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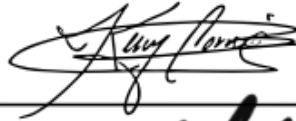
Museum Studies

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Kency Cornejo, Ph.D. , Chairperson



Kirsten Pai Buick, Ph.D.



Loa Traxler, Ph.D.



**THE BODY ARTICULATED: GENDER VIOLENCE AND THE
PERFORMATIVE TURN IN MEXICO**

by

KYLEE ARAGON

BACHELOR OF ARTS

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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**THE BODY ARTICULATED: GENDER VIOLENCE
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By

Kylee Aragon

B.A., Art History, University of New Mexico

M.A., Museum Studies, University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT

The Body Articulated: Gender Violence and the Performative Turn in Mexico explores the role of performance art in raising awareness for gender-based crimes. My thesis investigates the performative response to gender-based violence in contemporary art in Mexico during the 1970's and then again in the post-NAFTA era, with the aim of examining the use of the artists body, the voices of women as substitution for the body, and the bodies of others as means of creating a greater awareness to the femicidal epidemic. Artists like Mónica Mayer and Lorena Wolffer use their body and the voices of woman, as opposed to using more explicit body displays. Artists like Teresa Margolles opt for a more vulgar approach, by using the bodies of the dead and their physical remnants as a medium. Unlike Mayer and Wolffer, Margolles feeds into the shock value of the Mexican tabloids. Her gruesome images underscore a flagrant display of disrespect for human life and feeds into the violence rather than combats it. Throughout my thesis I evaluate various strategies artists have

used to address femicide, pondering what practices work and what practices are more harmful than productive. When discussing gender violence within the context of art, it is important to acknowledge how museums can be complicit, providing spaces for iniquitous artistic approaches. Throughout my thesis I argue there are ethical and unethical ways to use the body and performance in relation to gender-based violence.

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INTRODUCTION

“Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más.”

— Susana Chávez Castillo, Mexican poet and activist

In 2011, Mexican poet and human rights activist Susana Chávez Castillo was tortured and killed in Ciudad Juárez. Eighteen years prior to her death she coined the phrase “ni una mujer menos”, which translates to “Not one woman less, not one more death.”¹ This phrase has continued to serve as a statement of protest and defiance against gender-based violence. In the last thirty years, Latin America has witnessed an unprecedented rise of attacks against women. According to the United Nations, the countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world, fourteen are in Latin America and the Caribbean region.² In 2020, 3,723 women were killed in Mexico, according to the Mexico Public Prosecutors’ Office; just 940 of these murders were investigated as femicides.³ On average, 10 women and girls are killed each day in Mexico, the rate has doubled over the past 5 years.⁴ A startling forty percent of femicide victims in Mexico knew their killer. These alarming statistics have greatly impacted women’s perception of safety; seventy-seven percent of Mexican women report not feeling safe. Compared to other countries, the violence against women in Mexico does not reach the most extreme

¹ Elisabeth Jay Friedman and Constanza Tabbush, “#Niunamenos: Not One Woman Less, Not One More Death!,” NACLA, November 1, 2016, <https://nacla.org/news/2016/11/01/niunamenos-not-one-woman-less-not-one-more-death>.

² Rep. *Global Study on Homicide: Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls*. Vienna, Austria: United Nations, 2018.

³ “Justice on Trail: Failures in Criminal Investigations of Femicides Preceded by Disappearance in the State of Mexico,” [amnestyusa.org](https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Report-English.pdf), accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Report-English.pdf>.

⁴ Villegas, Paulina. “In Mexico, Women Go on Strike Nationwide to Protest Violence.” *New York Times*, March 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/world/americas/mexico-women-strike-protest.html>.

levels, but it represents an intractable problem that has been made more complicated, in part, by a lack of action from the Mexican government.

In March of 2020, Mexico's government reported a surge of emergency calls. Of these calls, 26,000 reported violence against women.⁵ These cries for help were quickly dismissed by the Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. When confronted about the flood of emergency calls, the President's response was both shocking and disheartening, "Ninety percent of those calls that you're referring to are fake." The President's insensitive comments highlight the government's cycle of negligence. Mexico's incessant violence against women and continual state of denial has prompted a resurgence of activism. Mexican artists are continuing to respond to the state authorized violence through performance and conceptual art, using the weighted medium of the body to protest the violations against their own bodies and the bodies of other women. Using visual art, artists can reframe feminicidal narratives, draw attention to the heinous acts and connect the issue of gender-based violence to broader societal relationships. Artists Lorena Wolffer (b. 1971, Mexico City, Mexico), Mónica Mayer (b.1954, Mexico City, Mexico) and Teresa Margolles (b. 1963, Culiacán, Mexico) approach the topic of feminicidal violence through radically different stylistic and ethical approaches. Each artist challenges the Mexican government, while bringing awareness to the international community of the hard realities of gender-based crimes.

Femicidal violence is not created in a vacuum, these attacks against women are a result of a legacy of military violence, colonial reverberations, structural impunity,

⁵ Kitroeff, Natalie. "Mexico's President Says Most Domestic Violence Calls Are 'Fake.'" *New York Times*, May 31, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/world/americas/violence-women-mexico-president.html>.

long standing gender imbalance, and the failure of the countries legal system. Gender violence is a form of systemic violence that infiltrates the public and private spheres, and is rooted in social, political, economic and cultural inequalities. Gender-based violence is a product of the patriarchal, hierarchical, and social organization of gender, based on supremacy and inferiority. This form of violence continues through longstanding patriarchal gendered power structures. Violence has always been linked to power, no matter if this violence is private or public. Violence has consistently been used throughout history to reinforce or defend existing power relations. As previously mentioned, no country is safe from gender-based crimes, and women around the world are subject to these heinous acts. In the United States, Indigenous and immigrant women continue to be targets and suffer disproportionate impacts. This violence will subsist if perpetrators are continually subject to impunity. The impunity granted to the perpetrators of these violent acts affords them with more power because they know their crimes will most likely go unpunished. These human rights violations are the result of a culture of impunity that has debased women's lives and disregarded their calls for help.

Gender-based violence has been used throughout the decades as a tool of power and control. The problem of gender-based violence is pervasive and not limited to Mexico, but for this study, I will focus solely be looking at the issue within the country. During the past three decades, we have seen a rise of violations against women's bodies: rape, disappearances, torture, and murders. With the rise of these unspeakable forms of degradation there has also been a rise in advocacy and research.⁶ Women's

⁶ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, "Introduction: A Cartography of Femicide in the Américas," in *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-44, 27.

rights advocates and scholars have begun using the terms ‘femicide’ and ‘feminicide’ to refer to these attacks on women’s bodies.

Femicide is defined as, “the murder of women and girls because they are female.”⁷ In Mexico, violence against women is commonly presented as “feminicide.”⁸ Feminicide builds upon the definition of femicide. This definition does not leave room for women whose bodies that have not yet been found or women who have been labeled as missing. Feminicide was first used around the 1980’s by feminist groups in the Dominican Republic. The term was used in reference to girls who were being physically and psychologically attacked within the country.⁹ Marcela Lagarde y de Los Rios categorizes feminicide by the inaction of the state, “Feminicide is able to occur because the authorities who are ommissive, negligent, or acting in collusion with assailants perpetrate institutional violence against women.”¹⁰

Feminicide can take different forms, including domestic violence, systemic sexual violence and feminicide based on stigmatized occupations, such as prostitution. Feminicide encompasses violence against women and the context in which these crimes were committed. In *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*, authors Fregoso and Bejarano further elaborate on the complexities of the term feminicide, “...feminicide is gender-based violence that is both public and private, implicating both

⁷ Russell, Diana E.H., “*Defining Femicide and Related Concepts*,” in *Femicide in Global Perspective*, ed. Diana E.H> Russell and Roberta A. Harmes (New York: Teacher College Press, 2001), 3.

⁸ Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia Bejarano, and Pascha Bueno-Hansen, “Feminicidio: Making the Most of an Empowered Term,” in *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 290-311, 295.

⁹ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, 5.

¹⁰ Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia L. Bejarano, and Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, “Preface: Feminist Keys for Understanding Feminicide: Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction,” in *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the AMÉRICAS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. xi-xxv, xix.

the state (directly or indirectly) and the individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it is thus systemic, widespread, and occurs daily.”¹¹ This definition highlights the systemic nature of femicide, and its type of violence has social, economic, political, and cultural roots. Femicide makes visible the ensemble of violations of women’s human rights. The term recognizes the lasting ramifications of environments where terror and violence against women is socially tolerated.

Despite the rising numbers of femicides, these violations continue to be insufficiently investigated by the Mexican police. The authorities and attorneys are completely absent during investigations. According to a 2019 report issued by Human Rights Watch, Mexican laws “contradict international standards” when it comes to the severity of punishment for sexual offenses contingent upon the supposed chastity of the victim. Mexican women and girls are not being protected; the public spaces they move in turn into spaces where they can lose their lives. Another contributing factor to crimes committed against women is the issue of state law. Women around the world continue to be blamed for sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence, which contributes to a lack of reporting on the victim’s behalf. Women not only feel that they will be blamed but are afraid of retaliation and fear that if they report the violence nothing will be done to bring the perpetrator to justice. Fears about the effectiveness of the criminal justice system are not unfounded. According to RAINN, in the United States out of every 1,000 rapes, only six rapists will ever spend a day in jail.¹² This statistic

¹¹ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, 5.

¹² “The Criminal Justice System: Statistics,” RAINN, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>.

does not instill much confidence in the justice system. In the United States sexual assault remains one of the most under-reported crimes.

The law repeatedly denies women the protections they deserve. This institutional gender-based violence represses actions against women rather than prevents and eradicates violence against women.¹³ Institutional violence flourishes in an environment where acceptance of inequalities, discrimination, and violence is normalized. This acceptance reinforces the permanence of state structures that perpetuate gender inequality. When feminicides started to rise in 1996, Mexican state officials justified the absence of investigations by saying that several victims were prostitutes. Gender-based violence is frequently blamed on the gangs or the victims themselves. The state's refusal to take accountability reflects this type of blame game. "By linking the victims to gang violence, officials place responsibility for the murders on the victims themselves, in effect blaming the women's presumed choice of acquaintances for their deaths."¹⁴ This climate of impunity and victim blaming propels more violations against women.

The rise of feminicides have been linked to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect in 1994. Many scholars refer to that year as the inception of the femicide epidemic. Though NAFTA has undoubtedly played a major role in the rise of femicidal violence choosing a single origin date overlooks the entrenched history of gender-based violations within Mexico. It is important to

¹³ Jackeline Fernandez, "Violencia Institucional Contra Las Mujeres: Vulnerables y Revictimizadas," [amnistia.org](https://www.amnistia.org/ve/blog/2017/07/3195/violencia-institucional-contra-las-mujeres), accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.amnistia.org/ve/blog/2017/07/3195/violencia-institucional-contra-las-mujeres>.

¹⁴ Rosa Linda Fregoso et al., "Getting Away with Murder: Guatemala's Failure to Protect Women and Rodi Alvarado's Quest for Safety," in *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 93-115, 99.

acknowledge these vicious acts have roots that predate 1994, and the lives lost prior to NAFTA also warrant further examination. The violence that ignited the performative turn in Mexico was authorized by the powerful Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PRI ruled Mexico continuously from 1929 to 2000, and then again from 2012 to 2018. By the 1960s, the PRI had already been in power for decades. In the 1960's, student and workers' movements spread throughout Mexico as part of the global movements for workers' and civil rights. At this time of great economic uncertainty in Mexico, the PRI silenced protests in the capital. The PRI responded aggressively to the unwelcomed protests, this period of state sanctioned violence and censorship is now known as the Mexican Dirty War.

In early 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, creating a free trade zone in North America.¹⁵ The goal of NAFTA was to eliminate all tariff and non-tariff barriers of trade and investment between the United States, Canada and Mexico. While a free trade agreement provides the façade of increased wealth for all involved parties, sadly, this is almost never the case. Typically, these types of agreements do not ensure equal distribution of that wealth. This historic agreement was a decisive moment for Mexico, altering the country's social and economic fabric. NAFTA transformed U.S.-Mexican relations, especially concerning the movement of products and people within and across the Mexican border. The agreement resulted in the relocation of factories to the Mexican side of the border, where labor is typically inexpensive. For example, in the northern border city of Juárez,

¹⁵ Kathleen Staudt, "How NAFTA Has Changed Mexico," *Current History* 117, no. 796 (January 2018): pp. 43-48, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2018.117.796.43>.

hundreds of *maquiladoras* (factories) sprang up, which caused internal migration of labor from rural parts of Mexico to Juárez. The maquiladora workforce was comprised mostly of women, who then became targets for exploitation and violence.¹⁶

Since its inception, NAFTA has suffered criticism for the agreement's failure to protect the working-class people, especially working women. These border region factories benefit from paying low wages and often female workers are exploited for their labor and are victims of the U.S.'s imperialistic relationship with Mexico. The female maquiladora workforce is met with patriarchal power structures within and outside of the home. Their new position as economic contributors to the household sometimes gives women more independence, threatening Mexico's patriarchal foundation. This newfound autonomy can lead to gender violations both within and outside of the domestic sphere as avenues of contesting or regaining physical and psychological control. For nearly three decades, since the passing of NAFTA women have been murdered at an alarming rate around the city of Juárez. Their bodies have been left mutilated, often showing signs of sexual violence and torture. By the 2000s, Juárez was referred to as "the femicide capital of the world" and in 2009 was declared the "most violent city in the world".¹⁷ This wave of violence is met with impunity providing little hope of relief. As of 2021, violence continues in Juárez at an alarming rate.

Much of the violence experienced in Latin America is not only a result of structural impunity and the normalization of machista culture, but is also a result of

¹⁶ Kathleen A. Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 45.

¹⁷ Nina Maria Lozano, *Not One More!: Femicidio on the Border* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), xv.

military violence, colonial reverberation, and a legacy of extractionism. The United States presence, specifically in Central America during the second half of the 20th century, left tens of thousands displaced from homes and countries of origin. The United States military intervention and extortionist tactics has left much of Latin America in a state of recovery since that time. When speaking about gender violence in Latin America, it is crucial to mention the United States' role in creating this vortex of duress. Violence is taught, and the manner in which women continue to be attacked follows the formulas implemented by US trained soldiers throughout Latin America. State sanctioned acts and the systematic use of sexualized torture of women was used throughout the civil revolutions, standardizing this type of cruelty. Counter insurgency tactics taught by United States, included both rape and the 'overkilling' of women. These tactics often consist of mutilation of the body, and they were used to terrorize both males and females. These vicious attacks were performative displays of power; they were done in the open with no hesitation or shame.

It is very easy to see that the same aesthetics of violence were employed from Argentina to Chile to Guatemala to El Salvador. Many of the men that were using the U.S. articulated terror tactics were trained at The School of the Americas in Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. The army center, founded in 1946 has trained more than sixty thousand soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills. "So widely documented is the participation of the school's graduates in torture, murder, and political repression throughout Latin America that in 2001 the school officially changed its name to the Western Hemisphere

Institute for Security Cooperation.”¹⁸ The viscous acts conducted during the revolutions throughout Latin America bear striking similarities to the accounts of gender-based violence reported today. The continued frequency of these acts highlights the lasting effects of violence.

Why is it important to examine these violent histories in relation to art? Art has always acted as a societal mirror, reflecting both a society’s positive and negative attributes. The telling nature of art is why we continue to look to artists for historical, social, and cultural insight. Throughout the decades Mexican artists have continued to react to their environments creating telling displays that speak to experiences of those living within the country. Art, particularly performance art flourishes in times of uncertainty.

In my thesis, I focus on the performative turn in Mexico, examining the artistic expression’s roots in the complex histories that followed the 1968 protests. The political motivations of young activists and artists shaped the medium of performance, creating an expression of provocation that calls upon community participation. Artists in Mexico are concerned with creating works that allow for public dialogue in response to a government that meets body violations with impunity, creating a vortex of violence. Performance art in Mexico is public, political, and personal, responding directly to local social and political situations. Performance is personal because it is both public and political. These performative themes effect people’s daily lives. The medium is living and breathing, responding directly to the environment in which it exists.

¹⁸ Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

To better understand how Mexican performance art condemns violence, specifically gender-based crimes, my thesis asks why so many Mexican artists engage with the body and performance? What are the conditions prompting this? What does it mean to use the body or not use the body? What performative practices work and what practices are more harmful than productive? How can museums feed into damaging narratives or participate in unethical practices? Why is it important to talk about these artists together in conversation about gender violence? And what is the role of these artists in combating gender-based crimes?

In order to properly answer these questions, I explore the significance of performance art in Mexico through historical analysis. Highlighting the social and political circumstances which prompted the performative turn. I rely on visual analysis when examining the role of the body in addressing gender-based violence, investigating how certain aesthetic and ethical practices feed into the violence rather than combat it. I place Mónica Mayer, Teresa Margolles, and Lorena Wolffer into conversation with one another, offering varied examples of how these artists use the body and performance to condemn femicide. I closely assess their various approaches to the body and femicide, demonstrating how Margolles uses the bodies of others, how Wolffer uses her own body, and how both Wolffer and Mayer use the voluntary voices of others in substitution for the body. It was important to place these three artists in dialogue with another to highlight how delicate the subject matter is. It is critical to be mindful of the implications of an artwork and to acknowledge how some artistic practices exploit the violence rather than fight it. Through cultural and visual analysis, I express the political consequences of unethical practices especially in relation to gender violence. Exposing

the museum's participatory role in preserving these nefarious artistic approaches. Through my thesis I argue, there are ethical and unethical ways to use the body and performance in relation to gender-based violence.

In Chapter two I examine the rise of the Mexican performative. Detailing how the medium's inception was tied to protesting local socio-economic and political injustices. I provide a detailed background of the historical events that prompted protests across Mexico. Throughout the chapter I analyze various Mexican aesthetics of provocation, fixating on the performative. I focus on how the performative uses the body and the public space as means of protest, garnering public awareness and creating visibility. In Chapter three, Chapter four, and Chapter five I move into a more detailed reading of artists Mónica Mayer, Teresa Margolles, and Lorena Wolffer's practices. Throughout these three chapters, I highlight the artists various approaches of addressing gender-based crimes in dialogue with the body and performance. I use these chapters to emphasize my argument that there are ethical and unethical ways to use the body and performance in relation to gender-based violence.

CHAPTER 2

THE PERFORMATIVE TURN IN MEXICO

Performance art has deep roots in the visual language of Mexico. Looking over a period of 50 years to present day, artists in Mexico have been responding to state violence, censorship, border violence, gender violence, disappearances and narco-violence with performance and conceptual art. Throughout these past several decades, Mexican artists have used the body to highlight the years of unchecked bodily violations. Artists use the body itself, memories of the body, clothes that touch the body, and other bodily fluids like blood and sweat. Using the body as a medium also helps to call attention to the absence of the violated body, making visible the referenced victims of institutionalized violence. The body is a vessel of pain and trauma but can also be the site of defiance and healing. Artists use the very weapon used against them to combat the continual abuses. Performance art in both Mexico and the rest of Latin America, is political as is the body, and can be an ideal weapon to wield against the state. The public nature of performance also plays a vital role in the relevance of the medium. Much of the performance art seen throughout Latin America is in direct rebellion against the state. Unlike marketable art, these ephemeral works are made for the community in order to evoke change. Performance art is defiant in nature, with longstanding commitments to protest. Artists who use the medium should honor the egalitarian essence of the art form. It is not to say there is no room for the practice within the white cube setting for the museum sphere can offer some level of protection against the state. But it is crucial for artists to not lose sight of the medium's intentions.

Unlike performance art within the Eurocentric world, performance in Mexico has a more layered history. Modern performance art in Mexico was born out of necessity under the authoritarian conditions of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.¹⁹ It is important to understand the political atmosphere which induced the necessary ascent of performance art within the country. By the 1960's, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) had already established its power as Mexico's dominant national party. The corrupt PRI ruled Mexico continuously from 1929 to 2000, and again from 2012 to 2018, dominating Mexican politics at local, state, and national levels for most of the 20th century. During the 1960's, Mexico was experiencing extreme economic instability which in turn led to large-scale social protests. Student and workers' movements spread throughout the country, but their cries for change were continuously silenced by the PRI.²⁰

In 1968, tensions hit a boiling point in Mexico, some calling the events that transpired the perfect storm. During the fall of 1968, all eyes were on Mexico as the government was preparing to host the Olympic games. The country was the first and only Latin American country selected to host the games until Brazil in 2016. Student and workers' groups saw the increased media attention surrounding the event as an opportunity to amplify their political, social, and economic concerns.²¹ The 1968 and 2016 Olympic games share striking similarities. In both host countries, much of the population was concerned with the government's extravagant spending and rapid

¹⁹ Coco Fusco and Maris Bustamante, "Non-Objective Arts in Mexico 1963-83," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (London, England: Routledge, 2003), pp. 225-239, 237.

²⁰ Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra. *Touched Bodies: The Performance Turn in Latin American Art*. (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 162.

²¹ Eric Zolov, "Showcasing the 'Land of Tomorrow': Mexico and the 1968 Olympics," *The Americas* 61, no. 2 (2004): pp. 159-188, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2004.0195>.

modernization in preparation for the international event. Venues assembled to appear modern and government overspending have become a touchstone of the Olympic games. In Mexico, this swift modernization benefited the rich and left the poor with even less.

Ten days before the opening of the 1968 Olympic Games the Tlatelolco Massacre took place. On October 2, 1968, a group of students staged in a peaceful protest in the plaza at Tlatelolco, just outside the city center.²² What started as a non-violent demonstration ended in bloodshed. When Mexican police opened fire on the unarmed protesters. Countless students were massacred; others imprisoned, and tortured. The bodies of those killed quickly disappeared.²³ In the wake of the massacre, the PRI took drastic measures to persecute the remaining opposition. During the years that followed, the government began a Dirty War, using counter insurgency tactics that mirrored those seen in Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. These techniques included rape, overkilling, forced disappearances, massacres, and mass arrests.²⁴ The human rights abuses in this period are rarely discussed or acknowledged by the Mexican government. It was only in 2001 that the National Human Rights Commission in Mexico released statistics on this period. The Commission found that between 1970 and 1985, at least 532 people associated with leftist groups disappeared and that police and other government agents were responsible for the illegal detention and killing of at

²² Robin Adèle Greeley, "The Performative Politicization of Public Space: Mexico 1968-2008-2012," *Thresholds* 41 (2013): pp. 18-31, https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00091.

²³ Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra, 162.

²⁴ Aviña, Alexander. *Spectators of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside*. (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2014).

least 275 people.²⁵ The exact number of innocent people that were killed will most likely never come to light.

The period following the Tlatelolco Massacre marked the start of a cultural era of repression which greatly affected artistic expression within the country. During these tumultuous years, artists, scholars and journalists became increasingly censored and were often threatened by government agents. Newspapers and magazines that promoted oppositional ideals were swiftly shut down. Government run museums and other cultural institutions refused to show the work of artists who were associated with the social and political movements that spoke against the corrupt PRI. This refusal encouraged the use of more avant-garde display spaces and the rise of art collectives in Mexico. These layered histories provide context to understand the inception of performance art and the source of the medium's defiant spirit.

This performative surge is seen throughout the Latin American world as means of opposing political injustices. Unlike other Latin countries, Mexico did not endure a dictatorship; however, the country did endure their own version of a "Dirty War" (c.1968-1980)²⁶ which parallels those seen throughout Latin America. As previously mentioned, during these bloody periods the state used unlawful terror tactics against their populations. Torture, rape, and disappearances were common practice. Unlike the Dirty Wars of Chile or Argentina, Mexico's war did not conclude in a military coup or the termination of democracy. In *Touched Bodies: The Performative Turn in Latin American Art*, author Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra investigates the aftereffects of the anticlimactic end

²⁵ "Mexico's National Human Rights Commission," Human Rights Watch, September 12, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/02/12/mexicos-national-human-rights-commission/critical-assessment>.

²⁶Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra,162.

to the Mexican Dirty War. “Indeed, the appearance of normality in Mexico’s institutional life, combined with effective strategies for co-operation and silencing, led writer Mario Vargas Llosa in 1990 to describe the country as a “perfect dictatorship,” characterized by the complexity of its methods of camouflage.”²⁷ These masked methods have endured through the subsequent decades and are echoed in the country’s post-NAFTA policies.

The ascent of performance art in Mexico is directly correlated with the increased state sanctioned violence within the country. In *Introduction: Latin American performance and the Reconquista of civil space*, Coco Fusco examines the connection between state violence, performance, and the relevance of the public space, “During the period in which performance has flourished, the “presence” of the state in Latin American public space has been experienced as harsh, if not excessively physical.”²⁸ The ‘harsh’ experience Fusco is referring to is the state-sanctioned rape, overkilling, forced disappearances, massacres, mass arrests, and censorship of opposing voices. The brutalities of the Mexican authoritarian government contributed to the tendency of artists to use the public space, and in doing so, artists use the communal environment as a symbolic confrontation against the state. Artists began to question the importance of who viewed their work and significance of location. Artists recognized the need to adopt innovative forms of protest while capturing the public’s attention. There is an urgency within the performative medium, where the demand for justice requires the public’s participation. Through performance, artists and activists can transform public

²⁷ Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra, 162.

²⁸ Coco Fusco, “Introduction: Latin American Performance and the Reconquista of Civil Space,” in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-20, 9.

spaces into a place of social, cultural, and political expression.²⁹ During periods of heightened violence in public spaces, it is a powerful statement to resignify the space, making the environments of violence a site of defiance, change, and communal healing.

The social upheaval of the post Tlatelolco Massacre era was decisive in the performative turn in Mexico. In *Touched Bodies: The Performative Turn in Latin American Art*, author Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra examines the power of the body as a medium, specifically during periods of duress “...during the years in which the dictatorial state sought to impose not only an authoritarian and neoliberal regime but also a model of subjectivity. The body-as a potentially alienated territory to be reappropriated-became a powerful agent with which to contest power relations.”³⁰ In response to the years of censorship and repression, artists, activists, and journalists formed collectives in a true act of solidarity. The ascent of the “Los Grupos” generation was in direct reaction to the violent events that transpired during the turbulent Dirty War.³¹ These experimental collectives broke the static museum model, creating works that brought art into the everyday lives of Mexican people, a practice echoed in the work of post-NAFTA era artists. “Los Grupos” revolutionized the interaction between artists and the public. The mission of “Los Grupos” was to create a greater social awareness and to spur lasting political and economic change, making public engagement paramount to their process.

The collective Proceso Pentágono, formed in the early 1970’s included Felipe Ehrenberg (1943-2017), Carlos Finck (b. 1946), José Antonio Hernández Amezcua (b.

²⁹ Cristian Aravena et al., “Introduction,” in *Arte Accion En Mexico: Registros y Residuos* (Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, UNAM, 2019), pp. 23-35, 27.

³⁰ Ezcurra, Mara Polgovsky, 45.

³¹ “Grupo Proceso Pentágono.” Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/grupo-proceso-pentagono?lang=en>.

1947) and Víctor Muñoz (b. 1948).³² Proceso Pentágono's groundbreaking performance and installation work addressed repression and violence in Latin America and Mexico. In 1978 the collective created *Proceso 1929* (Process 1929) (Figure 1). The encompassing installation reconstructed the interior of a police station, complete with torture devices used in government sanctioned human rights abuses. This large-scale installation measured over 1200 square feet and consisted of various rooms, creating a fully immersive experience. The work was exhibited in Mexico City's Auditorio Nacional (National Auditorium) during the PRI's 50th anniversary celebrations.³³ Each room referenced the violence, negligence, and impunity that epitomized the PRI's rule. This subversive installation was closed for several days by the PRI, further highlighting the governments rampant censorship.

One issue with the "Los Grupos" movement was the lack of female voice, which changed with Maris Bustamante's and Mónica Mayer's founding of the feminist performance group, Polvo de Gallina Negra (PdGN; Black Hen Power) in 1983 in Mexico City. Polvo de Gallina Negra was the only collective of the "Los Grupo" era that questioned women's roles in Mexico, the development of the ideal feminine in media, violence against women, and machismo culture. PdGN's goals were: "(1) to analyze women's images in art and in the media, (2) to study and to promote the participation of women in art, and (3) to create images based on our experience as women in a patriarchal system, with a feminist perspective and with the goal of transforming the

³² Peer, Jeff. "Revisiting a Subversive Mexican Art Collective and the Country's Forgotten Crimes." Hyperallergic, February 29, 2016, accessed on February 21, 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/275266/revisiting-a-subversive-mexican-art-collective-and-the-countrys-forgotten-crimes/>.

³³ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism the Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 181.

visual world in order to alter reality." ³⁴ In 1983, the PdGN used the public space to denounce sexual violence through a performative work that coincided with a public protest against the gender violence organized by the Red Nacional de Mujeres. The artistic intervention was given the layered title, *Receta del Grupo Polvo de Gallina Negra para hacerle el mal de ojo a los violadores, o el respeto al derecho del cuerpo ajeno es la paz* (The Polvo de Gallina Negra Group's Recipe for Giving the Evil Eye to Rapists, Or, Peace Means Respecting the Rights of Others' Bodies) (Figure 2).³⁵ The title reveals the action of the performance and refers to President Benito Juárez's proclamation that "el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz" (peace is respecting the rights of others); a phrase that feels artificial within a country that meets gender violence with such high levels of negligence and impunity. PdGN's witty transformation of the phrase, highlights the country's issue with gender-based crimes. During the protest, Mayer and Bustamante distributed bags of polvo (dust) and read out the list of ingredients needed to give the evil eye to rapists. The list included ingredients such as "20 kgs. of the shouts and fits of women rising in anger, 3 tongues of women who do not submit when violated and 1 dash of legislators interested in the social changes demanded by women".³⁶ The ingredients were later published and further distributed. The collective introduced feminist critique to 1970's Mexican performance art scene. The

³⁴ "Polvo de Gallina Negra" Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985 Digital Archive. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2019. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/artists/polvo-de-gallina-negra>

³⁵ Mayer Mónica and Karen Cordero Reiman, *Mónica Mayer: Si Tiene Dudas ... Pregunte - Una Exposición Retrocolectiva = Mónica Meyer: When in Doubt ... Ask - a Retrocollective Exhibit* (Mexico City, Mexico: MUAC, 2016), 60.

³⁶ Mayer Mónica and Karen Cordero Reiman, 60.

groundbreaking work of Polvo de Gallina Negra paved the way for the performative feminist art practice in Mexico's post-NAFTA era.

Through their collective practice, the Mexican performance artists of the 1970s and 1980s brought art out from the gallery into the lives of everyday people, where their political work could elicit real change. Together they pushed against state-sponsored and sanctioned art and offered the public an alternative perspective to the Mexican government. In acts of true solidarity, they denounced the censorship and violence that followed the Tlatelolco Massacre. Their influential work set a foundation for Mexican artists working in the post-NAFTA era. The legacy of the performative turn of the 1970's and 1980's serves as a prototype of action in the face of violence, impunity, and censorship.

These complex histories must be examined in order to better understand the defiant aesthetics of performance art and the medium's ties to political activism. During the turbulent years of post NAFTA Mexico, there is once again the need for performance and protest as means of expression against a negligent system. The passing of NAFTA in 1994 was a central historical, economic, and artistic moment in Mexico. With NAFTA in place, Mexico saw massive migration to border towns. People from all over the country moved north in order to find work in the *maquiladoras* (factories). The maquiladora workforce is comprised mostly of women, many of whom left their families and friends behind. These women are particularly vulnerable to crime and street violence, working late hours, and reliant on public transportation or walking home on foot. They are seen as targets both at work and outside of work. With the rise of the NAFTA induced maquiladora program, women were systematically exploited,

further contributing to the disregard for women's lives that set the stage for the feminicidal epidemic in Mexico. The wave of feminicidal violence hit the border town of Ciudad Juárez the hardest.

Since 1994, women in Juárez have been murdered at an alarming rate, their bodies disposed in the desert outskirts of the city like exhausted commodities that are no longer useful, further highlighting the utter disregard for female life. The bodies of those found in the desert are left mutilated, often showing signs of sexual violence and torture. Within a patriarchal context, women are often seen as objects, a thought process frequently leading to violence against women. "These acts are based on the belief that women have no autonomy; that they do not own their own bodies or their own lives but are, instead, things or goods that belong to men, who can dispose of them as they like."³⁷ As new contributors to the household finances, women challenge the patriarchal notions of power. Women now have purchasing power and can live a more independent life. The systemic violence of the neo-liberal social structure penetrates the personal, resulting in an increase of domestic violence. Women often are caught between the everyday man and the institutionalized masculine power attempting to preserve their dominance. With new power dynamics, violence brews and too often power and violence go hand in hand. Mercedes Olivera analyzes the friction that arises when the male identity is in question, "Conflicts within couples and families as masculine domination is brought into question and delegitimized steadily increase the

³⁷ Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia Bejarano, and Hilda Morales Trujillo, "Femicide and Sexual Violence in Guatemala," in *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 127-137, 128.

levels of violence and, of course, the risk of murder.”³⁸ Femicidal violence becomes a public spectacle of power and control.

With the current state of impunity, women are not protected and cannot trust the state for support. Despite the years of negligence on behalf of the government, women refuse to be silenced. Mexico has seen an increase of protests against femicidal violence.³⁹ Women take to the streets chanting “ni una más” (Not one more). The women of Mexico have begun to express their sorrow and seek attention from the public through visual language. Pink crosses (Figure 3) have become an emblem of the anti-femicidal violence movement in Mexico. The crosses can be seen throughout the country as a reminder of the women who have disappeared or been killed. These crosses not only represent lives lost but also an anger that cannot be silenced. The names of women who have fallen victim to gender violence have been plastered on street signs throughout Mexico City, (Figure 4). Public mourning functions have become common practice, a ritual of communal healing and remembrance. The appropriation of public space marks a shift where a neglected and silenced subject is made visible in the streets. These actions have established visual anchors of resistance that cannot be ignored.

Growing from these aesthetics of provocation, politically engaged performance artists have begun creating a new visual language to examine femicide. In Lorena Wolffer’s 2002 performance, *Mientras diríamos (el caso Juárez)* - While We Were

³⁸ Mercedes Olivera, “Violencia Femicida: Violence Against Women and Mexico’s Structural Crisis,” in *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 49-58, 51.

³⁹ “Hundreds Join Violence against Women Protest in Mexico,” BBC News (BBC, November 4, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-59162501>.

Sleeping (the Juarez Case) (Figure 5), Wolffer marked her body with a marker, indicating the parts of her body that would be severed or mutilated were she a victim.⁴⁰ The artist symbolically re-enacts violence against the body. During her performance, the artist makes direct eye contact with onlookers, highlighting the passivity of the public in relation to violence against women. The participation of the public is paramount. and the use of Wolffer's own body stands as a symbol for all victims of gender violence.

Similar performative expressions have been seen throughout Latin America as means of protest against gender-based crimes. In Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo's 2000 performance piece, *No perdemos nada con nacer* (We Lose Nothing by Being Born) (Figure 6), the artist uses her own body as a symbolic substitute for women who have been killed in Guatemala.⁴¹ The performance references the numerous lifeless female bodies that are callously abandoned in dumpsters and other deserted areas in the capital of Guatemala City. In the photographic evidence of the performance, Galindo is seen wrapped in a bag motionless in the municipal garbage dump in Guatemala City.⁴² Heaps of plastic overwhelm the landscape; the body is just another piece of waste, used and no longer needed. Front and center, in a large clear plastic bag is Galindo's naked body, immobile and in the fetal position. As the video documentation continues, it appears that the body is unresponsive, leaving the audience to wonder what the body is doing there. The onlookers seem oblivious, it's just another woman's body, just another victim. The violence to which she is responding,

⁴⁰ Cristian Aravena et al., "Introduction," in *Arte Accion En Mexico: Registros y Residuos* (Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, UNAM, 2019), pp. 23-35, 29.

⁴¹ Galindo Regina José, *Regina José Galindo* (Milan, Italy: SilvanaEditoriale, 2011).

⁴² "No Perdemos Nada Con Nacer," regina José galindo, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.reginajosegalindo.com/en/no-perdemos-nada-con-nacer-2/>.

whether from gangs or the police, has been woven into the fabric of everyday life, making discarded bodies as common as other waste items. Instead of being the exception, these acts have become common place.

In both the work of Wolffer and Galindo, the audience's response acts as a mirror, drawing attention to how numb society has become in relation to gender violence. Like Wolffer's *Mientras diríamos (el caso Juárez)*, Galindo's *No perdemos nada con nacer* seeks to combat the anesthetized, creating public awareness, and presenting gender violence as an issue that deserves a response. Wolffer and Galindo use their bodies symbolically in a way that is respectful to the victims and families effected by feminicidal violence. Though both artists work can be difficult to view, the artists do not create a voyeuristic experience that makes the pain of others consumable entertainment for the public. Both artists have witnessed within their home countries of Mexico and Guatemala how violence breeds more violence. Wolffer and Galindo push against the violence producing works that shed light on the issue of gender-based violence, urging the public to reflect on femicide and the power structures which enable the violence to continue.

Other artists like Mónica Mayer employ a different tactic to highlight the issues of gender violence in Mexico. Mayer often uses the absence of the body and relies on words from women within the community to combat the feminicidal epidemic. In Mayer's 1978 *El tendedero* (The Clothesline), the artist invites women of Mexico City to fill out a little pink piece of paper completing the phrase, "As a woman what I most detest about this city is...", initiating an important dialogue about the violence women experience

within their everyday lives.⁴³ Mayer does not exploit the women but rather amplifies their voices and sheds light on the very real issue of gender-based crimes. The testimony of these victims is rendered visible by artists through the public performative. By substituting the physical body for testimonials Mayer sheds light on how deeply engrained violence is. Mayer's *El tendadero*, makes visible Mexican government's erasure. The issue of femicidal violence needs to be public, making performance a fitting medium to amplify the calls for justice and change.

Though the body and the performative seem like the fitting medium to defy gender-based violence, many artists have abused the use of the body, creating works seemingly rooted in voyeurism instead of protest. Artists, like Teresa Margolles, create works that fetishize the gender violence in Mexico. Unlike Lorena Wolffer and Mónica Mayer, Margolles opts to exploit the bodies and the families who have been subject to the horrors of violence. Instead of using her own body or substituting the body for the female voice, Margolles uses the bodies of those most greatly affected by gender violence. Her approach does not express protest but rather creates violence as entertainment. In Margolles' 2006 work, *Cimbra* (Framework) (Figure 7), the artist submerged 546 pieces of clothing in cement. The clothing belonged to women from Juárez who were beaten, threatened or live in terror. Some of the clothing even belonged to women who were murdered.⁴⁴ By presenting objects that were worn by deceased women Margolles creates a tantalizing spectacle that demonstrates how

⁴³ Mayer Mónica and Karen Cordero Reiman, *Mónica Mayer: Si Tiene Dudas ... Pregunte - Una Exposición Retrocolectiva = Mónica Meyer: When in Doubt ... Ask - a Retrocollective Exhibit* (Mexico City, Mexico: MUAC, 2016), 8.

⁴⁴ "Frontera 450+," Station Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://stationmuseum.com/past-exhibitions/frontera-450/>.

violence is consumed for entertainment. When viewing objects, questions about how the women were killed inevitably come up. Cultural institutions that choose to display Margolles' work are complicit in the artists unethical practices, further perpetuating the cycle of violence. I argue that the work of Margolles encourages violent fantasies through her exploitive public displays.

These complex histories of the inception of Mexican performance art highlight the cultural significance of the medium. Mexican performance grew out of the tradition of Latin American protest art, in dialogue with the countries compounded histories and cultural aesthetics. Performance is a medium built on necessity and rooted in protest. Performance takes back the communal environment making visible violent acts that all too often take place unremarked upon within the public sphere. Performance in Mexico is a living art form that responds directly to localized socio-economic and political circumstances. Artists in Mexico are concerned with creating works that prompt public discourse and combat the institutionalized impunity that has created a vortex of violence. Local dialogue is paramount to pushing against institutionalized amnesia. The performative is witnessed by an audience which encourages collective witnessing and expands the support base. Performance art in Mexico provides a platform for memorializing and restoring agency to the victim, making visible what the government works so hard to make invisible. Artists like Monica Mayer, Lorena Wolffer, and Teresa Margolles use their body or symbolic versions of the communal body as a vehicle of enunciation. The body is a powerful agent that can be used to assign new meaning to those who have been victims of gender violence and engage the public in transforming the misogynistic social structure that has sustained feminicidal violence.

CHAPTER 3

MONICA MEYER: THE ABSENCE OF THE BODY

Mónica Meyer is a feminist performance artist, historian, activist, co-founder of the archive “Pinto Mi Raya”, and one of the most influential figures in the field of art. Over the past four decades Mayer has explored the subjective experiences of women in Mexican society through experimental forms of performance. Like many women, Mayer experienced sexual assault at a young age. According to her 2017 *Guardian* interview, Mayer first suffered a sexual assault at the age of 8 when a man 20 years her senior grabbed her genitals while walking down a street in Mexico with her mother.⁴⁵ This violation never strayed far from Mayer’s thoughts and though the attack jolted the artist, what continued to shock Mayer for years to come was how common sexual assault is. While studying at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mayer was aware of how her female identity effected not only her work but how people saw her work. It was during this period, when Mayer shifted her focus to feminist aesthetics of communication.

Between 1978 and 1980, Mayer studied at the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, an experience that prepared the artist for her future collaborations. In 1980, she received a master's degree in the sociology of art from Goddard College with the thesis "Feminist Art: An Effective Political Tool." When Mayer returned home to Mexico, the artist started meeting with other female artists to discuss the female experience within the country and the possibilities of feminist art. In 1983,

⁴⁵ Nadja Sayej, “The Clothesline Project: An Exhibit Asking Women to Share Stories of Sexual Abuse,” *The Guardian*, accessed on January 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/16/the-clothesline-project-monica-mayer-sexual-abuse>.

Mayer and Maris Bustamante changed the “Los Grupos” world and cofounded the group Polvo de Gallina Negra. The duo formed in response to the lack of engagement with the feminist subject matter and a lack of female artists’ participation in the performative turn in Mexico. ⁴⁶ In 1989, Mayer and her husband, Víctor Lerma (b. 1949), cofounded Pinto mi Raya, an alternative art space, which has since morphed into a platform that promotes artistic interactions and shows various processes.⁴⁷ Throughout her career, Mónica Mayer has fought to transform misogynistic social structures through her groundbreaking performative works and political activism.

Mónica Mayer’s unique approach to performance adapted the public art interventions of the “Los Grupos” filtered through Mayer’s persistent objective of transforming the lives of everyday women in Mexico. Her artistic practice is rooted in Mexican art’s insubordinate histories. The artist’s experience with sexual assault in the public space left a lasting effect on her, heightening her awareness of the issue of femineicidal violence. Tired of the gruesome aesthetics of Mexican newspapers and the government’s denial of the social impacts, Mayer took a different approach to addressing gender violence. Rather than creating work that explicitly illustrates bodily violence, Mayer uses words in substitution for the body. Mayer’s work introduces honest dialogue into the public sphere. This form of communicative artistic expression reflects the female experience through dynamic incorporations of diverse female voices. Mayer’s innovative performative interventions highlight the power of communal participation through personal written accounts. Mayer recognizes the capabilities of

⁴⁶ “Mónica Mayer’ Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985 Digital Archive,” Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2019, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/artists/monica-mayer>.

⁴⁷ “Inicio,” Inicio, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pintomiraya.com/>.

women's experiences as a vehicle for radically transforming misogynistic environments where abuses continue to go unpunished.

In Mayer's *El tendadero*, the artist relies on the voluntary participation of women. It is important to emphasize the word, "voluntary", when comparing Mayer's work to the work of other artists like Teresa Margolles. Mayer approaches the topic of gender violence in a way that seeks to not retraumatize or exploit victims and families of gender-based crimes. Through the years, Mayer has created numerous renditions of *El tendadero* in various museums and communities throughout Mexico, South America, and the United States. In each rendition the artist asks women from different economic classes, ages, and professions to respond to the statement, "As a woman, what I dislike most about my city is...". Participants write their responses on small pink ballots, which are then hung on a clothesline. With the continual rise of femicidal violence, Mayer continues to perform the participatory *El tendadero*. Mayer has created more than 30 variations of the piece, and the goal continues to be, visualizing harassment of and violence against women in order to initiate change. With each rendition there continues to be an urgency to the performance. The heart of the performative in Mexico is transforming political inaction and corruption through the articulation of communal pain.

The creation of the groundbreaking *El tendadero* started in 1978, when Mexico City's Museo de Arte Moderno asked young artists to create pieces around the theme "The City." Mayer, ever aware of the rampant gender abuses committed throughout her home city, chose to address how she felt as a woman living in the city. The artist invited women to complete the phrase, "As a woman what I most detest about this city is...". Mayer collected the testimonies and publicly displayed the personal responses on a

tendedero (clothesline), shedding light on the harsh realities of navigating the world as a woman.⁴⁸ Mayer used a pink clothesline due to the object's stereotypical representation of women's work. The simple clothesline is juxtaposed to the content of the answers, which refer to what happens in the course of the lives of everyday women. By using the archetypical clothesline Mayer combats the ideal feminine fantasies by contrasting these sexist delusions with the realities of the female experience. Mayer transforms the traditionally feminine object into a tool designed to engage the community and facilitate a dialogue around women's experience with violence—including topics such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and trafficking.

Each rendition of *El tendedero* (Figure 8) is site specific; Mayer notes that the piece changes from site to site, based on the community and the women she engages with. This is an important practice that illustrates Mayer's awareness that the issue of gender violence is ubiquitous. And in these performative alterations, we see Mayer modifying the tired narrative that gender violence is just a Latin American problem. In 2017, the participatory performance opened at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. As always community engagement is a critical component of *El tendedero*, during the exhibition, Mayer held workshops with artists, activists, and support organizations based in and around the capital. These community-based workshops echo those of the "Los Grupos" era, when the common goal was to improve the lives of the community, making public engagement essential. Mayer's practice is not

⁴⁸ "Mónica Mayer' Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985 Digital Archive," Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2019, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/artists/monica-mayer>, 93.

extractionist, she seeks to build trust within a community and create dialogue that will endure over time.

During the exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, visitors were met with a bold question printed on the gallery wall in the exhibition space: “what did you do to regain your joy after experiencing sexual violence or harassment?” In the center of the room Mayer laid out printed questions, prompting visitors to reflect, write, and hang their stories on the clothesline, in an act of defiance, catharsis, and communal healing. The printed questions included: “What have you done or could you do to stop violence and harassment against women?” “As a woman, have you ever experienced violence or harassment? What happened?” “As a woman, have you/would you denounce violence or harassment against you? Why?” And lastly, the question also printed large and looming over the show, “what did you do to regain your joy after experiencing sexual violence or harassment?”⁴⁹ This last question was first included during the D.C. exhibition. The question continued to come up during the workshops that Mayer facilitated prior to the opening of the exhibition. During these preliminary conversations, Mayer listened to the stories of the women and wanted these powerful conversations reflected in the exhibition. Long term, Mayer does not just want to shed light on the issue of gender-based violence, but she always wishes to support women in their healing processes. It is not just about denouncing violence but getting women to the other side.

⁴⁹ “El Tendedero/the Clothesline Project: Exhibition,” NMWA, May 23, 2020, accessed on November 30, 2021 <https://nmwa.org/exhibitions/el-tendedero>.

As reflected in her exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Mayer has started to include an array of questions that seek to better understand the different types of violence to which women are still subjected, the societal norms they confront, and ways to combat the violence, opening most importantly, mechanisms of healing. The question, “What have you done or could you do to stop violence and harassment against women?” helps to restore agency to victims and invites men and women to stop being passive bystanders. Creating awareness is an important first step, but in order to dismantle the pillars that support the structures of gender violence we need to engage in a deep educational process that allows us to understand why so many men are brought up to believe that feminicidal violence is acceptable behavior, or how as women most of us are taught to tolerate this violence and to keep quiet. Gender-based violence will continue to be an issue unless we take steps to transform misogynist norms that result in environments of impunity. This is not just a Mexican issue, or a Latin American issue, it is pervasive and if we do not work together to initiate change, we too are part of the problem.

Mónica Mayer’s *El tendadero*, serves as a powerful example of the way in which the participatory performative can transform misogynistic social structures. Through the decades Mayer has sought to reconstruct the female experience by making visible the silenced accounts of women. Mayer’s communicative, artistic expression reflects the female experience through the inclusion of diverse female voices. The artist understands how the stories told on the clothesline may be disturbing, triggering, and challenging for women to share, but they also hold a lot of power. By taking back their bodies through the ritualist experience of sharing their experiences, women are making

a choice to amplify their voices and change the narrative. Mayer utilizes the voluntary voices of women in exchange for some of the more explicit illustrations of bodily violence; *El tendadero* counters the exploitation. The artist understands the significance of voluntary participation, especially in relation to issues such as gender-based crimes. When viewing work that deals with delicate subject matter like femicide, questions about ethical practices inevitably rise. How do artists respect those greatest effected by violence? Are there approaches that do more harm than good? What are the consequences of unethical practices? Femicide has become so common that people have grown desensitized to the violence. Mónica Mayer opposes the extractionist tactics of artists like Teresa Margolles and newspapers like La Prensa, who both profit from taking advantage of victim's trauma, displaying private graphic images of victims of violence. Mayer's practice deviates from the prevalent convention of violence as a means of shock and entertainment, and instead, she amplifies the silenced voices of women, substituting the voyeuristic images of the body with the brave accounts of women, providing the space for protest, awareness, communal healing, and agency.

CHAPTER 4

TERESA MARGOLLES: THE BODIES OF OTHERS

Teresa Margolles is an internationally renowned artist and one of the most well-known female Mexican artists of the 21st century. Margolles investigates the social and aesthetic dimensions of violence, creating sculptural installations, photographs, films, and performances saturated with material traces of death. Margolles communicates social and political observations from the morgue and crime scenes throughout her home country of Mexico. Teresa Margolles was born in 1963 in Culiacán, Sinaloa, in northwestern Mexico. She received a Bachelor of Art Degree in Communication and Forensic Medicine from the Universidad Autónoma Nacional de Mexico.⁵⁰ In 1990, Margolles founded SEMEFO, together with Arturo Ángulo Gallardo, Juan Luis García Zavaleta and Carlos López Orozco. SEMEFO was an artist collective in which artists explored the human body and the subject of death. The group began as an underground performance collective, with its first exhibition in 1993. Shortly after, Margolles began creating work on her own, still using objects related to death. The artist's practice has always been deeply rooted in fieldwork and observation. Margolles spends time viewing remains of victims in the morgue of Mexico City and at crime scenes in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, whose location and post-NAFTA relationship to the United States has created a wave of violence. In my opinion Margolles' oeuvre is riddled with unethical and disturbing practices, using victims' physical remnants as a medium.⁵¹ Margolles incorporates post-mortem remnants such as, blood-stained

⁵⁰ "Teresa Margolles," James Cohan, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.jamescohan.com/artists/teresa-margolles2>.

⁵¹ Diego Sileo and Gilbert Canal, "Sangue-Blood," in *Ya Basta Hijos De Puta: Teresa Margolles* (Milan, Italy: SilvanaEditoriale, 2018), pp. 109-140, 122.

sheets, clothing, and bullet-ridden walls, materials typically concealed from public consumption. Margolles thrusts these personal items into the public spaces of civic and cultural institutions. For example, at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Margolles mounted a flag onto the facade of the Venice Biennale's Palazzo Rota-Ivancich splattered with blood from homicides near the Mexico-U.S. border.⁵² The artists collected the blood at crime sites in Mexico.⁵³ Margolles defends her extractionist tactics as means of creating visibility for victims. Despite her exploitive practice, Margolles has been welcomed and even praised by the Eurocentric museum and gallery world. Today, Teresa Margolles is one of the most exhibited contemporary Mexican artists.

While certain aspects of Margolles' work do not appear to fit so clearly into the category of performance, as the work of Mayer and Wolffer does, components of her practice are performative in nature. Margolles argues her work stands in defiance of gender-based violence and is created to garner greater awareness for the problem.⁵⁴ Her vocalized artistic intend appears to fall perfectly in line with the Mexican performative, since the medium has historic ties to protesting social injustices. And like the Mexican performance artists who came before her, Margolles uses the body as a medium. Throughout the past several decades, Mexican performance artists have used the body to make visible the institutional violence inflicted on the bodies of the people. However, instead of using her own body or the voices of voluntary participants,

⁵² Raul Martinez, "What Else Could We Speak about Teresa Margolles at the Mexican Pavilion," ARTnews.com, June 10, 2009, accessed December 28, 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/what-else-could-we-speak-about-teresa-margolles-at-the-mexican-pavilion-57746/>.

⁵³ Raul Martinez

⁵⁴ Moira Jeffrey, "Interview: Teresa Margolles, Artist," The Scotsman (The Scotsman, April 17, 2012), <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/interview-teresa-margolles-artist-2463493>.

Margolles chooses to use the bodies of the dead. Unlike some of her performative counterparts, Margolles has no interest in using her own body or the voices of others, her practice continuously exploits the bodies of victims.

Even during her early years, Margolles pushed ethical boundaries. In her 1998 *Autorretratos en la Morgue* (Self Portraits in the Morgue), Margolles performatively poses with cadavers she was preparing for burial. Nothing feels natural about these large-scale color images. The portraits present Margolles and the corpses in various poses; some images, as Amy Sara Carroll points out have a quasi-religious air about them.⁵⁵ In one portrait, Margolles poses with a twelve-year-old girl who had been beaten to death. The gruesome image's composition mirrors that of the traditional Madonna and Child. Though referencing religious iconography is a common practice within the visual arts, one might ask is it appropriate to do so in a context such as this? By presenting herself as a Virgin Mary like figure, the portrait can easily be read as disrespectful, especially when considering that Madonna and Child imagery references sacrifice. The deceased girl Margolles poses with is not a prop nor a sacrificial lamb but a human life that deserves respect. Positioned in the foreground, Margolles looks directly at the viewer, implicating us in the act of looking at what should be a private moment. The photograph is taken from above, positioning the viewer above Margolles and the child while creating an almost claustrophobic viewing experience. The crude display of a dead child should never be situated in the public sphere. One may ask: how are Margolles' *Autorretratos en la Morgue* any different than the lewd images that are

⁵⁵ Amy Sara Carroll, "Muerte Sin Fin: Teresa Margolles's Gendered States of Exception," *TDR/The Drama Review* 54, no. 2 (2010): pp. 103-125, <https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2010.54.2.103>.

flaunted on the cover of Mexican newspapers? I view her work as the antithesis of what Margolles claims, it does not fight the violence but rather feeds into.

In Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the author explores how damaging and counterproductive graphic images can be. Phelan contends that explicit imagery is detrimental for it "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession."⁵⁶ By using an image of an actual dead body, Margolles creates a viewing experience that invites fetishization. The artist's practice does not honor the sanctity of the body nor the sanctity of the personhood of the deceased. Margolles sees the body as a medium, an object that can be bought and sold. Margolles offered to pay for the burial of the girl she used in her portrait series. The family of the deceased girl came from a household with little economic means. Prior to the photos being taken Margolles offered to pay for a proper burial, in exchange for the families consent to photograph her dead body. This is not the first or the last time Margolles has bargained with families to use the bodies of their relatives. Margolles once offered a family a proper burial for their son in exchange for the son's penis or tongue.⁵⁷ These offers are not generous agreements but rather a use of Margolles' power and money to take advantage of mourning and financially unstable families. The body of the female child presented in Margolles' portrait series is twice abused, in life and in death. Margolles' *Autorretratos en la Morgue*, exploits the dead through voyeuristic images that do nothing beyond provoking shock.

In Teresa Margolles' 2007 work, *Cimbra* (Formwork), the artist continues her

⁵⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London, England: Routledge, 1993), 65.

⁵⁷ Iván A. Ramos, "The Viscosity of Grief: Teresa Margolles at the Scene of the Crime," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 3 (February 2015): pp. 298-314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770x.2015.1124668>.

examination of institutional violence within Mexico. In the installation, Margolles submerged 546 pieces of clothing in a large wooden container, with the garments bathed in cement.⁵⁸ The cement is meant to symbolize the weight of the femicide epidemic. The pieces of clothing held within the installation belonged to women from Ciudad Juárez, who were beaten, threatened, lived in fear, and to women who were murdered due to femicide. The garments represent those who have passed, but also remembers those who are alive and still fighting against gender-based violence. Here clothing stands in place for the bodies of women. Clothing within cases of femicide holds great significance, not only is clothing used to protect one's body but can also be manipulated into a vehicle of victim blaming. The clothing women choose to wear becomes a weapon used against them, when they are beaten, raped, or even killed. In Juárez, the police and newspapers pay special attention to what women wear when they are attacked. We see this victim blaming not just in Mexico, but around the world. All too often the phrase, 'she shouldn't have been wearing something so revealing' is used as means of justification of gender-based crimes.

The open wooden structure resembles a wall, reminding the viewer of the conflicts at the U.S.-Mexico border and the violence that ensued post-NAFTA. When viewing *Cimbra*, spectators are left to use their imagination, contemplating the ways in which the victims were killed. The experience resembles that of listening to a crime podcast. Margolles continues to feed into the machine of violence for entertainment. Another major issue with Margolles' *Cimbra*, is the disruption of the dead and their

⁵⁸ "Frontera 450+," Station Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://stationmuseum.com/past-exhibitions/frontera-450/>.

burial sites. Margolles' unethical handling of the dead and their physical remnants has become a touchstone of her artistic practice. When dealing with the dead there is no such thing as consent. By denying victims consent Margolles is participating in the same abuses these victims were subject to during their life.

In 2009, Margolles was selected to represent Mexico in the Venice Biennale. Margolles' display was entitled *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (What Else Could We Talk About?). The exhibit included performance, embroidery, fabrics soaked in bodily fluids, and graphic photographs. The works presented in *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* were a less than subtle display of the violence endured in Mexico. In the performance *Limpieza* (Cleaning) (Figure 9), Margolles again uses the bodies of others to carry out action. *Limpieza* consists of mopping the floors of the exhibition space from left to right. The floors were "cleaned" with a mixture of water and blood from murdered people, who were killed in different cities in Northern Mexico.⁵⁹ This ritualistic cleaning was not carried out by Margolles but rather the victims' families. The blood and the families of the victim's function in the place of the body. While Margolles did not use the morbid images of cadavers as she did in earlier work, she still manages to create a display that is just as triggering. Though dead bodies are not visible, the violence still feels palpable. By using the victims' family members to clean the floor with the physical remnants of their loved ones, Margolles demonstrates her complete lack of sensitivity. Again, Margolles creates a voyeuristic experience at the expense of others. With a history of bargaining with victims' families, the question of

⁵⁹ Raul Martinez, "What Else Could We Speak about Teresa Margolles at the Mexican Pavilion," ARTnews.com, June 10, 2009, accessed December 28, 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/what-else-could-we-speak-about-teresa-margolles-at-the-mexican-pavilion-57746/>.

payment comes up regarding *Limpieza*. Did Margolles pay the families, or did she just finance their trips to Venice? Margolles has a pattern of using her money to take advantage of mourning families. The artist's use of the remains of the dead also raises ethical concerns. Is it right to use the blood of victims as a medium? This type of shocking display does not feel in tune with the artist's alleged intent of combating violence and creating awareness. Instead, the display fits more into the category of violence porn than the Mexican performative. During her exhibition at the Venice Biennale, the artist articulated the display's intent of making visible the situation of explosive inequity that plagues Mexico, but through unethical practice all Margolles makes visible is her own injustices.

Teresa Margolles uses post-mortem remnants and other graphic material to explore the social and economic structures that enable the wave of violence in her home country of Mexico. Margolles pulls elements from crime scenes and the morgue, using elements of death as a medium. The artist inserts these personal objects into public spaces such as galleries and museums. Unlike her performative Mexican counterparts, Margolles rejects the use of her body or the voices of voluntary participants, instead Margolles uses the bodies of others, both victim and victims' families. As previously mentioned, Margolles is one of the most internationally exhibited contemporary Mexican artists.⁶⁰ Her work continues to be a favorite within the museum world. This heavy consumption of the artist's exploitive work emphasizes the voyeuristic enjoyments of the Eurocentric white cube and also perpetuates a Eurocentric

⁶⁰ "Teresa Margolles," James Cohan, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.jamescohan.com/artists/teresa-margolles2>.

stereotype of a violent and inhumane view of Mexico. By using racialized brown bodies, Margolles' work is praised by the museum world instead of questioned. Would this be the case if she were to use white US American bodies or white European bodies?

The continual exhibition of Margolles' works also highlights the static nature of the museum sphere. Since many of the items Margolles uses have been taken from crime scenes or the morgue without consent, the artist's unethical practice contributes to the museum world's longstanding history of displaying stolen objects. It is important to note that many Mexican museums and galleries refuse to exhibit Margolles. Some contribute this to Mexico's attempt to censor Margolles or another way the government is trying to downplay the feminicidal violence. But, it is not just the state-run institutions who refuse to exhibit Margolles, young gallerists and curators who speak against gender violence reject participating in the consumption of Margolles' work. Instead, they opt for the more ethical practices of Mexican feminist artists like Lorena Wolffer or Teresa Serrano. It is easy for those on the outside to get caught up with the hype of her name, but one question should always be asked when engaging with aesthetics of violence. 'Would I be okay if it was my loved one?'. Margolles' work retraumatizes those affected by feminicidal violence and counters the work of artists like Mayer or Wolffer. Rather than combating the violence, Margolles plays into the sadistic genre of violence as entertainment.

CHAPTER 5

LORENA WOLFFER: THE ARTIST'S BODY

Feminist artist, activist, and co-founder of the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, Lorena Wolffer combines activism, performance, and protest to address issues of gender disqualification, objectification, and violence that prevail within her home country of Mexico.⁶¹ Wolffer often uses her own body as a metaphor for the collective victims of femicide. The artist's work has been characterized by the exploration of the boundaries of the body. Wolffer's work emphasizes the body as both a weapon and a holder of pain. Her performative practices draw upon the traditions of the "Los Grupos" era and pulls inspiration from artists like Mónica Mayer and Regina José Galindo. Like the Mexican performance artists of the 1970's and 1980's, Wolffer combines art and activism to initiate social and political transformation. The artist looks to the powerful performances of Mayer and Galindo, using her own body, as well as, calling upon women to tell their stories in substitution for the physical form. Wolffer's unique blending of various aesthetics of provocation create compelling public displays that call for immediate action. Over the past several decades, the artist has persistently displayed her work, both nationally and internationally, calling for reflection, accountability, and change.

In reaction to the violence against the female body in Juárez, Lorena Wolffer metaphorically cuts her own body into symbolic parts that stand for all the bodies of women who have been subjected to femicidal crimes. Since 1993, the corpses of

⁶¹ Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 163.

more than 450 women have been discovered showing signs of an extremely violent death, and more than 1,500 women have disappeared in Juárez.⁶² In her 2002 performance *Mientras diríamos (el caso Juárez)* - While We Were Sleeping (the Juarez Case), Wolffer marked up her body with a black marker, indicating the parts of her body that would be mutilated if she were a victim. The performance opens with the audio of news reports of the murders within the city of Juarez. The narration remarks on how the victims were dressed, as well as their ages and some physical features. Many of the descriptions mirror the attire Wolffer presents herself in. The artist dons a Dickie's style work suit and a hairnet, clothing that not only recalls the descriptions from the news reports but also the uniforms of maquiladora workers.⁶³ Her clothing choice emphasizes the targeted attacks on maquiladora workers in the border city of Juárez.

The narration continues as the artist enters the somber space occupied only by a spot-lit surgical table. Wolffer sits on the table and removes her clothing, the dark environment echoes the atmosphere of a morgue. As the audience looks on, the artist uses a marker to record the mutilations suffered by victims of feminicide. With each movement the artist pauses, allowing the audience time to reflect on each laceration. By branding her skin the artist illustrates to the crowd how the wounds are systematically applied, and the pattern to the violence. Through Wolffer's movements, it becomes clear to the audience that areas associated with sexual acts become targets of misogynous attacks. As Wolffer continues to mark her body, with each symbolic wound reality begins to sink in, the spectator becomes more aware of the physicality of the markings.

⁶² Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia L. Bejarano, and Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, "Preface: Feminist Keys for Understanding Feminicide: Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction," in *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xi-xxv, xvii.

⁶³ Amy Sara Carroll, 170.

Throughout the performance the artist makes direct eye contact with the onlookers, emphasizing and challenging the social habit of indifference. Once the mark making is complete, Wolffer sits still granting the audience time to ruminate on the symbolic mutilations. The artist eventually dresses, covering herself with a black sheet. The performance ends in complete darkness, a metaphor for the erasure of women, with the artist slowly vanishing, mimicking the way women disappear without justice. Wolffer's performance was presented in various locations between 2002 and 2004, including galleries and museums in Mexico, Finland, Wales, and the US. In *Mientras diríamos (el caso Juárez)* - While We Were Sleeping (the Juárez Case), Wolffer's body functions as a symbolic substitute for the bodies of feminicidal victims, making visible their silenced pain through her visceral performance.

In Wolffer's piece *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?* (1997-1999) (Figure 10), the artist again allows her body to stand in for the bodies of all Mexican women. Here Wolffer uses the beaten female body as a metaphor for Mexico. In the performance, the artist presents herself as a model, her clothing evoking the colors of the Mexican flag. In red heels and a green dress, the artist uses her accessories to emphasize the narrative of the performance.⁶⁴ Bruises, wounds, and bloodstains are visible all over her body. The signs of abuse highlight the realities of the aftereffects of violence against women; with each violation women are exposed to, there are lasting side effects, both physical and mental. Presenting herself as a model, Wolffer illustrates the constant societal pressures of being a woman. With the expectancy of constantly looking beautiful, coupled with the possibility of being abused, there is of course a conflict. In a society of

⁶⁴ Amy Sara Carroll, 165.

promoting high female beauty standards and environments of femicidal violence, the contradicting views create a paradox in which women are forced to exist. As the title of the piece states, “She is Mexico”. The artist uses the colors of the Mexican flag in her clothing to articulate her body is Mexico, her body is the land, her body is the women, Wolffer’s body serves as a mirror for Mexico. The signs of abuse on her body not only illustrate the abuses of gender-based crimes but also stand as a metaphor for how U.S. imperialism treats Mexico. During the performance, a recording of the 1996 US Senate hearings on the War on Drugs plays in the background.⁶⁵ In the audio, the audience can hear the Senate speaking about the future of Mexico, highlighting how the U.S. views Mexico as a society incapable of administrating itself.

There is a connection between nation and the abused woman. This correlation is echoed in the titled, *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?*. “She” is a product of the post-NAFTA era, subject to violence and exploitation; “she” affirms the effeminization of Mexico. Amy Sara Carroll contemplates how Wolffer’s performance articulates this allegory, “Wolffer reiterates the neocolonial stakes of maintaining the foundational fiction of raced, gendered, and sexualized violences, where figurations of colonized populations and the nation-state as a sexualized and racialized feminine coevally exist in a global political unconscious as the operating systems of the New World Order’s territorial epistemologies.”⁶⁶ In the layered performance, *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?*, Wolffer examines the intersections between colonial violence and gender-based violence.

⁶⁵ Amy Sara Carroll, 165.

⁶⁶ Amy Sara Carroll, 166.

As an artist who is acutely aware of her country's performative history, Wolffer pulls inspiration from Mexico's past aesthetics of provocation. In Wolffer's 2008 piece, *Muros de replica* (Walls of Reply) (Figure 11), the artist references Mónica Mayer's iconic work *El tendadero*. The participatory piece was created for the inauguration of the 16 Days of Activism that InMujeres DF organized for International Day of Non-Violence Towards Women.⁶⁷ Four walls were set up in the Zócalo of Mexico City, and each wall presented the phrase: "I am a woman and I have been the victim of violence by a man. This is my name, and this is what I have to say to my assailant.". Like Mayer's *El tendadero*, Wolffer invited women to publicly display their personal stories in order to restore agency to the victims, create space for communal healing, and shed light on the realities of gender-based violence. Over a four-hour period, dozens of women bravely wrote their responses on the wall while hundreds of people bared witness to the process. People stopped to watch and read the responses; their participation became part of the work itself. Many women chose to include their name and/or that of their abusers while others chose to only write a message. In the end, all the walls were completely filled.

Wolffer's piece presents victims of violence the opportunity to verbalize what they would like to say to the man or men who violated them. Too often women are not allotted the space to communicate their pain or anger. As women, there is a pressure to be silent, which feeds into environments of impunity, making these public displays vital to initiating change. Public performances and actions in Mexico are historically linked to

⁶⁷ [*Muros de Réplica*], accessed December 8, 2021, http://www.lorenawolffer.net/01obra/22muros/muros_frames.html.

protest and calls for justice. Like the artists who came before her, Wolffer respects and understands the significance of the public space. The public performative heavily relies on community involvement, often because the issues being addressed effect the public. Without community participation, social critiquing performative works can fall flat.

Wolffer's dedication to changing the lives of women are reflected in her personal life, as well as, in her artistic practice. Lorena Wolffer's *Muros de replica*, highlight how the participatory performative can create awareness, elicit communal healing, and dismantle misogynistic social structures that have created the feminicidal machine.

Lorena Wolffer's artistic practice examines the layered violence endured by Mexican women. Her work reflects on the past histories of the Mexican and Latin American performative. Through her blending of various aesthetics of provocation, Wolffer creates work that articulates the complexities of gender violence in a manner which respects victims rather than exploits them. Wolffer's performative work accentuates the intricacies of the feminicidal epidemic through her pointed references to the colonial past and damaging capitalist policies.⁶⁸ The artist understands there is an array of factors that contribute to the wave of gender-based violence. In order to initiate a social and political transformation, the public needs to be aware of the whole story, not just a fragment. By using her own body, as well as, calling upon women to tell their stories in substitution for the physical form, Wolffer removes the blinders and exposes the realities of femicide. In using her own body and the voluntary communal voices of women, Wolffer pushes against the graphic displays of violence that have become the norm within the art and magazine world. Instead Wolffer uses her body and stories of

⁶⁸ Amy Sara Carroll, 165.

women as a visibility tactic, creating public performative works that make visible what the state and perpetrators try to make invisible.

CLOSING

The continual wave of gender violence has yet to provoke serious outrage among societies around the world. Decade after decade, misogynist violence continues to be brushed aside on a global scale. Gender violence endures when authorities fail to prevent and punish, thus creating a toxic climate of impunity that further creates a power imbalance between men and women. When looking back at Mexico's complex history, it becomes abundantly clear how acts of imperialism, violence, and neoliberalism have created an environment where violence thrives. Meanwhile, we must look toward activists and artists to consider how we can disrupt the state-sanctioned violence and bring further visibility to the injustices. Mexican performance artists have been at the forefront of this fight, creating works that demonstrate the power political art can wield. Over the past several decades, performance artists have created work that addresses political injustice and denounce society's passivity. The Mexican performative pushes against the anesthetized through confrontational body performances that force viewers' participation and generate greater awareness. The confrontational nature of the performative forces the audience to look, think, and talk about the issues. Examining the rise of the performative in Mexico highlights how the medium gained such cultural significance. As a response to the political abuses of the 1960's, the performative medium materialized. Artists and activists formed collectives in an act of solidarity and necessity. By taking back the public space, performance makes visible the violence that is all too often ignored by the state.

Throughout this study, I examined how the performative formed as a response to gender-based violence in contemporary art in Mexico during the 1970's and again in the

post-NAFTA era. For decades artists have worked to expose the unacknowledged and unpunished violence. Despite the government's continual disregard for women's lives and the rising number of feminicides, Mexican performance artists continue to create work that challenges misogynistic power structures. Through various forms of artistic expression, artists like Mónica Mayer, Lorena Wolffer, and Teresa Margolles push the issue of gender violence into visibility. Their work unmask the invisibility tactics of the government, by holding a spotlight to the feminicidal epidemic, thrusting the subject into the public gaze. By using the body, the voice of women as a substitution for the physical body, or other body references, artists can publicly display what the state and perpetrators try to make invisible. This provides opportunities for themselves and other women to rewrite the stories of trauma while offering an opportunity for communal healing. Keeping the issue of gender-based violence in the spotlight and making information available and accessible for women is key to holding the authorities accountable and preventing future violence against women.

Public participation is at the heart of performance art in Mexico. Performance is a medium which responds to the localized socio-economic and political circumstances, making it an artform that directly impacts the lives of everyday people. Since the medium is rooted in improving the lives of the people within the community, public participation is critical. The artform's goal should not be about pleasing the Eurocentric artworld but rather creating works that respond directly to local social and political situations. That is not to say that the Mexican performative should be isolated to public demonstrations within the country. There is room for the medium to be experienced both within the community and in museums and galleries around the world. But artists

should never disregard the medium's history of protest. Both museum professionals and artists need to consider how an artwork can negatively impact a community and even an entire country. When work is completely removed from its context or culture, the artwork begins to lose its potency.

It is important to ask what we can learn when placing Mónica Mayer, Teresa Margolles, and Lorena Wolffer in conversation with one another? Their various approaches to the body and performance demonstrate how quickly ethical lines can get blurred. The use of the body in performance in Mexico has a historical emphasis on protest and community involvement. In my thesis, I examined how quickly artists can lose sight of these significant cultural histories and instead create work that feeds into the voyeuristic nature of the Eurocentric white cube. It is important to be cognoscente of how some artistic practices exploit violence rather than combat it. By presenting gruesome images and exploiting the bodies of the victims and their families, artists like Margolles continue the cycle of violence instead of confronting it. Museums and galleries who continue to exhibit exploitive works are also implicit and should have to answer for their unscrupulous conduct. By choosing to show artwork that exploits victims, and their communities, museums and galleries attribute to damaging narratives and participating in unethical practices. Institutions that continue to condone unethical practices should be aware that they are also part of the problem, they are not part of the resistance by rather the aggressor. When discussing an issue as sensitive and as urgent as femicide, there is no room for artists or institutions who exacerbate the violence. In order to be a part of the fight against femicide, creative institutions must counter the violence, not stoke the flames.

Through my thesis, I assessed how some approaches to the body and feminicide can be more harmful and productive. Through my analysis of three different performative practices: Margolles use of the bodies of others, Wolffers use of her own body, and Wolffer and Mayers use of voluntary voices of women in substitution for the body, I conclude that there are ethical and unethical ways to use the body and performance in relation to gender-based violence. There are serious consequences when unethical practices are implemented, especially in relation to feminicide. To stop the violence, there needs to be an end to exploitation. Violence and the pain of others should never be used for entertainment. When museums and artists continue to exploit victims for profit, they, too, are part of the feminicidal machine.

Figures



Figure 1. Proceso Pentágono, *Proceso 1929* (Process 1929), 1978

noviembre

RECETA DEL GRUPO POLVO DE GALLINA NEGRA PARA HACERLE EL MAL DE OJO A LOS VIOLADORES, O EL RESPETO AL DERECHO DEL CUERPO AJENO ES LA PAZ

Acción plástico-política para el hemicycle a Juarez dentro de la marcha feminista contra la violación del 7 de octubre de 1983.
Duración: 20 minutos ante 1000 espectadores.

Ingredientes:

- 2 docenas de ojos y corazones de mujer que se acepte como tal.
- 20 kg. de rayos y centellas de mujer que se enoja cuando la agreden.
- 1 tonelada de músculos de acero de mujer que exige respeto a su cuerpo.
- 3 lenguas de mujer que no se somete aún cuando fué violada.
- 1 sobre de grenetina de mujer, sabor espinaca, que comprende y apoya a una mujer que fué violada.
- 30 grs. de polvo de voces que desmitifiquen la violación.
- 7 gotas de hombres que apoyen la lucha contra la violación.
- 1 pizca de legisladores interesados en los cambios sociales que demandamos las mujeres.
- Unas cuantas cucharadas de familias y escuelas que no promuevan los roles tradicionales.
- 3 docenas de mensajes de comunicadores responsables que dejen de producir imágenes que promuevan la violación.
- 3 pelos de superfeminista.
- 2 colmillos de militante de partido de oposición.
- ¼ oreja de espontáneo y curioso.

Siguiendo cuidadosamente las instrucciones sobre el modo de preparación lograremos tener como resultado final nuestra explosiva mezcla con la cual ud. podra sorprender a los violadores que habitan su misma casa o la de la vecina, los tímidos y los agresivos, los pasivos y los activos, y los que la acechan en el trabajo o en el camión y finalmente a los que se esconden en la noche que hoy venimos a tomar.

GRUPO POLVO DE GALLINA NEGRA
(Fundado el 21 de junio de 1983.)
Maris Bustamante
Mónica Mayer



Figure 2. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Receta contra el mal de ojo (Recipe against the evil eye) [with Herminia Dosal]*, 1984–85

Photocopy of feminist daily planner published by Centro para Mujeres. 9 7/8 × 8 1/2 in.



Figure 3. Demonstrators protest femicide and violence against women on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Mexico City, Mexico, 2019



Figure 4. Mexico City Street Sign, 2022



Figure 5. Lorena Wolffer, *Mientras diríamos (el caso Juárez)*, 2002



Figure 6. Regina Jose Galindo, *No perdemos nada con nacer (We Lose Nothing by Being Born)*, 2000



Figure 7. Teresa Margolles, *Cimbra (Framework)*, 2006
Clothing, cement and wood, 4' x 3.5' x 20'

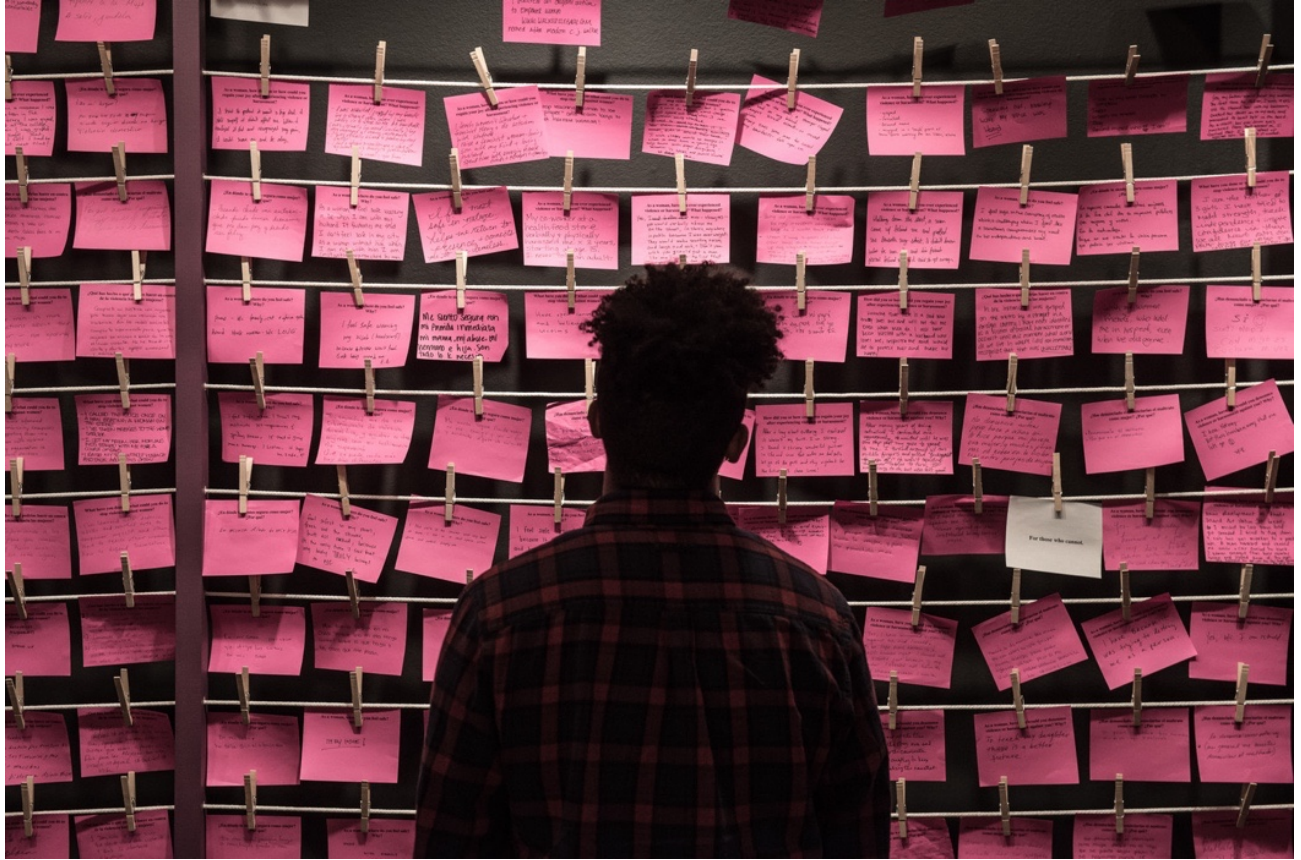


Figure 8. Mónica Mayer, *El tendedero* (The Clothesline), 2017



Figure 9. Teresa Margolles, *Limpieza* (Cleaning), 2009



Figure 10. Lorena Wolffer, *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up*, 1997



Figure 11. Lorena Wolffer, *Muros de replica* (Walls of Reply), 2008

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