

CLEAN AIR, CLEAR WATER: VAPOURIZATION AND THE ANONYMOUS CORPSE IN TERESA MARGOLLES' *PLANCHA*

Daniella E. Sanader

Upon first glance, Teresa Margolles' *Plancha* – on display from January 19 to May 13, 2012 at DHC/ART in Montreal, Quebec – seemed disarmingly simple (fig. 1).¹ Plain steel plates extended across the floor, resembling a strange hybrid between a minimalist sculpture and an operating table, the circles of oxidation that scarred their surfaces acting as the only obvious individuating details. A small plastic tube travelled across the ceiling, sending tiny droplets of water down upon the plates in a haphazard rhythm. Each drop vapourized upon contact with a sharp *hiss*; the plates were heated. The space seemed fully devoid of any other material, and without reading the didactic panel provided



Figure 1 - *Plancha* (2010), Teresa Margolles- Credits: Richard-Max Tremblay, with the permission of DHC/ART

by the gallery, one could easily believe that to be the case. However, Margolles sourced the water from a morgue in Mexico City, where it was used to clean corpses after autopsy. The air was saturated with traces of the anonymous dead, and I was breathing them into my lungs. For a space that once seemed empty and clean, *Plancha* was now bursting at the seams, overflowing into the surrounding exhibition rooms, the lobby, and the city streets outside.

Existing within an uneasy liminal space between the material and the immaterial, Margolles' *Plancha* complicates the spectator's phenomenological and political experience of the gallery space. This paper will explore how Margolles' mobilization of water in various

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states works to denaturalize the sensorial experience of *Plancha*. I will argue that *Plancha* enacts what Mieke Bal has referred to as “homeopathic complicity”: a politicized artmaking strategy that implicates the spectator within the violence enacted upon the art object, causing us – as viewing subjects – to re-evaluate how we may be complicit within systems of violence in daily life.² After situating *Plancha* within a discussion of the ethical implications of Margolles’ larger body of work in and emotionally demanding encounter with *Plancha*. By emphasizing the bodily engagement between the spectator and the absent-yet-present corpse, this essay will act as a critical intervention into the use of vapourized water as a political and phenomenological strategy of artistic production.

MARGOLLES’ UNEASY ETHICS AND ESTABLISHING CRITICAL UNCERTAINTY

When examining the breadth of Margolles’ artistic output, *Plancha* can be understood within a wider agenda of politicizing death, violence, and remembrance within the artist’s native Mexico. Her work frequently depicts the corpse from the forensic perspective, complicating the seemingly neutral gaze of the medical examiner and implicating the spectator within the violence inflicted upon the dead body. The founding member of a 1990s Mexico City-based performance collective (and “trash

Mexico City and elsewhere, I will theorize the use of water and its phenomenological effects by breaking down the sensorial environment of *Plancha* into four main experiential categories: the smell of the air, the sight of the water, tangible traces, and the presence of the corpse. I do not intend to claim that these categories are firmly delineated or rigidly sequential; rather, they act as a provisional framework for understanding the highly complex metal rock band”³) called SEMEFO (an anagram for the Medical Forensic Services of Mexico City), Margolles also trained as a forensic technician and worked in the morgue where she has sourced much of her material.⁴ Her work seems to imply the personal and emotional immediacy of her daily engagement with the anonymous dead – attempting to speak for the many bodies left unclaimed or without proper burial, thanks to uneven structures of power and wealth in Mexico – while retaining some residual aspect of the cold, austere, and unforgiving environment of the forensic autopsy room. In the early 2000s, much of Margolles’ work engaged in difficult interpersonal exchanges in order to be actualized. This included *Lengua*, the preserved (and pierced) tongue of a Mexican teenager who was murdered in a street fight, obtained from his family by Margolles in exchange for her payment of his burial expenses.⁵ In another case, Margolles travelled to Barcelona and

collaborated with a young Moroccan drug dealer by smearing the grease of human remains onto his naked skin. Of the resulting video – entitled, *Grumos sombre la piel/Globs on the Skin* (2001) – Margolles states: “[h]e was fully aware of the origin of the material 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.”⁶ While undoubtedly commenting on the violence and pain induced through the intercontinental drug trade, Margolles’ morbid ‘collaborations’ – which further emphasize the divide between artist and disadvantaged and/or dead subject – do not always seem like a fair deal. Since the early 2000s, many critics have noted that her work has taken a stylistic turn from the abrasive and confrontational towards a minimal, austere aesthetic;⁷ yet, as can be seen with *Plancha*, her more recent work remains just as difficult to ethically navigate.

As such, her work often sits uncomfortably (and I would argue, deliberately so) between the elegiac and the exploitative. I cannot say that I have fully resolved my feelings towards Margolles’ economy of the corpse – yet before I continue, I wish to deliberately claim this uneasiness as a methodological

strategy for my research. Given the phenomenologically distressing experience of *Plancha*, I see my academic approach as one that asserts a critical uncertainty in order to fully explore the complex and contradictory ethical terrain that is Margolles’ artistic output. In writing about Margolles, other authors have hinted at such a position of ethical uneasiness without fully naming it. Rebecca Scott Bray touches on these contradictions by asserting that her work ranges between the “playful” and “demanding,” either working to “counsel or *coerce* viewers into contact...”⁸ In a catalogue essay for the P.S. 1 exhibit, *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* (2002), Cuauhtémoc Medina claims that her installation in the show was the most “subtle and respectful” her work had ever been.⁹ This statement vaguely implies that her earlier work lacks ‘respect’ or ethical discretion, yet Medina does not spend time delineating why this may be the case. Therefore, this deliberate ‘critical uncertainty’ is not an excuse for the academically lazy; rather, it is a method of problematizing my absolute authority as the author of this text, while refusing a reading of Margolles’ *Plancha* that assumes stability and completeness.

THE SMELL OF THE AIR

Perhaps the most obvious way that *Plancha* phenomenologically disrupts the spectatorial subject is through the vapourized water that lingers in the air. Margolles' work is absorbed into the bodies of gallery visitors as *Plancha* atmospherically extends outwards past the visible structure provided. Her work relies upon the 'neutrality' associated with its austere formal language, while the curatorial placement of *Plancha* within a white-walled gallery context only emphasizes this supposed 'neutrality' further. However, *Plancha* compels the spectator to perceive the phenomenologically *non-neutral* nature of the gallery's atmosphere. Margolles *names* this invisible air, providing it with contextual, political, and affective specificity. Her work acts as the inverse of Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* from 1963-65, a 30x30cm hermetically sealed plexiglass cube built housing a centimetre of water, which evaporated and then condensed within the structure. Haacke's cube mirrored the air temperature and humidity levels of the surrounding space; in a simple gesture, it exposed the atmospheric mechanisms rendered invisible within the museum system. Yet as an institutional critique, the *Condensation Cube* remained static and self-contained (quite literally, hermetically sealed). As Mark Jarzombek observed, "despite all that it reveals in the context of the modern museum, [the *Condensation Cube*] traps

the very mechanisms that it wishes to expose. It places them in quarantine."¹⁰ *Plancha*, on the other hand, is radically un-quarantined. Margolles unleashes her material out into the world, problematizing the assumed boundary where the art object ends and the surrounding space begins.

The awareness that the water vapour contains particles of the anonymous dead suddenly emphasizes sensorial faculties that the "white cube" of the gallery typically attempts to neutralize, including the smell of the gallery's atmosphere. The knowledge of the death in the air induces a form of anxious curiosity in the face of the dirty or contaminating. I *want* to smell something different, I *want* to perceive a haziness or thickness to the gallery air, even if I am afraid or disgusted by what these differences would mean for the contamination of the boundaries of my body. Yet Margolles does not provide much evidence to meet my heightened sensorial awareness: there is nothing that asserts the presence of death or decay in the air. However, despite a lack of sensorial evidence, the olfactory experience of *Plancha* is crucial. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura U. Marks indicates that smell is an extremely material sense, resulting from the intermingling of bodies, infiltrating the smelling subject without their choice or consent: "it acts on our bodies before we are conscious of it. Smell

requires a bodily contact with the world, which in turn is mediated in the brain in an especially instinctual fashion.”¹¹ *Plancha* permeates the spectator. Standing within the installation, I do not have a choice; the distinctions between my body and the anonymous corpse dismantle as I breathe in vapourized water. In this manner, the traces of the dead become implicated within the bodies of the living, whether we like it or not.

Just as the corpse seems to break through the boundaries of the living body through the vapourized air – enacting a covert form of violence upon the viewing subject – Margolles’ work could equally (and contradictorily) be seen to perform a violent gesture in the other direction. In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Marks also writes that smell is based in a direct engagement between our olfactory receptors and the particles given off by a source:

Smell requires contact, molecules coming into touch with receptors. A source of smell gradually diminishes over time as its particles disperse. To smell something, then, is to participate in its gradual destruction.¹²

Breathing in the particles of the dead in *Plancha* through my nose and mouth – using the very action (breathing) that

distinguishes the living from the dead – I assist in their dispersal, and I further dissolve their presence. With each visiting spectator, the anonymous dead become more and more diluted, perhaps adding an additional layer of marginality to bodies that were already deemed invisible and anonymous in the morgue context. Therefore, how do we reconcile these oppositional and overlapping modes of violence? *Plancha* both infiltrates my body without consent, yet I also slowly chip away at its source. Bal likens “homeopathic complicity” – the spectator’s implicit participation within a form of violence enacted upon the art object – to a “poison of which a small amount can cure our vulnerability to a deadly dosage.”¹³ In *Plancha* this vision of complicity through ingestion becomes actualized. Through Margolles’ work I participate in the violence enacted upon the anonymous dead in Mexico City, yet this anxiety-inducing form of ingestion forces me to become aware of my responsibility and complicity within a political system which otherwise seems distant and unimportant: as Bal explains, only when we become aware of our participation within systems of violence “can we productively engage with it, and only then does resistance beyond defensive negativity become possible.”¹⁴ Given the highly embodied nature of the installation, *Plancha* adds a discomforting level of spectatorial

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self-awareness to the violence it describes. It causes me to claim responsibility for my own position – as a viewing, breathing subject – in relation to the anonymous dead within the work. If Gaston Bachelard understood the vapourous cloud as inducing a “reverie without responsibility,”¹⁵ then Margolles reinstates ethical and political responsibility to the experience of vapour. Complicating the borders between subject/object and living/dead, *Plancha*'s use of vapourized water decenters the work, forcing me to carry its implications within my body long after I have left DHC/ART.

THE SIGHT OF THE WATER

Swiftly sent downwards to meet the steel heated plates, the liquid water mobilized by Margolles in *Plancha* provides an additional set of sensorial complications. To the naked eye, her water seems clear and clean; it betrays nothing of the dangerous material it is said to contain. Despite any curious desire to see a visual manifestation of Margolles' anonymous dead, the water droplets in *Plancha* provide nothing for the viewer. The installation sits uneasily between an assumed 'truth' and a potentially suspicious 'fiction': we are left to suspend all disbelief, for there is no way to concretely verify the declared source of her water. The clarity of her water almost creates more space for suspicion and ardent questions. Without any

visual cues of death and decay, the viewer is left with blind trust and each individual spectator processes such a grand leap of faith differently. However, arguing over the accuracy of Margolles' claims seems fundamentally counterproductive in my eyes. Assuming that the 'authenticity' of her water is necessary is a highly reductive mode of reading an installation that revels in its own contradictory – and ethically ambiguous – complexity. Instead, the water used ('authentic' or not) creates a highly charged emotional and phenomenological space which dissolves the boundaries of *Plancha* into the viewer's own body. The invisibility of her source material even supplements the invisibility of her subjects: the anonymous dead of Mexico City. Therefore, Margolles' ambivalence to any straightforward delineation of truth and fiction seems highly appropriate for *Plancha*, and any impulse to fully 'prove' the source of her material could be understood as a mode of coping with the anxieties of contagion, ambiguity, and complicity that the installation provokes.

Gaston Bachelard's 1942 text, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, also attempts to poetically situate the communicative capacities of clear water as they relate to human consciousness. Bachelard writes that clear water creates the ideal mirror for reflecting the human image; it proffers a

reflection that is unfixed and thus capable of opening up a continuous variety of meaning:

The mirror a fountain [of clear water] provides, then, is the opportunity for *open imagination*. This reflection, a little vague and pale, suggests idealization. Standing before the water which reflects his image, Narcissus feels that his beauty *continues*, has not come to an end, and must be completed. In the bright light of a room, glass mirrors give too stable an image.¹⁶

In this “opportunity for open imagination,” Bachelard asserts that the purity of clear water allows the substance to act as an open-ended source of signification for the reflected subject. Without imposing any ‘impure’ materiality upon the image of the reflected self, pure water therefore becomes the perfect surface to represent an idealized image of human beauty. As Bachelard observes, “water serves to make our image more *natural*, to give a little innocence and naturalness to the pride we have in our private contemplation.”¹⁷ This model of innocent idealization is quite evidently disrupted by Margolles’ use of clear water. While remaining visibly clear/pure, her installation relies upon the open knowledge of the impure source of her material. Her water is by no means *innocent*, to borrow from Bachelard’s words. This implied contamination impedes the

ability of Margolles’ clear water to act as a natural reflective source for the viewing subject: her water imposes itself into my imagination, into my very body, instead of simply acting as a conduit for my own image or perspective. My limited ability to engage with her water-as-liquid complicates this process of idealization even further. *Plancha* has no pools of reflective water left still, but rather, droplets of water fall and within a split second are vapourized into the air. However, Bachelard’s awareness of the destabilizing, imaginative potential of clear water seems appropriate within the context of *Plancha*. Regardless of his visions of purity or innocence (and regardless of disruptive arguments regarding the ‘authenticity’ of Margolles’ claims), *Plancha*’s vapourization of clear water creates a space where the very *air* carries signifiatory powers that extend past what is materially (or sensorially) evident. Margolles’ water – in a very Bachelardian manner – creates meaning and metaphor beyond its physical states. The emotional and phenomenological impact of *Plancha* relies upon these open-ended associative possibilities.

This ambiguous sense of clarity is not present in all of Margolles’ work. The Mexican artist has employed morgue water in two earlier contexts. *Vaporización* (2002) and *En el aire* (2003) both made the material sensorially accessible in ways not permitted

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to *Plancha*. *Vaporización* was displayed in P.S. 1's exhibition, *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, and involved Margolles running morgue water through a fog machine, filling the gallery space with a dense haze of the anonymous dead. Following a similar logic, *En el aire* was displayed in Frankfurt at the Museum für Moderne Kunst. Morgue water transformed the space into one of (macabre) play: the artist used a bubble maker. Both installations confront the spectatorial body in markedly different ways. Providing a tangible sensorial experience, each accommodates different phenomenological associations with the nature of the material in the air. The dense fog in *Vaporización* had a palpable weight, smell, and taste, impeding the spectator's vision and spatial awareness. As Cuauhtémoc Medina describes:

[...] the gallery was bare, or rather it was simply filled with this mist that had a slightly industrial, bitter flavor. Enveloped in the vapor, you were alone with your thoughts, fears and breathing, only hearing the asthmatic wheeze of a smoke machine that, every once in awhile, blew out a thick white puff under the carefully designed overhead illumination.¹⁸

Similarly, *En el aire* would have created a complex tactile experience as the delicate bubbles popped against bare skin, absorbing into one's pores. *Vaporización* and *En el aire* employ

morgue water made substantial, indicating that the same watery material mobilized in different ways can create drastically different social and bodily engagements. Spectators wandering through *Vaporización* must have walked cautiously, awkwardly, barely able to recognize other bodies within the space of the P.S. 1 gallery. On the other hand, *En el aire* gave rise to a playfulness that was rendered uncomfortable – even guilt-ridden – once the source of the material was made known. One critic describes watching children play with the bubbles: “Running, laughing, catching, they are fascinated by the glistening, delicate forms.... The children's parents, meanwhile, studiously read the captions. Suddenly, with a look of disgust, they come and steer their offspring away.”¹⁹ Of course, in both cases the perceived tangibility of the material is, in some ways, only imaginary. Bubbles burst, fog dissipates; little is left to resist the gradual dissolution into air in *Vaporización* and *En el aire*. *Plancha* also leaves little material evidence, yet the emotional impact of all three installations hinges upon the uneasy balance between the visible and invisible; what can be distinctly perceived versus what is thought to linger in the air.

TANGIBLE TRACES AND THE PRESENCE OF THE CORPSE

Much of *Plancha* rests on the viewer attempting to perceive the invisible and immaterial, yet it is worthwhile to consider what

few aspects of the installation remain tangible for the human sensorium. These perceptible traces – the sound of droplets on metal, the oxidation patterns on each plate, even the wall text provided – become the source of spectatorial attention in the gallery, as they stand in synecdochically for the larger implications of the installation that our senses cannot not grasp: the presence of the corpse. It almost seems as if these small details are the only features in *Plancha* where I can adequately trust my senses. The tangible, yet haphazard rhythm of the droplets coming in contact with each metal plate – a light thud and immediate *hiss* – indicate Margolles' continued endeavour to infiltrate my lungs and pores with her material. The repetitive sound could even be read as a heartbeat: a delicate noise which, taken singularly, is inconsequential – yet its cumulative value represents the material presence (or 'life' perhaps) of *Plancha*. The oxidation patterns on each steel plate similarly rely upon the logic of accumulation. Each singular droplet making contact does not visibly alter the metal, yet with time their presence is made visible on its surface. These oxidation patterns indicate duration or repeated trauma, like scabs building up from a slowly dug wound. *Plancha's* ephemeral traces act as evidence of a larger story: our only contact with the lost identities of Mexico City's anonymous dead.

How can we use the ephemeral trace as a political strategy enacting Bal's idea of homeopathic complicity? In his essay, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," José Esteban Muñoz politicizes the ephemeral as a mode of creating evidence for queer subjects or others who have been traditionally marginalized from hegemonic forms of history making. For Muñoz, ephemeral evidence is resolutely specific and deeply social. It remains rooted within lived experience, and resists homogenizing systems of aesthetic or institutional classification:

Ephemera... is firmly anchored *within* the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived.²⁰

While the ephemeral has no inherent relation to the queer or "minoritarian"²¹ subject, Muñoz argues that ephemerality is an effective political strategy for asserting the presence of alternative histories and perspectives. Therefore, reliance upon ephemeral trace, residue, and vapourous material allows Margolles to create a phenomenological situation where the unvoiced politics of the anonymous dead are perpetuated long

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after the decomposition of flesh. Permitted to intermingle with the bodies of the living, these traces render the spectators complicit within the violence that engendered them.

Plancha's tangible traces – alongside the use of clear and vapourized water – work to imply the presence of the anonymous and marginalized dead. The corpses left unclaimed in Mexico City morgues – a city with a massive population of urban poor and, as Medina describes, “where widespread misery and violence go hand in hand with the inefficiency of the overburdened forensic, medical and legal systems[...]²² – are bodies further marginalized under an uneven system of wealth and power. In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva also imagines the corpse as marginalized: the ultimate abjected object. The act of expelling the abject is a method of reaffirming one's boundaries, of establishing a stable selfhood in the face of a threatening exterior:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death - the flat encephalograph, for instance - I would understand, react, or accept. No, ...refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.²³

The corpse indicates this exterior, the endpoint of all abject material, an uncontrollable excess of ‘self’ that the body cannot assimilate into an image of corporeal unity. Visitors to *Plancha* are left to breathe in the implications of that which is in excess of rational subjectivity. As Amy Sara Carroll observes, we are “forced to...interiorize the remains of the dead, to grapple with contemporary body counts and the fictive singularity of the subject.”²⁴ Reliance upon trace, residue, and vapourous material allows Margolles to create a phenomenological situation where the bodies of the dead are remobilized and intermingle with the bodies of the living.

However, these ephemeral traces of the dead would not carry any form of emotional impact were it not for the textual declaration of their presence. The didactic wall panel at DHC/ART *names* the presence of the corpse and creates the troubling phenomenological experience of the space. Therefore, I would argue that the gallery wall text is as crucial to the installation as the water vapour itself as it supplies the shared knowledge for gallery visitors. Naming the dead gives them their affective power; yet, contradictorily, the marginalization of these dead stems directly from their anonymity, the resolute *lack* of a name. Under the designation of “the anonymous dead,” hundreds of identities may have accumulated, their specificities

lost. As Judith Butler explains, to name is an act of power and privilege, a mode of calling a subject into discursive existence: “[t]he jarring, even terrible, power of naming appears to recall this initial power of the name to inaugurate and sustain linguistic existence, to confer singularity in location and time.”²⁵ In naming the anonymous dead, Margolles is still in control. She enacts her power and agency as artist, creating the space within which they can exist and exert their presence upon the spectator, both corporeally and textually.

The resolute anonymity of Margolles’ traces of the dead also creates space to consider how mourning and grievability function in uneven ways. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler discusses the politics through which the legitimacy of mourning becomes unevenly divided across different lives and different deaths, ultimately asserting that certain deaths attain status as publicly grievable. She writes, “we might critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more valuable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others.”²⁶ *Plancha* renders this division of value palpable in the gallery air. In a quite deliberate, jarring manner, Margolles’ installation calls into question how the deaths of some are simply absorbed back

into the status quo – calling the gallery visitors to directly attend to the ephemeral (or even invisible) traces left behind by a violent political regime.²⁷

Butler argues for a redistribution of grievability, a reconsideration of intersubjective relations that emphasizes vulnerability and interdependence over hierarchies of value: “In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt.”²⁸ In a disarmingly simple gesture, *Plancha* encapsulates these complex layers of intersectional vulnerability. By entering the gallery space and participating within its atmosphere, visitors become aware of their own corporeal vulnerability and fundamental interdependence with others who – due to systematic forms of violence and oppression – are no longer able to speak for themselves. “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other,”²⁹ Butler writes. My boundaries are undone by the traces of the dead in the air, just as I participate in their undoing by taking them into my body. Yet Margolles’ ambiguous stance in this process implicates the visitors to her installation in a series of difficult and potentially unanswerable questions. Is *Plancha*’s method of signaling to the

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intersecting vulnerabilities of bodies founded at the expense of enacting more violence upon those who have already experienced enough suffering – the doubled violence of death and subsequent social invisibility? Is Margolles participating in what Butler has named “the derealization of the ‘Other’”?³⁰ As they disperse into the air, are the bodies in *Plancha* rendered invisible twice over, made unreal and left anonymous? In short, how does the presence of the corpse *function* in *Plancha*?

I hesitate to claim that the anonymous dead are re-supplied with *agency* or *subjectivity* within the context of *Plancha*;³¹ rather, they are provided with an opportunity to implicate themselves upon the bodies of the living in a different fashion. Instead of claiming agency or subjectivity, I would like to suggest that the anonymous dead are supplied with new *possibility-as-flesh* within Margolles’ installation. The *possibility-as-flesh* of the corpse relies on Vivian Carol Sobchack’s relational mode of interobjectivity as outlined in, “The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity.”³² Designed as a counterpoint to intersubjective relationality, Sobchack describes a way of imagining how our bodies relate *as material flesh* to other material in the world.³³ Interobjectivity can create an acknowledgment of a shared material existence as it extends past subjective awareness: “I sense my body in its

broader existence and *possibility as flesh*,... the sanguine sense of not merely being-in-the-world but also belonging to it.”³⁴ Decentering the coherent, rational subject in favour of a broader network of material relations, Sobchack’s reasoning echoes how *Plancha* mobilizes the dead body to corporeally intertwine with the body of the spectator. Like Bachelard’s poetic vision of clear water and its ongoing associative capacities, the interobjectivity model indicates that the human body creates material resonances in spaces beyond one’s subjectivity and control. Margolles’ installation placed these material resonances at the forefront of my attention in the gallery, and as a spectator, I became aware of how the materiality of my *own* body was involved in the intermingling of particles and traces.

CONCLUSION

In an artist’s talk organized for the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, *Global Feminisms*, in 2007, Margolles described the cyclical nature of water: as recounted by Amy Sara Carroll in “*Muerte Sin Fin*: Teresa Margolles’ Gendered States of Exception,” “[s]he observed that the 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, and ingest one another in cycles of recomposition.”³⁵ Engaging with *Plancha*, I found myself imagining how the water I ingest and the air I

breathe implicates me as a citizen of Montreal and beyond. Despite its abject associations, is Margolles' vapour any more dangerous or disgusting than the air I breathe on any given day in a large city? Systems of violence and marginalization are not localized and discrete; they create resonances across broad global networks and as *Plancha* makes clear, we are *all* involved in the violence of Mexico City. Standing in the gallery space, I took that violence into my body, creating an uncomfortable, yet homeopathic form of complicity that allows me to take responsibility for my own position of privilege as a North American subject. Margolles' mobilization of water in its varied states is crucial to this process. It allows her to open up the very atmosphere of the gallery to a wide variety of emotional and phenomenological associations. Confounding our sensorial expectations, *Plancha* retains a lyrical complexity despite reductive arguments surrounding the 'authentic' origin of her material. Its resonances and implications remain present within my body long after I have left DHC/ART.

Notes

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- ¹ Further images of the exhibition can be found at the [DHC/ART website](#).
² Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 96.
³ Patricia Martin, "O-2*," in *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, [exhibition catalogue] curated by Klaus Biesenbach

(New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center: 30 June 2002 – 2 September 2002): 53.

⁴ Rebecca Scott Bray, "Teresa Margolles' Crime Scene Aesthetics," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110:4 (Fall 2011): 935.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 935-936.

⁶ Quoted in Amy Sara Carroll, "Muerte Sin Fin: Teresa Margolles's Gendered States of Exception," in *The Drama Review* 54:2 (Summer 2010): 112.

⁷ R. Scott Bray, "En piel ajena: The work of Teresa Margolles," *Law Text Culture* 11:1 (2007): 24.

⁸ Scott Bray, "Margolles's Crime Scene Aesthetics," 935. [emphasis mine].

⁹ Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Mutual Abuse," in *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, [exhibition catalogue] curated by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center: 30 June 2002 – 2 September 2002): 45; The installation Medina is describing is *Vaporización* (2002), which will be discussed in relation to *Plancha* in the following pages of my essay.

¹⁰ Mark Jarzombek, "Haacke's Condensation Cube: The Machine in the Box and the Travails of Architecture," *Thresholds* 30: Microcosms (Summer 2005): 102.

¹¹ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 115.

¹² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000): 114.

¹³ Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* [1943], trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1983): 185.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* [1942], trans. E. R. Farrell (Dallas: Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2006): 21-22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ Medina, "Mutual Abuse," 44.

¹⁹ Amanda Coulson, "Teresa Margolles," *frieze magazine* 85 (September 2004): http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/teresa_margolles/ [accessed April 10, 2012].

²⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8:2 (1996): 10-11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Medina, "Mutual Abuse," 44.

²³ Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," excerpt from *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1982] in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press: 2002): 231.

²⁴ Carroll, “*Muerte Sin Fin*,” 115; Carroll is here describing *Vaporización* yet I would argue the implications are the same.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 29-30.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Publishing, 2004): 30.

²⁷ Throughout Amy Sara Carroll’s “*Muerte Sin Fin*” and Rebecca Scott Bray’s “Teresa Margolles’ Crime Scene Aesthetics,” several examples of Mexican-based criminological, political, and judicial violence are listed as influences upon Margolles’ work; including the Ciudad Juárez femicides, Mexico City’s massive population of urban poor, transnational drug trades and gang activity, dangerous and low-wage working conditions in factories established by U.S. corporations, and the widespread negligence of state justice officials when handling criminal cases. All these factors have undoubtedly contributed to the large number of bodies left unclaimed after autopsy in morgues. However, it should be reiterated that Margolles’ practice does not aim to name this violence as a specifically Mexican problem, but rather, it resonates across broader transnational networks. For more information and additional sources, see Scott Bray, “Margolles’s Crime Scene Aesthetics,” endnotes 9 and 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ This strikes me as a reading that oversimplifies the ambiguous ethics that Margolles creates in her installations. *Plancha* indeed offers a mode for the dead to once again implicate themselves upon the bodies of the living, yet labeling this as a form of ‘agency’ or ‘subjectivity’ might redirect our attention away from Margolles’ own power/responsibility within this process. Obviously, the dead did not offer their consent for Margolles to use the traces of their bodies, nor could consent ever be given in this situation. Yet claiming the dead can carry ‘agency’ perhaps ignores Margolles’ own choices in how this ‘agency’ is enacted, while underrepresenting the ways in which these individuals were denied agency during life.

³² Vivian Carol Sobchack, “The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 286-318.

³³ *Ibid.*, 290. [emphasis mine].

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 316-317.

³⁵ Carroll, “*Muerte Sin Fin*,” 115.