotheslines, have become ephemeral memorials,

\(^{182}\) Up until November, 2014, the existing organizations are: Circulo de estudios bordados por la memoria, Colectivo Fuentes Rojas, Bordados pela paz Guarani e Kaiowa-Brasil, Bordados por la paz Hermosillo, Bordados por la paz Japón (red global por la paz en México), Bordados por la justicia en Copala, Bordados por la paz Morelos, Bordados por la paz Países Bajos, Bordados por la paz Patria Nueva, Bordados por la paz Playa del Carmen, Bordados por la paz Pueba, Bordados por la paz Rimini, Bordados por la Paz Uprez, Bordamos Feminicidios, Bordamos por la paz de México en Barcelona, Bordamos por la paz Durham, Inglaterra, Bordamos por la paz Guadalajara, Bordamos por la paz Maputo, Mozambique, Bordamos por la paz Nueva York, Bordamos por la paz Organización Social Patria Nueva, Bordamos por la paz Puerto Rico, Bordamos por la paz para, México en Montreal centro, Bordamos por la paz Parque Loreto, DF, Bordamos por la paz Toluca, Bordamos por la paz Córdoba, Argentina, Bordamos por la paz Zacatecas, Bordando por la paz Nuevo León, Bordando por la paz Torreón, Coahuila, Broder pour la paix Francia.

\(^{183}\) Whereas at the kiosk at Plaza Zaragoza on Sundays in Hermosillo, at Plaza Loreto on Saturdays in Mexico City; in front of the Fountain of Los Coyotes in Coyoacán, every two Sundays; at the esplanade of the Municipal Palace on Sundays in Monterrey, and at the Ofrenda del Zócalo the last Sunday of every month in Cuernavaca, just to mention a few. This was gathered from Bordamos Por la Paz Blog http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.com/ [accessed October 15, 2014].
generating empathy in passersby, with the hope of raising awareness about Mexico’s dead and disappeared, while creating a community united by pain.\footnote{Elia Andrade Olea; Gustavo Quiroz; Sol Henaro; Mónica Castillo; Naomi Rincón Gallardo; Taniel Morales; Carlos Báez; Carlos Martínez Renteria; Fernanda Arnaut; Victor García Zapata; Colectivo Sublevarte; H.I.J.O.S.; Colectivo de Mujeres Tejiendo Resistencias; Comité Estudiantil Metropolitano; Colectivo Hamaca Imaginaria; Alfredo López; Rodrigo Sastre; Julia Arnaut; Ángela Barraza; Héctor Calzada; Emilio Reza; Emanuel Leyzaola; Hajime Espinosa; Martín Torres; Mireille Campos; Edgar Xolotl; Larissa Rojas; Daniela Peña; Julio Cesar Hernández; Fátima Lozano; Alma Tonantzi; Alberto Arnaut; René Crespo; Jocelyn Pantoja; Regina Méndez; Humberto Robles; Francesca Guillen; Zona Autónoma Makhnovtchin (ZAM); La Furia de las Calles.

The initiative \textit{We Embroider for Peace} originated from an art collective named Fuentes Rojas. Its name, which means “Red Fountains,” comes from an earlier initiative proposed in 2011, which consisted in dying red the water that runs in the public fountains of Mexico City, representative of the city’s splendor and European influence. In their public manifesto posted on their Facebook page on April 29, 2011 and signed by visual artists from different disciplines, cultural promoters, social activists, and citizens,\footnote{Elia Andrade Olea; Gustavo Quiroz; Sol Henaro; Mónica Castillo; Naomi Rincón Gallardo; Taniel Morales; Carlos Báez; Carlos Martínez Renteria; Fernanda Arnaut; Victor García Zapata; Colectivo Sublevarte; H.I.J.O.S.; Colectivo de Mujeres Tejiendo Resistencias; Comité Estudiantil Metropolitano; Colectivo Hamaca Imaginaria; Alfredo López; Rodrigo Sastre; Julia Arnaut; Ángela Barraza; Héctor Calzada; Emilio Reza; Emanuel Leyzaola; Hajime Espinosa; Martín Torres; Mireille Campos; Edgar Xolotl; Larissa Rojas; Daniela Peña; Julio Cesar Hernández; Fátima Lozano; Alma Tonantzi; Alberto Arnaut; René Crespo; Jocelyn Pantoja; Regina Méndez; Humberto Robles; Francesca Guillen; Zona Autónoma Makhnovtchin (ZAM); La Furia de las Calles.
\footnote{As expressed in their manifesto published on Fuentes Rojas Facebook page on Abril 29, 2011. https://www.facebook.com/notes/fuentes-rojas/paremos-las-balas-pintemos-las-fuentes-manifiesto-p%C3%BAblico/105052549583325 [accessed October 15, 2014].} Fuentes Rojas’s members claimed their concern with the thousands of deaths in Mexico caused by the drug war. They called for a massive action on Saturday May 7, 2011 as support for Sicilia’s March for Pace with Justice and Dignity that was arriving to Mexico City the next day. “The main focus of the initiative,” they wrote “is to strengthen the call for the national march of May 8th lead by Javier Sicilia, through a peaceful activity that makes visually explicit the national mood.” On the day of the event, the collective colored the water of 16 fountains with red vegetal paint [fig. 55].\footnote{Elia Andrade Olea; Gustavo Quiroz; Sol Henaro; Mónica Castillo; Naomi Rincón Gallardo; Taniel Morales; Carlos Báez; Carlos Martínez Renteria; Fernanda Arnaut; Victor García Zapata; Colectivo Sublevarte; H.I.J.O.S.; Colectivo de Mujeres Tejiendo Resistencias; Comité Estudiantil Metropolitano; Colectivo Hamaca Imaginaria; Alfredo López; Rodrigo Sastre; Julia Arnaut; Ángela Barraza; Héctor Calzada; Emilio Reza; Emanuel Leyzaola; Hajime Espinosa; Martín Torres; Mireille Campos; Edgar Xolotl; Larissa Rojas; Daniela Peña; Julio Cesar Hernández; Fátima Lozano; Alma Tonantzi; Alberto Arnaut; René Crespo; Jocelyn Pantoja; Regina Méndez; Humberto Robles; Francesca Guillen; Zona Autónoma Makhnovtchin (ZAM); La Furia de las Calles.
\footnote{As expressed in their manifesto published on Fuentes Rojas Facebook page on Abril 29, 2011. https://www.facebook.com/notes/fuentes-rojas/paremos-las-balas-pintemos-las-fuentes-manifiesto-p%C3%BAblico/105052549583325 [accessed October 15, 2014].} The chosen color intended to denote “that the water that springs from the Mexican soil is tainted with
blood when it passes through all the narcofosas (narco graves),” as journalist Jaime Avilés wrote the following day in *La Jornada*.\(^{187}\)

During their meetings, some members of the Fuentes Rojas collective used to undertake the activity of embroidering. As noted by Francesca Gargallo Calentani, the collective was influenced by the work of Mónica Iturribarría, whose project *1/40,000 Regarding the Pain of Others*, consisted of embroidering crime news items published in the newspapers on handkerchiefs [fig. 56].\(^{188}\) The act of embroidering as protest has an exhaustive tradition in Latin America, where communities are formed to protest peacefully against violent events. It is the case of the Chilean *Arpilleras* (1974-1994), who knitted their stories of oppression under Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship with a technique similar to patchwork [fig. 57]. A more recent project is the “Scarf of Hope” (Chalina de la Esperanza) in Perú (2009-) a large scarf knit by 1,010 people and measuring one kilometer which commemorates the 14,500 disappeared of the Ayacucho region in the conflicts between the criminal group Sendero Luminoso and State agents [fig. 58].\(^{189}\) All of these projects recall the ways in which, beginning in the 1960s, feminists artists rescued embroidering and knitting by creating works around ideas of domesticity and highlighting the ways in which "feminine" crafts must be considered valid art forms. In Latin America, mourning the dead through feminine crafts has a highly

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\(^{187}\) The fountains that they intervened were the Corregidora, at the Santo Domingo Plaza; Los Coyotes, at Jardín Centenario de Coyoacán, the one at Auditorio Nacional, at Paseo de la Reforma street. Also, the fountains at the median of the Álvaro Obregón road, en la Colonia Roma, two fountains at Plaza de la Solidaridad, near Alameda Central, as well as the water mirror at Centro Cultural Universitario at UNAM. Also fountains at Centro Nacional de las Artes, Luis Cabrera, Mercado San Juan and Arco Chino in Mexico City. Jaime Avilés, “Tiñen de rojo 16 fuentes de la capital,” *La Jornada*, May 8, 2011, [http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/05/08/politica/004n2pol](http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/05/08/politica/004n2pol) [accessed October 15, 2014].

\(^{188}\) Francesca Gargallo Calentani, “Bordados de Paz y Memoria. Acciones de disenso ante la violencia,” in *Bordados de Paz, memoria y justicia. Un proceso de visibilización*, ed. Porfirio Torres, María Eugenia Camacho and Alfredo López Casanova, (Guadalajara: Grafisma Editores, 2014), 64.

\(^{189}\) “La Chalina de la Esperanza en memoria de los desaparecidos,” *Actualidad RT.com*, November 26, 2011. [http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/20220-Per%C3%BA-chalina-de-esperanza-en-memoria-de-desaparecidos](http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/20220-Per%C3%BA-chalina-de-esperanza-en-memoria-de-desaparecidos)
politicized charge. It is how women, mothers and grandmothers have historically manifested in times of struggle and repression. Their artistic interventions highlight the subversive possibilities of “low” art, of marginal and peripheral activities, in contrast to that of “high” art interventions.

The first time the Fuentes Rojas collective embroidered publically was in August 2011, in the context of the Jornadas de Cultura (Cultural Summit) organized by the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. A month later, they started embroidering systematically every Sunday in Coyoacán Plaza, the center of a popular Mexico City neighborhood. Five months later, on February 20, 2012, they launched a massive call for action through their Facebook page, asking people to participate with the hope of eventually embroidering the names of the thousands of victims killed up until that point. Soon after, this action started to spread contagiously. Activist and writer Lolita Bosch,¹⁹⁰ who has been a strong promoter of this project from the beginning, recalls:

The project is very interesting because the mothers of the victims appropriated it and started to embroider the names of their children dead or missing. Then many people, from different parts around the world, started to support these women. We, in Barcelona, embroider once a month.¹⁹¹

Very soon, one after the other, groups of embroiders started to gather around the country. Because thousands of families of the victims congregated at the cultural summits organized by Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, attended also by groups of

¹⁹⁰ Noticing the absolute lack of representation or even sympathy by local or Federal institutions, Catalan writer Lolita Bosch started a website titled Menos Días Aquí (Fewer Days Here) with an ongoing daily death-count that tried to gather as much personal information as possible about the victims in order to identify each and every one of the bodies, in order to enable them to emerge from anonymity. http://menosdiasaqui.blogspot.com/ [accessed May 6, 2013].
¹⁹¹ Lolita Bosch, interview with the author via skype on Jan 27, 2014. The translation is mine from original in Spanish: “El proyecto ha sido muy interesante porque las mamás se apropiaron de ese proyecto y empezaron a bordar a sus hijos muertos y desaparecidos, luego mucha gente del mundo de muchos lugares distintos ha decidido bordar para acompañar a estas señoras, nosotros en Barcelona bordamos una vez al mes.”
We Embroider for Peace, people brought the idea back into their hometowns and replicated it. Through the act of embroidering, the victims’ families began to create a network of support, a community of pain and hope. One of the most active and large groups is *We Embroider for Peace - Guadalajara*, which has been gathering every Sunday since March 18, 2012, mounting clothesline of handkerchiefs at the Parque Rojo in Guadalajara. “Every Sunday,” recounts the reporter Thelma Gómez for *El Universal*, “someone approaches asking them to embroider a handkerchief for a friend, father or brother.”

Usually the handkerchiefs used are white and measure approximately 42 x 42 cm. Since they cost only 5 pesos each (less than 50 cents USD), it is a feasible craft that can be done at very low cost. The aesthetics of the handkerchiefs vary from group to group. The ones done by Fuentes Rojas use red thread, and the text is usually centered in the fabric. In Nuevo León, the names of the disappeared are embroidered in green to symbolize hope; in Playa del Carmen people employ a colorful palette, while the

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192 The leaders of Colectivo Bordamos por la Paz-Guadalajara are Margarita Sierra, Rosalba Espinosa, Laura Patterson, Beatriz Eugenia Andrade Iturribarria, Tere Sordo and María Eugenia Camacho.

193 This group started gathering after sculptor Alfredo López Casanova called for the first embroidering action at ITESO, the Jesuit University of Jalisco State, in the Context of the Cultural Summit by the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. They have recently published a book that recollects the memory of the many embroiders around the world. However, on Monday, September 8th of 2014, they wrote in their blog a press release saying that “after two and a half years of intense activities, they were informing that the Guadalajara collective finished its activities of embroidering in the public space,” thanking everyone that was part of the movement, and arguing that unfortunately “the public space now a days is not a safe place to perform this activity. Better times will come in which a handkerchief is not a threat and the importance of the right of Memory and Truth is recognized. They currently gather to knit at ITESO school, were they feel safe.”


organization *Bordamos Feminicidios* (We Embroider Femicides)\(^ {195}\) opts for violet for the names of the women murdered in the country.\(^ {196}\)

In many of the embroidered handkerchiefs, the dead are named, as the families of the victims use the handkerchiefs to write specific messages to their love ones. But on the most part, since the names of the people killed are often not revealed in the newspapers, because the person that has died has not been yet identified, what the embroiders capture are the specifics on how they died:

*A man was found dead with signs of having been tortured and had several gunshots in his body. Acapulco, Gro. March 31, 2011.*

*Three people were killed and their heads were found by police and military in the free highway to Reynosa, Cadereyta, NL 02/02/2011.*\(^ {197}\)

Through most of his presidency, Calderón did not speak about the possibility of creating a public memorial for the victims of the drug war, nor recognize them as victims at all. Even worse: the administration argued that they were “collateral damage” or were criminals involved with drug trafficking issues. With these arguments, Ileana Diéguez concludes, “the dead from the drug war were already dead, already sentenced, or they were ‘the enemy,’ with no right to be mourned.”\(^ {198}\) In the words of Alfredo López Casanova, one of the founders of *We Embroider for Peace-Guadalajara*:

> When Calderón came out with the stupidity about civilian deaths being collateral damage, and that even though innocent lives were lost it was still worth fighting

\(^{195}\) That started on November 23rd, 2012 in Mexico City.

\(^{196}\) Francesca Gargallo Calentani, “Bordados de Paz y Memoria. Acciones de disenso ante la violencia,” 105.

\(^{197}\) Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Tres personas murieron y sus cabezas fueron encontradas por policías y militares en la carretera libre a Reynosa, Cadereyta, N.L. 02/02/2011” *Bordamos por la Paz Blog* [http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.com/](http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.com/) [accessed October 1st, 2014].

\(^{198}\) The translation is mine from original in Spanish: “De modo que los muertos de esa guerra ya estaban de antemano muertos, sentenciados, eran "el enemigo", sin derecho a ser llorados.” Ileana Diéguez, *Cuerpos sin duelo: Iconografías y teatralidades del dolor* (Córdoba, Argentina: Ediciones Documenta, 2013), 32.
drug cartels—that is to say, that humans lives were not significant—we proposed the urgency to give the dead back their names and reconstruct their history. In this sense, the *We Embroider for Peace* initiative helped fill a void, creating collective spaces to mourn. Naming as a practice for memorials extends way beyond Latin America; one can think of the meticulous efforts to inscribe the name of each American casualty in chronological order on the Washington’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Lin [fig. 59], and completed in 1982. Or the recent National September 11 Memorial, by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker, that honors the nearly 3,000 people killed in the attacks of September 11, 2001, by inscribing their names along the perimeter of two large pools [fig. 60]. Instead of arranging the names in chronological order, they “place the names of those who died that day next to each other in a meaningful way, marking the names of family and friends together, as they had lived and died or companies or groups attending a conference together and other “meaningful adjacencies.”

Driven by an intense pressure exercised by The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity by, one day before leaving office, on November 30, 2012, the secretary general informed the press that he had agreed to build a Memorial for the Victims of Violence in Mexico. The memorial generated much controversy as it was built inside military quarters in Mexico City. Consisting of 15 steel walls designed by architect Ricardo López Martín [fig. 61], it was not inaugurated until April 2013 and without the names of the victims or a proper contextualization of the events. The Movement for

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199 The translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Cuando Calderón salió con su estupidez de que los muertos civiles son bajas colaterales y que aunque se perdieran vidas inocentes, valía la pena luchar contra el narcotráfico—es decir, que los seres humanos no importan—nos planteamos la urgencia de darle nombres y apellidos y reconstruirles su historia a los muertos.” Francesca Gargallo Calentani, “Bordados de Paz y Memoria. Acciones de disenso ante la violencia,” 53.

Peace with Justice and Dignity called it “a monument for Felipe Calderón’s war” and together with the We Embroider for Peace Collective, they have rejected it ever since. On December 1, 2012, many groups that comprised the collective We Embroider for Peace gathered to “say goodbye” to President Calderón as his administration was coming to an end. They organized an ephemeral memorial at the Alameda Park of the Historic Center, in Mexico City, which consisted of hundreds of handkerchiefs exhibited on clotheslines. By hanging the handkerchiefs in the air, the demonstration exposed hundreds of crimes suffered by hundreds of victims who were desperate to mourn [fig. 62]. More recently, in November 2013, the collective organized a second memorial, Memoria y verdad, exhibiting 1,600 handkerchiefs at the Laboratorio de Artes y Variedades (LARVA) in Guadalajara [fig. 63]. These ephemeral installations helped make visible a new subjectivity: the dead of the drug war not as criminals but as victims that needed memorials, mourning, and recognition.

Thus these ephemeral memorials are full of handkerchiefs in which the victim’s families are not afraid of showing their pain and expressing their suffering for everyone to see, as in embroidered statements such as the following:

*My child I put you in the hands of God.*
*We hope to see you soon, very soon.*
*Force.*
*Your mom and Richi.*

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201 “El Memorial a las Víctimas, la última obra de Calderón, abre este viernes,” CNN Mexico, April 5, 2013 http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2013/04/05/el-memorial-de-victimas-la-ultima-obra-de-calderon-abriera-este-viernes
203 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “Mi niño te coloco en las manos de Dios. Te esperamos pronto, muy pronto. Fuerza. Tu mamá y Richi.” This was one of the first handkerchiefs done in Nuevo León by Irma Leticia Hidalgo, which son Roy Rivera was kidnapped on January 11th, 2011.
These installations use the handkerchief in a very different manner than other mourners in South America. As noted by Ileana Diéguez, Las Madres and Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (an association of mothers and grandmothers of victims that were abducted during the Argentinian dictatorship) used to protest by publically displaying their grief by wearing white handkerchiefs tied to their heads [fig. 64]. On the contrary, the ones exhibited in Mexico as clotheslines “evokes the laundry patios where one washes and spreads the clothes to the sun, out to the public light to expose and narrate what is happening.”

The clotheslines of handkerchiefs not only serve as ephemeral memorials built by civilians, but also denounce the alarming rate of the ongoing violence. As one of the members of We Embroider for Peace-Guadalajara says, “it usually takes us three hours to embroider one handkerchief, but in Mexico every forty minutes a violent crime occurs. We bought sixty handkerchiefs but that only serves us to cover the violence of just two and a half days.” It is obviously impossible for the embroiderers to keep up with the overwhelming murder rate. When the collective started, the official number of victims of the drug war was supposedly around 50,000. By the time Calderón left office, according to Proceso, which published data by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) (Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography), 121,683 violent

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204 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: “El pañuelo, esa prenda altamente cargada de sobrevivencias luctuarias en otros espacios sudamericanos, emerge en estos escenarios. Ya no para ser portado sobre la cabeza de los dolientes, sino como textura/texto que evoca el procedimiento de las tenededras de los patios donde se lava y se extiende la ropa al sol, saliendo a la luz pública para exponer, narrar los acontecimientos.” Ileana Diéguez, Cuerpos sin duelo, 34.

deaths had occurred. The reality of the situation in Mexico surpasses the artists’ efforts to portray it. Despite this element of futility, the artists persist, and handkerchiefs are embroidered slowly, with care and affect, individualizing each loss, defying the vagueness of statistics.

In addition, *We Embroider for Peace* can be seen as a “counter-machine,” a term coined by Rosanna Reguillo to refer to those projects which “oppose the power of the narco-machine,” those initiatives which “come from citizens in their multiple roles (activist, artists, parents, journalists, students), and resist, make visible, or subtract power from the narco-machine.” One of the functions that this “counter-machine” performs is the construction of community in the midst of a devastating social tissue. It is noteworthy that each of these handkerchiefs is hand-made, and that each one takes about three hours to finish. The embroiderers use that time to talk about their missing loved ones and to share thoughts, stories, and assistance to help find their missing loved one. They support one another, and create a security net that the government cannot provide. At the same time, they hold and kiss the handkerchiefs: sometimes they cry, expressing their emotions publically. What moves them and keep them going comes from the power of affect. “It is the union with the persons whose kids, sisters, fathers, and mothers have been taken away what motivates us,” says a member of *We Embroider for Peace-Guadalajara*.

**Conclusion**

208 Francesca Gargallo Calentani, “Bordados de Paz y Memoria. Acciones de disenso ante la violencia,” 53.
209 *Bordamos por la Paz Blog*, http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.com/
These three initiatives take shape only within the social sphere and through the efforts of a collective voice. A condemnation by the International Court becomes a collective demand through posters that are carried in political demonstrations. A ritualistic march such as *The March of the Calaveras* blends with other denunciatory marches of the time, while it unites a community afflicted by fear and death. Making individual pain into a collective protest, *We Embroider For Peace Collective* enounces affect as a political statement. In sum, these artistico-activist practices not only visually rebelled against the general state of violence that had inflicted the Mexican population, but were actions that promoted the visibility of the victims and defied the stigmatization of its dead by its hegemonic voices.
Conclusion

The nine works investigated in this thesis, created by six artists, one collective and hundreds of “civilians,” demonstrate an openly antagonistic political turn that occurred in Mexico’s art production after 2006 and throughout President Felipe Calderon’s six-year term. They call attention to a specific crisis of violence that had not been seen in the country since the Mexican Revolution. Nevertheless, this crisis has surpassed this time frame and has extended to the present day. In this sense, this investigation could be used for future analysis on the different strategies used by artists to respond—from the trenches of the arts—to times of war.

The three artistic strategies examined in these pages—the exposure of abject imagery, the resignification of the cultural meaning of death in Mexico, and the use of activist practices—made visible that which the government wished to erase. These projects helped put thousands of anonymous and unmourned dead bodies in the center of cultural and political debates. They contested the government’s hegemonic discourse about the amount of deaths and the scope of the violence lived. They unmasked nationally and internationally the true horrors of the crisis, concealed by the government and the mainstream media. They served to catalyze viewers and critics to address the issue of Mexico’s violence. They exposed the systemic violence hidden below the humanitarian crisis. They created new allegorical images of death and the dead in Mexico, which contrast the folkloric, festive, and now anachronistic national paradigms and stereotypes. They helped de-stigmatize the victims of the drug war by showing them not as criminals or collateral damage but as people who are loved, missed, and deserve
mourning. They encouraged public participation and fostered political agency. Last but not least, they formed communities and networks of support for the victims’ families.

While I was investigating and writing about these nine works created within a context of loss, suffering, and injustice, I had the thoughtful words of scholar Ileana Diéguez on my mind: “There are no art works that could remedy the lost of a love one. When there is lack of justice, there is no restitution or consolation.”210 These words serve as a reminder that political art today cannot pretend to restitute loss or injustice. As described above, however, political art does a great deal. It can illuminate and denounce larger issues. It can activate a narrative of dissent. It can defy hegemonic politics and discourses. It can be transformative.

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210 Translation is mine from original in Spanish: "Ninguna palabra, ninguna obra de arte puede remediar la pérdida de un ser querido. Cuando hay ausencia de justicia no hay restitución ni consuelo." Diéguez, Cuerpos sin duelo, 16.


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Figure 31. Teresa Margolles *Embroider (Bordado), What Else Could We talk About? (De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?),* 2009. Mexican Pavilion during the 2009 Venice Biennale.

Figure 32. Teresa Margolles, *Flag (Bandera) What Else Could We talk About? (De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?),* 2009. Mexican Pavilion during the 2009 Venice Biennale.
Figure 33. Teresa Margolles, *Cleaning (Limpieza), What Else Could We talk About? (De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?),* 2009. Mexican Pavilion during the 2009 Venice Biennale.

Figure 34. Artemio, *Rambo,* 2001. Video projection in loop 15 min. duration (video still).


Figure 40. Enrique Ježík, *Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material* (Seis metros cúbicos de materia orgánica), action carried out in Ciudad Juárez, 2009. Three different shots.
Figure 41. Javier Sicilia leading the *March for Peace with Justice and Dignity* that took place in May 8th, 2011. Photo credit: Notimex.

Figure 43. Colectivo Democracia, *Killer State/Freedom For the Dead*, 2010. 70 x 50 cm (27.5 x 20”) posters printed into newsprint paper.

Figure 44. Colectivo Democracia, *Killer State/Freedom For the Dead*, 2010. 70 x 50 cm (27.5 x 20”) posters printed into newsprint paper. Urban Action (pasting posters).
Figure 45. Graffiti in Ciudad Juárez inspired in collaboration with Colectivo Democracia.

Figure 46. Colectivo Demoracia’s posters used in massive demonstrations.
Figure 47. In 1996 a RTS party stopped all traffic on the M41 motorway, London.

Figure 48. The Siluetazo, Buenos Aires, 21 September 1983. Photo credit: Daniel García
Figure 49. Ephemeral-panic that took place in 1967 and consisted in Jodorowsky breaking a piano in a tv-show.

Figure 50. Face painting at *The March of the Skeletons*, November 27, 2011. Mexico City. Photo credit: Edlin Castro Navarrete.
Figure 51. Masks at *The March of the Skeletons*. November 27, 2011. Mexico City. Photo credit: Alejandro Saldivar.

Figure 52. Skeleton Costumes at *The March of the Skeletons*, November 27, 2011. Mexico City. Photo credit: Sharenii Guzmán/ *El Universal.*
Figure 53. Catrina at The March of the Skeletons, November 27, 2011. Mexico City. Photo credit: Shareen Guzmán/ El Universal.

Figure 54. José Guadalupe Posada. Grand Electric Skull (Gran calavera eléctrica). [between 1900 and 1974]. 1 print on white fabric, relief etching; 21.4 × 34 cm. (sheet). Print shows large skeleton hypnotizing a group of skulls and a sitting skeleton; an electric street car, with skeletons as passengers, is in the background. Image Courtesy Library Of Congress.

Figure 56. Mónica Iturribarría, *1/40,000*, 2011, textile technique. Embroidering crime news items published in the newspapers onto handkerchiefs.
Figure 57. Chilean *Arpilleras*. Patchwork textile technique. Photo credit: Royal Alberta Museum

Figure 58. *Scarf of Hope* (Chalina de la esperanza) exhibited at CICR (International Committe of the Red Cross), Geneve. Photo credit: CICR /M. Pecassou
Figure 59. Maya Lin, Washington’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, completed in 1982.

Figure 60. Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker, National September 11 Memorial. Photo credit: Brian Kusler
Figure 61. Ricardo López Martín, “Memorial for the Victims of Violence in Mexico,” 15 steel walls. Campo Marte, Mexico City. Photo credit: Fernando Camacho Servín.

Figure 62. We Embroider for Peace, “Ephemeral Memorial,” December 1, 2012. Alameda Central of the Historic Center, Mexico City. Photo credit: bordandoporlapazpuebla.wordpress.com
Figure 63. *We Embroider for Peace* "Memoria y verdad," 1,600 handkerchiefs at the Laboratorio de Artes y Variedades (LARVA) in Guadalajara. November, 2013. Photo credit: nuestraaparenterendicion.com

Figure 64. April 30, 1977, first march of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.