

Blasting Through the City:
Combating Feminicide Through Art in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

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Abstract

Blasting Through the City: Combating Femicide Through Public Art in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico explores the role of public art in raising awareness for women's rights.

Femicide, the gendered violence that has resulted in mass murders, arose in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in the early 1990s. This is due to the construction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which resulted in *maquiladoras* (technological assembly plants) and the emergence of working women in Mexico. The new class of working women and the promise of economic prosperity attracted young women from rural Mexican towns to the city. Unfortunately, patriarchal hierarchies were concentrated in the *maquiladora* industry, thus becoming places of exploitation for poor, young women. Working along with the complex drug systems that plagued the city, Ciudad Juarez soon became a dangerous, if not lethal, place for women. The irresponsible and dismissive nature of the police force resulted in public art that investigated the consequences of femicide. This paper explores the role of public art in disseminating information about femicide on local, national, and international levels.

Introduction: Enacting Social Change Through Public Art

Public spaces are reflections of a society's cultural infrastructure. They are places where the public congregates to participate in collaborative dialogues. The conversations that arise from public spaces are incredibly important in maintaining civility among diverse citizen populations. Healthy public spaces that spark thought-provoking discussions can be found through city-led projects, such as Abbott Square. Located in the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, California, the town square was established to form ties between residents and their communities. The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History and the City Council host multiple public programs at Abbott Square to revitalize the public's imagination and establish a sense of belonging between denizens and their multifaceted, diverse communities. According to Nina Simon, executive director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, the mirrored surfaces of Abbott Square "...represent the idea of seeing yourself in the plaza and in our community...and the idea of gathering together. Both of them are things we seek to do in the museum and in Abbott Square, that people will see themselves in the space, and it will be a space that brings people together" (Baine 2015). Abbott Square shows the positive effects of introducing creativity in a public environment in order to build community relationships. But, what happens when bureaucratic institutions such as museums or city councils deny one's place in the community? What happens to the public spaces of frayed societies, where building community relationships seems ultimately impossible due to corruption and impunity? How are spaces utilized by the public to reclaim their identity and community in corrupt societies? In the case of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, public spaces are transformed into a

political platform to fight against the brutal violence towards women and raise international awareness to eradicate this injustice from existence. In this paper, I discuss the implications of femicide in the context of public spaces. By working within the public spaces of Ciudad Juarez, activist networks composed of mothers, sisters, and friends of the deceased, along with internationally-known artist Teresa Margolles, utilized the arts as a means to create a collective consciousness that expressed bereavement, built solidarity, regained authority, and memorialized the dead with dignity and respect.

“War keeps blasting through the city tonight...”¹

Ciudad Juarez is a major metropolitan border city in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. The city is Mexico’s fifth largest with a population of 1.5 million people. It is home to the *Cartel de Juarez*, one of the world’s largest drug cartels, which has made the city “...internationally infamous as the city of femicide, corruption, and police impunity” (Staudt 2008: 2). Ciudad Juarez is also home to the *maquiladora* industry: industrial plants that manufacture technological goods with cheap labor. The *maquiladora* industry began with the North American Free Trade Agreement under President Carlos Salinas’s rule in 1992. By the year 2004, 300 factories were established and employed more than 100,000 women (ibid.: 5). This industry outsourced labor for American companies and attracted young female migrants to work as *operadoras* in dangerous and exploitative conditions (Patterson 2015: 116). The *maquiladora* industry took advantage of the rapid influx of

¹ The body of this research paper is separated with lyrics from the song “Blasting Through the City” by Thievery Corporation. The lyrics are as follows: “War keeps blasting through the city tonight”; “Hope cries louder than gunshot sounds”; and “Open up your eyes, don’t be blinded by the light.” The song is from the album *Radio Retaliation* (2008). I found this song to be suitable with the topic because it speaks about resilience of the people to strive for a just society. This political song resonates with the creative ways in which activism is performed through the arts.

vulnerable women from small rural towns for cheap labor and greater profit. According to Julia Banwell, “This agreement, which Mexico was to enter into in collaboration with Canada and the United States, was to implement measures such as reducing trade barriers and tariffs in order to facilitate free trade, and the Mexican government gave assurances that this would improve both Mexico’s economic situation and her position in the global economy” (ibid.: 6). Unfortunately, the trade agreement failed to materialize fully and resulted in negative consequences that exploited working women. Crime and poverty persisted as poor female workers from rural towns migrated to Ciudad Juarez in hopes of a sustainable future. Instead of becoming the prosperous hub Mexico imagined the city to be, Ciudad Juarez became a breeding ground for the hunting of women as “sport” by drug cartels (Staudt 2008:12). Patterson writes, “The longstanding dehumanization of working women only contributed to the further exploitation of women’s bodies, setting the stage for the wave of feminicide that would plague Ciudad Juarez in the years to come” (ibid.: 118).

Feminicide, a term first coined in nineteenth-century England and later popularized by South African feminist writer Diane E.H. Russell, is explained as “...the misogynistic killing of women by men and a form of continuity of sexual assault, where you must take into account: the acts of violence, the motives and the imbalance of power between the sexes in political, social, and economic environments” (Driver 2015: 9). Furthermore, feminicide is “...one of the extreme forms of gender violence; it is constituted by the whole set of violent misogynistic acts against women that involve a violation of their human rights, represent an attack on their safety, and endanger their lives. It culminates in the murder of girls and women” (Bejarano and Fregoso 2010: xxiii). This term precisely describes the ruthless murders that began in Ciudad Juarez in the early 1990s, when the

city became notorious for harvesting multiple disappearances and murders of young women. The victims of these murders are very young students and/or *maquila* workers, with ages ranging from late teen to early twenties (Banwell 2015: 6-7). These murders, which are inextricably linked to the *maquiladora* industry, are horrifyingly brutal; the victims were raped, mutilated, and murdered.

There are a few theories as to why these homicides are happening at such an alarming rate. Firstly, Kathleen Staudt sees the murders as “...an expose of the state, masculine privilege embedded therein, and unequal gender power relations in state and society” (2015: 19). The mass arrival of young, female workers threatened the hierarchy that traditionally placed women in homes serving as faithful wives and devoted mothers. With the creation of the NAFTA and the *maquiladora* industry, young women disrupted that status quo by gaining autonomy. Secondly, Driver writes that “The poor, young women who are the target victims of femicide in Juarez are also marginalized geographically by economic constraints that push them to the edges of the city or limit them to a particular geographical area. The areas where they live often have little or no infrastructure: no city lights, no sanitation, no roads, no public transportation, and no electricity” (ibid.: 7). In short, the immigrant populations of young female workers are concentrated in the outskirts of the city where violence is rampant. They have no choice but to reside in areas that place them in a vulnerable and dangerous position.

The war against women was in full effect in Ciudad Juarez, yet, due to corruption and impunity, the inept Mexican police force failed to take the dire situation seriously. Most reported cases were uninvestigated or disposed of, and evidence originally collected from medical and autopsy reports suspiciously disappeared. Consequently, family

members of the deceased sought support outside of the police force that mocked their sorrow, time and time again. Exact numbers of feminicide are largely unknown due to the mishandling of cases by the police. Fortunately, Amnesty International kept track of the number of victims, their identities, and the circumstances of the disappearances based on reports filed by their families. The numbers range from hundreds to thousands of disappeared and/or murdered women (Heiskanen 2013: 1-3). *Hundreds to thousands* of women have disappeared, yet incompetent police officials refused to act responsibly and justly.

Because their cries for help were left unheard, mothers and families of the deceased facilitated creative ways to express their sorrow and call attention to the public. Attempts to identify and humanize the urgent and dire situation started with the painting of black and pink crucifixes onto telephone poles (Figure 1). The appropriation of public space through black and pink crucifixes marked a shift where a taboo subject that had been silenced or ignored by government authorities was now highlighted and made visible in the streets. Despite warning threats by the police, the women kept painting telephone poles to symbolize their pain and suffering (ibid.: 5-6). They ultimately refused to succumb to an oppressive culture where their deep and irretrievable loss and devastation were unrecognized and dismissed as trivial. The simple act of painting a telephone pole, a rather mundane object, into a symbol that would later become an icon of the anti-feminicide movement, spoke volumes to the bravery of these women. They are claiming a space within a city that once labeled them as outsiders who are “unworthy” of justice for their slain daughters. In many ways, their appropriation of public spaces instituted authority over the inhumane and corrupt police department, which should be responsible for

protecting the public. As they marked public spaces with memorial crucifixes to honor their daughters, they consequently initiated a civic dialogue wherein art was used as a tool for communication (signified by the telephone poles) that crossed boundaries and united residents. The symbolism behind the black (death) and pink (daughters) crucifixes identified and validated their story as grieving mothers worth listening to. Political scientist Martha McCoy asked the important question: “If we were to have an active and democratic public life, what would it look like, and how would we create it?” (McCoy 1997: 2-9). I strongly believe that the mothers and families of the victims created an active and democratic public life by raising awareness on an inhumane issue. They rose above the barbaric and cruel practices of the murderers and police force to say “We are here, and we deserve justice” through their public art.

“Hope cries louder than gunshot sounds...”

_____ Politicized art created on a grassroots level reinstated hope in Ciudad Juarez by uniting artists and generating the international attention to the urgency of femicide as a human rights issue. The anonymous anti-femicide artist collective, Kolectiva Fronteriza, formed to tirelessly fight against systematic oppression. They describe themselves as:

...a group of young women, students, workers, professionals, artists, housewives, mothers, and activists that use our ideas, proposals, and collective talents to organize and develop creative and new ways of resistance to the patriarchal and capitalist systems on the border...we believe that young women are a revolutionary force and that our distinct experiences, outlooks, and our forms of organization and political

expression, both artistic and cultural, will transform and revindicate what we are and what we want to be (Driver 2015: 38).

They work to create memorials by marking the geography of the city with street art that pays tribute to the victims of feminicide. Like the mothers that painted telephone poles black and pink, these women also work for peace and justice, and to open a space for discussion. They employ graffiti techniques to protest the treatment of women by the maquiladora industry (Figure 2). What is important to note is the change of style from the black and pink crucifixes. Kolectiva Fronteriza's style is much more personalized, as seen with the purple and black emblem that is distinctly theirs. The art piece also contains the word "*Justicia*" in numerous colors to emphasize their belief in justice for women in Ciudad Juarez. The words "*Batallones Femeninos*," the Feminine Brigade, are situated between two images of the collective's emblem. We see a woman wearing headphones right above *Batallones Femeninos*, which alludes to the female hip hop group by the same name. It is clear to see that art is utilized as a tool for empowerment for Kolectiva Fronteriza. Their multi-media piece, which crosses visual and auditory boundaries, reinforces the power of public art to spark conversations about peace and justice. The art collective marks its proud feminized territory through colorful visual and poetic art, empowering women to question the gender hierarchy that upholds oppression.

In the year 2001, 8 bodies of young women were found in an area called the Cotton Field. The Cotton Field is a desolate area on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez. To commemorate the victims, 8 large pink crosses were raised from the ground where the women were displaced (Figure 3). As with the black and pink crucifixes painted on telephone poles, the large pink crosses were built to construct a narrative of the oppressive

and destructive history women have had to endure in Mexico. Feelings of mourning, confusion, and desperation inspired this piece to activate community advocacy. This politicized art garnered international attention by encouraging viewers to look at the horrors of daily life in Ciudad Juarez. What is so significant about this public art piece is that national attention turned to Ciudad Juarez, *finally*. According to Driver, “President Felipe Calderon ‘promised’ to go to Juarez, Chihuahua, to unveil a monument in memory of the hundreds of women murdered in the border city. He also promised to offer a ‘public apology’ to the family members of the victims as was recommended by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights” (2015: 32). Although President Felipe Calderon did not fulfill his promise to apologize to the victim’s families, the monument to the femicide victims was inaugurated at the Cotton Field in November 2011 (Figure 4). The families of the victims attended the ceremony in protest because police officials never actually investigated the crimes (ibid.: 33). The public’s original memorial, the eight large pink crucifixes, underwent a symbolic transformation from an expression of personal, individualized grief to a political symbol carrying the weight of the nation’s grief. The eventual acceptance of the pink cross symbol by government officials demonstrates the processes of creating memory within a nation. It underscores a community’s power to successfully criticize a flawed governance and criminal justice institution through public art. What was once a “...quiet public presence that reminded Juarenses of police infamy and impunity...on telephone poles, main arterial streets, and walls all over the city...” (Staudt 2008: 82), ultimately became a movement with *national* support from a country that once stripped away human rights from its own citizens.

“Open up your eyes, don’t be blinded by the light...”

_____ Born in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico, in the 1963, Teresa Margolles has worked endlessly to criticize the mass violence that plagues her home country. She has “..devoted her career to exposing the effects of violence on the individual and the social body, examining the relationship between violence and absence and confronting the viewer with uncomfortable realities” through her artwork (Banwell 2015: 1). Margolles earned her art qualifications in her home state of Sinaloa and a forensic medicine certification from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. Her education strongly influences the course of her artwork, as seen with her early work with the artist collective SEMEFO. From 1990 to 1999, SEMEFO (Servicio Medico Forense) utilized forensic materials to expose the transitional biography of the dead body in Mexican culture. Margolles’s work with SEMEFO demonstrated that with death, “...the body continues into another phase that is contingent upon the social, political, and economic context of life pre-death” (Bray 2007: 15). Her solo work as an artist continued politicizing death and the corpse in contemporary Mexican culture. Dr. Rebecca Scott Bray, criminology professor at the University of Sydney, describes Margolles’s artworks as a funereality of aesthetics that provides forensic compassion to the victims of systemic violence (ibid.: 12).

These ideas are seen through Margolles’s video/sound art piece *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro*, which were named after locations where women’s bodies were found. The piece is looped with video images and sounds of quiet nights in the desolate desert where women travel to get from work to home. It is an eerily stimulating piece that calls attention to *absence*; absence of murdered women from their families and the absence of justice from the nation. To accompany the video/sound piece,

Margolles collected sand and earth from murder sites to form 500 blocks, entitled *Lote Bravo* (2005; Figure 5). These red-brown blocks of sand are similar in shape and size, yet they are not identical. The blocks resemble headstones, suggesting the funereality of aesthetics suggested by Dr. Bray. It is interesting to see Margolles's use of public spaces in the gallery space. When presented in the gallery, Margolles explains the positioning of the art piece as "...like a barricade of pain that interrupts movement...so you don't forget what is happening." Additionally, *Lote Bravo* works on several levels:

the first point of communication between the objects and people who come into contact with them is that their exhibition in sites distant from their place of origin serves to raise public awareness of the continuation of the murders in the Mexico-US border region. The unsolved nature of these cases makes the absence of the bodies from the artwork doubly poignant, mirroring their absence from the familial sphere and from the wider social world (Banwell 2015: 158-159).

The adobe bricks made of sand cross multiple boundaries. They are bodily representations of the murdered women and reference the endemic violence that is continually occurring in Mexico. The manifestation of public space is utilized through the formation of blocks made from Mexican earth, and when displayed in an international space, raises awareness of the injustice of femicide.

Teresa Margolles, a highly educated and privileged woman with ties to the international art world, uses the power of public space to create art that symbolizes the gendered failure of criminal justice in Ciudad Juarez. The act of collecting sand from the murder sites symbolizes the lack of evidence collected by authorities. She collects forensic

evidence of the crimes to showcase “...the general indifference towards crimes always committed on another skin, in another society, on the other side of the Atlantic or on global television...” and to remind people that “...this Mexican who got killed could be any of us” (ibid.: 20). In short, she is much like the activist families of the deceased in that she demands attention to the injustice of femicide by humanizing the murdered women and illustrating the need for accountability.

Teresa Margolles further integrates art, memory, representation, and activism to heighten awareness of social issues on a global scale through the *Frontera 450+* and *Frontera* exhibitions in Houston, Texas and Kassel, Germany. The *Frontera 450+* exhibition was held in 2007 at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas, and included the piece *Cimbra Formwork* (Figure 6). In this installation, Margolles submerged 546 pieces of clothing in a wooden container that held cement. The pieces of clothing belonged to women from Ciudad Juarez who were beaten, threatened, or lived in fear. Some of the garments actually belonged to women who were murdered due to femicide. The *Frontera 2010* exhibition at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, included *Muro Ciudad Juarez* (Figure 7). The wall was constructed of concrete blocks and barbed wire with marks and residues from Ciudad Juarez homicides (Chadwick 2012: 514-515). In both artworks, Margolles works with public spaces to draw attention to the treatment of the poor and disadvantaged individuals that fall prey to femicide. These artworks demonstrate “...the traces left by murder; echoing the work done by crime scene investigators and highlighting their ineffectiveness and the impunity of the crimes’ perpetrators” by focusing “...on the victims of these crimes and those left behind to grieve...to challenge those in power to justify their failure to heal the wounds in society”

(Banwell 2015: 2-5). The gallery visitors who gaze upon Margolles's artworks reflect on the facts surrounding women's death in Ciudad Juarez. There are no photos of the murdered women in *Cimbra Formwork* or *Muro Ciudad Juarez*. Instead, spectators are left to imagine the public spaces of Ciudad Juarez that allow these crimes to continue. The clothes submerged in cement in *Cimbra Formwork* gives a sense of heaviness in the tragedies. Clothing, an essential protective item worn by humans everywhere, is a symbolic item in public spaces. It is meant to physically cover and protect individuals and provide a means of cultural and personal expression. By submerging the women's clothing in cement, Margolles is emphasizing the oppressive forces of femicide that weigh women down, physically, politically, and socially. The oppression surfaces again with *Muro Ciudad Juarez*, a concrete wall that is aesthetically and physically broken. Similar to *Cimbra Formwork*, this large installation evokes an imaginative idea of what living in Ciudad Juarez is like. Observers view this wall and create imaginary realities of Ciudad Juarez's public spaces. Does the wall protect or trap the city's citizens? Observers witness the evidence of violence in the city. The bullet-holes and cracks on the wall emanates visions of an apocalyptic landscape. It is now in the spectator's discretion to decide what to do with the violence they have just witnessed.

Teresa Margolles furthers her creative activism in asserting justice for women in Ciudad Juarez in her multi-media art piece *Irrigation* (Figure 8). This piece was showcased at the Satellite Gallery in Vancouver, Canada, in 2010 and consists of a video that conveyed a truck travelling on a road between the Texas (U.S.) towns of Alpine and Marfa. Margolles filmed the truck from behind as it dispensed 5000 gallons of water that is mixed with blood and bodily fluids. She collected these forensic samples from various

sites of violence in Ciudad Juarez by placing moistened fabrics over the crime scenes. Johnson and Santos explain, “For the video, Margolles soaked blankets in the blood and bodily fluids of the dead women from Ciudad Juarez, later soaking the blankets in a large quantity of water which was placed in a water truck that sprayed a highway road in Texas. The video shows the water truck’s journey across the border, carrying the fluids of the dead women, transporting the dead in its remains...” (2012: 103). By wasting thousands of gallons of water onto a desert road, Margolles creates a conversation about the wasted lives due to systemic violence. The truck’s journey across the Mexican border and into Texas can be likened or compared to a funeral procession. It is an act of transnational memorialization for an issue that is urgently present. Banwell writes, “This act of displacement brings the horror closer, making it happen here as well as now, impossible to turn away from as it has been replaced directly before our eyes” (2015: 160). The video connects viewers to public spaces of trauma that are traced with sexist deaths and gendered violence. It relocates the disappearances of the women into a transnational public sphere to render femicide as starkly visible. This invites reflection and engagement within the gallery space and beyond. Active participation is encouraged in order to carry out the artistic-activist processes of the artwork.

Conclusion

The mothers of deceased young women never thought such violence and devastation would happen to them. They never thought that their young daughters would fall victim to femicide. Stories of women being tortured, raped, and murdered for daring to engage a public life to further financial and social security seemed like an urban myth.

Or, so they thought. It wasn't until the emergence of black and pink crucifixes on telephone poles that local, national, and international communities began to accurately see the violence and listen closely to grieving mothers and families. Testimonies of mothers declare: "The only thing that I request is respect for the memory of my daughter and respect for my pain" and "They are not merely dead women from Juarez; they are our daughters, and they had names, dreams...they had everything" (Blancas 2010: 40).

Respect, memory, and accountability were only achieved after the emergence of art in public spaces. Through the creative outlet of the arts, the politics of memory were formed to push against femicide. Art was able to cross boundaries between myth and reality to evoke the stark emotions of pain and suffering that haunted the women of Ciudad Juarez. Art painted the city with visible renditions of human rights violations to offer the public a forum for sustainable and progressive civic dialogue. As seen with the artwork of mothers, families, and feminist activists, such as Kolectiva Fronteriza and Teresa Margolles, employing artwork within public spaces created a shared consciousness that challenged the crucial question: *Whose history is remembered, and why?*

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Figure 1.

Black and pink crucifixes painted by mothers and families of the deceased women to garner public support. Source: <<http://news.trust.org/item/20131126031438-e28i6?view=print>>



Figure 2.

Kolectiva Fronteriza utilizes street art to empower women into fighting against femicide. Source: <<http://www.magis.iteso.mx/content/los-vivos-de-ju%C3%A1rez>>



Figure 3.

Large pink crosses stand at the site where 8 bodies were found in the Cotton Field area of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Source: <<http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/12/for-the-women-of-ciudad-juarez/>>



Figure 4.

The Mexican government's attempt to appease the murders by incorporating the anti-femicide icon of a pink crucifix.

Source: <<http://www.fronterasdesk.org/content/ju%C3%A1rez-murder-victims-get-memorial-families-still-seek-justice>>

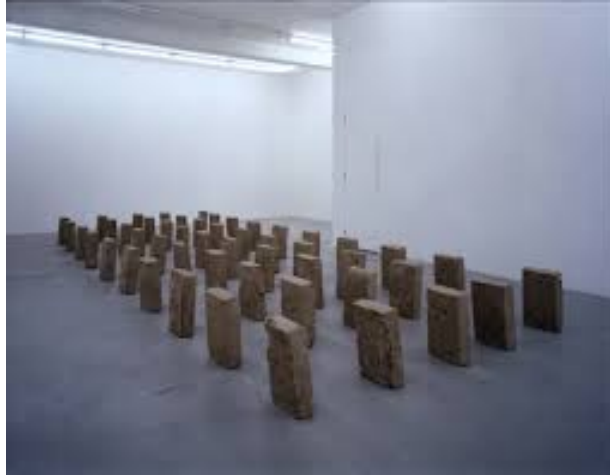


Figure 5.

Lote Bravo by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles in 2005. Adobe bricks made of sand from the crime scenes in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Source: <<http://www.art-lies.org/article.php?id=1273&issue=48&s=1>>



Figure 6.

Cimbra Formwork by Teresa Margolles in 2006. 546 pieces of clothing submerged in cement to signify the oppression that feminicide supports.

Source: <<http://stationmuseum.com/index.php/component/content/article/19-exhibitions/231-frontera-450-teresa-margolles>>



Figure 7.

Muro Ciudad Juarez by Teresa Margolles in 2009. The wall serves as a witness to Mexico's endemic violence.

Source: <<https://ballroommarfa.org/archive/teresa-margolles-new-show-at-the-kunsthalle-fridericianum/>>



Figure 8.

Irrigation by Teresa Margolles in 2010. Video still of a truck dispersing water mixed with blood and fluids of murdered women onto the road.

Source: <<http://www.bastaexhibition.com/margolles/mre1kj97eiw2wbih4yj60l7zr80aa8>>