

Invisibility, Grief, and Death: A New Burial in Mexican Contemporary Art

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Abstract

With the perpetuation of violence in Mexico, traditional forms of mourning and burial have become increasingly inaccessible to victims and their families. Widespread bloodshed has not only resulted in mass burials of unnamed victims, but the Mexican government furthers the trauma by discouraging institutional processes that would otherwise bring closure and recognition to affected families. In response to the institutions that have rendered victims invisible, this article argues that Mexican contemporary artists have created their own spaces of mourning, referred to as a ‘new burial,’ to repair traditions of death that have otherwise been compromised or denied entirely.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Mexico has experienced—and continues to undergo—catastrophic levels of homicide, femicide, forced disappearances, and other forms of violence carried out both by cartels and a militarized state. These violent crimes have not only resulted in illegal mass burial sites and public cemeteries full of unnamed victims—and well over 100,000 individuals missing—but the Mexican government also discourages institutional processes that would otherwise bring closure and recognition to affected

families.¹ In response to the crime, governmental institutions, and disproportionate poverty that renders victims invisible, this article argues that Mexican contemporary artists have created their own imaginary and actual spaces, which I refer to as a ‘new burial,’ to re-establish and repair traditions of death that have otherwise been compromised or denied entirely. This article discusses artwork from the beginning of Mexico’s signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, utilizing theories of trauma, abjection, and affective reception to analyze art as a response to new, exploitative labor systems and other long-standing institutions that perpetuate violence. Mexican artists Teresa Margolles and Alfredo López-Casanova are analyzed as creating physical and conceptual sites of burial, remembrance, and grieving within this theoretical space as a means to cope with, and discuss, these traumatic deaths.

Despite Mexico’s significant beliefs and traditions regarding death, scholarship surrounding Latin American contemporary art as it relates to the post-mortem perception analyses the function of death, burial, and grief in the artwork of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. For example, Andreas Huyssen’s book *Memory Art in the Contemporary World* discusses Salcedo’s engagement with memory and absence in her piece, *Atrabiliarios* (fig. 1). *Atrabiliarios* is among Salcedo’s most prominent works, notable for the artist’s use of shoes belonging to the disappeared, and the use of cow bladder and surgical thread to shroud the viewer’s gaze upon them. Huyssen argues that the presence of shoes belonging to the disappeared (and their placement

¹ Carolina Robledo Silvestre, “Peinar La Historia a Contrapelo,” *Encartes* 2, no. 3 (March 21, 2019): 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.29340/en.v2n3.62>.

within niches of walls) underscores the absence of a body. Interestingly, Huyssen also describes Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* as being "a mournful substitute for the proper burial denied" to murdered and disappeared women in Colombia. Yet, the author does not discuss the transformation of artwork into a site of grief and burial outside of memory.² Jill Bennett's book, *Empathetic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, on the other hand, analyzes Salcedo's work as a function of grief, with various artworks (including *Atrabiliarios*) serving to both embody it and to portray the haunting changes that accompany loss and mourning. Though Bennett's analysis generates an undeniable link between Salcedo's work and grief, there is no discussion as to how the evasiveness of physical burial for the deceased might transform the function of an art object into an actual site of mourning.

Scholarship on the relationship between contemporary Mexican art and themes of death and grief focuses primarily on the artist Teresa Margolles and the use of physical traces of the deceased in her art practice, as well as the implications surrounding her unique attention to abject corporeal remains. Julia Banwell's article "Agency and Otherness in Teresa Margolles' Aesthetic of Death," for example, analyzes the role of Margolles in dictating the outcome of the victims' remains and their perception as art-objects. Banwell argues that the incorporated participants (both deceased and alive) are "powerless" to Margolles' artistic practices, and there exists a power dynamic between the artist and her choice of substrate. Contrastingly, Mónica

² Andreas Huyssen, "Traveling Trauma Tropes: Salcedo, Atrabiliarios, and Sundaram, 12 Bed Ward/Trash/The Ascension of Marian Hussain" in *Memory in Art in the Contemporary World* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Limited, 2022), <https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=3281828&scope=site>.

Salazar's article, "Redefining the Mexican Tradition of Death: Teresa Margolles and the Embodiment of Absence," analyzes Margolles' practice as an extension of complex, historically-rooted practices surrounding death and conceptualism in Mexican art since the 1990s. Both authors, among others, place emphasis on Margolles' interaction with narco-violence, conceptualism, and death, but do not discuss ideas of her art functioning *as* a simulated burial or gravesite. As for Mexican artist Alfredo López-Casanova, however, there exists minimal research discussing the functions of his artwork that commemorates the disappeared and deceased, despite the impact of such artwork in Mexican journalism.

Overall, compared to other Latin American countries, there is little emphasis on the role of grief and mourning in Mexican contemporary art as a fundamental and necessary mode of creative expression within the current context, despite contextual similarities between Mexico and countries such as Colombia and Argentina. As a result, this article seeks to establish a connection between the absence and/or mutilation of remains, institutional/psychological barriers to proper burial and grief, and the creation of what I refer to as a new burial by contemporary Mexican artists, as an effort to restore long-held traditions of death, burial, and grief.³

SECTION II: A PROPER BURIAL DENIED

³ Societal ideologies that support victim-blaming and stigmas are also factors in the invisibility and exclusion of affected individuals. For further reading, please see: Claire Moon and Javier Treviño-Rangel, "Involved in Something (Involucrado En Algo)': Denial and Stigmatization in Mexico's 'War on Drugs,'" *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (June 8, 2020): 722–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12761>.

In 2010, 72 bodies—all killed with signs of torture—were discovered in a warehouse in San Fernando, Tamaulipas.⁴ In 2014, 43 student-teachers in Guerrero were kidnapped by police officers, and as of today, none of the 43 students' remains have been found.⁵ More recently, in 2020, a mass grave with “at least 113 bodies” was found in Jalisco, and in Ciudad Juárez, the bodies of raped and tortured women are often dumped near *maquiladoras*, or factories.⁶ For Mexico, occurrences like these happen daily, but have skyrocketed since the early-1990s upon the signage of NAFTA which created the conditions for overwhelming economic disparity that exacerbates violence, as well as the subsequent invisibility of victims and their families. The homicides, tortures, and forced disappearances have ravaged Mexico for decades now, and even today show no signs of stopping: As of 2021, at least 350,000 people have been murdered, and over 100,000 have gone missing, with many of these victims being impoverished, and thus, “unimportant,” to the Mexican government.⁷ Mass gravesites are found regularly with the remains of the murdered or disappeared, but very seldom do officials actually test the often mutilated or destroyed remains for identification.⁸ Reports of violence and disappearances are left ignored, as they are

⁴ Carolina Robledo Silvestre, “Peinar La Historia a Contrapelo,” *Encartes 2*, no. 3 (March 21, 2019): 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.29340/en.v2n3.62>.

⁵ It was said that three of the students' remains were found, but testing later revealed they did not. For further reading, see: Arely Cruz-Santiago and Ernesto Schwartz-Marin, “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Arely

⁶ Jack Guy, “Mexican Authorities Uncover 113 Bodies in Mass Grave,” CNN, November 24, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/24/americas/mexico-mass-grave-jalisco-scli-intl/index.html>.

⁷ Oswaldo Zavala, *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist: Narcotrafficking in US and Mexican Culture*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unt/detail.action?docID=6986822>; Carolina Robledo Silvestre, “Peinar La Historia a Contrapelo,” *Encartes 2*, no. 3 (March 21, 2019): 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.29340/en.v2n3.62>.

⁸ Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Arely Cruz-Santiago, “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Disappeared in Mexico,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 483–510, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0038>.

often carried out by the same individuals or agencies that would receive reports of those occurrences. Additionally, many individuals are too fearful to alert officials of the disappearance or death of their loved ones, due to the possibility of being targeted out of retaliation.⁹ These various levels of violence have ultimately led to a web of trauma that has made it necessary for cultural actors, such as artists, to intervene with conceptual sites of mourning.

The perpetrators behind the death that continues to haunt Mexico are a complex mixture of actors both within and outside of Mexico's federal government, as well as its institutions. Government corruption allows officials to remain as facilitators of the highly profitable and illicit economies such as human and sex trafficking, appropriation of natural resources, arms smuggling, and others.¹⁰ The combination of government corruption and the decades-long relationship between Mexico's government and the drug cartels results in an excess of terror and violence in the country's cities, and the majority of this burden surrounds impoverished individuals within cities that are already lacking in infrastructure, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Photos of dismembered bodies shamelessly flaunt the covers of tabloids and newspapers, and victims of what Samuel Shmidt and Carlos Spector refer to as "authorized" (as opposed to organized) crime reappear with their bodies hung from bridges; their heads, fingers, and limbs near high-traffic areas; or their corpses in "[chopped] little pieces" piled outside of their homes.¹¹ Even in (the often-ignored)

⁹ Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pdf1>.

¹⁰ Claire Moon and Javier Treviño-Rangel, "'Involved in Something (Involucrado En Algo)': Denial and Stigmatization in Mexico's 'War on Drugs,'" *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (June 8, 2020): 722–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12761>

¹¹ *ibid.*

clandestine mass burial sites where these murdered bodies are mercilessly piled together, remains are often mutilated, burned in acid, fed to animals, or disposed of in lakes to further avoid testing and identification. Through complacency and outright perpetration, the Mexican government has created countless abjected and missing corpses resulting in tremendous grief and trauma for the affected families that have experienced such loss firsthand. Alice Driver describes the impact of this violence as “a wound that [continues] to fester” in Mexico: She writes, “often, after a child [is] murdered, the parents [will] experience extreme stress, become ill,” and “even commit suicide.”¹² For activist Paula Flores whose daughter, Maria, disappeared and was killed in 1998, the grief would lead her husband to murder his mistress and take his own life. Flores says, “the government still hasn’t done anything to address the inconsistencies in the case of [her] daughter,” a pattern that represents the narrative of many of those affected by violence in Mexico.¹³ This first layer of trauma, of being subjected to the tremendous grief of losing a loved one to homicide, torture, and/or disappearance, is unfortunately only a portion of the extent to which Mexico has failed to protect the economically disadvantaged.

For victims of the physical and institutional violence that often occurs as a result of economic disparity comes a second layer of trauma: These individuals suffer from a lack of closure, recognition, or even a slim chance of acquiring justice for their murdered and missing. In fact, only 0.06% (22 out of the *reported* 35,000) of homicides committed by authorities, for example, have ever led to a criminal

¹² Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Femicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pdf1>. (p.

¹³ *ibid.*

conviction in Mexico.¹⁴ Failure on behalf of the justice systems within the Mexican government has also led to an unreliable forensic-science system, and an inability to pursue disappearance cases due to the decentralized search processes.¹⁵ Without a government capable of administering justice, victims of violent crime and disappearance are collectively dismissed and made invisible to the Mexican government, perpetuating trauma and grief among affected families. This collective trauma is materialized through the declination of four culturally significant categories as discussed by Sylvia Karl: the initial declination of bodies and their location (regardless of whether they are alive or dead); the declination of mourning itself as a significant psychological prerequisite to healing (through a lack of a body to grieve or care for); the denial of “mortuary rituals” relating to physical burial; and the denial of physical memorial sites and areas of recognition through institutional denial of the above events.¹⁶ This collective trauma is so vastly significant in the lives of affected individuals that the “overwhelming liminality” between life and death without the return of loved ones is “often described...as *duelo suspendido*,” or suspended grief.¹⁷ Not only does the lack of reconciliation leave many as “prolonged, if not eternal mourners,” the rejection of accountability by the Mexican state causes many to

¹⁴ Claire Moon and Javier Treviño-Rangel, “‘Involved in Something (Involucrado En Algo)’: Denial and Stigmatization in Mexico’s ‘War on Drugs,’” *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (June 8, 2020): 722–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12761>.

¹⁵ Arely Cruz-Santiago and Ernesto Schwartz-Marin, “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Disappeared in Mexico,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 483–510, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0038>.

¹⁶ Sylvia Karl, “Rehumanizing the Disappeared: Spaces of Memory in Mexico and the Liminality of Transitional Justice,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2014): 727–48, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0050>.

¹⁷ Arely Cruz-Santiago and Ernesto Schwartz-Marin, “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Disappeared in Mexico,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 483–510, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0038>.

exhume mass gravesites on their own as grassroots forensic groups in hope of finding the remains of their deceased or disappeared.¹⁸ One such person, Julio Sánchez Pasilla of the Vida group in Coahuila, stated in an interview with Carolina Robledo Silvestre:

*We are not looking for justice [in the exhumation of mass graves], we have stopped looking for that a long time ago... we want to know where our family members are, perhaps [we're] hoping to hug them again or... put a candle [where they stayed] for the salvation of their souls.*¹⁹

It is also worth noting that such groups are often declined resources, or threatened by authorities to cease their searches. Another individual working to exhume mass graves told Silvestre:

*If I told the government that I am looking for those responsible, they would not give me their experts or lend me their dogs... Their motto is [that] there is no body, there is no dead, there are no disappeared.*²⁰

Even if remains are recovered, which seldom occurs, most victims and their families are disproportionately low-income, leaving many without the means to fund a proper burial and funerary traditions, another form of the denial of mortuary practices.

¹⁸ibid.

¹⁹ Carolina Robledo Silvestre, "Peinar La Historia a Contrapelo," *Encartes* 2, no. 3 (March 21, 2019): 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.29340/en.v2n3.62>.

²⁰ ibid.

Instead, these families are left to forego a funeral, and are forced to bury their dead in anonymous graves with no casket or identification. This combination of denial, repression, and discrimination on behalf of the Mexican government has created a sense of invisibility and loss amongst those in the country, and has left many to forego traditional burial and funerary practices as a result of their circumstances. As Jeffrey C. Alexander explains in his discussion of psychoanalytic perspectives in cultural traumas, “the effort to accurately attribute responsibility for the [traumatizing] event,” in this case, the eruption of violence in Mexico, “and the progressive effort to develop an ameliorating response are undermined by displacement,” which can often take the form of the aforementioned repression or outright denial, such as that by authorities. As a result, this article addresses artwork that facilitates a way to bridge the gap (or mitigate the trauma) that results in the need to provide a proper burial for deceased loved ones and combat invisibility, and the inability of many in Mexico to do so.

SECTION III: ART AS A NEW BURIAL

Though the Mexican government has disallowed victims in the country a space of proper recognition and mourning, contemporary artists in Mexico have attempted to rectify this gap through artistic practice. While the work of the discussed artists is often defined as “artivism,” this article analyzes artwork as functioning *beyond* the traditional practice of activism in art, materializing into actual and conceptual spaces that I refer to as a ‘new burial.’ A new burial—or simulated gravesite—within Mexican contemporary art serves to reinstate the dignity and closure lost by the families of the killed as well as the rights of the disappeared, via art objects and the subsequent

transformation of spaces. The notion of art's serving as a form of burial for otherwise invisible victims of economic, institutional, and physical violence disrupts repression and denial, particularly for that which exists within Mexican governmental bodies and social ideologies that dismiss the severity of violence in the country. Victims of homicide and disappearance are denied recognition and resources by governmental institutions that have allowed cartels and corrupt power to remain intact and avert justice for those missing or killed. The 'new burial' as both actual and conceptual spaces in Mexican contemporary art, however, resists systemic denial through direct confrontation by artists to "[undo] repression, and allow the pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed."²¹ To do so, femicides, homicides, forced disappearances, and other occurrences are discussed outwardly by artists through artwork, transforming artists into not only commentators on the socio-political issues in Mexico, but as facilitators of realization, grief, and eventually, healing. Here, the artist combats institutional invisibility, and in doing so, restores the care and dignity denied to victims of disappearance and violence. Taking the form of a conceptual burial, a new burial creates room within art for victims—and their loved ones—to be seen, recognized, accounted for, and above all, properly mourned through the reception of the viewer-turned-mourner, reinstating the rights denied them in their violent deaths and disappearances.

Art objects that exist within this new burial typically appear as manifestations of recognition in response to institutions or circumstances that require a practice

²¹ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=575147&scope=site>.

beyond activism in art, or “artivism.” Such objects not only transform the gallery space into one that encourages mourning by recognizing victims the government has failed to protect, but in a country such as Mexico “where it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring the perpetrators of crime to justice,” this “making visible the existence of [often unnamed] corpses” also combats societal indifference, complicit authorities, and thus, erasure of victims and their experiences.²² These engagements by Mexican contemporary artists often center on the artist’s providing of an index (that which has touched the corpse) and through the presentation of the abject (pieces of, or the corpse itself). Teresa Margolles and Alfredo López-Casanova are two such artists in Mexico’s contemporary art world who concern themselves with allowing these often unnamed, mutilated bodies into visibility.

The first artist, Alfredo López-Casanova, was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. He began his practice as a sculptor, creating works from bronze portraits of revolutionaries, to abstracted paintings and “playful engravings.”²³ Along with being a notable artist who has received many awards in Mexico, López-Casanova has also been involved as an activist, reportedly with the Zapatista Front of National Liberation.²⁴ Among his most notable works are those of historical figures, as well as his public pieces of art, such as *Ave*, a large geometrical sculpture in Guadalajara.

²² Arely Cruz-Santiago and Ernesto Schwartz-Marin, “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Disappeared in Mexico,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 483–510, .

²³ Alfredo López Casanova, Sabrina Melenotte, and Verónica Vallejo Flores, “Art, Memory, and Disappearance in Contemporary Mexico: A Conversation with Alfredo López Casanova,” *Violence: An International Journal* 2, no. 1 (April 2021): 169–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024211003010>.

²⁴ *ibid.*

Though he has long worked with families of the forcibly disappeared, perhaps one of his most renowned (and still ongoing) projects has been *Huellas de la Memoria*, or, *Footprints of Memory* (fig. 2). Utilizing donated shoes that previously belonged to the forcibly disappeared, López-Casanova hangs 86 pairs of shoes—and most recently, over 200 pairs—in a gallery space, with each painted on the soles, and then “inscribed with messages about the disappeared.”²⁵ López-Casanova’s work shifts the gallery space into a site of grief, recognizing individuals otherwise invisible to a governmental system that both dismisses and perpetuates violence. Whereas the majority of the disappeared are continuously degraded even after death through the destruction of their remains and the denial of their disappearance, art such as that created by López-Casanova disrupts narratives of helplessness and invisibility among affected individuals by showcasing an index of their existence in the constraints of an art gallery. *Huellas de la Memoria*, in a mode similar to that of Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabiliarios*, provides a simulated gravesite for the disappeared, when a site of recognition, remembrance, and grief was otherwise denied. The victims previously rendered invisible become visible through the display of evidence of their existence, with many of the shoes bearing scuffs, slight tears in their fabric, and the imprint of footprints in the interior soles. If this was not thorough evidence of the lives each victim lived, the engraving of their shoes solidifies the undeniable impact of loss on those still alive. One such pair of shoes, the first collected by Alfredo-Casanova at the beginning of the *Huellas de la Memoria* project, solemnly reads:

²⁵ Sarah Cascone, “Artist Condemns Mexican Drug Violence,” Artnet News, May 16, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-condemns-mexican-drug-violence-poignant-exhibition-496931>.

*My name is Baurlia Jaimes, I am looking for my husband Epifanio Aviles. Epifanio Aviles [is a] politician, disappeared since May 19th. 1969, those responsible are [General] Miguel Bracamontes, Arturo Acosta Chapparro, and Miguel Nazar Haro. I have looked for you and I will continue to look for you, with all my strength until I find you.*²⁶

Huellas de la Memoria's significant impact is derived from its function to ensure a sense of identity and recognition for each of the victims as well as those that mourn them. This individualization of the portrayed victims contrasts pieces such as Mexican artist Artemio's *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Juárez)* or Enrique Ježik's *Seis Metros Cúbicos de Materia Orgánica (Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material)*, both of which render victims homogeneously, as simply outputs of their traumatic deaths through the use of dirt and animal intestines (fig. 3, 4). Both artworks by Artemio and Ježik prioritize activism and awareness through the shocking magnitude of their pieces, utilizing substrates in quantities that serve only to portray the constant disposal of bodies in Mexico. *Huellas de La Memoria*, however, combats the homogeneity of numbers, statistics, and calculations by utilizing a new burial to generate a final resting place and recognition for every individual whose shoes are displayed, solidifying a space for mourning and healing which was otherwise declined.

²⁶ Sarah Cascone, "Artist Condemns Mexican Drug Violence," Artnet News, May 16, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-condemns-mexican-drug-violence-poignant-exhibition-496931>, Daniela Rea; "Huellas de La Memoria: Un Recorrido Por Un País de Desaparecidos," Pie de Página, September 7, 2020, <https://picdepagina.mx/huellas-de-la-memoria-un-recorrido-por-un-pais-de-desaparecidos/>.

Though such a burial, of one that only exists in the perception of the viewer-turned-mourner, is by no means a complete replacement for the expensive processions, funerals, and other customs that typically accompany death, *Huellas de la Memoria* provides evidence of the lengths to which individuals will go to provide their deceased with the dignity and care that was denied them by governmental institutions. Perhaps the most disturbing extension of this practice, then, is the art that directly incorporates abject remains, or what Rina Arya refers to as “phenomena that linger on the margins of existence” such as blood, excrement, or even the corpse itself. One of the most notable artists of this practice is Teresa Margolles, an artist impacted by her proximity to narco-violence in her home state. Born in Cualicán, Mexico, Margolles began as a mortician in Mexico City where the countless murdered and tortured bodies would directly impact her practice as an artist. She incorporates traces of the corpse in many of her pieces, such as water used to wash bodies in the morgue, blood taken from crime scenes, murder weapons, and more shockingly, pieces of the corpse itself.

One example of such an artwork is *Lengua*, or *Tongue*, by Teresa Margolles (fig 5). Created in 2000, *Lengua* utilizes an embalmed, pierced tongue as substrate, derived from the body of a teenage boy who was killed by gun violence in Mexico. Reportedly, Margolles noticed the young man’s piercing while embalming the corpse, and in exchange for his tongue, offered to pay his family for a proper burial, as to prevent the body from being buried in an anonymous gravesite.²⁷ Though the young man would go on to receive a proper burial—which otherwise would have been too

²⁷ Mónica Salazar, “Redefining the Mexican Tradition of Death: Teresa Margolles and the Embodiment of Absence,” *Proceedings of the Art of Death and Dying Symposium* 1, no. 1 (November 1, 2013): 91–98.

expensive for the family to afford—Margolles' *Lengua* still serves to speak upon the tragedy of economic inequality and the results thereof in Mexico. The piece also embodies those who, without the means to properly bury their loved ones, were (and still are) forced to rest their deceased in unmarked, anonymous gravesites. Engulfed in a morbid remembrance of the victim himself through the display of his severed tongue, *Lengua* provides the young man an extended, resting place that fixes itself in the conceptual: As one might lament over the ashes of loved ones spread across space, the presence of his pierced tongue offers the viewer-turned-mourner an opportunity to grieve and recognize his existence, by providing them an additional index of the life cut-short outside his gravesite. However, with pieces such as *Lengua* and the later discussed *Entierro*, this function is arguably heightened by the abjection cast onto the viewer. The severed organ is a strong *memento mori*, quickly and effectively confronting the viewer with their own mortality through an ultimate transgression of the Duchampian legacy. In wincing at the thought of his tongue's being severed, we experience only a portion of the brutality of his being gunned down in the streets of his city. The young man's body was degraded in his murder, and even moreso in the severance of his tongue, yet he obtains a state of visibility upon the display of his pierced tongue as an art-object. Though his poverty and death rendered him invisible, *Lengua*—though morbid—allowed the victim to be seen, and accounted for, despite his name's never being mentioned. In the nonspace of a new burial, this transcendence beyond institutions emphasizes the ability of art to serve as an additional resting place and acknowledgment, for those otherwise denied by their circumstances.

The next piece analyzed is Margolles' 1999 piece *Entierro*, literally, *Burial* when translated (fig. 6). *Entierro*, on the surface, appears to be a simple concrete block, placed in the center of a gallery space. Inside the concrete, however, rests the body of a stillborn child, given to Margolles by the mother to spare the stillborn's fate of being discarded as "medical waste," as a result of her inability to fund a funeral.²⁸ In this case, there was no murder, or violent death that led to the mother's requesting Margolles to encase her child in a work of art. In fact, the highly inaccessible and often discriminatory practices of healthcare in Mexico ultimately resulted in the creation of *Entierro*, a direct consequence of the violence of poverty thrust upon many in the country.²⁹ *Entierro* reveals the reality of those who not only experience homicide and disappearance, but who are also disregarded via lack of education, health, and social programs for their welfare. Instead of representing the body dismissed by economic disparity with numbers or figures, Margolles *provides it* and confronts the viewer with it, though it is not until one reads an accompanying label that the viewer recognizes what is concealed within the cement. In fact, it is the minimalism of *Entierro* that invites the viewer to seek an understanding of the artwork beyond what presents itself at face-value. This proximity to a corpse in a public gallery space transgresses the boundaries of the self of the viewer, unsettling them through the imposition of the corpse, and of human mortality. Yet the inability to see the

²⁸ Felipe Sánchez Villarreal, "Trabajar Con Vivos Duele Más': Teresa Margolles," *Semana.com* Últimas Noticias de Colombia y el Mundo, November 2, 2020, <https://www.semana.com/impresas/arte/articulo/la-exposicion-de-teresa-margolles-la-artista-mexicana-que-trabaja-con-cadaveres/73743/>.

²⁹ Vania Smith-Oka, "Microaggressions and the Reproduction of Social Inequalities in Medical Encounters in Mexico," *Social Science & Medicine* 143 (October 2015): 9–16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.08.039>.

decomposed body in such a sanitized space reminds the viewer-turned-mourner that their own discomfort pales in comparison to the terror and grief experienced by the young mother of the buried stillborn, and the many others who continue to share a similar fate. Though *Lengua* enabled the family of the deceased to provide a proper burial through the display of a fragment of his remains, *Entierro* completely foregoes a traditional gravesite by physically burying the corpse within a piece of art.

With their simulated burial now within the arguably transcendent space of a gallery, the young man, the infant, and those whose shoes were showcased in *Huellas de la Memoria* are granted a final resting place within the status of art-object, driving their now-visible existence far beyond the institutions that initially failed them, denied them, and rendered them utterly invisible. Though the artworks function to substitute a gravesite for those who lacked access to one, the ultimate goal for pieces that constitute new burial is the reinstitution of grief, and subsequently, healing. Through the confrontations that artists such as Margolles and López-Casanova provide to viewers, such pieces function in accord with psychoanalytic views of the healing of collective trauma by restoring memory and allowing for expressions of mourning. With the socio-political conditions in Mexico far from improving, this “working through” of traumatic experiences as they continue developing is vital for facilitating a sense of reconciliation and closure. Considering the Mexican government’s unwillingness to address the tragedies occurring in the country, the utilization of art as a means to resolve grief and trauma is more significant than current scholarship discusses. Despite this, there are legitimate concerns surrounding the practice of embedding the deceased in art, specifically that of artist Teresa Margolles. Such a

practice is scrutinized for its often exploitative and illegal nature, as the creation and sale of such artworks is arguably a commodification of the deceased.³⁰ It is worth questioning, however, whether the incorporation of post-mortem matter—whether it be the shoes of the deceased, or a severed organ—would exist without a government such as Mexico, whose institutions relentlessly prevent proper grief and burial, and if such a practice is simply an extension of the desire to rectify institutional and cultural gaps by families and contemporary artists in Mexico. One author, Jennifer Cooper, argues that this transformation from remains to art-object, however, commodifies and commercializes victims through their introduction into the art market (where individuals also pay to enter a museum to observe pieces of art), inflicting further exploitation and violence onto individuals who were repeatedly violated in their death.³¹ As for the pieces *Entierro* and *Lengua* specifically, there is strong criticism of both pieces in addition to that of Cooper, who also argues that reliance “on the concept of exchange value” of such remains allows Margolles to “profit from the deaths of the socially marginalized,” while preying on the families of those who were killed. As such, the ethics of a burial replaced in art itself leave much to be researched and discussed, especially from the perspective of the affected families and their socio-political circumstances. As both families involved in *Entierro* and *Lengua* chose to donate the remains of their deceased, it is worth considering if, or more importantly, *why*, an alternative burial within art was more preferable to that of an anonymous

³⁰ María Campiglia, “Teresa Margolles. Reiterating Violence,” *Barcelona Research Art Creation* 2, no. 1 (January 30, 2014): 100–125, <https://doi.org/10.4471/brac.2014.04>.

³¹ Jennifer Cooper, “‘No Soy Un Activista, Soy Un Artista’: Representations of the Femicide at the Intersections of Art and Activism,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 41, no. 3 (June 8, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13242>.

grave, or none at all, and if such a movement in contemporary art would exist without the initial violence of Mexico's various institutional issues.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSION

By confronting viewers with the morbid reality that is life for those impoverished in Mexico, contemporary artists have generated a 'new burial' to rectify the access to a proper final resting place for those otherwise denied by governmental authorities and institutional structures. By acknowledging the countless disappearances and violence in the country, contemporary artists such as López-Casanova and Margolles utilize grief as a tool of collective healing, to bring awareness and recognition to those continuously rendered invisible by disappearance, violence, and poverty. As the socio-political environment in Mexico continues to remain stagnant, I encourage further research into the function and ethics of artwork that serves to substitute the grave, and the function of harmful governmental institutions in making such artwork necessary in Mexico's contemporary art world.

Images:

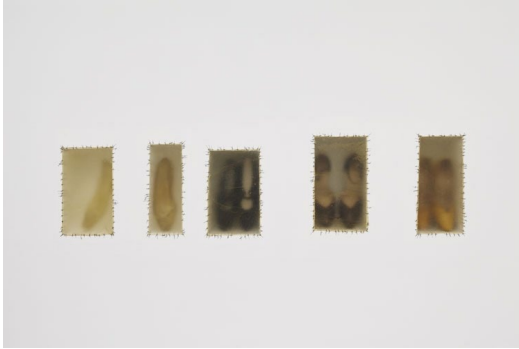


Figure 1, Salcedo, Doris, *Atrabiliarios*, shoes, surgical thread, and cow bladder, 1996,
Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, <https://www.icaboston.org/art/doris-salcedo/atrabiliarios>



Figure 2, López-Casanova, Alfredo, *Huellas de la Memoria*, 2011-present
<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/267600-huellas-memoria-lucha-olvido-desaparecidos-mexico>



Figure 3, Artemio, *Untitled (Portrait of Women in Ciudad Juárez)*, 2009,

<https://artillerymag.com/mexico-inside-out/>



Figure 4, Enrique Jezik, *Seis Metros Cubicos de Materia Organica* (Six Cubic Meters of Organic Material), 2009.

<https://enriquejezik.com/2008-seis-metros-cubicos-de-materia-organica/>



Figure 5, Margolles, Teresa, *Lengua*, 2000

<https://www.guggenheim.org/video/hugo-boss-prize-2018-nominee-teresa-margolles>



Figure 6, Margolles, Teresa, *Entierro*, 1999

<https://www.mmk.art/en/whats-on/teresa-margolles/>

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