



# Muerte Sin Fin

## Teresa Margolles's Gendered States of Exception

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Traversing P.S. 1's *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* (2002), viewers encountered a roadblock. To enter a portion of the show, each person had to sign a release form that included the ominous disclaimer, "P.S. 1 renounces all responsibility for any physical, mental, or emotional damages caused to the undersigned once he/she enters the installation." Those brave or curious enough to proceed stepped into a thick fog that converted

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Teresa Margolles

them into participant-observers—one could not *not* inhale. True to its title, Teresa Margolles's traveling installation, *Vaporización/Vaporization* comprises disinfected water taken from the washing of corpses in the Servicio Médico Forense (SEMEFO; Medical Forensic Service)—Mexico City's central morgue—which is run through a fog machine. The installation raises ethical, political, and aesthetic questions that resonate across the artist's oeuvre: If performative cultural production sometimes is identified in terms of its recourse to the body, what does it mean to utilize bodies beyond the artist's own with or without the consent of the bodies' owners? Does a remembrance and deployment of dead bodies whose owners were victims of violence give a voice to the anonymous dead or further victimize them? Do audiences participate in a necrovoyeurism when encountering work whose method represents a precarious alchemy—the transformation of forensic science into forensic art—which runs the risk of being depoliticized?<sup>1</sup>

As such, *Vaporización/Vaporization* easily could be mistaken as the logical conclusion of Margolles's corpus, as the signature vanishing point of the artist's Agambean-driven “bare life” minimalism. But, striking out on her own, Margolles has amalgamated territory outside of *Vaporización/Vaporization*, even as that installation testifies to the artist's expansion of the conceit of SEMEFO, a Mexico City-based 1990s performance collective (named after the federal district's central morgue), infamous for its work with cadavers, of which she was a founding member.

Purporting to consider “the life of the corpse” (Margolles 2000), SEMEFO has displayed tattoos cut from corpses; and, later, gesso that they pressed against unclaimed bodies, so that bits of skin remained in the gesso when it was removed. Critics once trivialized and reduced the group's efforts to a redeployment of a Mexican “fascination” with the (Day of the) Dead, citing José Guadalupe Posada's skeletons and popular culture's uses of the skeleton/cadaver in often ironically decontextualized readings of Mexicanidad. Seemingly more sophisticated commentators (reenacting a traditional/modern split) have proposed such feasible hypotheses as a connection between SEMEFO's performative *memento mori* and Colombian-born sculptor Doris Salcedo's “rememories,”<sup>2</sup> between SEMEFO's neobaroque tactics and the Viennese Actionists' sacrificial use of animals. Reluctant to dismiss any of the above, Margolles has delineated additional influences: Aristotle's cathartic shudder, Bataille's visions of excess, Artaud's “theatre of

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1. Clearly, these are not the same questions as those posed in the context of other blatant displays of human remains (for instance, see Petra Kupperts's treatment of *Körperwelten*, the traveling exhibition of plastinated human corpses [2007:25–73]).

But, the questions do resonate with previous or contemporaneous work that takes up “the cadaver as *fascinosum*” (Mey 2007). In her historical overview, “‘Playing with the Dead’: The Cadaver as *Fascinosum*,” Kersten Mey contrasts the photography of artists such as Sue Fox, Midas Dekkas, Andres Serrano, Damien Hirst, Joel Peter-Witkin, John Issacs, and Nan Goldin. Regarding Serrano's efforts, she writes: “Like Fox's dead, Serrano's corpses remain anonymous. Yet, while Fox's figures have been reduced to mere material facts, objects of study devoid of any dignity or personality, Serrano ‘reinvests’ them with some sort of identity through the traces of their ‘case histories’” (76).

Mey does not address the work of either Margolles or SEMEFO (presumably because she focuses on US and European examples), but, via the articulated artistic philosophy of Margolles, their efforts might be understood as taking Serrano's conceit a step further to reinvest the corpse with the intertwined “case histories” of the Nation and its Others.

2. Doris Salcedo also has worked to represent the unrepresentable: Colombia's waves of violence. She has created installations with household objects that ghost the disappeared (see Salcedo 2000).

*Figure 1. (previous page) Teresa Margolles, Autorretratos/Self-Portraits (No. 5), March 1998. Color photograph, 100 × 125 cm (39¾ × 49¼ in.), Edition of 4 + 1 AP. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)*

cruelty” (Margolles 2000), Beuys’s scripts of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the Mexican sociopolitical and economic milieu since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Margolles’s alternative list, coupled with her reflexive narrative of intentionality—“Mi ética es mi estética” (my ethics are my aesthetics<sup>4</sup>) (2000)—went a long way at the turn-of-the-millennium to complicate SEMEFO’s output in the vein of Coco Fusco’s coterminous interpretations of the group’s confrontational tactics. Anecdotally presenting her initial exposure to SEMEFO via their solo show *Lavatio Corporis* (1994)—a carousel of dead horses, in Mexico City’s Museo de Carrillo Gil—Fusco argues that the exhibit demanded, “a reading in relation to Mexican national allegory” insofar as horses function as a “well-known icon of colonialism,” an allusion made apparent to Fusco by SEMEFO’s juxtaposition of the carousel and a reproduction of José Clemente Orozco’s painting *Los Teules*, “the epithet the Aztecs used to denigrate the Spanish conquistadors” (2001:62). While Fusco defuses the allegorical in her argument to contrast SEMEFO’s work with two other performative responses to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),<sup>5</sup> the specter of the “Other speaking in the public sphere” (the *allos* and *agoreuein* of allegory), which she evokes, haunts Margolles’s concerted efforts to reroute interpretations of SEMEFO’s corpus, as well as subsequent critics’ periodizing impulses that situate the individual artist and the collective’s work as the “essence” of experimental, post-NAFTA, Mexican art.

For instance, in *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (2004), Rubén Gallo identifies Margolles as one of five Mexican artists, who, “practicing” (*ejercer*) Mexico City, re/presents the megalopolis.<sup>6</sup> Gallo posits that Margolles uses Mexico City’s morgue as an artist’s studio, salvaging body parts for her photographs, readymades, installations, and performances. Gallo contends, “Margolles’s work can be read as an effort to draw attention to the breakdown of the taboo against corpses in Mexican society and to its dehumanizing effects” (2004:126). Gallo’s interpretation reflects a trend to incorporate SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s project(s) into contemporary narratives of Mexican cultural production from the mid-1990s to the present, a trend that perhaps finds its clearest articulation in Cuauhtémoc Medina’s essay, “SEMEFO: The Morgue” (2004).

Medina claims, “[T]he three phases through which SEMEFO and Margolles’s work moved in the last ten years could be abstracted as a provisory schema for the stages of contemporary art in Mexico during the 1990s” (320). In turn, he meticulously fashions a timeline, which I compress, paraphrase, and amend: SEMEFO originally came together as a death-metal rock and underground-performance collective in 1990. Its first show was in 1994 (coinciding with the implementation of NAFTA, the Zapatista Movement, and the alleged beginnings of Ciudad Juárez’s femicide). In the mid-1990s, SEMEFO swerved into conceptual art, applying

3. Regarding the latter, Margolles and her critics continue to cite her birthplace, Culiacán, Sinaloa, dubbed “Narco City” for its high narco-traffic-related homicide rates, in relation to the artist’s work. See, for instance, *Time Out New York*’s reportage on her *Muro Baleado/Shot-Up Wall*, included in Creative Time’s “This World and Nearer Ones” on Governor’s Island, June 2009 (Halle 2009). According to art critic and historian Olivier Debroise, the Mexican artist Alejandro Montoya, who worked with animal and human corpses in the 1980s (predating SEMEFO), was an influence on Margolles and SEMEFO’s work. Debroise asserts that Margolles was Montoya’s assistant on several of his early installations (2007:346).

4. Except for titles, all translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

5. Actually, the comparative choices Fusco makes are questionable. She contrasts SEMEFO’s work with that of Santiago Sierra and Electronic Disturbance Theatre, only mentioning briefly that not all of the three artists/collectives are based in Mexico City.

6. Gallo borrows the verb *ejercer* from Salvador Novo, who numbered among los Contemporáneos, a circle of 1920s Mexican poets. Daniel Balderston identifies los Contemporáneos as, “the unacknowledged gay fathers of Octavio Paz and of modern Mexican poetry” (1998:73). As many have noted, los Contemporáneos preoccupied themselves with life/death questions (consider not only José Gorostiza’s *Muerte sin fin* [1939], but Xavier Villaurrutia’s *Nocturnos* [1933], and, if we take Balderston’s argument seriously, Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* [1950]).

its principles to human remains: “as if the group sought to revise art history from a necrophilic perspective [...] they have systematically dissected the corpse of conceptualism and minimalism, adjusting such traditions to the third world’s dark social setting.” In the 1990s, Margolles, as the group’s spokesperson, upped the ante of this trajectory, endowing SEMEFO’s work with a political relevance (Medina 2004:312–16).

Medina’s characterization of SEMEFO’s mutations, especially his observations regarding Margolles’s role in setting the group’s conceptual agenda, supersede Gallo’s contextualization of SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s corpora. Asserting that SEMEFO and Margolles’s efforts reflect “periodicity in the periphery” (316), Medina’s “allegory of reading” collapses its interpretation of SEMEFO’s ethical “evolution” into its mapping of the group’s location in the swath of millenarian Mexican cultural production. As such, like Gallo’s (and Fusco’s to a lesser extent), Medina’s account moves beyond the literalism, indeed visceralism, of prior engagements with SEMEFO and Margolles’s “body art” to assign the project(s) meta-significance.

But, Medina’s underlying allegorical ambitions are bolder insofar as they situate *performance* at the center of understandings of the globalization of Mexican art. His account breaks ground, amounting to a preliminary reflection on the contributions of SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s corpora to the triangulated traditions of (post)conceptualism, minimalism, and performance art in Mexico and beyond, even as it hints at the intimacies of the rise of Mexican stars in and on the global art market and changes in the markets and marketing of Mexico proper, which included the accelerated systemic privatization of national resources in the era of what Latin Americans have termed “savage neoliberalism” (*el neoliberalismo salvaje*).<sup>7</sup>

Effectively ushering in a second wave of interpretation of SEMEFO and Margolles’s efforts, Medina’s argument nonetheless does not make good on its own promises. For if, as Medina contends, performance (both as an artistic form and as the author-function) is a goodly portion of what’s marketable here; then an examination of the marked and marketed body of the (performance) artist would seem *de rigueur* to a reading of the work in question. Yet, Medina virtually ignores the significance of Margolles’s *person*, even as he makes passing reference to the artist’s series *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue* (1998).<sup>8</sup> To compound interest, SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s corpora become indistinguishable in Medina’s arguments. And, while, in part, this confusion accurately reflects the manner in which it is challenging to determine ownership of 1990s work done by the individual artist (Margolles) versus the collective (SEMEFO), the slippage also lends itself to a discursive chain reaction (turtles on turtles’ backs) whereby Margolles seemingly stands in as a part to the whole (even as she is apart from that whole)—as representative of SEMEFO, itself representative of Mexican art, itself representative of Mexico, itself representative of a global South... (Should it come as any surprise, then, that by 2009, Medina, chosen to curate the Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, features Margolles as *the* representative of Mexican cultural production?)

7. Because so many in the interdisciplines of anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, performance studies, and postcolonial and subaltern studies, as well as the arts, have troubled the waters of naturalized narratives of Neoliberalism (with a capital “N”), I offer a quick and dirty definition of the term with some misgivings: neoliberalism is a political philosophy that set the gold standard of economic and social policies in a variety of contexts. It imagines the market as a better vehicle than the state for allocating public resources. It advocates deregulation, consumer sovereignty, and individualism in the name of economic efficiency and single-cell ethical agency. Regarding the specificities of “conceptualism” in Mexico and beyond, I implicitly draw inspiration from Luis Camnitzer’s lead in *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (2007) and his insistence upon “trac[ing] the roots and genealogies of Latin American conceptualism from its own tradition rather than treating it like a derivative product of what was current in New York and Paris” (2).

8. Medina supplements his essay with a reproduction of one of these portraits.

9. By “chosen” I really mean that Margolles (with Medina as her curator) was selected as the winning entry to represent Mexico. Her multi-mediated presentation is titled *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?* and was shown 7 June–22 November 2009.

Failing to mention the obvious—that Margolles was the only female founding member of SEMEFO, and one of the only women involved in the collective, which often was criticized for its “male aesthetic”—Medina disregards the gendered significance of his elision.<sup>10</sup> Put differently, Medina’s history ignores how Margolles’s status as *woman* simultaneously has been targeted and placed under erasure in discussions of hers and SEMEFO’s efforts. What would it be like to recall the specificities of Margolles proper, literally and allegorically? How would these “feminine details” alter the perils and pleasures of the periodization to which Medina’s essay aspires and succumbs? How could they help us to reread Margolles’s message and medium to posit another unfolding narrative of shifts in the artist’s corpus? And, what could those shifts, in relation to the aforementioned intertwined destinies of performance, (post)conceptualism, and minimalism in “greater Mexico,” teach us more generally about the historical moment, replete with keywords, emplotted as coordinates—neoliberalism, globalization, NAFTA, 9/11, narco-violence, even the H1N1 flu virus?

While Margolles’s work has driven the body to abstraction, one could imagine her distillation of the corpse as gaining conceptual legibility when read against early efforts that include her person, *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* (1999) and *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue*. And, if one examines this work for its forensic prescience—Margolles’s solo transitional pieces (coinciding with her initial break with SEMEFO)—one might generalize that in these performances (apprehended as the artist’s exceptions), Margolles puts her own corporeality into conversation with her medium—the corpse—to engender her audiences’ attentions to an aesthetics=ethics that extends beyond the gallery or museum.<sup>11</sup> In turn, the latter could be mapped across the artist’s oeuvre (performance, installation, photography, and her unique style of “painting”) to contend: in the afterlife of Margolles’s “states of exception,” gender/ing as remediation mints the artist’s dolorous *muerte sin fin* (death without end), her increasingly “bare life” minimalist turn toward *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s release of form (and P.S. 1’s addendum to

10. To contextualize properly, Medina is not alone in overlooking the gendered dimensions of Margolles’s work. Even some feminist performance artists/*performanceras* in Mexico City resist approaching Margolles’s efforts through the lens of gender. For instance, in her hybridized history/memoir, *Rosa Chillante: Mujeres y performance en México* (2004), Mónica Mayer, one of the co-madres of Mexican performance art, makes passing reference to Margolles and SEMEFO in her catalog-like compilation of Mexican women performance artists (in the service of establishing a genealogy). Tellingly, she decontextualizes Margolles’s solo efforts and participation in SEMEFO, transcribing part of an interview with Arturo Angulo (another SEMEFO member). Angulo’s response to the question of whether there is a gender to art does and does not suggest a relationship between SEMEFO/Margolles’s efforts and “gender” as a construct. Angulo claims, “Sin duda existe la diferencia biológica, pero esto no nos impide trabajar con una mujer, puesto que la que tenemos piensa como hombre” (No doubt biological difference exists, but this doesn’t stop us from working with a woman, albeit the one we have thinks like a man) (in Vélez 1996; in Mayer 2004:49, my translation). His response is striking in regards to the ways in which Margolles becomes the group’s and Woman’s exception; but, also diverges sharply from Margolles’s own response to a related, but not identical question I posed to her in an interview four years after the above-cited exchange. Question: “Can you bring the lens of gender to bear on your work?” Answer: “Of course, my status as a woman in relation to what’s been termed an all-male aesthetic has affected my artistic practice. Of course, my status as a woman in the world affects the ways in which I work” (2000).

11. Nicolas Bourriaud defines “relational aesthetics” in his book of that name as “aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt” ([1998] 2002:112). It’s tempting to affix ethics onto aesthetics (relational aesthetics=ethics) to honor Margolles’s aforementioned conceptual reflexive equation, “My aesthetics are my ethics,” and call it a done deal. But, the addition of “relational” to the equation/hyphenation smacks of redundancy. Moreover, if critiques of Bourriaud’s thesis sometimes fault it for masking the ways in which the works he discusses make intersubjectivity mandatory versus optional, Margolles’s efforts, like many of her Mexico City–based contemporaries, make no bones about the bind. In fact, their work practically defines intersubjectivity as imposed, as anything but free choice. We could imagine this as the difference between Antigone’s imperative, “Decide, will you share the labor, share the work” and the point at which it becomes apparent that this isn’t an instance in which one makes a decision.



that project, itself uncannily prescient of the artist's recent turn to language).<sup>12</sup> Thus, what began in clear reference to the literal and symbolic figure of Woman (Margolles) and what anthropologist-historian Claudio Lomnitz terms, "death and the idea of Mexico" (2005), becomes a dispersed allegorical force field through which vulnerability is *gendered* centripetally in relation to a recognizable performative substitution—the replacement of the artist with her works' publics. The implications of such an interpretation situate this essay as both an examination of the trajectory of a single cultural producer's efforts and an oblique reflection on intersubjectivity—as theory and practice—at the beginnings of the 21st century.

## Self-Other Portraiture, or, When Margolles ≠ SEMEFO

*Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby*'s title is descriptively transparent. In the unreleased video of that private performance, Margolles bathes a dead infant. *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* (1999) opens with a short shot, as the camera pans in on Margolles, she places latex gloves on her hands to frame the ritual of the bath in terms of religious and medico-juridical imagery. Referencing the Madonna-and-child and Mary Magdalene bathing Christ's feet (the image reinforced by Margolles's long hair), the camera establishes Margolles as a "middle-Woman," literally and figuratively. It concentrates on the artist's torso in lieu of her face. And, with such an abbreviated focal range, the artist's body becomes the anonymous, yet feminized, bridge, the mediating agent between the child's corpse and the video's viewers—just as in actual practice, Margolles's diploma in forensic medicine from the Universidad Nacional de México complicates the relationship between the artist's "medium" and her publics' implicitly "gendered" receptions of it.

The camera follows Margolles's presentation of a tin basin filled with water, the stark tiles of the bathroom, and then the body of the child—already decomposing, a vision of *rigor mortis*. The cold hard tiles acoustically contribute to a claustrophobic echo—the doubling sounds produced by Margolles's gestures in contrast to the artist's lack of speech. Margolles bathes this corpse with a vengeance, scrubbing it with a brush one might use to clean a bathtub; she works to remove mold, to cut hair, and to grapple with pliers and a hammer to extract plaster from the infant's hands (the residual effects of the artist's prior attempt to make a casting of the child). Lastly, Margolles sets the basin aside and swaddles the cadaver in saran wrap—a finish suggestive of clinical preservation and ritualized mummification.

*Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* stands in sharp relief to Margolles's well-known installation *Entierro/Burial* (1999), as if the latter had been interred within the former. In *Entierro/Burial*, Margolles took the infant of *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* and in a second private performance, buried him in a block of concrete. Margolles explained in an interview that because the biological mother could not afford to give the child a proper burial and because both the mother and Margolles wished for the baby to be remembered, she sought to honor the infant by creating a memorial to him that held his corpse at its center (Margolles 2000). While it doesn't take a leap of faith to recognize *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* and *Entierro/Burial*'s affinities, it initially might seem counterintuitive to juxtapose that set of correspondences with another, to approach *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* as an extension of Margolles's self-portraiture vis-à-vis a comparison of it with a nearly contemporaneous independent project by Margolles, *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue*.

12. Of course, this sentence is riddled with references to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* ([1995] 1998). There, Agamben, building upon the Schmittian exception, defines the "state of exception" as a kind of space to which outsiders (constituted as "bare life") are banished without recourse to juridical-political protection. I am less interested in pitch-perfect transcriptions of Agamben here, more interested in recalling Aihwa Ong's guiding principle: "I conceptualize the exception more broadly, as an extraordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well as to exclude" (2006:5).



Figure 2. Teresa Margolles, *Autorretratos/ Self-Portraits* (No. 2), March 1998. Color photograph, 100 × 125 cm (39¾ × 49¼ in.), Edition of 4 + 1 AP. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)



Figure 3. Teresa Margolles, *Autorretratos/ Self-Portraits* (No. 3), March 1998. Color photograph, 100 × 125 cm (39¾ × 49¼ in.), Edition of 4 + 1 AP. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

In the latter, whose title is also self-referential, Margolles revisits the genre of self-portraiture to fashion a series of images of herself with corpses from Mexico City's central morgue (as if she were placing herself within the SEMEFO proper, rather than collectively taking on its name). Unlike *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby*, these portraits do not fragment Margolles's body, but arrange the artist and her "sitters," her "decompositions," in various poses. The series—which challenges the veracity of Gallo's assertion that "Margolles has never shown a human corpse taken from the morgue [...] the corpse is always conspicuously absent [...] The body is always implied, never present" (2004:119)—likewise problematizes Medina's narrative of cause-and-effect. For, if Medina and Gallo both stage arguments that at least implicitly hinge on the premise that Margolles's *lack* of bodies casts viewers in the role of the detective (as an exhortation to uncover the plethora of corpses in recent Mexican history),<sup>13</sup> these images, reminiscent of the common turn-of-the-20th-century practice of taking portraits of families with their recently deceased loved ones, nevertheless resist being reduced to such an interpretation.

For instance, in one of the images from the series *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue*—specifically, *Autorretratos/Self-Portraits* (No. 5)—Margolles cradles and displays in her arms the badly beaten body of a 12-year-old girl. The artist as a figure here (and throughout the series) walks a precarious tightrope—evoking a



Figure 4. Teresa Margolles, *Autorretratos/ Self-Portraits* (No. 4), March 1998. Color photograph, 100 × 125 cm (39¾ × 49¼ in.), Edition of 4 + 1 AP. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

13. Gallo numbers his evidence, including in his argument such figures as assassinated Mexican 1994 PRI Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, the missing and murdered women of Juárez, and the 5,855 bodies that SEMEFO, the literal Mexico City morgue, received in the year 2000 (2004:119–21).

Mother-Child dyad, but also cross-referencing the clinic via her white lab coat and (social) scientific gaze (again the accessorizing sign of the artist's accreditation in forensic medicine and science). As such, Margolles's presence in the images keys traditions of (self-)portraiture, including or perhaps those within performance art, which locate the female body as a ripe, rife force field for resignification and cross-subjective identification. Notably, if clichéd critiques of the female self-portrait question the genre's narcissism, Margolles's *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue* exude a "subversive narcissism" (although not quite in the spirit of Amelia Jones's arguments in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* [1998]) to present the body/self with disinterested interest. The push-and-pull of a relationship among Margolles's body as woman, symbolic Woman's currency, and the minimalism of the dead indexes the feminine in this series as that which locates the images as *self-other* portraits. Ironic literalizations of Agamben's "bare life," the *Autorretratos*, in turn, goad their publics to apprehend *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* as likewise eclipsing the self-portrait as a genre, as confronting and adding a temporal dimension to a re/presentational tradition that posits femininity, narcissism, and death as equivalents (Bronfen 1992). Vis-à-vis an author/artist/citizen/scientist function closer to that of the character of Antigone in a resistant strain of criticism and theory beholden to the shifting categorical imperatives of gender, the *Autorretratos* and *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* rely on the shock value of contrasting "the quick and the dead."

For, though one hardly could confine the significance of *Antigone's* eponymous protagonist to discussions of the feminine (after all philosophers from Hegel to Heidegger, from de Man to Lacan, have sought solace in the play's symbolic economies), for the moment, my argument catches itself in the undertow of two turn-of-the-21st-century engagements with Antigone's ambiguous subject position—the earlier publication representative of a Latin American feminist obsession with Antigone's impossibility and the subsequent volume invested in establishing Antigone as the "occasion for a new field of the human" (Butler 2000:82). While ostensibly arriving at *Antigone's* limits from opposing directions, Judith Butler and Diana Taylor's treatments of the character of Antigone do not forget the potential of the play's rhetorical accents on gender's troubling performative prospects.

In *Antigone's Claim*, suggesting that Antigone utilizes the contradictions that constitute "the melancholy of the public sphere" to throw this sphere into crisis, Butler interprets Antigone's location as "outside the symbolic or, indeed, outside the public sphere, but within its terms and as an unanticipated appropriation and perversion of its mandate" (2000:81). In turn, she insists Antigone must be reappropriated from prior theoretical appropriations of her figure, even as she returns to Sophocles' drama to reproduce its heroine as a middling biopolitical agent (beyond that of symbolic Woman "between men," more like the marked, yet anonymous, figure of Margolles in *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby*), evoking gender as an allegorical operation with material and ethical consequences.

Contrapuntally, in *Disappearing Acts* (1997), Taylor offers an impressive double reading of Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa* and the Argentinean Madres' movement. She recalls Jean Franco's observations on the foreclosed possibility of Mexican women writers inhabiting the subject position of Antigone (1989:183–222), an argument deeply committed to ruffling the feathers and features of "national allegory." Approaching gender symbolically, Taylor precludes the mobility and disjuncture the allegorical affords Butler in thinking through potentially "disidentificatory" polis-driven allegories or their allegorical fragments, which continue to evoke the figure of Woman. Instead she offers an on-the-ground account of the disabling effects of prescribed gender roles. I roughly sketch out the opposition to suggest that Margolles's self-other portraiture brushes the circularity of Butler and Taylor's respective arguments, and, by extension, Antigone's feminist legacy to theorize an alternate death sentence for the false binaries of allegory/symbol, self/other, and ethics/aesthetics.

Death and femininity, in Margolles's solo transitional pieces, operate as excesses that haunt the expanding circles that constitute the works' publics. *Ef/feminized* death carries a classical



allegorical aura—where honoring the dead becomes tied up in the illumination of the interlacing of two economies, Sophocles’ once-upon-a-time distinction between “the divine” and “the human,” which, having undergone a secularization, becomes the opposition of the reified commodity, and its always-already readymade, disposable labor pools.<sup>14</sup> The *Autorretratos* and *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* paired invite a reading that situates them as responses to asymmetries in contemporary “social dramas,” but Margolles’s presence in their de/compositions shares another kind of labor, clarifying the gendered agenda of both those dramas and Margolles’s increasingly “bare life” minimalism.

For, in the same breath, arriving at structural inequalities via an amplification of the performatively allegorical effects of gender/ing as practice, Margolles’s growing corpus, read against this initial solo production, casts femininity like a shroud or shadow, greater than a male/female opposition. Not the baby thrown out with the bathwater, but the baby buried in a block of concrete, gender/ing across Margolles’s efforts re/presents the staggering weight of inequalities that the *Autorretratos* and *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* initially reproduce. Moreover, to speak of gender/ing here is not to discount other mechanisms of differentiation and distantiation aboveground: *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue* enjoin (Mexican) viewers to intuit that the un/dead, often so disfigured that their features and their “color” are illegible, in their very status as the unclaimed occupy the lowest socioeconomic strata (where the cross-pollination of densely pixelated racial and class typecasting enjoys a long history in Mexico and beyond). *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue* showcases, via the gendered body and person of Margolles, basic infrastructural inequities hardwired into the viewer’s frames of reference.

Standing in as half of a Barthesian punctum, as a narrative surrogate or middle-Woman, Margolles bears and lays bare witness, marking where the conceptual “impossibility” of Antigone—understood as the impossibility of agency in the face of world systems—becomes the allegorical hot spot through, and at which, the viewer is dealt “acts of transfer” and transference (Taylor 2003). Both/and: the Antigone-effect in Margolles’s self-other portraits follows Taylor’s pessimistic reading of Antigone’s nowhere-ness, even as it becomes the series’ medium for hailing its publics. Gender/ing (understood as a partiple in perpetual motion)reactivates the viewer as a participant-observer. Less about the female or feminine and more about familiarizing audiences with a practice-based theory of the intersubjective, gender/ing in *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* and the *Autorretratos* conjures environmental -isms, particulate matters of difference, free-floating in everyday built environments. Remains to be seen: what happens when Margolles is no longer in the picture? How does gender/ing morph to interpellate her publics in a self-other portraiture that extends (beyond) the visible framing devices of the corpse and the artist’s person?

### Neoliberal Guilt, Other Privileges of Un/knowing,<sup>15</sup> and *Vaporización/Vaporization’s* Release (of) Form

There is another exception in and to Margolles’s oeuvre that is seldom written about. In the summer of 2001, Margolles presented *Grumos sobre la piel/Globs on the Skin*. Margolles traveled to Spain with small bottles of human fat. She’d intended to smear the fat on a gallery’s exit (conceptually synonymous with an installation she presented in Havana, Cuba, in 2000, *Ciudad en espera/City on Standby*) so that people would track it on their shoes all over the city. Instead, in Barcelona’s Plaza Real, Margolles met Mohammed, a Moroccan drug dealer, with whom she eventually collaborated.

14. This shift is foreshadowed by the contrast between Antigone’s concerns for the material body’s relation to respect/ the soul and Creon’s paranoid assertions that “money has ruined many men” (Sophocles [441 BC] 1982:69) and/ or his later comment to Tiresias, “You and the whole breed of seers are mad for money!” (113).

15. I wrench Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s memorable phrase, the “privilege of unknowing” (1993), out-of-context here, compelling it to do a kind of queer work in relation to global inequalities in the spirit of the “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” issue of *Social Text* (2005).

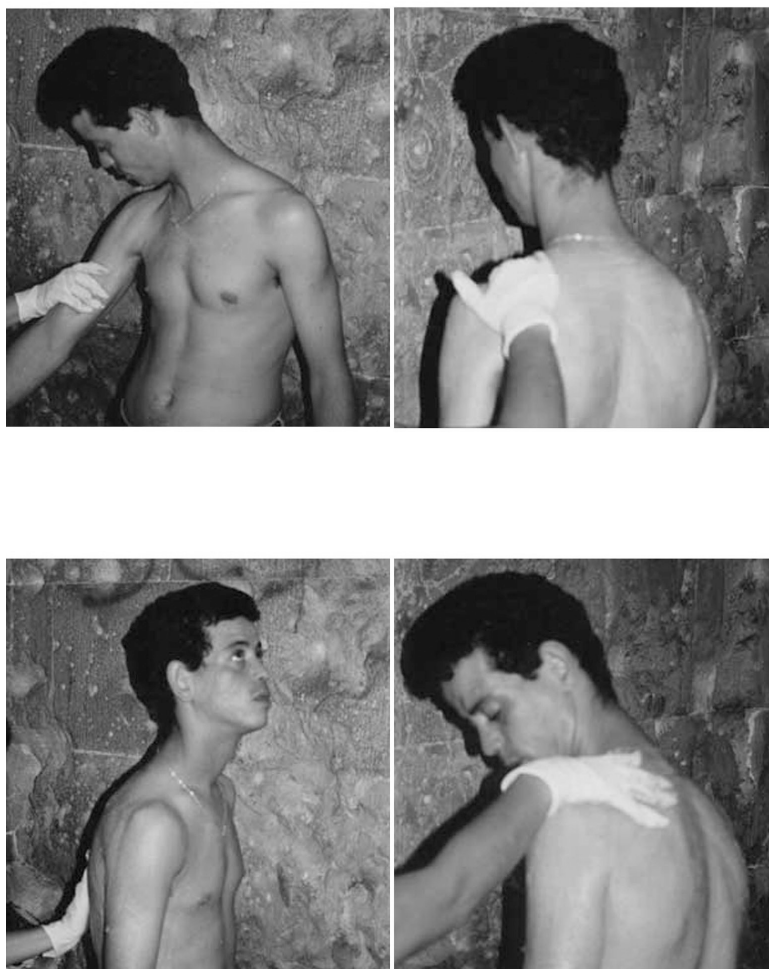


Figure 5. Teresa Margolles, *Grumos sobre la piel/Globs on the Skin*, Barcelona, June 2001. 4 Color photographs, each photograph: 45 × 45 cm, Edition of 4 + 1AP. Solid human grease, obtained from the containers of the Medicine Faculty where students do their anatomy practices, was applied upon a body as canvas. The person had knowledge of the material employed and he authorized the use of his body for this action. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

Margolles writes, “He was fully aware of the origin of the material that I would use. [...] I spread toxins on his naked torso, remains of human beings that had been murdered, forgotten, recycled. I smeared remains of my misery onto his misery, our human misery” (2003:182). In the two-minute video documentation of this performance, which was included in the magazine *Felix’s* compilation *Risk* (2003), one is never privy to Margolles and Mohammed’s bodies in their entirety. Instead, viewers encounter Margolles’s latexed hands, clinically massaging human fat into Mohammed’s back and chest. As such, the performance replicates the stakes of performing the self as a portrait of non-negotiable intersubjectivity (not a question of whether to sit for tea, but the mandatory statute of breathing), but, this time, its reception also keys broader reflections on the im/possibilities of post-millennarian connection.

As Margolles notes in an interview with Kathy High, the few critics who have cited *Grumos sobre la piel/Globs on the Skin* repeatedly have misdated, and subse-

quently misinterpreted it, unconsciously locating the piece within the force field of post-9/11 cultural production, elevating it to the status of lament. In fact, the performance happened the summer before the twin towers fell. More than infelicitous, this case of mistaken (over-) identification invites a response that takes stock of other periodizing impulses, which add a layer of performative meaning, like fat, to exegeses of *Grumos sobre la piel/Globs on the Skin* and Margolles’s corpus, preceding and proceeding from it.

A rough diagram, an unstable isotope of generalization: around the turn of the millennium, a discursive shift in the humanities and the social sciences in the global North began to take shape. Attentions to the post- (the postcolonial, the postmodern, the post-feminist, post-racial...) were paired with or eclipsed by attentions to the global and the neoliberal, a process, in large measure, accelerated by 9/11. In the scramble to articulate the possibilities of theory and criticism post-9/11 (where to produce theory after that Event horizon became a task as seemingly suspect as writing poetry after the Holocaust), a wide array of critics created chronicles that retrench, retreat, revert

to a US-identified politics of self-representation qua exceptionalism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, just as Achille Mbembe (2003) has taken Agamben to task for relying upon the singularity of the Nazi concentration camp to illustrate his theses regarding “bare life” and “the state of exception,” one might question the “normative reading of the politics of sovereignty” (13) that privileges 9/11 as a simultaneous point of departure and arrival—unless one perceives the latter as a proliferating referent.

In such a scenario, looking south would involve recalling 9/11’s Other Event-horizon, equally implicated in the infrastructural narrative of Neoliberalism (with a capital “N”). I refer, of course, to the domino effect of the Chilean coup (11 September 1973), which provided Milton Friedman and others with a “blank slate”/laboratory for neoliberal praxis in the Southern Cone.<sup>17</sup> Long before post-9/11 2001 accounts of neoliberal guilt were being penned, cultural critics of post-dictatorship Latin America, often tangentially touching upon the work of Walter Benjamin, compiled and critiqued a rich “archive and repertoire” of performance and alternative cultural production, which considered the contours of transition, a restructuring of the “lettered city” and its markets.

The recursive themes of the work under investigation—death and dismemberment, opacity versus transparency, new relations to allegory and its dismantling, and gender as a metaphor for “the spectacle of ‘difference’” (Masiello 2001; see also Richard [1998] 2004; Avelar 1999; Sarlo 2000; Moreiras 2001; Franco 2002; Taylor 1997, 2003; Jenckes 2007; Puga 2008; Gómez-Barris 2009, among others)—are strikingly similar to those prevalent in Margolles’s oeuvre. And, while the contingencies of the works’ loci of production separate the works (notably the post-dictatorship years of Chile and Argentina do and do *not* resonate with Mexico’s post-NAFTA years), parallels between the corpora beg the questions: What could this same difference tell us about neoliberalism as a global shape-shifter? And, if, as Francine Masiello asserts, “Gender is often the

16. Now contrary to the introduction of the aforementioned issue of *Social Text* (Eng et al. 2005), I read *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Butler 2004) as indicative of a landlocked US post-9/11 cognitive dissonance. As students of Judith Butler are quick to comment, *Precarious Life* is seemingly more accessible than its author’s previous works. Following in the footsteps of *Antigone’s Claim*, broadening the stakes of Butler’s investments in impossible, alternate kinship diagrams that bridge Agamben’s attentions to Foucault’s biopolitics and Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1978), in *Precarious Life*, Butler rehearses a fundamentally *humanist* set of questions, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes a grievable life?*” (20). Yet, framed as a conversion narrative, *Precarious Life*’s structure of address depends upon a Faustian pact with the lyric “I,” which enables a contradiction whereby Butler’s prior commitment to the performativity of the self is undone in favor of a portrait of the insulated citizen-subject. Alternately parsed, standing in as a public intellectual’s account of a post-9/11 privative sphere, *Precarious Life* inadvertently maintains a distance between self and other to the extent that Butler juxtaposes her status as a First World intellectual with the knowledge that she has acquired, as a sexual minority, about violence and “a normative notion of what the body of a human must be” (33) in order to reflect on a before-and-after praxis of citizenship, which suffers the indignities of a binary logic. This contradiction curiously replicates the contradictions of Butler’s prior attentions to performativity at the expense of performance as aesthetic practice (where the informal economy of the aesthetic in Butler’s efforts takes on the characteristics of “etiolation” as described by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick [1995:1–18]), but it is not necessarily replicated in Butler’s latest, more nuanced reckoning with the concept of ‘intersubjectivity,’ *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), which realizes intersubjectivity as its point of departure versus arrival. Butler’s restless return to the figure of Antigone in *Precarious Life* anticipates *Frames of War*’s breakthrough, and parallels my own continued attentions to Antigone’s refusal to compromise. Reading backwards, in *Precarious Life*, find:

Antigone, wishing death herself by burying her brother against the edict of Creon, exemplified the political risks of defying the ban against public grief during times of increased sovereign power and hegemonic unity. What are the cultural barriers against which we struggle when we try to find out about the losses that we are asked not to mourn, when we attempt to name, and so to bring under the rubric of the “human,” those whom the United States and its allies have killed? (2004:46)

17. The significance of 9/11’s “twin towers” has not been lost on all recent historians of the “vanishing present.” Although, while offering compelling accounts of neoliberalisms’ Latin American connections, Greg Grandin (2006), David Harvey (2005), and Naomi Klein (2007), for instance, provide scant to no portraits of cultural responses to neoliberalism in the regional “case studies” of their arguments.

material limit against which the system is tested and produces, in this dark season of postpolitics, new terms of identification, new forms of recognition, as well as new expressions of doubt” (2001:43), then how might gender/ing in Margolles’s work in particular contribute to theoretical and critical speculations about post-millenarian (inter)subjectivity and its representations?

David Harvey muses of Mexico, “In 1984 the World Bank, for the first time in its history, granted a loan to a country in return for structural neoliberal reforms” (2005:100). A dubious milestone, the requirements coincided with an externalized internalization of neoliberal policy, shorthanded as the dismantling of the remnants of the Mexican state’s post-revolutionary sociocultural mandates.<sup>18</sup> As public services have undergone metamorphoses of privatization, the streets have become increasingly incapable of accommodating the likes of the homeless child (with a life expectancy of seventeen years in Mexico City), the migrant female worker (now elevated to the symbolic level of precarity/precarioussness in discussions of Juárez’s dead and disappeared), the undocumented (often, ditto female) Central American en route to the Mexico/US border, waylaid in the Republic’s actual and metaphoric South, and the poor caught in the crossfire of various trafficking organs (so anonymous they defy the specificities of a city or region’s given name). In this ambience, Margolles inhaled, collaborating with SEMEFO and launching her self-other portraits, contrasting her own body as W/woman with that of the lifeless in *Bañando al bebé/Bathing the Baby* and *Autorretratos en la Morgue/Self-Portraits in the Morgue*. Her argument spans her subsequent solo efforts that earmark disintegration over totality, what Gallo references as “variations on a corpse” (2004:119), seemingly leading the viewer to *Vaporización/Vaporization* (as the artist’s zenith).

Cannibalistic, cabalistic—*Vaporización/Vaporization*, as some have noted, is reminiscent of breathing in New York City after 9/11 2001. Also likened to the realization of a Brazilian *Manifesto Antropófago*, the installation forces its interlocutors to acknowledge that while “all that is solid melts into air,” it does not disappear.<sup>19</sup> Participating instead in a centripetal cycle, *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s “ether is bound up with particularization; it epitomizes the unsubsumable and as such challenges the prevailing principle of reality: that of exchangeability” (Adorno [1970] 1997:83). *Vaporización/Vaporization* reminds audiences that the aestheticization of globalization (say, in the form of hyper-commodification) does not diminish the tenets of “social dramas” that produce *inexchangeability*; it socially redistributes notions of the “state of exception.” Just as Agamben recently revisits Benjamin’s *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*<sup>20</sup> to

18. Or, with an admirable Gramscian “optimism of will,” one could note that the histories of globalism are also being repared through the efforts of citizen-subjects who collectively inhabit, reinforce, and/or contest the Mexican Republic as a loose union of literal and imaginative geographies. Examples abound; I’ll name a few that refuse to believe that “might equals right”: Zapatismo (1994–the present), broadly understood as, among other things, an initial response to NAFTA’s implementation and as an ongoing “Other Campaign,” invested in disrupting business-as-usual; the 2006 teachers’ strikes in Oaxaca, partially responding to the vending of the post-revolutionary nation-state’s guarantee of free and accessible education to multinational corporate-industrial-complexes; and the Mexican Civil Resistance Movement (2006–the present), spawned in the cauldron of the questionable politics of the 2006 Mexican presidential election.

19. This quote is in reference to Marshall Berman’s classic text, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), which itself refers to a line from Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. Of course, I modify the context of the quote slightly in the service of perhaps imagining something the other side of modernity.

20. Agamben contends that Benjamin’s “description of the baroque sovereign in the *Trauerspielbuch* can be read as a response to Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty,” where Benjamin’s re-vision of Schmitt’s concept of sovereign power hinges on the question of what Benjamin terms, “sovereign indecision,” insofar as “the baroque sovereign is constitutively incapable of deciding” ([2003] 2005:55). For Agamben, such a move signals the ways in which, for Benjamin, “the state of exception is no longer the miracle, as in [Schmitt’s] *Political Theology*, but the catastrophe” (56) whereby the baroque becomes restoration’s antithesis and “a theory of the state of exception is devised” (Benjamin in Agamben [2003] 2005:56). While Agamben’s agenda here is not the aesthetic per se, the sympathies his argument harbors for the aesthetic enable him to locate Benjamin’s “baroque sovereign” as tied up with the performative force of the speech-act in the public sphere of the letter of the Law, inseparable from re/presentation.

suggest that Benjamin presents the allegorical as a kind of mist versus mystification, as a translucent “state of exception,” *Vaporización/Vaporization* dis/re-orient the “particularization of the unsubsumable,” presenting the materiality of “immaterial labor” as the corpse’s vaporization, as the paradoxically *literal* (versus the alleged “thick description” of Margolles’s self-other portraiture) misty allegorical figuration of socioeconomic inequalities.

And, in this regard, *Vaporización/Vaporization* initially might be understood as allegorically charting an ontological transformation in “national allegory” proper. Like the body, which is transubstantiated, but not disappeared, allegory evaporates but still remains, conceptually supersaturating *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s medium—its liquid and vapor. In turn, as if to score the dispersal of what Doris Sommer (1991) once characterized as the foundational fictions of the Latin American nation-state (national romance/allegory), *Vaporización/Vaporization* produces in its wake a scattering of *literal* humanity to recycle meaning—the allegorical—as its epistemologically violent particulate matter.

Small wonder that in an artist’s talk associated with the Brooklyn Museum’s show *Global Feminisms* (2007), Margolles devoted the majority of her presentation to a detailed description of a global-local water cycle. She observed that morgue water already enters the “great river of Mexico City,” evaporates, and rains down on its inhabitants; that the world’s citizens daily imbibe, inhale, ingest one another in cycles of recomposition. Margolles’s narrative supplement foregrounds *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s “analytical proposition” of unapologetic full-on audience-interpellation.

For and “against race” simultaneously,<sup>21</sup> the installation obliterates the essentialized body in favor of distilled “essence,” the thick fog machine of the undocumented. If the figure of Margolles proper functioned as a kind of osmotic membrane in *Autorretratos en la Morgue/ Self-Portraits in the Morgue* and *Bañado al bebé/Bathing the Baby*, by *Vaporización/Vaporization* Margolles as mediator has vanished to be replaced by her work’s publics. Akin to Margolles’s self-other portraits, *Vaporización/Vaporization* recasts its audiences in the role of symbolic Woman, even as it confronts each participant-observer with this typecast role as a *perform-or-else* imperative (McKenzie 2001). Like Mohammed of *Grupos sobre la piel/Globs on the Skin*, *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s publics are forced to wear, to interiorize the remains of the dead, to grapple with contemporary body counts and the fictive singularity of the subject. The installation thereby suggests that Holocaust museums do not present the only reenactments of genocide, catastrophe, “disaster capitalisms.”

Modifying the performative matrix of gender/ing, the corpse in *Vaporización/Vaporization* remediates the work’s re/presentation of disparities between haves and have-nots. A gesture, a happening, an interactive installation, *Vaporización/Vaporization* deactivates boundaries between public and private, creating a peculiar “state of exception” that postscripts gender/ing (again as a performative participle in motion) as allegorically algorithmic of inequality, where “gender,” as Jasbir Puar insists in *Terrorist Assemblages*, cannot be understood as the “petrified sites of masculine and feminine,” but as “the interplay of it all within and through racial, imperial, and economic matrices of power” (2007:100).

In conjunction, then, but also in contrast, P.S. 1’s addendum to *Vaporización/Vaporization*—its requirement that spectators sign release forms—albeit legally pragmatic, casually and causally reinscribes free-market maxims of choice, which generate ladder-like hierarchies or “distinctions” (that which allows for the meta-apprehension of “Mohammed” as the quintessential post-9/11 collaborator). Dependent upon the reproduction of imaginative geographies that *a priori* prioritize the very asymmetries that the installation seeks to demystify, P.S. 1’s release form corroborates a North/South divide in *Vaporización/Vaporization*’s production and reception, even as the release (of) form ironically presages Margolles’s most recent attentions to postscriptual economies of representation.

21. I obliquely acknowledge Paul Gilroy’s book by the same name in this instance (2002).



“Proceed with caution”: bound up and in the force of the law, P.S. 1’s release form (what sardonically might be read as a quintessential example of “relational aesthetics,” of democratic neoliberalism) re-situates interpretation as the bedrock of intersubjectivity as performative practice.<sup>22</sup> Insisting upon the activity of the viewer, P.S. 1’s addendum underscores the significance of the “signature,” providing another portal through which to imagine the institution’s uneasy digestion of Margolles’s hyphenation of participation-observation. But, the felicitous accident of this re-vision’s infelicity also facilitates a renovation of what I have dubbed the second wave of interpretation of Margolles and SEMEFO’s efforts (Fusco, Gallo, and Medina’s treatises on SEMEFO’s significance with which I opened this essay).

It doesn’t take the *longue durée* to imagine early dismissals of SEMEFO and Margolles’s work as willful refusals to situate the collective and individual artist’s oeuvre within traditions of conceptual art. As Fusco, Gallo, and Medina aptly demonstrate, SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s initial corpora rely upon an uncanny site-specificity—“(death and the idea of) Mexico”—to demonstrate the work’s affinities with the formulae of (post)conceptualisms. But, that same site-specificity also lends itself to charges of geopolitical complicity, such as those of Santiago Sierra:<sup>23</sup>

Sierra, Margolles’s Mexico City-based contemporary, has railed against critics who exceptionalize Mexico and the global South as risky sites of cultural production in relation to international artistic consumption. Sierra suggests that periodizations that approach corruption as exclusively the purview of the “Otherworldly” overlook purloined letters of violence: the North’s manufacturing of correspondent narratives of exception/ality (from the vilification of multiculturalism and identity politics to torture taxis and Guantánamo). On the one hand, Sierra’s observations substantiate the claim that in the current global climate—with its rain cycles and art circuits—no one is afforded the “privilege of un/knowning,” of either signing a release form or walking away, that—contrary to the logic of P.S. 1’s release form—the “papers” *we all* have been issued (and issue) function as blank and blanket implication. On the other hand, Sierra’s “indictment” points to the conundrum of “the body in pain” and the limits of representation as they relate to Margolles’s own recent forays into a (post)conceptual turn to “language” (a word I use advisedly in conjunction with the para/literary, the linguistic, new literacies, journalism, history, policy, the poetic). In that spirit, I turn to what I view as Margolles’s second break with SEMEFO, her post-2004 meta-gendered “states of exception,” which attend to the chasm between Mexico’s dramatic increase in narco-related violence and the latter’s narration—a break and chasm not unlike those that animate both the “impossibility” of theory/criticism post-9/11 and the aforementioned millenarian reevaluations of SEMEFO’s and Margolles’s efforts.

## Abstract as Expression, -isms

### *Margolles’s Liner Notes toward a Body-Poetic/Politic*

In May 2008, in the small but large-minded Y Gallery of Jackson Heights (Queens, New York; now relocated to the Bowery, Manhattan), Margolles, with the assistance of the gallery’s director (Cecilia Jurado), spent four days chiseling into a wall that faces the street, a single phrase, “para quienes no la creen / hijos de puta” (for those who don’t believe it / sons of bitches; the gallery’s translation as printed in the literature they distributed during the show). The storefront glass

22. Of course, I remember and reference Doris Sommer’s observations on the perils of translation here (1999).

23. Without naming names, Sierra writes:

I wonder [...] why her [Margolles’s] work is mentioned in articles, which constantly suggest that the methods she uses to acquire her material reveal the corruption of the Mexican forensic system. Teresa Margolles has been authorized by officials of the respective authorities to carry out her investigations in the morgues, her work has absolutely nothing to do with bribing or suborning, she never paid anyone to obtain anything. Reiterating such assumptions not only dishonours the truth by simplifying and reducing the semantic value of her work to a Latin American anomaly; it also endangers a professional relationship, which has grown over more than a decade. (Sierra 2004:214)

window separated pedestrians and traffic from Margolles's Austinian-like performative utterance (and it does function as such—one could observe many who, passing by, had to stop, stare, and/or step into the gallery to grapple with the avenging angel of that epigraph/epithet). On the window, in white vinyl lettering, Margolles transcribed Mexican and US journalists' accounts of the exponential spike in violent crime in Mexico since 2007. The statistics translate from either English or Spanish into damning evidence:<sup>24</sup>

Todavía faltan cuatro días para que concluya el mes de mayo y la cifra de homicidios dolosos es la más alta en décadas. Van 106 asesinatos en Sinaloa. [...] La mayoría de los casos han ocurrido en la capital del estado y a balazos.

Periódico El Debate (Culiacán, Sinaloa—México). 28 de Mayo del 2008.

En 18 meses de gestión de Felipe Calderón Hinojosa se han cometido 4 mil 400 ejecuciones: 2 mil 794 de enero a diciembre de 2007 y mil 250 del primero de enero al 20 de mayo de este año.

Periódico La Jornada (Mexico D.F.). 22 de Mayo del 2008

*Figure 6. Teresa Margolles, Operativo: Part 1, 2008, Y Gallery, Queens, New York. (Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Jurado)*

24. The quotes appeared on the window in the languages in which they were originally published. The gallery compiled a handout for visitors, which included the following translations:

There are four days to complete the month of May and the number of intentional homicides is the highest in decades. There have been 106 killings in Sinaloa. [...] Most cases, involving fatal gunshots, have occurred in the state capital.

*El Debate* newspaper (Culiacán, Sinaloa-Mexico), May 28, 2008

Within 18 months of management under Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, there have been 4,400 execution-style killings committed: 2,794 from January to December 2007, 1,250 from the first of January to May 20th of this year.

*La Jornada* (Mexico City), May 22, 2008

[...]

Every minute, a gun enters Mexico illegally. That is, at least two thousand weapons a day. Sixty percent of the illegal weapons circulating in national territory come from the United States. At twelve thousand checkpoints along the border, weapons are bought and sold without restrictions.

*Once noticias* (Channel 11, Mexico City), July 19, 2007



Figure 7. Teresa Margolles, Operativo: Part 1, 2008, Y Gallery, Queens, New York. (Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Jurado)

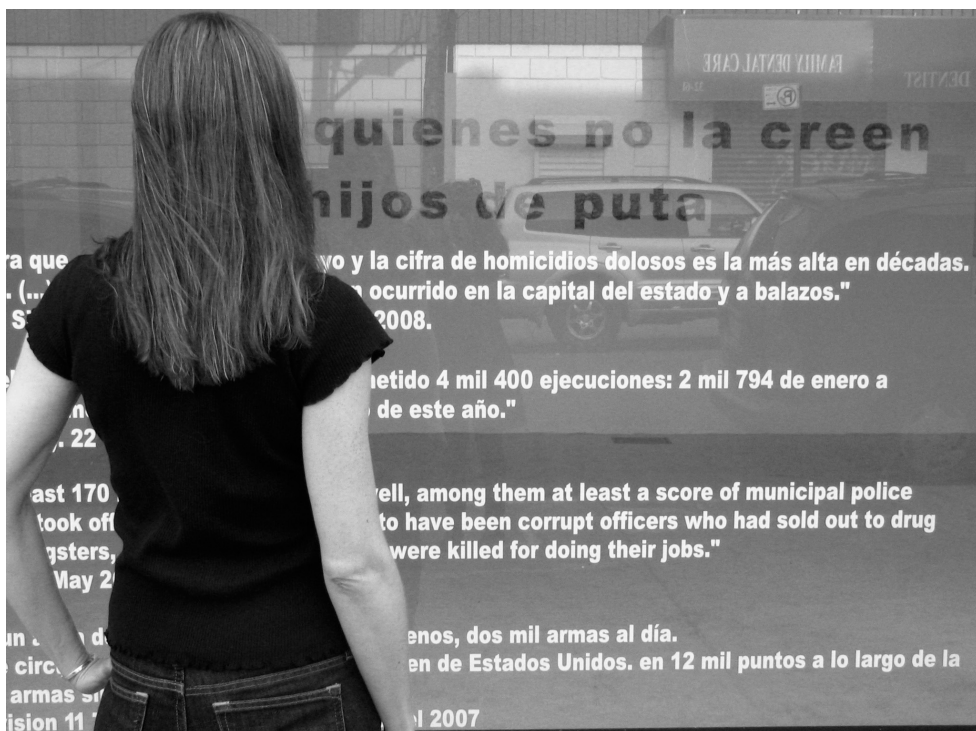


Figure 8. Teresa Margolles, Operativo: Part 1, 2008, Y Gallery, Queens, New York. (Courtesy of the artist and Cecilia Jurado)

Drug traffickers have killed at least 170 local police officers as well, among them at least a score of municipal police commanders, since Mr. Calderón took office. Some were believed to have been corrupt officers who had sold out to drug gangs and were killed by rival gangsters, investigators say. Others were killed for doing their jobs.

New York Times (New York, U.S.). May 26, 2008

Cada minuto entra a México un arma de manera ilegal. Son por lo menos, dos mil armas al día. 60% de las armas ilegales que circulan en territorio nacional provienen de Estados Unidos. en 12 mil puntos a lo largo de la frontera se compran y venden armas sin restricciones.

Once Noticias, Canal de Television 11 TV (Mexico D.F.). 19 de Julio del 2007

The installation, exhibited in two parts, was titled *Operativo: Part 1* (29 May–30 July) and *Operativo: Part 2* (8 August–6 September). The word “operativo”—operative as a noun or an adjective—exerts power or force, it “does things,” seemingly commanding the reader to act in the capacity of the detective, secret agent, or rhetorician, to maintain the momentum of the above citational machine. Yet, the agency implied in *Operativo: Part 1*’s interpellative call for accumulation is realized and disempowered simultaneously as the piece’s publics come up against the literal wall of narrative impossibility—a veritable obscenity, lurid and lurking beneath the journalist’s eye-for-detail.

In particular, the direct address of *Operativo: Part 1*’s interior challenge, reminiscent once again of Antigone’s insatiable desire for accountability, appears to grate against the “neutrality” of the piece’s found text—newspaper and television reportage as word-objects. For, on closer examination, the interior and near transparent exterior of the project run on parallel tracks. “Para quienes no la creen / hijos de puta” functions as a conceptual “enabling violation” (Spivak 1999:371), as the site of citational confrontation (the affront of the senses of the viewer that sets *Operativo*’s body into motion). A phrase twice-removed, a drug-gang’s message tied to an executed, life-less body’s ankle found on the corner of Gran Canal and Aguilas in Mexico City, “para quienes...” is reprinted in the “police section” of the newspaper *Ovaciones*, and, in turn, is chiseled into the gallery’s wall.

“Para quienes no la creen / hijos de puta” capitalizes on a tradition of the Mexican pulp crime report (*la nota roja*), which, as historian Pablo Piccato argues, from the 19th century onward has established the important role journalists play in constituting “all murder [as] political” (2008). The two tracks of text (the window versus the wall’s words, newspapers’ facts checked by the interior “found object” of an Austinian direct address) complicate and cross-fertilize one another, becoming representative of an almost-already conceptual incommensurability writ national or global; that which, subsequently, operates as a bifurcated readerly activation. A double-language, *Operativo: Part 1* dwells in opposing “things done with words.” But, *Operativo: Part 1* also prompts the query: How does this piece formally map onto the trajectory of Margolles’s oeuvre?

If the *Operativo: Part 1* vis-à-vis language rescripts and reinscribes (indeed once again interpellates) interpellation into its formal and thematic *modus operandi*, the double-jointed texts’ lingering effects nevertheless rematerialize *after the word*, an afterword to *bodies* that speak louder than words. For even the juxtaposition of the clearly cited reportage and the interior chiseled message qua body-tag cannot prepare the viewer turned participant-observer for the un-wholely distance between *Operativo*’s two parts. Specifically, in *Operativo: Part 2*, the medium is once again the message, *la nota roja*’s recon/figuration, the allegorical’s auto-distantiation, a release of energy after the split of the atom of the already (trans/national) allegorical fragment (its double-yolked linguistic and visual propensities).

In July 2008, Margolles covered “para quienes no la creen / hijos de puta” with two canvases, which, to the passive observer, might appear to be unremarkable exercises in abstract expressionism. Their captions again reveal the “Other” “speaking in the public sphere” (of allegory):





Figure 9. Teresa Margolles, *Papeles de la morgue* [#8], 2003. Water drawing on fabriano paper with water that has been used to wash dead bodies after autopsy. 60 × 80.5 cm (23½ × 31¾ in.) (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)



Figure 10. Teresa Margolles, *Papeles de la morgue* [#10], 2003. Water drawing on fabriano paper with water that has been used to wash dead bodies after autopsy. 60 × 80.5 cm (23½ × 31¾ in.) (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

*Operativo: Part 1*'s sequel-sequela relies upon the infamous alternate kinships of re/presentation that Margolles's (and SEMEFO's) corpora diagram. In response to informants' calls, Margolles "ready made" *Operativo: Part 2* by pressing canvas against the wounds of a crime victim in Culiacán, Sinaloa (Mexico). No longer confined to SEMEFO (the collective *or* the city's central morgue), the project tracks how the morgue—what Margolles has termed "a barometer of society"—overflows (like the factory like the prison like the school like the hospital...).

*Operativo: Part 2* clarifies the stakes of *Operativo: Part 1*'s "misfit" of language. But, it also speaks to the classically multitiered ambitions of Margolles's efforts and their reception. For, *Operativo*'s two parts, like a micro-staging of Margolles's own post-2004 operative split, perform *in reverse* the juxtaposition of (artistic) production and (critical) consumption—a conceptual double turn to language (Part 1) and an abstract expressionism becoming "bare life" minimalism (Part 2). *Operativo: Part 1* and *Operativo: Part 2* blur the boundaries of so-called life and art as "Event" and "context" precede "signature." Language commissioned to describe violence falls in between language performatively affixed as warning falls in between the alternate spoken word of the canvassed body falls in between any language that might be mobilized to describe the in between's of the above vicious cycle...

In other words, *Operativo: Part 1* and *Operativo: Part 2* re-extend a critical advisory. Like some para-aesthetic versus paramilitary operation, the two parts of a whole re/stage a chasm between the written and the unspoken, the corporeal and the unincorporated, to mobilize (post) conceptualisms' recourse to language in the context of a larger textual environment, the meta-particulate matter of difference-machines, as they pertain to the bankruptcies of Mexican (post-revolutionary, post-1968, post-1994...) cultural nationalisms and geopolitical Othering as practice. As such, *Operativo: Part 1* and *Operativo: Part 2* are characteristic of what might be viewed as Margolles's second clear break from or "exception" taken to SEMEFO.

The first break, Margolles's portraiture, established the terms of the artist's investments in a self-other hyphenation as the bedrock of her aesthetics=ethics. The second, still in process, involves the artist's lien on language, epitomized in and by her German retrospective (2004, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt). *Muerte sin fin* pays titular tongue-in-cheek homage to Mexican literature's nation-building project by alluding to José Gorostiza's 1939 classic book-length poem ([1939] 1996) of the same name, remediating that text vis-à-vis a body-poetic-politic.<sup>25</sup>

25. Gorostiza is numbered among los Contemporáneos, whom I reference above.



A laundering of Gorostiza's work, *Muerte sin fin* encapsulates Margolles's overarching project—in name and scope. For instance, in one of the series included in the retrospective, *Papeles/Papers* (2004), Margolles arranged rows of “paintings”—watercolor paper that had absorbed remaindered blood and fat. Like *Vaporization*, *Papeles* recycles water that was used to wash corpses to present a body that is and is-not; a signifier and signified that defies its audiences to “release form,” the literary and the national. Plumbing a name (*Papeles*) that scales the word “documentation” in so many minor keys, the series reconfigures the language of poetry, of subjectivity, of citizenship, as an idiosyncratic collection of Möbius strips, which, like *Operativo: Part 2*,

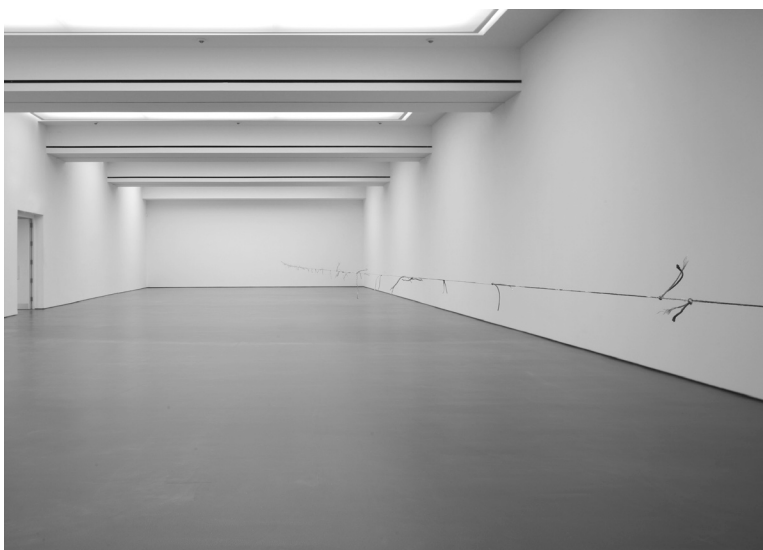


Figure 11. Teresa Margolles, *127 cuerpos/127 Bodies*, 2006, *Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf*. Remnants of threads used after autopsies to sew up bodies of persons who have suffered a violent death. Each thread represents a body. (Photo by Achim Kukulies, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich)

“abstract” expressive cultures. The play on language here in the service of re-marking conceptualism, of texturing the textual's limitations, peppers Margolles's post-2004 solo efforts, including the borderwork of *127 Cuerpos/127 Bodies* (2006) or some of the artist's contributions to the Mexican Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, *Narcomensajes/Narco-messages* (2009).<sup>26</sup>

In sum, not simply form for form's sake, the unraveling, vaporized, disintegrating corpse across the body of Margolles's efforts allegorically offers up keywords like the ethical, the political, and the aesthetic as “effigies” in the sense that Joseph Roach maintains in *Cities of the Dead*, effigies can be “fashioned from flesh” (1996:36). If, as Walter Benjamin posits, “the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse” ([1928] 1998:217), Margolles's increasingly transubstantiating corpse and the languages it spawns key the great divides between words and bodies, drama and social drama, at the heart of

26. In *127 Cuerpos/127 Bodies* (2006), Margolles linked and displayed the threads used to stitch up 127 autopsied bodies in a gallery. The show's catalog mirrors the exhibit, detailing page after page of thread, but also becomes its own exercise in book art. In sum, the threads evoke the memory of the threads of a message, while also resonating with borderwork (in the double-jointed sense of embroidery and the effeminization of labor in the US-Mexican borderlands). *127 Cuerpos/127 Bodies* “does things with [imaginary] words,” too, acting like some meta-revision of Mexican and global conceptual –isms, be they in the space of the aesthetic, ethical, or (necro)political. Channel the corpse in works like *127 Cuerpos/127 Bodies* to literalize the conceit of the “organic line and after” with which Ricardo Basbaum seeks to acknowledge Brazilian artist Lygia Clark's crucial contributions to developments in post–World War II contemporary art and thought. Basbaum imagines Clark's line as “intent on finding an escape from the linearity of dialectics” (in Alberro and Buchmann 2006:87), as outside of the painting's surfaces. Same/difference: for the Venice Biennale 2009, Margolles commissioned various artists to “perform” *Narcomensajes/Narco-messages* (part of the larger project, *De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?/What Else Could We Talk About?*) Participants embroidered with gold thread onto previously blood-soaked fabric narco-messages collected from execution sites in northern Mexico. These messages include: “See, hear and silence,” “Thus finish the rats,” “Until all your children fall,” and “So that they learn to respect” (see *Universes in Universe* 2009).

Benjamin's pronouncement. Detailing the convergence of the figural and the poetic via a divergent "bare life" minimalism that schisms language and what it re/presents, *Operativo: Part 1* and *Operativo: Part 2* and contemporaneous work by Margolles, like so many prostheses of *Muerte sin fin*, incite Margolles's publics to recognize and take up their predetermined mantles of intersubjectivity, to imagine gender's performative range of motion as that which punctuates the Mexican present as a period of sky-rocketing "domestic violence."

If we flatfootedly could view all of performance/performativity as dependent upon the minimal engendering gesture of recognizing the vulnerable threshold where and at which self-other invariably exists as a hyphenated assemblage, Margolles's work sets this threshold at the minimum wager of a peculiar kinship between the living and the dead, one which paradoxically marks the residual epistemic violence inherent in the shifting dimensions of the gendered coupling of "death and the idea of Mexico." Across Margolles's work, the corpse does a double-duty—it is *both* minimal as the literal *and* baroque as the allegorical, like the beginnings of the sutured preface and introduction of Denise Ferreira da Silva's extraordinary *Toward a Global Idea of Race*: the "death foretold"; "the fall of another black body, of another brown body, and another..."; and "the death of the subject" (2007:xi–xli). Or, like the deadpan prose of the fourth book of *2666* (2004), the posthumous trademarking of Roberto Bolaño's prose (the savage detective's tracking of "savage neoliberalism" in and of the Americas),<sup>27</sup> Margolles's corpus re/presents a "visceral realism" of *las artes plásticas* (art as plastic explosives), one flagging the landmines of discursive praxis. Navigating that Scylla and Charybdis is the operative challenge posed not only to the would-be viewer/critic of Margolles's "muerte sin fin," but also, perhaps more importantly, to the historian/critic/public policy maker of "Mexico" as *concept*.

In the introduction to his *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (2005), Claudio Lomnitz makes passing reference to post-contemporary attempts to re/present "the violent and oppressive presence of death" in a Mexican (trans)national imaginary. As if to bound the extremes of his book-length aspirations to the "national essay," Lomnitz includes a brief, wondrously dismissive encapsulation:

In their characteristically heavy-handed way, Mexican performance artists have hammered the point home, most notably Teresa Margolles, who uses "the morgue and dissecting room as her atelier" and then mobilizes traces from the nameless and anonymous victims [to] draw attention to inhuman relationships in modern overcrowded cities. (25)

I'll admit: I went to Lomnitz's text in search of "evidence" to contextualize Margolles's project. I expected to find neither a buried acknowledgment of Margolles's corpus, nor the repetition of a perennial conflation of the latter with Mexican performance at large. To brush against the grain of Margolles's "brush with death" in Lomnitz's meditation, one must heed the asymmetry of *Operativo: Part 1* and *Operativo: Part 2*'s forms, the asymmetries the paired project aesthetically-ethically unleashes upon its participant-observers.

Margolles's oeuvre insists on "oppos[ing] the general in/difference towards crimes always committed on another skin, in another society, on the other side of the Atlantic or on global television" (Sierra 2004:214). The artist's post-2004 recourse to language, like her self-other portraits, sets her solo work apart from her efforts in conjunction with SEMEFO, endowing the former with a forensic prescience "para quienes no la creen." The incommensurabilities of

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27. Roberto Bolaño has been hailed as the post-Boom voice of Latin America, as the paradigmatic figure of anti-magical realism. *2666* (2004) and *Los Detectives Salvajes* (1998), as well as Bolaño's other efforts, set out to sketch the interdependent contours of "visceral realism" and "savage neoliberalism," a cognitive mapping of Mexico post-1968 that re/members that nation (and megalopolis) within the context of a global Mexico (the concrete poetry of a Mexico City that spills into Ciudad Juárez, San Diego, Barcelona, Paris...). In the past few years, the fiction of Bolaño has provided me with an oblique angle from which to reassess both post/contemporary (Mexican) cultural production and the critical itch of periodization.

linguaging and bodies in this latest phase of Margolles's multi-mediated "narrative" in turn demonstrate how Mexico writ global (the impossible precarity/precarioussness of a "we") neither can afford to stand in for the "fall of yet another brown body" nor doubly explode into the rhetoric of "a country convuls[ing] with daily violence" (Ellingwood 2008), with "death rates comparable to those in a war zone" (Painter 2008). Margolles's efforts (like so many scattered, high-pitched performative utterances) challenge historians of the proliferating present to revisit minimalism, conceptualism, and performance's triangulation in the everyday body-poetic/politic of "this world and nearer ones." For, however tempting it may be to retroactively read Margolles's entire body of work as allegorical of Mexico's arrival at its contemporary crisis (of re/presentation), Margolles's corpus makes a case for the latter interpretation's simultaneous "vaporization," rebuking instead: the task—a repeat performance—is one of bearing the burden of Antigone-like witness (versus that of shock for shock's sake, otherwise known as the "shock doctrine"), of placing an equal sign between one's ethics and aesthetics. In the interlude, whatever prescience can be salvaged from such a strategy's "minimalism" must scavenge for fodder in the forensic, the literal, as tactic, what it leaves to its publics' coming imagined communities.

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