

# FORENSIC AFFECTS

Affective Operations of Forensic Aesthetics as Artistic Mediation of Violence in Three Mexican Contemporary Artworks: *Level on Confidence* (2014) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *The Promise* (2012), and *What Else Could We Talk About?* (2009) by Teresa Margolles.

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## Summary

Cultural representations of violence can trigger a shallow engagement with the problem of violence, reinforcing exoticizing stereotypes about certain peoples' natural tendencies toward self-destruction and death. Alternatively, cultural expressions also foster critical engagements with violence, making the spectator reflect on the invisible mechanisms that produce visible acts of violence. This thesis uses the concept of forensic aesthetics to examine three contemporary Mexican art installations that incorporate materials that constitute evidence of violent events. The project seeks to understand how violence is represented through forensic aesthetics and how this form of art can promote critical thinking about violence. The thesis argues that forensic aesthetics enhances the affective operations of materiality through diverse mediation techniques, such as theatricality and technological devices, which influence the spectators' embodied perception of the objects and promote sensations and feelings that come from physical imagination —the affective response towards an inanimate object— instead of identification with the victims. These sensations are usually uncomfortable and riddle the spectators' minds, making them think.

## Introduction

When President Felipe Calderón launched the so-called war against drugs in 2006 hit Mexico. Since then, mainstream media often depicted the country in terms of the drug cartels' extreme brutality, often implicitly framing its violent reality as the result of ingrained tendencies toward aggression and corruption, leaving aside structural factors (e.g. poverty) and geopolitical considerations (e.g. economic and political interests of the United States). Nonetheless, as many have argued, murders, kidnappings, and other acts of atrocity are just the visible manifestation of more complex issues rooted in other forms of violence —such as exploitation and discrimination— that are not easy to perceive. Consequently, developing an understanding of violent conflicts with the potential to lead towards a resolution demands going beyond the spectacular manifestations of violence and reflecting on the extensive mechanisms involved in its production.<sup>1</sup> Considering socially-engaged artworks in the light of this argument brings up the question to what extent and through which means artistic representations of violence can make the spectator reflect on the mechanisms that produce it and to what degree, on the contrary, they foster a shallow relationship with the problem. In engaging with this issue, this thesis examines three Mexican artworks developed during the war on drugs that address violent situations: *Level of Confidence* (2014), a media artwork by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and two installations by Teresa Margolles: *What Else Could We Talk About?* (2009) and *The Promise* (2012).

Most of the research on the artistic representations of violence produced during this period has centered on allegorical interpretations of artworks that engage with corpses and violent death, for instance, examining their connection with a baroque sensibility (Diéguez 2013a; Ruíz 2018; Rosauro 2017) and the Mexican tradition of honoring the dead (Salazar, 2016). In contrast, this project takes a different approach, so far unexplored: it focuses on artworks that, without depicting corpses, engage with violence by using appropriated objects, materials, or images directly related to violent events and analyzes them through the lens of forensic aesthetics, specifically interrogating how this art can foster a critical consideration of violence.

Usually, “forensics” denotes scientific research applied to a criminal investigation. In art’s context, the term commonly refers to the use or evocation of material evidence and forensic techniques. Although, since the 1960s, artists have produced works that are relatable to this approach, the concept has only recently acquired critical purchase in visual arts research.<sup>2</sup> The choice of using forensic esthetics to explore art’s potential to make the spectator consider the mechanisms that produce violent events stems from the contrasting opinions about its effects as a mediation of violence and death. On the one hand, contemporary research relates forensic aesthetics to politically-engaged artworks using material evidence of violence and argues that they expose the power structures that produce violence (Herlinghaus 2013, 224; Bernstein 2017, 284; Alvarez and Zaiontz 2018, 285; Domínguez Galbraith 2019, 106). On the other hand, scholars have also related this art to the widespread obsession with crime

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is explored in chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> The diverse conceptualizations of forensic aesthetics are discussed in chapter one.

and death, which manifests itself through the growing popularity of the multiple representations of forensic research in media and popular culture (Symons 2008, 85; Penfold-Mounce 2016, 2; Close 2018, 18). According to Penfold-Mounce, many of these representations contribute to the desensitization and the normalization of corpses and death (2016, 14). Glen Close argues that they immerse the public in “morbid spectacularity” (2018, 32). Consequently, as Scott Bray has observed, forensics’ penetration into artistic practices raises questions about arts’ influence on the perception of the events they represent (2014, 95).

## Motivation and Research Question

This research is motivated by the ethical questions raised by violence mediation within the Mexican context. During the past two decades, violence has taken a protagonist role in that country’s cultural representations. The global north constructed the amalgamation of reality and magic that characterized many Mexican cultural expressions as an inherently foreign, strange commodity. Nonetheless, since the turn of the millennium, violence has become that peculiar feature that is considered to belong to distant Mexico, so that the exoticism of violent, fast-paced, postmodern, and post-postmodern Mexico has replaced the exoticism of magical realism characteristic of 20th-century art, literature, and cinema (Sánchez-Prado 2006, 48).<sup>3</sup> As Ignacio Sánchez-Prado notes, such a shift mirrors a broader transformation in the Latin American repertoires of representation that made violence into the whole subcontinent’s new trademark (2006, 48). This change resulted in multiple aestheticized representations of violence, “packed and advertised in order to sell” (47).<sup>4</sup> Differently put, these productions have made witnessing violence an enjoyable experience to guarantee commercial success. During the past decade —especially after the war on drugs—, in Mexico, literary studies scholar Brigitte Adriaensen argues, violence has been exoticized even more than in South America, to the point that it seems to have resulted in the emergence of a market fed by literature, movies, T.V. series, magazines, and touristic attractions around drug traffickers and femicides (2016, 224-234).

Exoticizing representations of violence are problematic because they construct Mexico as a violent and abject place (Adriaensen 2016a, 388). Besides, they reinforce stereotypes based on the idea that Mexicans —and

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<sup>3</sup> In her study *Exotic Switzerland?*, art historian Noémi Etienne explains that the word “exotic” refers to a gaze that constructs things as “inherently foreign —pertaining to other regions or continents.” This construction, nonetheless, is more than a form of representation: it involves creating and exploiting strangeness through a series of gestures that are bound up with “asymmetrical power relations” (2020, 11). Underlying these relations, there are multiple dynamics that include the resistance to and appropriation of such imagery by diverse local classes, the production of commodities for export, and the construction of a touristic identity by local elites (11-17).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sánchez Prado discusses Alejandro González Iñárritu’s acclaimed movie *Amores Perros* (2002), which, the scholar contends, portrays Mexico City as a chaotic metropolis inhabited by a violent society (2006, 50). Similarly, the exhibition *Mexico City: An exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values* displayed at MoMA PS1 in 2002 can be related to these repertoires of representation, as the curatorial discourse framed Mexico City as a chaotic place, effervescent in poverty and violence (MoMA PS1 2002). For an analysis of the exhibition, see Montero (2013).

often Latin Americans— have natural tendencies towards self-destruction and death.<sup>5</sup> These narratives spring from orientalist views that have been part of Western imagery at least since the early twentieth century and have been embraced by the Mexicans themselves.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the construction and maintenance of such stereotypes play a political role in facilitating social control and consolidating the global hegemony, often in the United States' interest. Such stereotypes work because violence and drugs are understood as threats to progress and modernity, so attaching them to specific subjects facilitates the construction of an irrational and barbaric Other that must be disciplined (Hopenhayn 2002, 57–58).

The construction of an irrational Other to justify cultural and political domination is usually employed by power structures today predominantly organized by global capitalism or neoliberalism. As a contemporary version of imperialism, orientalist views inform neoliberalism, which “discursively assigns violence to particular peoples and cultures” to facilitate their domination and, most of all, their economic exploitation (Springer 2011, 91). In other words, they propose a “place-based culture of violence” thesis” based on imaginative geographies that explains violence as the result of “personal or cultural failures” and neglects the role of the political-economic system to promote the market’s growth (96). Under this logic, the global south has become the space of multiple wars derived from a supposedly inherent barbarism instead of the international economic-political order. In short, it makes it seem as if violence in the global south is entirely independent of the global north. The use of violence-related discourses as a mechanism of othering exists not only in international politics —e.g. the relationship between the United States and countries like Mexico, Colombia, or Iraq— but also as a social struggle. As philosopher Martín Hopenhayn has observed, many Latin American states, often ruled by neoliberal economies, also use discourses about drugs and violence to stigmatize specific populations, mostly the young and the poor (2002, 61). Again, such stigmatization creates the image that violence among the low classes is disconnected from the oppression and economic exploitation sustained by the upper classes.

Cultural products —such as movies, art, or literature— can, perhaps unwillingly, participate in legitimating these narratives, promoting an uncritical view on violence. Nonetheless, according to scholars like Herman Herlinghaus, cultural expressions can also have the opposite effect as they can develop a critical understanding of violent events. In *Violence Without Guilt* (2009) and *Narcoepicis* (2013), the scholar suggests that some Latin American novels and films narrate violence in a way that does not allow the reader to enjoy it. Instead, they open the space to consider the “layers and meanings” that are not evident at first sight (2013, 41), including the broader context of structural violence. In other words, these narratives possess characteristics that do not satisfy the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in the introductory text of the exhibition “Dear Mr. Thanatos,” the Chilean curator Christian Viveros-Fauné wrote: “The themes of death, aggression, and psychic and physical violence have long been central to contemporary Latin American artists. Because of Latin America’s violent history, most artists from the region find themselves at most a single generation away from large-scale collective manifestations of the “instinct toward aggression” —with its devastating effects on local societies” (Viveros-Fauné 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the Western stereotypes of Mexico as a savage and violent land in relation to exoticization and commodification see, the second chapter of *Cannibal Culture* by Deborah Root (1996).



reader's expectations about the narration of violence, which makes its reception not necessarily pleasurable or entertaining; in its place, the texts create an experience that hints towards the non-evident mechanisms of violence without explicitly describing them. In this way, these narratives stimulate the reader to think critically about the violent events and examine her own biases and conventions.

Significantly, Herlinghaus's argument suggests that a narrative's potential to make the reader engage in critical reflection is related to an interplay between the text's structure and the reader. For example, in analyzing "The Part About the Crimes" in Roberto Bolaño's *2066*—a fictional representation of Ciudad Juárez's femicides—the scholar underlines that the Chilean writer relentlessly describes murdered women's corpses, their names, and ages through "third-person recounting of what sounds like bits of police reports, forensic filings, and press coverages" (209). According to the literary theorist and others (Mikel Frantzen 2017, 437; Close 2018, 137), these raw accounts, written in a "notarial tone" (Herlinghaus 2013, 179) as well as the police investigation theme, relate the book's chapter to forensic aesthetics, which, in addition to the lack of progress towards solving the crimes, creates the sensation of "a spiral-like, murderous machination" ingrained in the city (210). The result is a hint of normalization's role in sustaining this violent environment.

Notably, Herlinghaus connects Bolaño's work with the installations of the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, who uses forensic evidence to produce minimalist artworks. Without elaborating on this argument, the scholar suggests that, like Bolaño's take on Juárez's femicides, Margolles' installations open the space to reflect on violence's hidden layers (2013, 210). This comparison which resonates with other scholars' arguments (Alvarez and Zaiontz 2018, 285), invites the consideration that forensic aesthetics in the visual arts can operate as a medium to gain a different knowledge about violence. Emmelhainz, however, has argued that Margolles' art has the opposite effect as it turns violence into a spectacle and spreads narratives that promote fear (Emmelhainz 2016, 173). Various scholars have put forward similar arguments about Mexican artworks that refer to crime and death, suggesting they are part of a discourse that normalizes violence, turning it into a fashionable trend (Valencia 2016, 2875/3885), or that contributes to the exoticization of violence (Salazar 2016, 136). As mentioned before, other research has made similar observations about forensic aesthetics in general. These contrasting opinions demand an in-depth exploration of forensic aesthetics in the context of Mexican contemporary artistic practices.

Inspired by Herlinghaus's work on Latin American literature's potential to trigger critical reflection on violence, this research seeks to explore the devices through which Mexican artistic practices have contributed to disentangling the "obscure networks," the "uncanny web of relationships and mechanisms" that produce violence (Herlinghaus 2013, 209). In other words, it examines the mechanisms through which Mexican art can open the space for a more thorough understanding of violence's "disguised core," those aspects of violence that are not self-evident (209). As Herlinghaus notes: "The visible part, increasingly taken care of by corporatized media, is not necessarily what helps to gain experience and insight. How can we manage to step back without losing sight of what is most striking?" (209). Specifically, this thesis focuses on artworks related to forensic aesthetics produced under

the war on drugs and examines if they trigger critical thinking on the spectator. Consequently, it departs from the following research question:

Do Mexican forensic aesthetics-related artistic representations of violence produced after the onset of the war on drugs have the potential to lead to critical reflection on the non-evident aspects of violence affecting the country, and if so, how?

## Aim and Approach

As described above, art and popular culture can produce violence by constructing and reinforcing stereotypical views about political and social issues. In analyzing contemporary Mexico's cultural mediations of violence, academic projects of different disciplinary affiliations have described how specific artworks and other cultural products reproduce stereotypes and exoticizing narratives about this issue (Salazar 2016; Mercille, 2014). Nevertheless, as scholars like Susie Linfield (2010, xv) have argued, the critical approach often falls short in going beyond exposing master narratives. That is, it bypasses the positive impact that art can have. Starting from the assumption that cultural expressions have an agency that might open the space to think outside the frames imposed by power structures, this project has a twofold aim: first, to understand how forensic aesthetics has been used to represent violence; second, to examine how experiencing this way of representing violence can trigger critical thinking. Striving to achieve this goal, this research takes a theoretical approach. Following critical theorist Mieke Bal who argues that "concepts, if well thought through, offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states, and other theories" (2002, 22), the thesis interrelates three concepts —violence, affect, and forensic aesthetics— to analyze the selected artworks as representations of violence and their reception.

As will be discussed in the first chapter, there is a long-held debate between those who contend that the representations of conflict must elicit empathy for the victims and the antipsychological theorists who argue that the evocation of feeling clouds critical engagement with social struggle (Best 2016, 47-50). For the latter, "the political must be separated from the personal, ideas from feeling, and knowledge from identification" (47). This thesis agrees with the centrality of thinking when engaging with the mediations of violence and suffering. Nonetheless, it does not concede that thinking opposes feeling. Inspired by scholars like Jill Bennett (2005), Susie Linfield (2013), and Susan Best (2016) —who maintain that, rather than opposed, feeling and thinking are necessarily related— this thesis approaches the reception of artistic representations of violence through affect theory.

The affective turn in the humanities considers cultural expressions beyond the ideological perspective by raising questions about materiality, embodiment, experience, and distributed agency (Brinkema 2014, xi-xii). It opens the space for thinking from the intersection between philosophy, cognitive sciences, phenomenology, and cultural studies (27). In researching visual arts, scholars use affect theory to explore how images operate beyond their construction as signs (semiotics) and beyond the influence of cultural processes on their interpretation

(hermeneutics), by focusing on experience, perception, and sensation. Without dismissing the semiotic and hermeneutic perspectives, the affective turn emphasizes that it is crucial to understand how an image's effects and meanings derive from embodied experience (Hoogland 2014, 13). In other words, it focuses on the non-representational dimensions of art and visual culture. As Jill Bennett points out, not all aspects of the artwork are representational; art is also an event that impacts the subject at a physical level (2005, 4). Correspondingly, in Brian Massumi's words, theoretical approaches are "incomplete if they operate only at a semantic or semiotic level. (...) What they lose, precisely, is the expression of the event in favor of structure" (1995, 222). This is not to say that meaning is neglectable because, as Ernst van Alphen notes, meaning is unavoidable. After all, experience always has an object. In reading and looking, he continues, the object of experience is, or at least includes, meaning. Both meaning and affect-oriented approaches substantiate each other (Van Alphen 2008, 28). The affect-based analysis shows that an artwork's capacity to impact the spectator does not rely exclusively on its content: the sensations and cognitive processes derived from experiencing the artwork play a crucial role in its interpretation.

As this thesis takes an affect theory approach, the argumentation revolves around the interplay between violence, sensation, and thinking. Building on Jill Bennett's reading of Gilles Deleuze's aesthetics and her theorization of how art uses affect as its operative element, it argues that forensic aesthetics exploits the affective capacities of materiality to evoke violence without explicitly showing images of atrocity. Instead, it makes the spectators feel the dimensions of violence that are not self-evident. Embodied sensation moves the spectator into "critical inquiry" or "deep thought," that is, a mode of thinking that circumvents common sense about the workings of violence.

## Methodology

This thesis uses what Johannes Galtung calls "the extended concept of violence" (1969, 168) to understand the different forms in which violence can manifest and emerge. The concept of "forensic aesthetics" is employed to analyze the artists' formal and technical representation strategies and to explore how they mediate the spectator's aesthetic experience. For examining these strategies and mechanisms, this project uses three case studies, the selection of which is structured by the following criteria:

1. The artworks employ materials or images that directly or indirectly relate to recent Mexican violent events.
2. The materials correspond to a theme or trope identified by Stephen Tatum (2006) as characteristic of what he calls the "forensic aesthetics paradigm:" surveillance technologies, corpses, and ruins.
3. The materials are similar to those identified by Rubén Yepes in his study of forensic aesthetics in Colombian contemporary art (2018): Appropriated photography, human body parts, and found objects.

These criteria allow me to explore some of the themes often associated with forensic aesthetics —surveillance technologies, corpses, and ruins— and the materials or techniques used to present them —found photographs, surveillance technologies, human remains, and ruined objects — advancing the objective of unpacking how forensic aesthetics represents violence. The selected cases studies, the aesthetic mechanisms they use, and the forensic tropes they represent are the following:

1. Appropriated photography and technologies of surveillance, in the case of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence* (2014)
2. The corpse as represented through body parts in Teresa Margolles' *What Else Could We Talk About* (2009)
3. The ruin as presented as a found object in *The Promise* (2013), also by Margolles.

Although other Mexican artists also use forensic materials in their work, the choice of using two artworks by Margolles responds to the broad international recognition her work enjoys, and consequently, to the more extensive number of available sources about her artistic production and the reception of her work. Similarly, Lozano-Hemmer's work has wide international circulation because of the artist's global reputation and the open-source character of this particular piece.

After analyzing the forensic aesthetics devices used to represent violence, I use the concept of “affect” to describe the work's non-representational aspects and account for the spectator's bodily experience, which may lead to critical thinking. It is worth noting that some argue that affect is an amorphous force that resists structure and form and consequently cannot be registered or analyzed by examining an artwork. René Hoogland, for instance, holds that “the experience of embodied intensity [...] cannot be fully captured in language, nor fully determined by form nor by the chains of signification” (2014, 13). Nonetheless, like Eugenie Brinkema, others argue that such a perspective does not allow us to “grapple with affect and affectivity in text,” thus complicating the understanding of affect in itself (2014, xiv). Consequently, in her case, Brinkema calls for integrating formal analysis and close reading to study of affect in cinema. Likewise, Ernst van Alphen observes that, although the “affective conditions of art and literature should not be seen as formal conditions (...) in many cases formal features of works can trigger affect” (2008, 26). Consequently, he suggests taking a structuralist approach to understand better how a work of art produces affect (2008, 26). Taking inspiration from Brinkema and van Alphen, I relate the feelings, emotions, descriptions of the spectators' bodily reactions, and their interpretations to the artworks' formal and material characteristics—e.g. size, color, and smell.

The data regarding the spectators' experience was obtained from my impressions after examining the artworks through videos and photographs and descriptions of first-hand encounters with the works published in academic and non-academic sources —e.g. articles in art magazines and blogs. This information was combined with the observations gathered through what Gillian Rose calls “compositional interpretation” (2016, 56-84), a concept the author relates to affect-based approaches in visual studies. It centers on a work's compositional features and the

technical aspects in as much as they affect the image's impact on the spectator. In other words, the methodology of this thesis involves relating my impressions and spectators' reactions to the work to the compositional and material characteristics of the pieces to unpack how their materiality influenced such reactions. Finally, to expand the comprehension of the different responses to the work, those formal and technical features of the artworks that appear impactful are analyzed through various concepts that illuminate the role of materiality and sensation in the experience of the work of art, such as Gilles Deleuze's notion of the reflective face, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Rudolph Arnheim's research on the role of entropy in art (1971).

## Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into five chapters, each of them including an introduction and conclusion. The first one presents the theoretical framework, which revolves around the concepts of violence, affect, and forensic aesthetics. By bringing these concepts into dialogue, the chapter theorizes how forensic aesthetics can exploit the affective capacities of materiality to trigger embodied sensations —or physical experiences— that catalyze critical thinking about non-evident aspects of violence in the spectator. Then, it argues that forensic aesthetics — understood as the techniques and technologies used to present an object as evidence— influences the spectator's embodied perception of the piece and activates a process akin to physical imagination, which involves experiencing sensations and emotions after engaging with an inanimate object. These embodied sensations operate as what Deleuze denominates "encountered signs" that prompt the viewers' critical thinking, revealing aspects of the lived experience of violence in the spectator's body. In other words, the chapter maintains that, through diverse mediation techniques, the work enhances materiality's affective capacities and influences the subject's perception of the object. In this way, the spectator experiences sensations and emotions that do not derive from identifying with a character but from engaging with an inanimate object. Such sensations put the spectator in contact with objective violence as a force that cannot be seen but felt. As common sense does not correlate these sensations and emotions to the affective image or stimulus, they trigger critical thinking about the artwork's content.

Chapter two presents a literature review on the Mexican contemporary artistic representations of violence produced under the war against drugs, after discussing their historical context in light of the extended definition of violence introduced in the first chapter. Accordingly, the historical framework focuses on some of the political, economic, and cultural aspects relevant to understanding the conflict, from the introduction of neoliberalism in the early 1990s until Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012-2018). The second section of the chapter discusses the existing literature on artistic representations of violence after the war on drugs. First, it comments on how the politico-economic transformations of the last three decades have influenced artistic practices to sketch the impact that drug-related violence has had on Mexican contemporary art. Specifically, it explains that these years of conflict have fostered the emergence of iconographies representing the missing and murdered, manifested through diverse representational strategies. The appropriation of images and material evidence of crimes is one of these forms, which, notably, has not been researched in connection to forensic aesthetics.

Chapter three explores appropriated portraiture and surveillance technologies as forensic aesthetics components by analyzing Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's media installation *Level of Confidence* (2015), which addresses the enforced disappearance of forty-three students from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. It shows that the installation is a counter-forensic device that contests the official discourse, which asserts that the students were murdered by maintaining the narrative about their disappearance alive. The artwork achieves this goal by exploiting portraiture's potential as evidence of disappearance and the face recognition technology's capacity to express such a narrative. Building on Ariella Azoulay's work on the reception of photography of injustice and Gilles Deleuze's theorization of the affective operations of the face, the chapter argues that the installation invites the spectators to think critically about enforced disappearance by making them watch the students' faces and compare them with her own. Presenting the pictures next to the spectator's face mediated through a face recognition device has an estrangement effect which influences the subject's physical perception of the photographs and enhances its affective operations. Such an experience might trigger both pity and somber feelings, which are not usually related to observing portraiture. This mismatch opens the space to reflect on the students' disappearance and, simultaneously, on the continued existence of this form of violence and the spectators' exposure to this force. In this way, the work reveals to the viewers' bodies what Žižek denominates the "threat of violence" (2008, 8), which the philosopher contends is a component of systemic violence.

The fourth chapter focuses on human remains as a forensic aesthetics trope by examining Teresa Margolles' 2009 Venice Biennial pavilion entitled *What Else Could We Talk About?*. First, it argues that in contrast to interpretations that frame the cadaver as a reminder of the finitude of life, in forensic aesthetics, the corpse is made to speak to denounce the existence of a necropolitical order that annihilates those deemed unworthy. Then, the pavilion is analyzed as a forensic reconstruction of the lived experience of violence under the war on drugs to contest the official narrative that frames the military intervention as a social security program. Unlike Lozano-Hemmer's installation, in which the estrangement effect and the contradictory emotions that emerge after "watching" the students' faces foster critical thinking, here, in addition to estrangement, the primary mechanism that ignites cognition is based on invisibility. Starting from Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the chapter argues that the corpse as an artistic component fosters critical thinking when its presence is mediated or disclosed: abjection can "shock to thought" (Massumi quoted in Bennett 2005, 11) when the source of abjection is not entirely evident. Correspondingly, in the pavilion's case, the artist exploited the materials' affective capacities to develop an uncomfortable atmosphere that induced the spectator to feel the threat of violence as a force by making the corpse sensible but invisible. The discrepancy between sensation and what was visible puzzled the spectator's mind, setting her into an inquiry mode about living with what Brian Massumi calls "low-level fear" or "everyday fear" (1993, 24), motivated by the necropolitical regime that affects the Mexican population.

The fifth chapter examines the found object and ruination as components of forensic aesthetics through the installation *The Promise* (2013), also by Teresa Margolles. It analyzes the artwork composed of the rubble of a

demolished house as evidence that enforced displacement is one of the consequences of structural violence. In this way, the installation contests the discourse that presents late-capitalism as a synonym of progress and well-being by registering and expressing the community's pain and triggering critical reflections about violence. Since the installation is activated through a delegated performance, the encounter with the work triggers critical thinking through two different mechanisms. In the volunteers' case, their reflections result from the painful and exasperating experience fostered by the physical interaction with the artwork's materiality. The disconnection between this experience and the enjoyment usually associated with art puzzles the subject and forces her to think. On the other hand, for the spectators, critical thinking emerged from an indirect engagement with the work's materiality facilitated by its defamiliarizing effect. Such an engagement was stimulated by the discrepancy between the spectator's expectation of amazement and the actual feelings of bewilderment, desolation, and grief that the artwork triggered through its simple and crumbling structure, the dusty atmosphere, and the dark exhibition space.

Building on Jill Bennett's argument that viewers can relate to an artwork through their "sense of bodily memory," the chapter argues that the crumbling structure evokes bodily memories of grief through what Gregory Currie denominates "simulative processes," that is, the conscious or unconscious act of simulating an object's shape or texture (2011, 83). In addition, the chapter contends, the rubble has an unsettling effect that also contributes to the adverse affects the installation triggers. The work's analysis through Gastón Gordillo's research on rubble as a disruptive force (2012, 10) and Rudolf Arnheim's reflections on entropy (1971, 4-55) reveals that the installation triggers disconcerting –and even depressive– affects along with a certain degree of pleasure, because of its gradual loss of structure through the volunteers' action. Its tendency towards entropy or chaos is a frank expression of failure which conjures the socio-economic disaster that affects Ciudad Juárez. In this way, *The Promise* puts the spectator in contact with structural violence as a destructive force. Notably, the mismatch between the distressful and pleasurable affects is at the basis of the spectator's critical thinking about the circumstances that push people to abandon their homes forcefully.

Finally, the conclusion restates this thesis' central argument. In addition, it synthesizes the most relevant points discussed in this paper and presents the questions that emerged during the development of this research, which could not be addressed.

## Chapter 1. Violence, Affect, and Forensic Aesthetics

*Acts of violence, their unspeakable outbursts, defaced bodies, and lacerated lives, today's geographies of fear, as devastating as they may be, are not self-evident, even in their most compelling expressions. The violent "real" has an "unreality effect."*  
Herman Herlinghaus (2013, 69).

### Introduction

On January 29 of 2009, *The New York Times* published an article reporting Santiago Meza's crimes, a man who admitted having disappeared many human remains under a drug kingpin's instructions by dissolving them on acid (Lacey 2009). The article described the atrocities committed by Meza in a straightforward but catchy way and gave the impression that there is no explanation for such behavior. Nonetheless, spectacular forms of violence like these are just the visible expressions of a complex dynamic involving social and political structures and cultural constructions. Correspondingly, a thorough understanding of violence consists in considering the interaction between these forces. This research starts from the hypothesis that, in the visual arts, forensic aesthetics can open the space to make the spectator reflect on the conflicts' non-evident layers. In developing this argument, the theoretical framework relates the concepts of violence, forensic aesthetics, and affect to theorize the impact of such art on the spectators' bodies and the role of sensation in the work's interpretation.

The opening section of this chapter considers violence along the lines of structure-based theories —specifically Johannes Galtung's (1969; 1990) and Slavoj Žižek's (2008) work— which argue that, under any conflict, there are other invisible mechanisms enabling violence, which are also forms of violence. Correspondingly, a conflict's ethical representation must invite the spectator to think critically about violence by considering the forces that produce it instead of focusing on its visible manifestations. In other words, it must be seen awry.

The second section theorizes how art can achieve such a goal, using a conceptual apparatus based on affect theory. It starts by defining key concepts such as affect, sensation, emotion, and feeling according to Deleuze-influenced perspectives and describing how a work of art affects the spectator, as proposed by Ernst van Alphen (2008). These concepts are helpful to explain the research problem at the core of this thesis: how



can art make the spectator think critically about violence? Subsequently, the second section addresses this issue by building on the theorist Jill Bennett's reading of Gilles Deleuze's concept of "encountered sign," which suggests that art triggers cognition by making the spectator feel (2005, 7).

The last part focuses on forensic aesthetics. It shows that there are three different approaches to the concept: the curatorial point of view, which frames it as an aesthetic exploration of "the trace;" the literary studies' perspective, which suggests that it is a cultural response to systemic violence, and the human rights viewpoint, which understands it as a recognition of materiality's agency in the denunciation of violence. While the last approach best describes the artworks analyzed in this research, the other two shed light on aspects that would be left out if only the third viewpoint were followed, such as its cultural signification and the spectator's experience, which are helpful to understand how forensic aesthetics represents violence and how it impacts the viewer. Finally, the last part argues that through indexical objects, forensic aesthetics makes accessible some invisible aspects of violence, specifically the affects (or forces) related to the lived experience of violence, such as fear, anxiety, and pain, by making them sensible. Then, the artwork's affective operations set the spectator into a mode of inquiry, as common sense cannot correlate the sensations and emotions that the viewer experiences with the object triggering them.

## 1.1 On Violence

As dictionary definitions attest, in common parlance, violence comprises actions intended to hurt, such as crime, war, and civil unrest, a perspective long-held by behaviorist and empiricist models. Nonetheless, structure-based approaches argue that violence is more than physically damaging someone or something. They propose instead to adopt an "extended definition of violence" that acknowledges that manifest violence is just the visible part of the phenomenon and that underlying these acts, there are other types of violence that, although in more indirect ways, also cause harm (Jackson-Jacobs 2011, 16–44). One of the most prominent proponents of this view is the sociologist Johannes Galtung, who defines violence as "avoidable insults to basic human needs, (...) lowering the real level of needs-satisfaction below what is potentially possible," regarding any of the four classes of basic needs: survival, well-being, identity, or freedom (1990, 292). Otherwise stated, violence is when people cannot reach their full potential because of preventable circumstances. In a word, violence is "need-deprivation" (295).

In Galtung's model, violence exists in three categories that differ in visibility and relation to time: direct, structural, and cultural violence (292) (Fig. 1.1.). Direct violence refers to visible, interpersonal attacks —killing, maiming, repression, detention, and alienation (291). In contrast, structural violence is not an event but a process through which not specific individuals but social structures and institutions prevent people from meeting their needs, typically to facilitate exploitation (293–294). Through this distinction, Galtung labels poverty and underdevelopment as forms of violence, which, although unapparent, have a tremendously destructive force. Consequently, people are unaware of what is harming them and cannot effectively fight against it. As they fail to

recognize these mechanisms, they feel stressed and frustrated, facilitating aggression against others (quoted in Demmers 2012, 11).

According to Galtung, what prevents people from understanding what is damaging them are cultural constructions. He proposes the term “cultural violence” to refer to cultural aspects like religion, ideology, science, and art that legitimize the “act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence” (292) —e.g., the illegality of certain drugs like cocaine and marihuana and not others like alcohol that has punitive consequences against their producers and users. Like structural violence, cultural violence does not directly kill. Instead, it normalizes direct and structural violence by making the hegemonic groups’ values the commonsensical values for everyone, impeding mobilization and consciousness formation. Cultural violence is not an event or process; it is “invariant, a permanence,” operating as a substratum that sustains structural and direct violence (294).

Galtung stresses that these different forms of violence are interrelated, so that they work in a triangular relationship. Notably, the emotional component —or attitude, as Galtung calls it— plays a crucial role in constructing these relationships (quoted in Demmers 2012, 11). For example, a group of people may cause a riot (subjective violence) because of the frustration that oppression triggers. As a result, others might label them as criminals (cultural violence), as the recent response to Mexican feminist protesters demonstrates.<sup>7</sup> Because the production of violence involves the interrelationship of the three forms of violence, Galtung notes, the connection between direct and indirect violence needs to be further explored (1990, 302-303). When taken into the terrain of representation, Galtung’s argument suggests that placing direct violence in the spotlight —e.g. through art or media— does not necessarily contribute to raising awareness about violence and its impact, as it might divert one’s attention from the mechanisms of objective violence that underlie subjective violence. If this is so, how should violence be mediated to foster the comprehension of its construction?

In *Violence. Six Sideviews* (2008), Slavoj Žižek argues for an approach that takes distance from common forms of representation, interpretation, and engagement with violence. To explain his argument, it is worth noting that, like Galtung, Žižek sees violence as composed of a triumvirate that includes subjective violence and two modes of objective violence —symbolic and systemic— (2008, 1) which scholars often understand as equivalent to direct, cultural, and structural violence. Like direct violence, subjective violence refers to physical or ideological attacks, which are perceived as perturbations “of the ‘normal’ peaceful state of things” (2008, 1). Peace, for Žižek, is relational as it is a variable circumstance determined by objective violence. Unlike subjective violence, objective violence is abstract and anonymous, yet it is very “real,” as it shapes the material living conditions (12). It encompasses two categories: symbolic and systemic. The first refers to the structures of oppression and domination entangled in language and its forms —e.g. the male hegemony implicit in using “he” as the preferred pronoun or understanding state violence as legitimate violence. As it is a form of objective violence, symbolic violence is always

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<sup>7</sup> See Juárez Gamero and Tucker’s article (2021) in which they describe how feminist protesters were silenced and criminalized after the 8M riots.

invisible. Only when the structures of oppression implicit in the language are exposed —through artistic practices, for example— symbolic violence becomes evident. Systemic violence, according to Žižek, is intrinsic to the dominant economic and political systems’ ideology. The violence inherent to global capitalism involves putting the market over people’s basic needs. The market mobilizes emotions —such as fear, anxiety, and hate— to create need and desire, facilitating exploitation and oppression. Therefore, Žižek writes, systemic violence encompasses “the most subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (2008, 8). For the philosopher, objective violence must not be ignored, as:

Objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this ‘normal’ state of things. [. . .] Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence (2).

In short, like Galtung, Žižek contends that the examination of the interaction of these three modes of violence is critical in understanding any conflict. Nevertheless, he notes that such understanding might be obscured by common forms of mediation that usually take a humanitarian approach, leaving aside any political, economic, and cultural considerations (11). According to the scholar, there is something inherently “mystifying” in the direct confrontation with violence that complicates critical reflection: “the overpowering horror of violent acts and the empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking” (2008, 4).

## 1.2 On Affect and the Representation of Violence

Žižek’s argument about the mystifying effects of the confrontation with direct violence relates to a long-held debate about whether depictions of violence can render viewers sensitive to atrocity, inviting them to think and act against it, or if, on the contrary, they have an inuring effect.<sup>8</sup> Aestheticization, pornography, and spectacularization are among the most common terms to criticize images that render violence acceptable. Even though an in-depth analysis of these concepts is outside the scope of this thesis, it is noteworthy that, to some extent, they all share the idea that certain representations of conflict foster uncritical engagements with the images’ broader context.<sup>9</sup> How, then, can a work of art trigger critical thinking? As mentioned in the introduction to this

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<sup>8</sup>In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag notes that, since the late 19th century, some have maintained that vivid photographs of war are capable of raising awareness about the horror of violence (2003, 14). Nonetheless, others have criticized such images arguing that pictures of corpses and suffering bodies are “pornographic” as they turn the body of the victim into a source of voyeuristic pleasure and deny the subject’s dignity (Dean 2003, 91). For example, artist Allan Sekula contended that documentary photography has contributed to the spectacularization of violence, voyeurism, and “retinal excitation” without contributing to the critical understanding of the world (1978, 235-241). Years before, Theodor Adorno had criticized aestheticized representations of violence because, according to the philosopher, they turn violent events into something enjoyable and diminish the victims’ suffering (2003, 147-150). Discussing documentary practices about misery in Colombia, Ospina and Moyolo claimed that what they called “misery porn” made of poverty a spectacle while it allowed the viewer to be soothed and alleviate her guilty conscience (1978). Berger, on the other hand, argues that images of violence have a depoliticizing effect because, far from moving the spectator to engage with the wider context, they invite her to regard the event as another display of human suffering. Consequently, at most, the viewer might momentarily experience indignation and hopelessness without feeling compelled to take action (1991, 44).

<sup>9</sup> For a monography on the debate about the ethical implications of images of violence, see Rosauro (2017). For an analysis focused on the term “pornographic” in relation to violence see, Dean (2003).

chapter, Bennett's reading of Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "encountered sign" offers a framework that theorizes how art achieves such a goal by mobilizing affect. Bennett explores the connection between art, affect, and critical thinking as part of her work on trauma-related art. Although Bennett's main research topic is not the central issue of this thesis, her ideas about art's affective dynamics —specifically as presented in the case studies that address political violence— and their connection to critical thinking are essential to tackle this project's research question. These ideas are discussed in the second part of this chapter. The section firstly presents the central argument of Bennett's book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), paying particular attention to those ideas that contribute to understanding what art *does* and how it does it. Secondly, it explains the concept of the "encountered sign" as defined by Deleuze. Thirdly, it addresses art's affective dynamics or mechanisms as described by Bennett, and, finally, it relates Bennett's theory to the violence theory. It argues that, through its affective operations, art makes the spectator perceive different aspects of objective violence as this form of violence —like trauma— operates as a force that, although invisible, can be felt.

### 1.2.1 On Affect Theory

Derived from the Latin *affectus* —passion or emotion— the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "affect" as "emotion or desire." Although affect does not have a universal definition (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 83/5490), since the 1990s, the term has been used as a critical concept in diverse disciplines across humanities, social sciences, and psychology to address issues of sensation and emotion.<sup>10</sup> Within the humanities, according to Gregg and Seigworth, what is known as affect theory has two main theoretical vectors: psychobiology and poststructuralist philosophy (2010, 109/5490). Psychobiology builds on Silvan Tomkins' research and understands affect as an amplifier of human bodily drives (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 115/5490). In contrast, the philosophical perspective builds on Deleuze and Guattari's take on Spinoza's ethology of affect, for whom affect is more than emotion or desire: it is a force or an intensity that emerges in the encounter between bodies —both human and non-human— and that exists at every level, from the subatomic to the universal scale (2010, 56/5490). Correspondingly, affect is immanent to matter and to experience (O'Sullivan 2001, 126). Moreover, as Patricia Clough asserts, the term points to matter's dynamism, that is, to material bodies' capacity to interact with and transform each other (2010, 2841/5490).

When analyzing art, Ernst van Alphen argues, a strictly psychological approach is not helpful to theorize how an artwork —and material culture in general— produces affect (2008, 26). Therefore, this thesis understands affect after Deleuze and Guattari as intensity or a force emerging from human and non-human interactions, circulating between subjects and objects.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it subscribes to the idea that matter is not passive but an active agent that plays a crucial role in human experience through its affective capacities.

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of affect, and the related terms passion, feeling and emotion, have changed substantially throughout time. An account of these taxonomic transformations can be found in Brennan (2004, 3-5).

<sup>11</sup> On the circulation of affect see, Brennan (2004) and Ahmed (2014).

## AFFECT, EMOTION, AND FEELING

While some scholars use the term affect as a synonym of emotion and feeling, according to Deleuze, affect is different from the other two. In contrast to sensations, emotions, and feelings, which “express our state at a moment in time,” affects are intensities that mark a passage or a transition into another material state: they are signs of “the passage to a more or a less” and have diverse effects, such as “a pain, joy or sadness” (Deleuze 1998, 139). Brian Massumi explains that these embodied intensities or forces are “pre-personal” (2005, xvii).<sup>12</sup> Unlike emotions —direct expressions of intensity or affect— and feelings —displays of emotion under conscious control— affects precede spoken expression and are independent of the subject’s personal history (Shouse 2005, 3-5). In terms of human experience, Massumi associates them with small “shocks”:

Affect is, for me, inseparable from the concept of shock. It does not have to be a drama. It is more about micro-shocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives. For example, a change in focus or a rustle at the periphery of vision that draws the gaze towards it. In every shift of attention, there is an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life (2009, 4).

Notably, although affect is not a synonym of emotion or feeling, many argue, these phenomena are necessarily related: affects can lead to sensations, emotions and, as will be discussed later, can also catalyze cognition. For instance, Massumi defines emotion as “the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of experience” (1995, 88). Emotion implies the “conventional, consensual, point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable actions-reactions circuits, function, and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized” (98).<sup>13</sup> Putting it simply, while affects have no content or meaning, according to Massumi, emotions are associations of these intensities with categories built on previous experiences. Teresa Brennan argued that these associations —which she describes as judgments— are critical to the relationship between affects, sensations, emotions, and feelings, as feelings and emotions involve judging or evaluating the sensations derived from affect (2004, 5). Correspondingly, she defines affect as the psychological shifts accompanying such judgments and, like Eric Shouse, understands feelings as “sensations that have found the right match in words” (2004, 5).

Notably, according to Brennan, the actual distinction between affects and feelings relies on the phenomenon of transmission. Challenging the Freudian belief that affects originate at the subject who experiences them, the scholar argues that the body is not self-contained, as, energetically, its boundaries are permeable (2004, 3). Correspondingly, she asserts, affects come from without —from other bodies— and affect the subject through what she calls the “transmission of affect” (3). With this term, she refers to the process of projection or introjection through which these intensities affect the body, enhancing or depleting it —e.g. making a person feel energized or drained (5). Notably, this is not to say that all people experience the same feeling when the affective transmission occurs. For example, someone’s anger can become the other’s depression (5). This shows that, while affects or

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<sup>12</sup> In this context, body is understood in its widest sense, to include mental processes, what Massumi calls mental bodies (2005, xvi).

<sup>13</sup> Brian Massumi’s definition of emotion differs from that of Eric Shouse and Teresa Brennan. While for Shouse and Brennan, emotions are not necessarily recognized, and consequently do not find verbal expression, for Massumi, emotions have already been owned by the subject.

intensities are transmitted, feelings are not. Though Brennan's work takes a psychoanalytical instead of a philosophical perspective, for this thesis's purposes, her argument is helpful to show two essential features of affect: that the body can be affected by other bodies through the transmission of affect—which will be instrumental in explaining art's affective capacities—and that emotions and sensations are indications of affective transmission.

In sum, although they are not synonyms, affect, emotion, and feeling are deeply related. In human experience, affects are realized as physical reactions, like movements, paralysis, or attention shifts, which, once they have been evaluated or "judged" (to borrow Brennan's term), might be interpreted as sensations or emotions and expressed as feelings. Therefore, this research considers physiological responses (e.g. paralysis, shivers), sensations, and emotions as indications of the transmission of affect and refers to them when using terms such as affective response or affective experience. On the other hand, this thesis refers to how an artwork affects the viewer through the term "affective operations," which is addressed in the following section.

#### ART AND AFFECT

Building on Deleuze and Brennan, Ernst van Alphen proposes the term "affective operations" to describe how art and literature affect people (2008, 26). According to the scholar, as affect originates in the interaction between bodies, art transmits affects that impact the spectator at a physiological level; the person who receives the affect will project it towards someone else or introject it (accept it or "absorb" it): The moment of the projection or introjection is when the affective transmission takes place (23). The affective response is a crucial component of the aesthetic experience and the construction of meaning. For example, it might substantiate "the moral conclusions implied by the narrative event," giving intensity to the emotions conventionally attached to the subject matter, or it might oppose the event's moral conclusions—e.g. making funny an image supposed to be sad (28). Art's affective operations are relational in both cases as they depend on the work's characteristics and the spectators' sensibility (26). In other words, not all images have affective capacities, and a single image will not have the same effect on all viewers.

Nevertheless, although relational, the work's qualities, such as its visual characteristics (shape, color, composition, and texture) and estrangement effects, are crucial in affecting the viewer (28). Estrangement is a term related to other concepts, such as defamiliarization and disautomatization, which refer to a device employed in literature and the visual arts to make something familiar appear strange, sometimes by changing its form without changing its essence (Shklovsky 2015, 151). According to the Soviet critic Viktor Shklovsky, estrangement reverts the process of automatization through which people stop having feelings, like enjoyment or horror, after they get used to seeing something. Art, he argues, can both actualize the beauty of the world and also make its horrors felt (151). Correspondingly, by making violent events appear strange, art can make the spectator feel the effects of violence. In addition to these devices, the subject matter—especially violence and sex—and psychic identification with the characters also play an essential role in art's potential to affect the viewer. This potential, van Alphen argues, is

more significant than that of propositional content because of its “concreteness” (2008, 26). In other words, images—whether imagined or material—have a power that conceptual knowledge lacks because they make the content into “an event that one experiences directly and even bodily” (28). Consequently, in addition to what it represents through its symbolic dimension, art can reveal a sensation-based knowledge through its affective operations.

Van Alphen’s argument is illuminating for this research as it suggests that an artwork can make the understanding of violence more concrete by turning the contents into sensations that are processed directly in the body, revealing in this way a sensation-based knowledge about the subject matter. Correspondingly, this thesis suggests, art can reveal knowledge about the lived experience of violence. Significantly, although violence tends to affect the spectator, not all representations have the same affective power. According to van Alphen’s argument, what makes the affective operations of one representation of violence more potent than another is related to features such as its plastic characteristics, its capacity to present the situation in an unfamiliar way, or its potential to make the spectator identify with the featured suffering victims or the perpetrators. Notably, as will be discussed in what follows, art theorist Jill Bennett argues that it is precisely the artwork’s affective operations that may foster critical thinking in the spectator (2005, 7).

### 1.2.2 Critical Thinking and the Representation of Violence

In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), Jill Bennett contends that traumatic memory, more than a narrative, is a physical experience felt in the present every time it is retrieved. Such experience, she asserts with others, cannot be “represented,” as it can only be felt (24). Nonetheless, she argues that art can contribute to understanding trauma by using affect as its operative element. As will be explained below, through its affective dynamics, Bennett notes, trauma-related art opens the space to comprehend the subjective processes involved in remembering a trauma by exploring the subject’s psychic trajectory (24). In the same way, it can also advance the understanding of shared traumatic experiences, such as death and loss within a context of political violence, by putting the spectator in touch with trauma, not as a personal experience, but as a force inhabiting the space (42-49). Bennett’s understanding of trauma as a force that occupies the environment, it will be argued, is close to the idea of objective violence as an invisible force that shapes people’s lives. Correspondingly, violence-engaged art that uses affect as its operative element can contribute to the viewers’ understanding of the lived experience of violence by putting the spectator in contact with this force.

According to Bennett, using affect as art’s operative element involves exploiting ways of embodied perception (10). This term evokes what Dennis Proffitt describes as the influence of the subject’s psychological state, emotions, intentions, and relationship with the surroundings on perception. As he writes: “Perceptions are embodied; they relate body and goals to the opportunities and costs of acting in the environment” (2006, 110). Considering these ideas together suggests that, through its affective operations—to borrow van Alphen’s term—art engages the body in diverse forms, triggering sensations, emotions and influencing its movements, which modifies its relationship with the environment, and consequently, her perception of it. In this way, art makes

accessible a kind of knowledge about trauma outside the narrative framework's reach, which can only be perceived through the body (Bennett 2005, 24). Of central relevance for this thesis is Bennett's argument that through embodied perception, art promotes forms of critical inquiry or critical thinking, instead of triggering what she calls, after Bertolt Brecht, "crude empathy" (a feeling based on the "assimilation of the Other's experience of the self") (10). As explained below, these emerging questions and thoughts are free of moral judgments and conventional explanations. Hence, art paves the way to think about the issue at stake —trauma or violence in itself— from a different perspective than the dominant discourse dictates.

Importantly, considering that not every sensation or affect reveals knowledge to the body or leads to critical inquiry, Bennett explores the relationship between art, affect, and thought through Gilles Deleuze's aesthetic theory. Building on the notion of "the encountered sign," which the philosopher describes in *Proust and Signs* (2000), she argues that certain artworks engage the spectator into critical thinking by triggering a kind of affect that does not incite a "passive bodily experience"; instead, she continues, "it agitates, compelling and fueling inquiry" (Bennett 2005, 36). Bennett explains that her argument derives from the theory that Deleuze exposes in the text mentioned above, through which he suggests that affect is a better catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought than explicit statements as it grasps the subject at multiple levels: psychologically, emotionally, and sensorially (Bennett 2005, 36). Correspondingly, the art that Bennett describes does not intend to reproduce reality —to represent the traumatic event— but to register and produce affect. In this way, the encounter with these artworks opens the space for a specific understanding based on sensation (36).

#### THE ENCOUNTERED SIGN

Deleuze's aesthetic theory is extensive, and unpacking it is outside this paper's scope, but suffice it to say that it is part of the scholar's investigation of dogmatism and common sense —what everyone knows. Following Kant, Deleuze contends that people recognize the objects surrounding them through common sense (1984, 15) — from houses or cars to abstractions like crime or violence. Importantly, recognition necessarily implies representation, and consequently, it is reductionist: it only considers specific features, ignoring the others (1995, 133).<sup>14</sup> For this reason, Deleuze argues, common sense is at the core of dogmatism, which opposes critical thinking or thinking "the new" (138). While common sense, then, helps navigate everyday life, it constrains critical thinking, as it implies following the hegemonic order and impedes thinking against the grain. This observation is relevant for this research because it suggests that if art can make the spectator feel and reflect, then the ideas that emerge from the encounter with it may be outside the conventions —or common sense— about what violence is and how it works.

Critical thinking, according to Deleuze, emerges from sensing something that cannot be recognized and, consequently, understood through common sense. To develop this argument, the philosopher builds on Immanuel

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the idea of "a successful economy" is centered on specific characteristics, ignoring others.



Kant, who posited that recognition necessitates that all the human faculties —memory, understanding, imagination, and perception— work harmoniously (1995, 133). Then, Deleuze argues that critical thinking happens when the subject perceives something, but the other faculties fail to recognize it (146), e.g. the memories activated by the taste of the madeleine when the main character fails at recognizing the sensation they produced, in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. Consequently, the sensation —what is perceived— is addressed as a “sign:” something that demands inquiry and interpretation (146). The sign, then, is a force (an affect) that exerts a “kind of violence” that forces the subject to scrutinize such an impression to find its truth (Deleuze 1995, 145). As the scholar Itay Snir notes, “unlike qualities or attributes leading thought straight to recognizable objects, signs trouble and embarrass, set riddles and demand interpretation” (2020, 102). In other words, signs are puzzling, and therefore provoke the urgency to decipher them (Fig. 1.2). This specific sensation or emotion can have diverse origins —an idea, a contradicting hint of love, or the taste of the madeleine that Deleuze describes (Snir 2020, 101-102). In any case, the sensory impression or stimulus triggers sensations that trouble the human faculties, involuntarily engaging the subject in thoughts and questions. This affective encounter, then, is at the core of critical thinking.

Deleuze’s argument links the artwork’s affective operations to deep thought, challenging the idea that feeling opposes thinking (Bennett 2005, 7). Most importantly, it offers a theoretical tool to examine the effects of cultural expressions on the spectator. When applying this argument to violence-engaged art, this tool opens the space to distinguish those works which, like some horror films, engender sensation with no other purpose but to stimulate the spectator’s body, from others which trigger “signs” that propel us “into a form of intellectual inquiry through its assault on our senses, emotions, bodies” (Bennett 2005, 64). This form of engagement is akin to what Brian Massumi calls a “shock to thought,” which Bennett describes as “a jolt that does not so much reveal the truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry” (11). In other words, the work affects the spectators in a way that does not dictate what to think; instead, it triggers a physical experience that makes them reflect and question commonsensical ideas about the event. The following section explores some of the mechanisms through which a work of art can achieve such an effect.

#### ART AS AN ENCOUNTERED SIGN AND ITS AFFECTIVE DYNAMICS: IMITATION AND EMBODIED IMAGINATION

As Bennett explains, since affect is the engine that mobilizes thought “toward a deeper truth,” Deleuze posits that the affective encounter is integral to art-making (2005, 37). For Deleuze, then, art results from the artist’s response to a “sign” or sensation by engaging with a medium. In other words, art is a sustained sensation as experienced by the artist’s body (37). Correspondingly, from a Deleuzian point of view, art is better understood as registering a subjective process emerging in the present than as a transcription of a preconceived idea.

While Deleuze is concerned with figurative painting —specifically with Francis Bacon’s work— Bennett argues that contemporary art also has a long tradition of engaging with affect by exploring different ways of presenting the body undergoing sensation (2005, 37). For example, she discusses Marina Abramovic’s 1975 famous performance *The Lips of Saint Thomas*, in which she displays her body “*in extremis*” by undertaking different actions

such as eating a kilo of honey, cutting a star on her belly, and wiping herself until she does not feel pain. In this work, Bennett explains, the most lasting image on the spectator's mind is the star on the artist's belly because it presents a body enduring and sustaining sensation, an image which the viewer reads viscerally, that is, through her body (38). Correspondingly, according to the scholar, these artworks are not only the artist's response to a sign; they also incite affective reactions in the spectator. Notably, these affective responses do not come from a sympathetic relationship with a character in the artwork but from "imitation" or affective contagion (38). In other words, the spectator experiences sensations in her own body when looking at a body that feels because she imagines how it could feel. In this way, the work "reveals" knowledge about the Other's lived experience (38). The spectator integrates such knowledge through recognition, which Bennett explains is "less a cognitive function than one proceeding from an awareness of the body" (47). Then, the spectator can only read such bodily knowledge when compared with her physical experience, which shows that, as van Alphen's argument mentioned before suggests, the artwork's affective dynamic does not determine on its own what a work of art does. Its effects, instead, are relational.

Deleuze's aesthetic theory suggests that art operates as sensory impressions that constitute the stimulus necessary to trigger the sensations—or signs in Deleuze's terms—that involuntarily mobilize the spectator's ordering of faculties, setting her into an inquiry mode. For example, in addressing child sexual abuse, Bennett discusses the Australian artist Dennis Del Favero's photographic series *Parting Embrace* (1997), which aims at registering the pain of this traumatic experience as a physical imprint by depicting details of body parts displaying openings—e.g., wounds, the belly-button, and the mouth (28). The artist constructed the series with two sets of images that convey contradictory affects: *Parting*, composed by overtly disturbing pictures, and *Embrace*, conformed by softer and more diffused images that evoke romantic feelings. In this way, the work takes distance from narrative and especially from moral frameworks to instead embrace moral ambiguity: it fuses the violent and pornographic components of abuse's memories with love and fantasy, which, according to Bennett, the artist argues are not necessarily distinct within the context of such an experience (36). When watching the series, the spectator might feel disturbed by *Parting*, a sensation that common sense associates with sexual violence, and, simultaneously, experience the love and joy that *Embrace* communicates through its plastic features. These contradictory emotions tied to the same object might puzzle the spectator, setting her into an inquiry mode that questions the moral judgments commonly attached to the situation. In this way, the photographs evoke a sensation of confusion that opens the space to consider the complexity of feelings that the survivor experiences, adding deepness to the spectator's idea about the experience of child sexual abuse. Nonetheless, often, to arrive at such consideration and level of reflection about such issues as sexual violence, it is necessary to add a discursive framework that places such sensations and emotions against it. In Bennett's words, the piece "generates sensation as to produce an encounter in the present. Nevertheless, at the same time, such work does require a discursive framework; it operates, in other words, in concert with developing cultural awareness of the issue of sexual abuse" (2005, 28).

Displaying a body that feels is not the only mechanism through which contemporary art triggers affect. Other artworks transmit affect through inanimate objects, making the spectator experience emotions through “embodied imagination” (Bennett 2005, 56) instead of imitation or affective contagion. Although Bennett does not mention the origins of the concept of embodied imagination, it is worth noting that it refers to a psychoanalytical technique proposed by Robert Bosnak that allows the subject to engage with different aspects of the self, which usually exist as complexes and, consequently, are difficult to access consciously and understand (2003, 690). Entirely unpacking Bosnak’s theory and technique is outside the scope of this paper. To explain Bennett’s argument, it suffices to say that embodied imagination in psychoanalytic practice involves bringing the patient into a hypnotic state under which she describes the entities and objects that appear in her mind and explores the emotions that emerge in their presence. Correspondingly, by using this concept, Bennett evokes the human capacity to experience physical sensations when engaging with non-human entities —e.g. animals, objects, materials— which, subconsciously, connect with different aspects of the psyche, such as the pain caused by a traumatic experience. Reflecting on this concept along with that of “embodied perception” mentioned above opens the space to think that a subject can experience sensations, emotions, and feelings when encountering inanimate objects through embodied imagination and, besides, that art can foster these affective responses by exploiting the fact that perception is shaped by the subject’s relation with the environment and her psychological and physical states, among other factors. Differently put, by influencing the spectator’s embodied perception of an image or object, a work of art can make the spectator experience sensations and emotions that do not come from identification with the Other or “crude empathy”—to borrow Brecht’s term mentioned before— but from engagement with an inanimate object.

As case studies, Bennett analyzes *Casa Viuda* (1994) and *Untitled* (1995) by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, two installations composed of pieces of furniture which the artist made strange by embedding them with traces of extinguished human lives: the first attached to human bone’s fragments, clothes, and other traces of murdered individuals, and the later packed with clothes and covered in concrete. According to Bennett, these artworks evoke a state of grieving or loss, a feeling difficult to convey as it is not something that everyone can easily recognize nor that is felt in one moment, as it is instead a more extended process (60-61). Despite these specificities, Salcedo manages to evoke this sensation by making the spectator gradually apprehend the object’s transformation: after familiarizing herself with the ordinary thing, the discrete modifications that Salcedo has done on the object start to appear. The recognition of human traces is the affective trigger that, while offering too little to build a narrative, invites a strong bodily investment (61). At this moment, the spectator might experience pain or sadness when looking at the work. Nonetheless, as familiar objects, like furniture, are not associated with such emotions, the encounter with this object which Salcedo has made strange by anthropomorphizing it, might set the spectator into an inquiry mode. These characteristics together —the objects’ estrangement, the “shock” (borrowing Massumi’s expression) that human remains trigger, and the slowed perception process— make the spectator feel

how things become gradually strange during the grieving process, a knowledge that can only be apprehended through the body.

#### *ART AND VIOLENCE AS A FORCE: SHORTENING THE DISTANCE WITH VIOLENCE*

In the third chapter of her book, Bennett examines how art can lead the spectator to a better understanding of the encounter with death and loss in the context of political violence by focusing on the artistic mechanisms that facilitate pain's contagion. The scholar builds on the anthropologist Veena Das's argument that pain is a force with a beseeching nature. For Das, pain seeks expression, makes a claim, and demands a response that may be given or denied. In any case, it leaves a mark, changing people and societies (quoted in Bennett 2005, 48-49). Bennett then argues that expressions of pain function as "encountered signs" because they demand responses from the witness (49). According to the scholar, art can operate as a medium for expressing pain by giving a body to this affect. The work registers the artist's pain or her pain for the other. For example, Bennett discusses some works of art by the Belfast artist Sandra Johnston and the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, two artists whose places of origin have been affected by violence. Although both explore others' trauma, they approach it not as outsiders but, in Bennett's words, "within a particular cultural affinity" (53). Besides, she notes, their work proceeds from a relationship with the primary subjects of violence, allowing them to experience grief as a form of embodied perception —as it is felt in the body and its relation to space— and respond to it by giving it a body through the artistic medium: performance in Johnston's case and installations in Salcedo's work. The resultant artworks trigger physical sensations that make pain recognizable, particularly the pain of living a violent reality (60). This imagery, she contends following Das's analysis, might be understood as a medium that brings the spectator in contact with trauma, not with a specific traumatized subject, but "with the force of trauma as this inhabits space, both internal and external to the body" (50). Correspondingly, cultural representations of pain operate as Deleuzian signs, as they demand a response from the spectator (60).

This thesis argues that Bennett's reading of Das's ideas about pain as a force with a beseeching nature inhabiting space, changing people and society, can be productively related to Galtung's theorization of structural and symbolic violence and what Žižek calls objective violence. As discussed before, both theorists note that these forms of violence are invisible or unapparent. Nonetheless, as Galtung stresses, they have a tremendously destructive force (1996, 36). Notably, these forces, which exist as a continuum instead of as an event, invade space and become the normal state of things, as Žižek describes. People tend to experience frustration because of the invisibility of these forms of violence as they fail to recognize the forces oppressing them. In Galtung's words, this emotional component, or attitude, is central in shaping the relationships that construct and sustain violence (quoted in Demmers 2012, 11).

Inspired by Das' and Bennett's ideas, this thesis contends that, like trauma, objective violence works as a beseeching force that demands responses and leaves a mark in people and society. If we consider Galtung's argument, these responses might lead from emotions and feelings —such as frustration, anxiety, and pain— to acts

of subjective violence. Art can put spectators in contact with this force by exploiting forms of embodied perception, which may lead them to experience feelings such as anxiety, pain, or discomfort that are not triggered by identification. In this way, the artworks that use affect as their operative element to address violence circumvent Žižek's observation about the mystifying effect that empathy for the victims can have (2008, 4). These works, instead, trigger what Massumi calls "shocks to thought" (quoted in Bennett 2005, 11).

As exemplified by Del Favero's work, what characterizes a "shock to thought" is the impossibility of recognizing the connection between sensation and trigger. That is to say, what the subject feels is not clearly and conventionally attached to what caused the sensation, setting her into an inquiry mode. Importantly, scholars like Luc Boltanski observe that looking at mediations of violence is associated with pity, sympathy, and compassion, feelings that mark a relationship of distance and hierarchy in which the onlooker is superior to the sufferer (1993, 21-22). Boltanski's argument is of central relevance for this research as it shows that we are used to relating to the Other's suffering —to violence— from a distant point of view enabled by affects like pity and compassion.<sup>15</sup> This idea suggests that if the sensations and emotions that the spectator feels do not allow a distant relationship with violence and, in turn, make her sense the forces or constraints of living under violent circumstances, the viewer could experience something that is outside the commonsensical knowledge about facing violence, puzzling her and urging her to think and make interpretations. For example, some installations by Christian Boltanski, like *Réserve Hamburger Strasse* (1992) —a work that relates to the second world war and consists of magnified children's photographs illuminated from the front— might evoke the sensation that people in the pictures are dead and incite discomfort and fear in the spectator, instead of pity or sympathy. The evocation of death through ordinary objects and the sensations they trigger might also set the spectator into an inquiry mode. As Bennett's theory suggests, it is more likely that artworks that invite critical thinking evoke violence as a force instead of depicting subjective violence, as in Fernando Botero's *The Death of Pablo Escobar* (1999), which shows the drug trafficker murdered. The works of art that conjure violence as a force may trigger "signs," making the spectator sense something that is not available to immediate cognition, opening the possibility of experiencing something "irreducible and different, often inaccessible" about violence, which can transform the subject's perception of these violent events (Bennett, 2005, 11).

Nonetheless, as Bennett argues, the artwork does not explicitly indicate what to think; instead, the sensations it triggers are "a hook to a more extended form of engagement" (2005, 65). Reflecting on violence's mechanisms, then, is the spectator's task. Still, the affective responses and the ideas that might emerge from this encounter are not incidental but "carefully addressed within the artwork's structure" (8). To be specific, the artwork possesses features that influence the spectator's embodied perception and trigger sensations that hint towards certain feelings and ideas. Salcedo's work is instrumental in explaining this mechanism, mainly because it relates to

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis on the reception of distant suffering and the ethical implications of experiencing affects such as pity and sympathy see, Boltanski (1993).

forensic aesthetics, as will be evident in the next section. The artist has described her work as addressing “the constraints of a world shaped by violence” (quoted in Bennet 2005, 18). Her art achieves this by placing multiple installations like those described above in the same space. Encountering multiple familiar objects made strange by adding a human component that is reminiscent of death creates a sensation that arises in the space and evokes the discomfort of living in a place where the probability of dying is high while everyday life continues. Notably, as explained in the previous section, as the works involve inanimate objects instead of feeling bodies, the spectator gains this knowledge through embodied imagination, a mechanism that underpins many forensic aesthetic artworks.

### 1.3 Forensic Aesthetics: From Imprint of the Unseen to Counter-Forensics

“Forensics” designates the application of scientific tools to legal investigations (Oxford English Dictionary), that is, the use —usually by the state— of techniques such as photography and DNA analysis to investigate crimes by examining physical evidence. This approach derives from the “forensic gaze,” a 19<sup>th</sup>-century way of seeing, which framed physical evidence as to more objective and trustworthy than human testimony (Valverde 2006, 85). Since forensics is related to objectivity, it has been traditionally divorced from aesthetics (Bois, Foster, & Weizman 2014, 122). The term, then, did not emerge as a critical concept from criminology but the humanities. Curators and scholars have used it since the 1990s to examine cultural expressions centered on the trace, forensic analysis, or the crime scene as aesthetic objects.

Human rights scholarship has recently questioned forensics’ presumed objectivity and commenced seeing it as an aesthetic practice with a subjective component (Weizman 2014, 15). As a result, forensic aesthetics became a traveling concept. At the same time, it also strengthened its relationship with politically-engaged artworks, as the increasing number of projects framing literary, photographic, and artistic oeuvres under the so-called “forensic turn” demonstrate.<sup>16</sup>

The forensic turn refers to the increased attention to materiality’s role in the configuration and functioning of social networks to reveal usually invisible relations that bear witness to state crimes and other forms of violence (Isanović 2017, 18–30; Lowe 2018, 7). Although there are some examples of the penetration of cultural expressions by the forensic gaze going back as far as the 19th century (Valverde 2006, 85), scholars characterize the forensic turn in Western culture as the explosion of a forensic sensibility in multiple realms —from media, popular culture, and art to law and politics— occurred since the 1990s (Tatum 2006, 127; Isanović 2017, 35; Scott Bray 2014, 70; Weizman 2017, 83). This interest has manifested in different ways through books, art exhibitions, movies, TV shows, and even academic courses and forensic science programs (Penfold-Mounce 2015, 2). For instance, in memory studies, this has meant new approaches such as looking at the past through detection and analysis (Bøndergaard 2017, i) and paying attention to humble instead of grandiose artifacts as carriers of memory (Lowe 2018, 18). In the

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<sup>16</sup> For literature see, Bøndergaard (2017); for photography see, Lowe (2018, 6-7); and for visual arts see, Stankievich (2019, 43) .

terrain of the visual arts, the forensic turn has manifested as an increasing number of artworks operating as pieces of evidence articulated through a human rights logic, opening the space to reflect on the forces that produce a conflict.<sup>17</sup> In short, as what follows describes, the concept has expanded from describing art that functions as an imprint of unseen actions to how this imprint performs as material evidence of violent events, which in turn has political agency. In this way, the concept has taken the connotation of a critical tool to represent political violence.

#### FORENSIC AESTHETICS AS AESTHETICS OF THE AFTERMATH

Various art curators (Rugoff 1997; Campany 2006), criminologists (Young 2004; Scott-Bray 2014; 2017), literary studies scholars (Tatum 2006), and art historians (Bright 2012; Yepes 2019) have addressed the penetration of the forensic gaze into artistic practices. Most of them state that art with forensic elements, instead of mimetically representing a situation, recalls evidence or forensic analysis using found objects connected to actual events or evoking forensic imagery.<sup>18</sup> Its affective operations can be addressed through the mechanism of embodied imagination as described by Jill Bennett (2005, 56).

Rugoff and Campany claim that forensic aesthetics emerged after post-war art transitioned from object-centered art to the performative. These works, according to Rugoff, are closer to scenes composed of diffused clues than to “coherent, organized objects” (1997, 72) and “seem defined as much by an absence as by their physicality” (60). Correspondingly, both Rugoff (1997, 60) and Campany (2006, 3) relate this aesthetic form to conceptual and post-minimal artworks that emphasize theatricality and the processual—e.g. Ed Ruscha’s photobook *Royal Road Test* (1967), a photo series that documents the destruction of a typewriter, and Barry Le Va’s *Shatterscatter* (1968-71), composed by a pile of smashed glass. Similarly, in discussing John Divola’s 1970s photo-series *Vandalism*, Campany associates what he calls “para-forensic photographs” —the result of a downward tilt of vision that turns incidental details into signs and emphasizes the spectator’s body as a witness of an event’s sequels (2006, 7)— to the shift from the “pictorial” towards the “performative” in 1960s and 1970s art (3). According to the curator, “paraforensic photography” became common in those years, as, in his words: “It look is so artless that it lends itself to all kinds of art interested in the idea of the trace” (6)—e.g. Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series (1978), consisting of silhouettes of the artist’s body left in different materials, and Lewis Baltz’s *Nevada* (1977), a photographic series of suburban building sites. In short, for both curators, forensic aesthetics relate to the work of artists who are more interested in the artwork’s materiality and the actions involved in its creation or its character as an outcome than on the piece’s artistic or expressive character.

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<sup>17</sup> Emmelhainz makes similar observations about the so-called “materialist realism,” which seeks to map the fluxes, work, and living conditions imposed by capitalism. As examples, she mentions Allan Sekula’s *The Fish Story* (1996) and *The Forgotten Space* (2010), which, according to the scholar, break with capitalist processes’ inherent abstraction (2016, 121).

<sup>18</sup> Scott Bray, for example, discusses Melanie Pullen’s photographic series *High Fashion Crime Scenes* (2004), which recreates fictitious murders (2014, 69-70), and Stephen Chalmers’ *Unmarked* (2007-2013), a photographic series of dumpsites identified by the police (77-85), both as examples of forensic aesthetics. On the other hand, Stankievich relates Thomas Hirschhorn and Marcus Steinweg’s *Foucault Map* —which consists of a diagram that shows the connections between Foucault’s ideas— to forensic aesthetics (2019, 52).

It was for the exhibition *Scene of the Crime* (1997) held at Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center that curator Ralph Rugoff developed one of the earliest conceptualizations of forensic aesthetics. He describes it as an “aesthetics of the aftermath,” in which art evokes evidence of hidden meanings or actions. Its structure echoes a mystery novel as the spectator must reconstitute the past by examining evidence through a “scanning gaze” (18). Notably, in his view, this is forensic aesthetics’ central feature: the spectator must adopt a speculative approach (Rugoff 1997, 18). Although influential, Rugoff’s perspective has not gone without criticism.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the scholar Jean-Michel Rebaté argued that the curator’s characterization of forensic aesthetics was forced, as the artworks unrelated to real-life documents “look[ed] fake, staged, jocular, never even frightening or awe-inspiring” (quoted in Scott Bray 2014, 94). In other words, according to Rebaté, an artwork could be related to forensic aesthetics because its connections to actual violent events made it shocking, and not only because it could make the spectator reconstruct an event. Rebaté’s argument suggests that, although relatively undefined at that time, forensic aesthetics’ core is more than the scanning gaze. Defining it based on the spectator’s role is then too general, as any artwork that invites one to wonder about its making process or its origin —e.g. action painting or performances’ relics— would then qualify as forensic aesthetics. In other words, forensic aesthetics, according to this definition, could take any format and address any topic, as long as it demands making speculations about the work’s meaning, which could apply to many art pieces.

Rugoff’s argumentation is not sufficiently concrete; nevertheless, it is helpful in addressing two medullar questions for this research: how forensic aesthetics represents violence and what the affective responses associated with it are. He suggests that what makes an artwork look as evidence —including violent events— is, first, that it forces the spectator to take a speculative approach, and, second, that it has a double identity: “an ordinary object and an uncanny incarnation of evil” (1997, 79). In his book *Sinister Aesthetics. The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature*, literary studies scholar Joel Eliot Slotkin explains that evil opposes the normative or the morally acceptable: it is what we are supposed to dislike and reject (1997, 9). Correspondingly, the artworks that are perceived as reminiscent of something evil typically consist of found objects presented as repulsive events’ records: they can appear mundane yet charged with an invisible surplus that makes them uncanny or close to something that must be rejected, an effect that the artist can construct by exploiting embodied perception and also through textual means. For instance, Edward Kielholdz *Illegal Operation* (1962) consists of a chair, a lamp, and other heavily damaged objects. Read next to the title, the set of objects evokes a backstreet abortion, an event that the title implies goes against the law and, consequently, is socially unacceptable (Rugoff 1997, 73). Both the terms uncanny and evil relate to distressing emotions, like fear or anxiety, which some —such as Rebaté in the argument quoted above— also relate to forensic imagery.

Interestingly, Campany describes Divola’s paraforensic photography as “playful and sinister,” a look that results from the interplay between the photographs’ expressionless character and the “elusive narrative” they

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, Derek Balieau’s “Fidgeting with the scene of the crime,” which uses Rugoff’s work as a starting point.



convey (2006, 1). The word sinister, Slotkin points out, “can refer to moral evil or the aesthetic conventions associated with it” (1997, 9). According to the scholar, while there is what he denominates “normative aesthetic,” which centers its ideals on “culturally sanctioned conceptions of beauty and virtue,” there is also a “sinister aesthetic,” which is a “set of poetic conventions that generates pleasure by representing things we are supposed to dislike” (2017, 9). On the contrary, if such representations do not trigger pleasure in the reader or viewer, they appear ugly (9). The artworks that employ the sinister, Slotkin argues, must, by definition, violate the normative and also simultaneously rely on it. In other words, these works must combine elements of beauty or good and evilness. He states that enjoying these works requires “audiences to balance opposing sensibilities, emotions, and systems of value,” that is, to negotiate their relationships with a morally questionable issue and their enjoyment of its representation (12).

Both Rugoff and Campany agree that forensic aesthetics is entangled with evilness and the sinister. The relationship between evilness, the sinister, uncanniness, and the affects they trigger—fear, anxiety, enjoyment—suggests that forensic aesthetics is already associated with concrete affective responses, and, consequently, people might expect a specific experience when encountering these artworks. When taking Rugoff and Campany as the starting point, then, it follows that the spectators relate to forensic aesthetics through common sense as the viewers might associate experiencing certain degree of fear and anxiety to such expressions. When this argument is considered next to Deleuze’s theory of the encountered sign, there seems to be nothing intrinsic to forensic aesthetics that leads to critical thinking. Nevertheless, Rugoff argues that forensic art might instigate reflexivity or interrogation of the viewers’ assumptions—e.g. about the legitimacy of war— as the artwork’s dual quality as an ordinary object and incarnation of evil triggers the spectator’s curiosity, engaging her in the event’s mental reconstruction. According to the curator, then, in experiencing curiosity for the object’s nature, the spectator might question her prejudices about the events or ideas that are alluded to (1997, 73).

Rugoff’s argument comes close to Deleuze’s theory about the workings of a sign, as the curator suggests that the discrepancy between the object’s ordinary and evil characters might trigger curiosity and reflexivity in the spectator. Nevertheless, these theorizations are not fully applicable to this thesis’ cases studies because, although these texts shed light on forensic aesthetics’ structural and aesthetic characteristics, they do not necessarily address politically engaged works. For instance, even though Rugoff’s argument pertains to violence, it mainly refers to violence towards the idea of art. Briefly, he discusses allusions to violence as an expression of social activism. Explicitly, Rugoff discusses Chris Burden’s famous work *Shoot*, a performance in which the artist had himself shot in the arm and that, according to the curator, invites a reflection about the US right to sustain Vietnam’s war, when considered next to its historical context (1997, 68). The almost absent attention to socially engaged artworks in the work of these curators is due to the fact that they concentrate on characterizing a way of approaching post-1960s American and European art, pointing to “a social gaze, embodied in these artworks” (Rugoff 1997, 62), without considering forensic aesthetics a response to actual violence. Consequently, they do not account for the artists’

response to atrocity or the spectator's experience, for instance, theorizing the role of pity and sympathy in the reception of these pieces.

In sum, the authors discussed above all describe forensic aesthetics as evoking an event's aftermath in a dispassionate or disenchanted way through objects or images defined by their ordinary character and an absent or elusive meaning. This duality might give them an uncanny or evil quality. Consequently, encountering these objects or images might trigger curiosity and some degree of fear and anxiety, which may be pleasurable, though, or on the contrary, the work could be perceived as ugly. This perspective offers two insights relevant for this research: first, forensic aesthetics represents violence indirectly by evoking something absent or unseen through its traces; and second, the artwork's uncanny and elusive character triggers curiosity, anxiety, or fear. According to Rugoff, these affective responses might open the space for a consideration of the biases and conventions about violence.

However, the affects that Rugoff and Company relate to forensic aesthetics are not the same as those Bolstansky associates with looking at images of human suffering, such as pity and sympathy, which could also be at play when looking at an artwork related to actual events of human suffering instead of fictional ones (such as Edward Kienholz's mentioned above). Interestingly, then, in the case of looking at an artwork related to forensic aesthetics that refers to real violent events, in addition to pity and sympathy, the spectator might also experience fear and anxiety—which do not allow a relationship of distance between the spectator and what the image depicts. As explained before through the example of Dennis Del Favero's photographic series *Parting Embrace* (1997), experiencing these contradictory affects might further set the spectator into an inquiry mode.

#### FORENSIC AESTHETICS AS A CULTURAL RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

Other scholars explicitly frame forensic aesthetics as a cultural response to violence. For example, literary studies scholar Stephen Tatum, inspired by Rugoff, also relates the "forensic aesthetics paradigm" in 1990s Western North American culture to evidence and aftermath but adds that it is an aesthetics "centered on human subjects living in the *aftermath of loss*," in which material traces mediate the encounter with "the missing" (2006, 127-128). Accordingly, in contrast to Rugoff's theorization, for Tatum, forensic aesthetics is structured by the felt absence created by death or the pain of loss experienced or explored by the artist and not by the spectator's speculative attitude. Besides, Tatum argues that forensic aesthetics materializes through specific tropes: "haunted topographies of ruin or contamination"—corpses, cemeteries, and toxic wastelands—; material artifacts or "found" evidence; and visual surveillance (131-132). Here, the "surplus pleasure" results not from sinister impressions but from building narratives that give voice to the dead or the missing. Under this logic, then, forensic aesthetics is both about pain and felt loss, as much as about "*the abiding human dream of justice*" (129).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Tatum argues that forensic aesthetics' preoccupation with bodies, places haunted by violence, and visual surveillance, responds to globalization's "uprooting of human subjects from a place," the homogenization of

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<sup>20</sup> Emphasis on the original

space, and the hegemony of the scopic regime in “postmodern societies of the spectacle” (132). At a more general level, Tatum argues, forensic aesthetics reflects the anxiety and fears of the so-called trauma or wound culture, defined by violence, wars, and terrorism (132). Next to the expanded concept of violence, these considerations suggest that forensic aesthetics respond to subjective and systemic violence, specifically to the anxieties resulting from migration and space transformation. Differently put, it responds to violence as a force that changes people’s lives. Forensic aesthetics, then, appears as an aesthetic device that deals with the negative affects resulting from this form of apparently invisible violence and its visible manifestations as subjective violence.

Tatum's characterization of forensic aesthetics as a cultural response to systemic violence is relatable to the artworks addressed in this thesis and their socio-historical conditions, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Nevertheless, since Tatum focuses on literary and cinematic fiction, like Rugoff and Company, he does not theorize how real evidence participates in the mediation and reception of actual violent events. As Penfold-Mounce argues, fiction offers a space where contact with death and crime is acceptable and perhaps even pleasurable. However, actual images of corpses and violent events remain shocking and discomfiting (2016, 14). Besides, as this type of artworks deals with the Other’s suffering, feelings like empathy and pity might, as Boltanski argues, play a role in the aesthetic experience.

Art based on materials related to actual violent circumstances is in an in-between position, which Domínguez Galbraith describes as an asymptotic relationship with the real object (2019, 93). While the object's aesthetic treatment and circulation in an artistic context emphasize its contemplative function, Scott Bray notes that its connection with actual events makes it “especially alluring” (2017, 145). It raises, then, ethical concerns that influence the work's reception. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, it forces the references to ruin, violence, and death out of the realm of allegorical representation and makes them enter into the space of evidence and demand for justice (Domínguez Galbraith 2019, 93).

## COUNTER-FORENSICS

Many recent approaches to forensic aesthetics take inspiration not from a curatorial perspective but from Eyal Weizman's work in human rights advocacy. Consequently, they relate the concept with politically engaged artworks (Isanović 2017; Alvarez and Zaiontz 2018; Yepes 2018; Stankievich 2019). By focusing on the analysis of architectural remains, Weizman's project seeks to rethink forensics as a critical practice with a political potential which the scholar locates in its rhetoric origins:

*Forensis* is Latin for “pertaining to the forum” and is the origin of the term forensics. The Roman forum to which forensics pertained was a multidimensional space of politics, law, and economy, but the word has since undergone a strong linguistic drift: the forum gradually came to refer exclusively to the court of law, and forensics to the use of medicine and science within it. This telescoping of the term meant that a critical dimension of the practice of forensics was lost in the process of its modernization (Weizman 2014, 9).

A central component of Weizman's project is "counter-forensics," a term he derives from *forensis* and which designates a practice that inverts the forensic gaze to investigate state and corporative violence, and that critically reflects on forensic research and the practices of production of evidence (2014, 9-12).

To rethink forensics, Weizman builds on the word's rhetorical sense, which is "the practice and skill of making an argument by using objects before a professional, political or legal gathering" (Weizman 2010, 11). In other words, forensics is a form of rhetoric that does not focus on human speech but the object's speech (11). Naturally, things cannot speak by themselves; they require a human mediator. Consequently, forensics is not only a technique of analysis but also a contemporary form of *prosopopoeia* —a rhetorical figure that consists of speaking on behalf of non-living things or absent persons (Hasian 2016, 13-14)— in which the interpreter animates objects by transforming them into code and image (Weizman 2014, 10). Interpreters are not necessarily subjects but also technological devices. For its part, the forum —traditionally a physical place—emerges as a "composite apparatus" constructed by the relationship between the object, the interpreter, and the audience. Consequently, forums expand into a broader spectrum of media forms (Weizman 2014, 10), such as websites or art exhibition spaces.

Producing evidence involves finding ways to render a specific object's features sensible and articulate them into a convincing narrative. As Weizman points out, these choices are aesthetic: "The making of facts depends on a delicate aesthetic balance" (Keenan and Weizman 2012, 24). Forensics, then, is necessarily an aesthetic practice. Weizman defines forensic aesthetics as both the understanding of matter as a sensor —as a device responding and registering physical forces— and "the techniques and technologies by which things are interpreted, presented, and mediated in the forum, that is, the modes and processes by which matter becomes a political agent" (Weizman 2014, 15). These include "the techniques and technologies of demonstration, rhetoric, and performance, gestures, narratives and dramatization, image enhancement and projection" used to give an image persuasive power (Weizman 2017, 96). Forensic aesthetics, then, does not merely refer to the display of material traces but also to the understanding of matter as an agent and, most importantly, how mediators transform it into persuasive evidence. In this way, the concept challenges the assumption that forensics is necessarily objective.

Weizman locates the origins of counter-forensics in human rights discourse and the so-called witness culture. It departs from the last in that pursuing objectivity shifts attention from the subject's testimony to the object's testimony (Weizman 2010, 10). Human rights emerged after the second world war as a tool for contesting the oppression of totalitarian states by giving legal agency to subjects and private organizations. Since human rights discourse privileges individuals over states, Hispanist Fernando Rosenberg argues that it relates to the neoliberal ethos (2016, 1).<sup>21</sup> As he explains, this is not to say that human rights do not possess any emancipatory power, nor that neoliberal economics does not ignore fundamental rights, but that both demonstrate a transformation in the ideals of this time: a turn towards the individual (1). Considering that forensic aesthetics, as understood by

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<sup>21</sup> See chapter two.

Weizman, emerges from human rights discourse, it follows that it is as an aesthetic form of the neoliberal era that assumes that the procurement of justice is not an exclusive attribution of the state but that individuals have the capacity and the responsibility to seek justice.

In Latin America, the issue of human rights gained momentum during the 1980s and the 1990s, at the twilight of the military dictatorships and the ascent of late capitalism and globalization (Rosenberg 2016, 1). The exhumation and identification of missing people's bodies by self-organized groups of forensic anthropologists marked the starting point of the forensic turn in politics and aesthetics (Domínguez Galbraith 2019, 93).<sup>22</sup> As Domínguez Galbraith points out, it is at this juncture during the transnational post-dictatorial era and the transition towards neoliberalism and globalization that forensic aesthetics penetrated artistic practices within the region as artists began to produce politically engaged works that introduced material evidence into the museum (2019, 92).<sup>23</sup>

#### ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND COUNTER FORENSICS

As discussed before, Weizman's work has inspired research projects focused on artworks that, unlike Rugoff's case studies, explicitly intend to intervene in the public debate about events of political violence. Correspondingly, in contrast to scholars who, like Scott Bray (2014, 76), define forensic aesthetics as the display of material evidence as art, these investigations stress that it is more than that: it involves engaging with techniques and processes of forensic analysis to produce artworks aimed at contesting power structures and the hegemonic discourses about violence.<sup>24</sup>

These artworks represent violent events through the indexicality of materials and objects. Indexicality is a property of indices, a category of signs proposed by Charles S. Peirce as part of his theory of the signs. In contrast to the other two categories —symbols and icons, which, respectively, center on resemblance and conventionality— indices have a physical or existential connection with their object or signified (Peirce 1982, 56). Correspondingly, material indices can be understood as objects or images “considered representational in their connection to the crime, even if abstract or divorced from crime's facts” (Scott Bray 2014, 76). In Rugoff's terms, these are ordinary

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the the government of Chihuahua, Mexico, donated shovels to self-organized groups seeking missing people. The smiles on their faces is telling of how they have embraced the responsibility of undertaking a task that should be the state's responsibility (Redacción Sinemabargo 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Although Domínguez Galbraith does not illustrate his claim with specific artworks, it is possible to name as example *Señores, niñas y niños* (Sirs, girls and boys) (1987) by the Chilean artist Claudio Bertoni. The work consists of more than a thousand shoes the artists compiled at the beaches of Con-Cón.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the curator Charles Stankieveh argues that it is an art that “either uses forensic strategies or engages in a commentary on forensic processes” to contest power structures or the *status quo* (2019, 53). Similarly, Paul Lowe notes that the photographers related to the “forensic turn,” as Giles Pares and Gary Night, are informed by their photojournalistic experiences in former Yugoslavia and Bosnia and their subsequent efforts to align to human rights groups in Kosovo (2018, 76). Their goal is to “challenge the state monopoly on the apparatus of evidence gathering” through their series of artless photographs of material evidence (76). Likewise, in analyzing the work of one Bosnian and two Latin American artists, Alvarez and Zaiontz define “feminist performance forensics” as performance installations that operate as evidence to hold the governments liable, produced through three counter-forensic investigation processes: “the collection of evidence, the identification of victims, and the examination of the trauma inflicted” (2018, 285-289). This artistic practice, they argue, participates in the critical work that forensic anthropology and community-led efforts make to produce evidence independent of the state's jurisdiction with the recognition “that placing redressive action solely in the hands of state institutions risks perpetuating state hegemonic power” (285-289).

things that also represent actions considered wrong or evil. A frequent strategy, then, is appropriating found objects, photographs, and human body parts related to violent events (Yepes 2018, 66-74). Correspondingly, Domínguez Galbraith argues, forensic aesthetics is an aesthetic mode situated between art, science, and law, which encompasses visual, textual, or performative cultural expressions concerning crime scenes, police evidence, bones, human remains, and the places where they could be found, declassified archives, and testimonial documentation about truth and justice in cases of state crimes (2019, 93).

Notably, most objects and places mentioned above relate to the tropes Tatum characterized —found evidence, ruined landscapes, and visual surveillance— which suggests that forensic aesthetics can be linked to specific tropes. These tropes, as Tatum suggests, are related to the ideas of the aftermath and loss. An event's aftermath becomes sensible through indices or signs which indicate an absent object or a past action. Interestingly, underlining the relevance of indexicality, Yepes defines forensic aesthetics as indexical aesthetics at the service of testimony about events or circumstances that demand collective acknowledgment (2018, 64). The scholar transfers Weizman's perspective to art through Peirce's conceptualization of indexical signs (64). As he notes, Peirce identifies two types of indices: direct and indirect. In a direct index, the object is the sign's cause (a footprint as a sign of a step), which is akin to what Weizman calls "non-sensuous perception": the materiality's physical transformation after registering or "sensing" the forces around it (2017, 94). On the other hand, in an indirect index, another sign mediates causality (as in a footprint photograph), which is comparable to forensic mediation techniques that make an object into evidence. What is especially relevant for this research is that, following Peirce, Yepes argues that both direct and indirect indices not only refer to the object they represent; they also affect the viewer's body, triggering sensations and emotions (2018, 96). In other words, indices are capable of performing affective operations. Together, these perspectives suggest that forensic aesthetics is entangled with ideas about loss and the aftermath of a denied or obscured event that must be acknowledged, reflecting the human rights logic. The aftermath of these events is perceivable through material indices, the semiotic and affective dimensions of which construct the artwork's meaning.

#### *FORENSIC ART: FROM ALLEGORY TO THE FORCE OF PROSOPOPEIA*

Dominguez Galbraith argues with Weizman that constructing the object as evidence involves a displacement from allegory to prosopopoeia (2019, 94). In other words, the thing is at the limit between embodying metaphor —an allegory— and performing as an agent that the artist makes speak about an event or lend presence to victims who were erased or forgotten by power structures —a prosopopoeia. Instead of being the symbol of an abstract concept, then, some of these works represent concrete missing subjects or populations, the encounter with whom, as Tatum notes, is mediated by material traces (2006, 127-128). As discussed above, the object speaks through its indexicality, which is at the center of its representational dimension and affective operations.

Nevertheless, as Weizman argues, the object cannot speak alone. To be interpreted as evidence, the interpreter must mediate it. Forensic techniques intensify the sensibility to space, matter, and image, devising "new

forms of narration in the articulation of truth claims” (Weizman 2017, 94). Correspondingly, the artistic mediation techniques —what Alvarez and Zaiontz denominate “practices of forensic persuasion” (2018, 286)— are also intended to intensify the sensibility towards the index’s affective operations. These techniques might involve, among multiple procedures, presenting the object or material in specific ways, using technological devices, and placing it within a semiotic context that connects it to the referred events —such as the work’s title, the curatorial text, and the artistic interventions (Yepes 2018, 66). The resulting artwork does not reproduce actions or events. Instead, as Yepes argues, violence is captured as “forces.” Indices, he explains, allow the spectator to feel the effects of violence as intensity or sensation and not only approach violence as an idea or a concept (2019, 69). Yepes’ observation resonates with the argument proposed by this thesis before: that forensic aesthetics makes the spectator feel violence as what Deleuze calls forces, intensities, or affects. As affects arise and are felt in the moment, this experience bridges the distance to the violent circumstances, which is an unusual form of relating to them. The mismatch with the usual ways of experiencing distant violence creates sensations that puzzle the spectator and urge her to think.

The exhibition space operates as an alternative forum to make public the evidence produced by the artist (Alvarez and Zaiontz 2019, 290). Besides, in contrast to Rugoff’s argument, the spectator plays a witness instead of a detective (Lowe 2018, 76; Alvarez and Zaiontz 2019, 290). Witnessing is associated with a modality of viewing related to trauma reception (Best 2008, 38). Accordingly, as a witness, the spectator acknowledges the evidence and, in turn, becomes responsible for its transmission (Alvarez and Zaiontz 2019, 290). The distinction between the spectator as a witness and the spectator as a detective suggests that the artworks discussed by Alvarez and Zaiontz have a less elusive or mysterious narrative than the ones described by Rugoff and are closer to political denunciation than to an aesthetic exploration. Correspondingly, the objective of these artworks goes beyond art’s representational function as they aim to intervene in the social context. Alvarez and Zaiontz argue that the bodies of evidence expose the sociopolitical structures that sustain violence and make visible those rendered invisible by the state (2018, 286-287). In this way, the work of art redirects a space of privilege —the privilege of the art gallery or the art fair— to shelter the evidence necessary to hold the government accountable (288). Likewise, Domínguez Galbraith suggests that these bodies of evidence put pressure on states. Consequently, according to the scholar, through its pass from allegory to prosopopeia, forensic aesthetics exceeds the tasks of memorialization and mourning and expands into the realm of confrontation (2019, 95). In addition, as Yepes argues, the works of art create a connection between the spectator and the victims of violence, contributing in this way to the de-normalization of violence by transforming apathy into compromise (2019, 79).

## 1.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the thesis’s theoretical framework, which connects theories about violence, art’s affective operations, and forensic aesthetics. By bringing together these ideas, the chapter sought to theorize how forensic aesthetics can trigger critical thinking about the workings of violence, considering that they are not easy to

perceive, as discussed in the first section. Objective forms of violence, such as systemic and cultural violence, constitute the forces constructing and sustaining visible forms of violence, like murders and civil unrest. While people can feel these forms of violence as forces oppressing them and shaping many aspects of their lives, they cannot easily understand them. Comprehending how visible acts of aggression emerge demands reflecting on the interactions between these different forms of violence. An ethical representation of a conflict should invite such consideration instead of making violence a spectacle or keeping the spectator's understanding at a surface level. Affect theory offers a valuable tool to approach this issue, as it opens the space to grasp how an artwork can invite deep thought through the consideration of the relationship between the artwork's affective operations, sensation, and critical thinking.

Writing from an affect-based approach, Jill Bennett argues that art can make the spectator engage in critical thinking through feeling. Differently put, she posits that art that uses affect as its operative element can contribute to understanding something that cannot be represented as it can only be felt (such as Trauma) by putting the spectator in contact with it as a force. She explains that the use of affect as art's operative element implies using embodied perception, a concept that suggests that perception is not only visual but relies on the subject's physical capacities, sensations, emotions, and relationship with the surroundings. Consequently, capitalizing on embodied perception means shaping the environment and influencing the spectators' sensations and emotions to make them perceive things differently. Nonetheless, as van Alphen notes, art's "affective operations" are relational, which means that not all subjects are affected in the same way by a particular work of art. Still, even though they are relational, art's affective operations are strongly influenced by the artwork's structure, such as its physical features and other devices, like estrangement and identification with the characters. Through these characteristics, art triggers affective experiences that take part in the artwork's interpretation.

Importantly, Bennett stresses that even if a work of art can affect the spectator, this does not mean it agitates or sets the spectator into an inquiry mode. For an artwork to catalyze thought, it must operate as an encountered sign as defined by Gilles Deleuze; that is, it must disorder human faculties by arousing sensations that cannot be understood through cognition. This might involve triggering feelings that common sense does not relate to the affecting image or conflicting with the topic at stake. By arousing this type of affect—or sign—art can reveal a knowledge that can only be known through the body.

Regarding violence-related artistic expressions, Bennett's argument suggests that the artworks that trouble common sense make the spectator reflect. Such works of art might produce an experience that does not meet the spectator's expectations about the representation of conflicts; instead, they trigger sensations that evoke the experience of violence as a force instead of mimetically representing the events. These sensations riddle the spectators, as they cannot be explained through conventional associations (as with Proust's famous madeleine). As a result, the spectator might feel forced to reflect on the experience to understand it. Although the work does not explicitly indicate what to think, its structure affects the person's cognition, leading her somewhere. In other words,



the work of art triggers sensations and bodily movements or gestures in the spectator that influence the interpretation she makes of the piece.

Building on Bennett, this thesis argues that, through their affective operations, artworks related to forensic aesthetics can invite the spectator to reflect on the unapparent aspects of violence, contributing to the understanding of the lived experience of violence. In addition to stressing the relevance of embodied cognition, Bennett describes two mechanisms through which art registers affect and, consequently, triggers affective responses in the spectator: through the imitation or affective contagion of a body undergoing sensation and through embodied imagination after engaging with inanimate objects or materials. Of these mechanisms, the second is the most relevant for addressing forensic aesthetics' affective operations, as it implies that people can experience affective responses after engaging with inanimate objects.

In the terrain of artistic practices, forensic aesthetics has traditionally referred to artworks that use forensic materials or evoke forensic imagery. Nonetheless, during the past decade, the concept gained academic purchase outside the art realm, especially within the field of human rights advocacy. Eyal Weizman's work on forensic architecture has been highly influential. It fostered the concept's expansion from describing artworks related to the idea of the trace and the aftermath to describing politically engaged art pieces that use diverse mediation techniques to interpret and present materiality as evidence to contest structural violence. When related to Bennett's research, Weizman's ideas suggest that artists exploit embodied perception through mediation techniques, magnifying the object's affective operations to which the spectator relates through physical imagination. Differently put, forensic aesthetics exposes the spectator to things and materials to which she can connect through physical imagination by enhancing their affective operations through mediation techniques that engage the subject's embodied perception. The artist operates as the object's interpreter and mediator. She uses technological devices or artistic methods to enhance the material's affective potential and capacity to function as evidence of a certain counter-narrative. The exhibition space, then, functions as a forum to display such evidence, where the artist hails the spectators as witnesses to whom materiality speaks, as it were, through its affective operations.

Within the context of this research, it is essential to emphasize that forensic aesthetics is often connected to specific affective responses because of its relation to violence's aftermath, evilness, and the sinister. Consequently, when encountering one of these artworks, people might expect to experience fear and some degree of enjoyment. Nonetheless, as many artworks —such as this thesis' case studies— address actual violent circumstances, the spectator might instead expect to experience feelings usually related to witnessing the Other's suffering, like pity and sympathy, which mark a hierarchy and imply a relationship of distance with the sufferer. Notably, this thesis contends, it is also possible that the artwork shapes the spectator's embodied perception through its structure. In this way, the work can make her feel violence as a force that exerts its power over her body, breaking the relationship that people usually keep with distant suffering. Feeling this complex of emotions after

engaging with ordinary objects might riddle the spectator, setting her into an inquiry mode about the referred events.

In sum, forensic aesthetics-related art produces bodies of evidence that expose power structures by making the spectator feel the forces mobilizing violence through indices or traces of unseen events. The works make the spectator feel those forces as intensity by exploiting embodied perception. Correspondingly, violence cannot be seen but only felt. These affective experiences are not triggered by identification but by the encounter of an inanimate object through a process akin to embodied imagination. The artworks, then, avoid the traps of horror and empathy for the victims and lead to an experience that puzzles the viewer, as the sensations do not match the commonsensical knowledge about encountering violence. In this way, forensic art produces a different understanding of violent circumstances that can only be revealed to the body by creating such a disjunction between sensation and cognition.



## Chapter 2. On Violence and Artistic Practices in the Post-NAFTA Era

### Introduction

This chapter describes the historical and art-historical context of the case studies analyzed in this thesis. As discussed in the introduction, these artworks were produced under the temporal framework of the so-called “war on drugs” and responded to the crisis of violence it unchained. The war initiated by former president Felipe Calderón in 2006 is usually the starting point of the official narrative used to explain Mexico's ongoing violence crisis (Halvey 2018, 1; Emmelhainz 2016, 159). The hegemonic discourse sustains that the military intervention aimed to control the production and distribution of narcotics and suffocate criminal organizations. Most research, nonetheless, rejects the narrative that presents the conflict as a single consequence of drug smuggling and the state's efforts to control it (Díaz Tovar and Ovalle 2017, 2). Instead, scholars assert that the origin of this crisis is systemic violence, as it results from late-capitalism —also called neoliberalism— and globalization (del Sarto 2012, 83; Calveiro 2010, 99; Valencia 2016, 51; Emmelhainz 2016, 164). Accordingly, the war on drugs is one of the multiple consequences of the liberalization of the Mexican economy. Importantly, this transformation is not recent and did not happen suddenly: it has been crystalizing slowly since the late 1970s and has impacted every aspect of social life, including artistic practices.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first elaborates on the historical circumstances that led to the war on drugs, building on diverse literature formulated within political science (Calveiro 2010), sociology (Reguillo 2015), and critical theory (Emmelhainz 2016) that, like the theories about violence discussed in the first chapter, take a structural approach. The second part addresses artistic representations of violence. Although there are multiple cultural products related to narcoviolence and the war on drugs, the chapter's final section concentrates on visual artistic practices, omitting other expressions such as memory sites and documentary works.

## 2.1 Historical Context: Violence and Mexican Neoliberal transformation

### 2.1.1 Neoliberalism: Economic System and Structure of Feeling

The geographer David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an economic and political regime that places the market and capital interests at the center of economic and political life (2005, 2). Within neoliberalism, the state's role is to safeguard that markets work vigorously by implementing policies such as lowering trade barriers, eliminating the mechanisms to control the prices of goods and services, promoting state-owned companies' privatization, and reducing public expenditure (2). In other words, under neoliberal regimes, welfare social programs are reduced to allow the penetration of the private sector. Consequently, the subject is responsible for her own well-being (2005, 2). More importantly, the state's economy is at private actors' service instead of serving the public interest.

For Harvey, neoliberalism's influence extends beyond the economy and penetrates every aspect of social institutions (such as the family, science, and education) and the cultural consciousness (2005, 16). Similarly, Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2018) argues that neoliberalism has come to be understood not only as an economic model but also as a "structure of feeling," a term defined by Raymond Williams as "a particular quality of social experience [...] historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (1977, 131). Accordingly, Sánchez Prado explains that neoliberalism has constituted a new form of subjectivity and citizenship, which embodies cultural values that reflect the market's interest, such as entrepreneurship, creativity, and independence. Consequently, as scholar Abril Trigo notes, neoliberalism has fostered a shift from subjectivities centered on national or political ideologies to subjects structured by desires mobilized by the market (2012, 39). Like Sánchez Prado, cultural critic Irmgard Emmelhainz has described this shift as a new sensibility and common sense structured by individualism, utilitarianism, and developmentalism (2016, 19). In other words, the ethics of the neoliberal subject is based on self-profit and a modern notion of development that influences her relationship to the community and nature. Therefore, the ethos of neoliberalism animates social relations and cultural forms, such as human rights and forensic aesthetics, which emphasize the subject's capacity to face the state.

### 2.1.2 The Mexican Neoliberal Conversion: From NAFTA to the War on Drugs

After the 1982 economic crisis in Mexico, the International Monetary Fund supported the country with a bailout. However, such financial support came with the pressure to adopt austerity measures and introduce neoliberal economics, which President Carlos Salinas de Gortari consolidated during his administration (1988-1992). Under the promise of development and economic growth, Salinas privatized several state-owned companies, partially dismantled communal land property, and signed the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada —the first of its kind in being signed between a developing economy and economically advanced nations (Emmelhainz 2016, 18). Through this agreement, Mexico joined the globalizing economy.

Far from promoting development, NAFTA brought the deregulation of market and labor rights, employment downfall, and promoted deterritorialization —eroding people’s connection and control over land (Valencia 2014, 131; Emmelhainz 2014, 18). Mexico became a source of cheap labor for transnational corporations, especially at the northern border, where the proliferation of assembly plants —*maquiladoras*—attracted a large migratory flux from impoverished rural areas to border cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez (Valencia 2014, 131; del Sarto 2012, 78). In this way, NAFTA, besides the other neoliberal reforms, promoted the precarization of life. According to Judith Butler, precarity is a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009, ii). In other words, precarity denotes vulnerability to harm of any kind. Unemployment, poverty, and lacking health care produce precarious situations because they threaten people’s psychological and physical integrity. For example, a person without a sufficient income is more exposed to injury and death than someone with stable employment because of the difficulty of affording food or medical services and their quality. The precarization of life under NAFTA shows how the political and economic systems exert violence over the population, suggesting that precarization is an expression of systemic violence.

Increasing poverty and unemployment supported the ongoing installment of illegal economies — especially drug trafficking— among rural and low-class populations (Valencia 2014, 131; del Sarto 2012, 76; Franco 2013, 215–2016).<sup>25</sup> As Serrano observes, thousands of unemployed people became the working force of an expanding drug market —or the *narco*— energized by the United States cocaine demand. She argues that this development resulted in a shift from a state-controlled to a private-owned narcotic business, which increased competition, and consequently, violence thresholds (2007, 271).

Besides the neoliberal reforms, Salinas also introduced the structural changes that allowed the so-called democratic transition in 2000, ending a seventy-year-long single-party ruling period. The end of the so-called soft dictatorship —*dictablanda*— was considered another step in modernization. However, the political transformation further destabilized long-held relationships between the state and criminal organizations (Serrano 2007, 267). Between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the combined effect of destabilization and the growing drug market led to violence in different states —like Michoacán and Sinaloa— and the border region. During the same period, the epidemic of femicides in Ciudad Juarez reached the media. These murders can be considered one of the first visible manifestations of the violence crisis that the media and the state characterized as the war on drugs.

When Calderón arrived in power in 2006, he prioritized the combat against drug smuggling. As in Colombia, the United States joined forces with the Mexican government to set a military campaign against drug traffickers (Paley 2015, 1). However, far from eliminating drug smuggling, it resulted in civilians’ slaughter, clashes between proliferating criminal groups, and multiple human rights violations committed by law enforcement agents,

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the installment of the neoliberal regime is not the starting point of a drug-related economy in Mexico. For a historical analysis of how the Mexican state has dealt with drug trafficking see Serrano (2007).

all perpetuated with spectacular cruelty. In other words, in these acts of subjective violence, there is “deliberate intention to hurt and damage another” (Franco 1, 2013), which reveals a displacement from “utilitarian” to “expressive violence”: more than just killing, the purpose is to affirm an absolute power (Reguillo 2011). This form of extreme violence came to be known as *narcoviolencia* (narcoviolence).

While the media often explains narcoviolence as the result of criminal subjects’ natural tendencies towards death and destruction (Halvey 2017, 1), Mexican philosopher Sayak Valencia argues that it is a manifestation of the neoliberal ethos. She uses Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics —a form of sovereignty whose major project is “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembe 2019, 68)— to argue that subjects who are faced with precarity use violence as a strategy to acquire economic and political agency (2010, 16). Under this logic, which she denominates *Gore Capitalism*, bodies are turned into profitable commodities. Valencia borrows the term “gore” from the cinematic genre to refer to the explicit and unjustified bloodshed and dismemberments brought by this non-judicial political order that she frames as a dystopic duplication of the hegemonic economic system in which the administration of death dictates political and economic power (2). Seen from this perspective, narcoviolence emanates from the neoliberal ideology, and, consequently, it is a visible or subjective expression that derives from systemic violence.

The escalation of violence continued during Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration (2012-2018). As with Calderón, the official discourse framed the conflict as the state’s strategy to eradicate narcoviolence and drug trafficking. This narrative served the purpose of justifying the country’s militarization while denying its relationship with structural violence (Emmelhainz 2016, 162). Research in political economy points out that more than a military intervention on health and security concerns, the war on drugs is a rhetorical construction intended to protect economic interests and repress dissent from neoliberal policies (Mercille 2014, 1637). In this way, the war covered up diverse projects, such as the annihilation of communities and activists defending areas rich in natural resources to facilitate the penetration of international corporations (Paley 2015, 19; Emmelhainz 2016, 36). The political theorist Pilar Calveiro takes this argument further and pairs the war against drugs with the fight against terror and suggests that, more than wars, both are forms of state violence targeted against the dissident and the excluded that serve the economic and political interests of private corporations at the cost of the state resources (2010, 109).<sup>26</sup> She supports her argument on the basis of the multiple structural reforms introduced by Peña Nieto that further allowed privatizing public resources —including energy, telecommunications, and education— and increasing state surveillance and repression. As a rhetorical construction that legitimates structural violence and subjective violence, the war’s discourse constitutes a form of cultural violence. Because, as exposed above, the war on drugs creates a discursive framework that produces death on a large scale by constructing disposable subjects, it appears as a “necropolitical” project moved by the hegemonic economic and political orders (Emmelhainz 2016, 162).

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<sup>26</sup> Calveiro’s argument is further explored in chapter four.

Accordingly, as these arguments suggest, narcoviolence and the war on drugs might appear as antagonist figures: like syndrome and its cure. However, they are both mobilized by objective violence as the logic of the hegemonic order energizes them. Seen from this perspective, it becomes evident that necropolitics is inherent to neoliberal ideology and the war on drugs operates as one of its tools targeted against those deemed worthless.

### 2.1.3 Systemic Violence and Structure of Feeling in Mexico During the War on Drugs

In recent years, there has been growing academic interest in the emotional dimension of violence in Latin America.<sup>27</sup> Following this effort, diverse research projects have explored the emotions and feelings brought about by the war on drugs and the Mexican experience after NAFTA. Scholars agree that the violence crisis gave rise to a complex of negative emotions and feelings. For example, Reguillo argues that Mexico is a “dysphoric country,” experiencing an unpleasant emotional state that feeds from different moods, especially sadness, fear, and hopelessness. These moods, she argues, emerge from the horror produced by the death toll. Horror leads to fear of dying, which, in turn, brings sadness and anxiety about the lack of control over violence (Reguillo 2015, 69). According to Emmelhainz, the Mexican state uses horror to govern through suffering, in this way paralyzing and fragmenting the population. Consequently, the sense of collectivity is being destroyed and substituted by fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability (2016, 146). As Žižek argues, systemic violence encompasses the subtlest forms of coercion that enable exploitation and repression, including the threat of violence (2007, 8). Correspondingly, spreading terror and anxiety are forms of systemic violence, which, as will be discussed in the following chapters, this thesis’s case studies address.

Interestingly, amid this fear, anxiety, social indifference, and the political apathy often associated with the neoliberal ethos (Trigo 2012, 51), an atmosphere of discontent emerged, especially after the disappearance of forty-three students from a rural school in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero in September of 2014 (Reguillo 2015, 69; Noble 2018, 429).<sup>28</sup> In this social shift, the poet Juan Villoro saw the emergence of an “emotional republic,” referring to the empathy and shared indignation impregnating the national and international community (quoted in Noble 2018, 424). Such discontent became visible through multiple public protests, artistic displays, and political activism to make the victims visible —both dead and alive— denouncing criminal acts and introducing alternative versions to the official discourse (Emmelhainz 2016, 139–56). The paradoxical combination of the depressing affects described by Reguillo and Emmelhainz and the empathy and rage can be interpreted as a structure of feeling: an emergent cultural mood that reflects the quality of the group’s experience. Correspondingly, this thesis suggests, the artworks analyzed in this project result from this structure of feeling in which a dysphoric state coexists with a wave of political activism moved by empathy and indignation.

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Moraña and Sánchez-Prado (2012); Fotta et al. (2016).

<sup>28</sup> The events of Ayotzinapa are discussed in chapter three.

## 2.2 Post-NAFTA era Mexican Art and the Representation of Violence

Mexican art also underwent significant style, content, circulation, and sponsorship transformations during the neoliberal transition.<sup>29</sup> From the end of the Mexican revolution (1910) until the 1990s, the government was practically the only art's promotor. As a result, despite the efforts of different generations of artists to get out of the frame of muralism —the official artistic style— for several decades, mainstream art remained centered on nationalist discourses and relatively closed to external influences (Salazar 2016, 12–16). Nevertheless, among other issues, the economy's opening, the reduction of the state's participation in arts funding, and social unrest of the 1990s catalyzed the penetration of international artistic influences and the private sector's increasing involvement as art's sponsor (Montero 2013, 48). These transformations led to nationalist discourses waning in favor of artistic languages in vogue in international art circuits. Such developments enhanced the international projection of Mexican art through transnational projects, biennials, and art fairs (Salazar 2016, 24), as the wide circulation of the three case studies analyzed by this thesis illustrates.

Post-NAFTA-era art transitioned from the nationalist repertoires of muralism and so-called Neo-mexicanism to the adoption of globalized visual vocabularies through the reintroduction of conceptualism.<sup>30</sup> Neo-conceptual artists —such as Minerva Cuevas, Yoshua Okón, and Teresa Margolles— rejected painting and sculpture in favor of experimental media, like video, installation, and ready-mades (Gallo 2004, 9). Nonetheless, as curator Cuauhtémoc Medina points out, many artists did not use conceptualism to reflect on the artistic object or criticize art's institutionalization but meditated on the social context (2002, 39). For instance, in *Mejor Vida Corporation* (Better Life Corporation, 2000), Minerva Cuevas created a virtual company that falsified and distributed subway tickets, barcodes for lower prices, and student IDs, among other products, aimed at alleviating some economic pressure after the 1994 financial crisis.<sup>31</sup> For Medina, that time's art reflects the sense of a failed modernity and the anxiety about the sociopolitical and economic turmoil in the wake of neoliberal globalization (2002, 40). Such concerns are visible in some artworks that addressed spreading precarity —e.g., Cuevas' work discussed before— and the threat of violence —e.g., Francis Alÿs' *Reenactment* (2000), a performance in which the artist walked through Mexico City's streets with a gun (Gallo 2004, 9). Importantly, although scholarship has not yet analyzed these artworks in relation to violence, they can be interpreted as artistic responses to the pressures of systemic violence. For art historian Rubén Gallo, these works exemplify what Hal Foster has called “the return of the real” as they explore and comment on the country's actual material circumstances (2004,15). Medina denominates this

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<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of 1990s art situated against the historical context of its production, see Medina (2002), Gallo (2004) and Emmelhainz (2016a). For an extended analysis on how neoliberalism impacted artistic practices see, Salazar (2016), Emmelhainz (2016), and Carroll (2017).

<sup>30</sup> Neomexicanism is an artistic movement that emerged during the 1980s that playfully reinterprets the nationalist iconography, using it to explore issues of identity and sexuality. Conceptualism, on the other hand, entered Mexican art during the 1970s through the work of multiple artistic collectives, known as *Los Grupos*. In contrast to mainstream conceptualism, Mexican artists were mainly concerned with art's distribution, and resisting the state's censorship (Salazar 2016, 50).

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed description of the work see <https://museumarteutil.net/projects/mejor-vida-corp/>



“exploration/exploitation” of the effects of Mexican modernization through international art languages the “aesthetics of the modernized” (2002, 40). This artistic sensibility rooted in actual bodies and sites expressed through conceptual art has continued to be present in much of Mexican art until today and, as will become evident later, is one of the critical components of forensic aesthetics. In other words, Mexican forensic aesthetics is closely related to 1990s conceptual artworks interested in social trauma left by systemic violence, an argument which comes close to Rugoff’s observation about forensic aesthetics in North American art.

### 2.2.1 The War on Drugs and Representations of the Disappeared and the Broken Body

While in much of the 1990s and early 2000s, Mexican art was concerned with Mexico’s “peripheralness” and diverse manifestations of systemic violence —labor precarity, the threat of violence, and corruption—, the war against drugs fostered an artistic development centered on direct or subjective violence, most of which portrays or emulates the condition of the victims.<sup>32</sup> For many years, Teresa Margolles and the art collective SEMEFO were the most prominent examples of a small-scale trend of portraying or using corpses in artmaking. Other examples of this trend —although substantially less studied— are Martha Pacheco’s (Ernerich n.d.) and Alejandro Montoya’s artistic corpus.<sup>33</sup> As narcoviolence became more evident and spectacular in the early 2000s, references to corpses and violent death became more common in artistic practices (Perrée 2013). Many of these works continued following the conceptualist vein.

Interestingly, not only artists responded in artistic ways to narcoviolence. As art historian Iván Ruíz observes, a “new documentary turn” in photojournalism produced images of corpses characterized by their great beauty in contrast to the spectacularism of yellow journalism and mainstream media (Ruíz 2018, 223). In these pictures, the photographer presents the corpse in “contemplative photographic scenes,” emphasizing characteristics like the light and the rarified atmosphere rather than the dead body (223). Some examples are Fernando Brito’s series *Tus Pasos Se Perdieron en el Paisaje* (Your steps got lost in the landscape, 2006) and Guillermo Arias’s *The body of a dead man hangs from a footbridge in the suburbs of Tijuana, northwestern Mexico.*’ *May 8, 2011.*<sup>34</sup>

Performance studies scholar Ileana Diéguez argues that the display of corpses in the public space and the circulation of gruesome images in the media fostered the emergence of iconographies that mirror the traumatic impact of extreme violence (2013, 2). At their core are the corpse and the dismembered or the broken body. These tropes, the scholar notes, sit next to the figure of the disappeared, characteristic of the art concerning the Latin American dirty wars and dictatorial periods’ art (3). For example, Diéguez mentions Gustavo Monroy’s painting *La*

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<sup>32</sup> Some relevant sources on these artistic practices are performance studies scholar Ileana Dieguez’s research on the iconographies of extreme violence (2013; 2016), art historian Elena Rosauero’s book on the representation of political violence in contemporary Latin American visual culture (2017), and Ivan Ruiz’s study of the artistic practices of Mexican photojournalists during the war on drugs (2016, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> See the works *Acuchillado*, 1984; *Cadáver*, 1985; *Apunte post mortem*, 1985; *Doble apunte de un decapitado* (s/f).

<sup>34</sup> Images available in Ruíz (2018, 220).

*Ultima Cena Mexicana* (Mexican Last Supper, 2009), which shows twelve heads beheaded over a table. Other works that could be associated with this iconography are Abraham Cruzvillegas' *El J.J.* (The JJ)—an installation the artist named after a famous drug lord—, which consists of coconuts with hair suspended from the ceiling that allude to beheaded heads, and Lenin Marquez *Paisajes* (Landscapes, 2006), which portraits a corpse laying on a bucolic landscape.<sup>35</sup>

In her book on artistic representations of violence in Latin American art, art historian Elena Rosauero makes a similar observation and notes that these tropes —the disappeared and the dismembered— are represented either explicitly or through evocation in the region's contemporary art. In other words, while the corpse is presented explicitly in some cases, as in Brito's photographic series mentioned above, in others, the corpse is evoked by presenting other objects and materials. For example, Rosauero discusses Enrique Jezik's *Seis Metros Cúbicos de Materia Orgánica* (*Six Cubic Meters of Organic Matter* 2009), an action-based artwork in which the artist dropped animal guts into the dessert in allusion to the Ciudad Juárez's femicides.

In addition to the tropes described above, Rosauero identifies three main strategies of representation: classic iconographic repertoires, dematerialization, and the appropriation of media and documentary images (2017, 27). The first reinterprets of iconic imagery of local or European and American art. Although the scholar focuses on examples from South American countries, this category can be related to Monroy's *Mexican Last Supper*. The second strategy, dematerialization, involves the evocative representations of violence as in Jezik's work described above. The third strategy appropriates media or documentary images, as in Carlos Amoraes *The Language of Dead* (2012), in which the artist used newspapers' pictures of corpses and composed them into a comic book (Rosauero 2017, 35). Like Rosauero, Diéguez also discusses the use of imagery of mutilated bodies presented as part of classic and religious Western European and American iconographic repertoires (2016, 111), and the appropriation not only of images but also of material traces of crimes —objects, clothes, materials, and body fluids— as artistic materials (Diéguez 2013, 9). She discusses *Pietà* (2010), a work by Rosa María Robles, which evokes Michelangelo's work by replacing Christ's corpse with kilts obtained from the morgue. In this work, which belongs to the series *La Rebelión de Los Iconos* (The rebellion of the icons 2011-2012), the kilt, Diéguez argues, constitutes a symptomatic image and an icon of death (10).<sup>36</sup> Importantly, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the appropriation of objects, like media images and other material traces of violence, is a strategy closely related to forensic aesthetics.

According to some scholars, these artistic representations of narcoviolence display documentary and allegorical registers (Diéguez 2013, 2; Ruíz 2018, 224; Rosauero 2017). The word allegory refers to "the expression of by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary). Correspondingly, these authors read the artistic representation of narcoviolence as both

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<sup>35</sup> For an analysis of Salazar's work in relation to narco culture in Culiacán, Sinaloa, see Dueñas (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Narcoviolence gave rise to a series of figures such as "*El encobijado*" (A corpse wrapped in blankets), and "*El Encajuelado*" (A corpse in the truck of car), which form part of the vocabulary of violence within the Mexican context (Haidar and Chávez Herrera 2018). Consequently, the kilt has become an iconic symbol of murder.

records of crimes and symbolic representations of emotions or abstract notions associated with violent circumstances. For example, about Robles' work, Diéguez explains: "These images talk to me as allegories of the formless, mythologies of fear, spectral and dystopic iconographies that mirror a highly dislocated reality" (2016, 48). Similarly, discussing Brito's work, Ruíz states that the power of these works stems from:

"(...) the fact that his photos are bearers of an intolerable metaphor: that of a state without entrails, a politics consisting of the destruction of the body politic that obeys the perverse logic of a neoliberal economy in cahoots with the drug cartels, according to which countless bodies are used and discarded in pursuit of the greatest possible economic profit." (2018, 224).

Art historian Rubén Yépez has also identified the strategy of appropriating images and material traces of violence discussed by Diéguez and Rosauero in contemporary Colombian artworks that refer to violence (2018, 63). Nevertheless, unlike Diéguez and Ruíz, Yepes does not understand this practice through the lens of allegory rather through that of forensic aesthetics. In other words, Yepes does not interpret the use of appropriated forensic materials in art as symbolic fictional figures that convey complex ideas about human existence but as evidence that speaks about concrete violent events. Notably, although many Mexican artistic practices relate to this aesthetic form, except for Ramos (2015), no authors have approached them yet from this perspective because, in Latin American visual arts, the concept has had relatively little impact (Yepes 2019, 63; Ramos 2015, 302).

As discussed in chapter one, forensic aesthetics relates to the crime scene, a trope that repeatedly appears in Latin American and Latino art —e.g., in Pepon Osorio's *The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993) and Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape/Murder)* (1973) (Ramos 2015, 301). For gender studies scholar Iván Ramos, these expressions centered on the after-effects of violent crimes are often received "with apparent shock and horror, yet also with morbid fascination that transcends local contexts, creating an unspoken bond between Latinidad and death." Consequently, he continues, these cultural expressions call attention to "the various modes in which the spectacle of violent morbidity constitutes a crucial, if painful, element in the history of Latina/o America" (Ramos 2015, 305). Ramos's observations resonate with the arguments made by authors like Adriaensen (2016b) and Sánchez Prado (2006) about the spectacularization of violence in Latin American countries discussed in the introduction. Correspondingly, as Ramos suggests, the concept of forensic aesthetics can be used as a research perspective to analyze the mediations of violence in Mexican artistic practices in particular and Latin American art in general as it allows to examine these cultural manifestations without losing track of the morbid and spectacularizing component often associated with the topics of violence and forensic investigation (305).

## 2.3 Conclusion

The crime wave affecting Mexico is the visible manifestation of the violence endemic to the hegemonic economic and political systems. The imposition of neoliberal policies and globalization has led to a dramatic precarization of life and the intensification of extreme violence. Such circumstances have triggered a complex of paralyzing affects —such as sadness, fear, and hopelessness— which play a crucial role in producing and sustaining

violence. Nonetheless, this dysphoria coexists with an activist spirit moved by empathy and indignation. Socially engaged artworks, like the ones discussed in this thesis, express this structure of feeling.

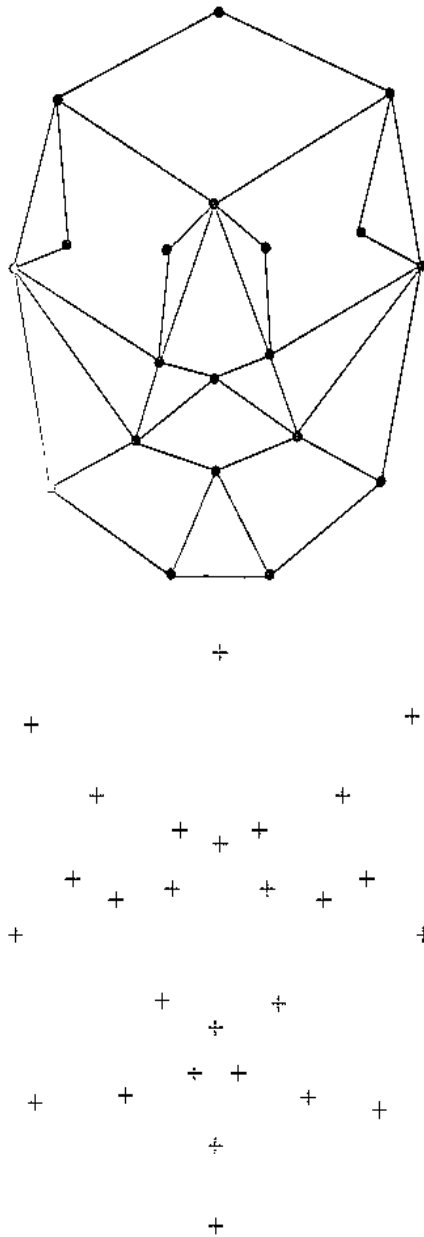
In the terrain of artistic practices, narcoviolence fostered the proliferation of references to the missing and the murdered, as will be discussed in the following chapters. The scholarship discussed above has contributed substantially to understanding the semiotic functions of these artworks. As discussed in this chapter, the literature based on this research has shown how artistic practices have resignified classical iconographic repertoires, materials, and objects associated with expressive violence to construct signs that allegorically represent concepts like terror, mourning, or a broken state. Nevertheless, regarding the works that appropriate objects and images related to violence, these art historical and critical investigations have paid little attention to artworks' evidentiary character and their political agency, an inquiry in which the concept of forensic aesthetics is illuminating as this thesis shows. Moreover, the approaches centered on making allegorical readings of the artworks do not account for the role of the spectator's experience in constructing the work's meaning. As the scholar Ernst Van Alphen argues, reading for meaning is often limited as it must necessarily ignore significant components to be efficient in interpreting the work as these components—for instance, narrative, temporality, and succession in the case of literature—“are superfluous for an allegorical reading,” because they “are not needed for the signifying transaction to take place” (2008, 27). Likewise, diverse aspects must be neglected in the visual arts, such as the time the spectator spends in front of the work, the smells, or the artwork's texture because they do not contribute to the construction of the symbols that constitute the work. Nevertheless, these aspects are of central relevance for the spectator's experience, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, they can be addressed through a reading focused on affect.

## Chapter 3. Haunted Encounters: Found Photography and Surveillance Technology in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence*.

### Introduction

Photography and surveillance technologies are tools used in forensic research with policing purposes, and are consequently, are associated with forensic aesthetics (Tatum 2006, 129; Yepes 2019, 64). This chapter analyzes *Level of Confidence* (2015) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. This media installation features a face-recognition device and the portraits of forty-three students who were victims of enforced disappearance, which the artist appropriated from the media.

Appropriation —borrowing, copying, and altering images and objects— has played an essential role in modern and contemporary European and American art history, especially from the 1960s until the 1980s, after the rise of consumerism and mass media (MoMA Learning n.d.). Because of photography's capacity to recall the past, it has inspired multiple artists to appropriate media pictures to revisit historical events. For example, in *Birmingham Race Riot* (1964), Andy Warhol reproduced news-papers photographs of the protest in which the police arrested Martin Luther King. As Warhol's work illustrates, artists have reflected on photography as a historical object through these appropriation acts, leading to questions such as the effect of an image's serial reproduction or the extent to which the document lends an element of truth to the artwork (Tate n.d.).



The appropriation of photographs from the media or police archives is the artistic strategy most frequently employed in Latin American artistic representations of violence (Rosaura 2017, 23). In Mexican art, most of the artworks associated with forensic aesthetics appropriate photographs, especially images of corpses obtained from the press, which are more common than in European and North American art. Examples of these works are Miguel Aragón's *Evidencia No. 1* (Evidence No. 1, 2011), which consists of burned-residue embossed prints taken from

newspapers or magazines, and Alejandro Luperca's *PM* (2018), an artist book that uses photographs taken from Ciudad Juárez's newspaper of the same name. Portraits of murder victims or missing people are also frequent in Latin American art as in European and American art. The work of the French artist Christian Boltanski is one of the earliest and most well-known European examples. Boltanski re-photographed images from common documents—newspapers, passports, and family albums—reprinted them and used them in installations. His work, nonetheless, does not seek to expose an alternative narrative about historical events but to explore the potential of photography to take part in cultural memory. For example, for *Autel de Lycée Chases* (*Altar to the Chases High School*, 1986–87), he enlarged six portraits from the 1931 graduating class from a Viennese Jewish high school and presented them in an installation that operates as a monument to the Holocaust's victims without naming them (Liss 1998, 42).

As is the case with Boltanski's work, scholarship often discusses the appropriation of portraits of victims of violence in terms of trauma and memory (Liss 1998, 1-11; Krastev 2019, 196-200). Without denying the memorializing capacity of this strategy, this chapter explores Raphael Lozano-Hemmer's installation as an example of forensic aesthetics: as a counter-forensic device that calls into question the hegemonic narrative that asserts that a local cartel murdered the students by actively continuing with the search for them, additionally implying that the state exerts violence over the citizenry. This chapter argues that the face recognition device influences the spectators' embodied perception of the photographs, triggering a complex of discomfort, anxiety, and pity. In this way, the artwork reveals a feature of systemic violence that can only be known through the body: what Žižek calls the threat of violence.

The chapter's first part introduces Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's work. The second one elaborates on the historical events of Ayotzinapa that the artwork evokes, and the third one describes *Level of Confidence*. The fourth section analyzes the artwork as a forensic device by taking cues from Fernando Rosenberg's work on representing the missing in the human rights era and Weizman's notion of counter-forensics. It argues that the installation evokes the students' disappearance by exploiting the portraits' potential to operate as evidence of their absence and enhancing their affective capacities through the face recognition device. The work critically uses this technology to create a virtual space of encounter between the spectator and the missing, paying sustained attention to their faces. Finally, building on the visual culture scholar Ariella Azoulay's concept of "watching" and Gilles Deleuze's work on "the face," the fifth part argues that, although the artist intends to stimulate empathy for the Other, the installation triggers pity and unexpected sensations of discomfort and anxiety which can be related with what Žižek calls the threat of violence. As Deleuze suggests, looking at what he denominates a "reflective face"—a fixed face, as in any portrait—agitates the mind as it shows a different and unknown world within the Other. The mismatch between pity and displeasure makes the spectator engage with the images in a way similar to what Azoulay describes as "watching," which implies reconstructing the events while observing a photograph. This process breaks the distance that usually separates the spectator from the Other's suffering, making her reflect on the implications of this form of violence for the community, its pervasiveness as a tool of state control, and her exposure to it.

### 3.1 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Surveillance Technologies as Virtual Openings

Raphael Lozano-Hemmer (Mexico City, 1967) is an influential new media artist —the second most renowned Mexican artist and within the first 300 in the ArtFacts world ranking 2020. Although he could be related to the so-called “Mexican new conceptualists” introduced in chapter two, scholars and art critics, do not identify him as part of this generation as he spent most of his childhood abroad. Lozano-Hemmer completed a minor in art history, a major in chemistry, and received a Ph.D. in chemistry, both from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, in 1989 (Fernandez 2014, 285). In the early 1990s, he transitioned to art —particularly performance and media arts— when he produced experimental works conversant with information and complexity theories and poststructuralism, especially responding to Brian Massumi’s ideas (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 131). His work rapidly became known in artistic circuits and became part of multiple collections, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London. In 2007, he was the first artist to officially represent Mexico at the Venice Biennial, with the multimedia installation *Some Things Happen More Often Than All of The Time*.

Lozano-Hemmer is interested in technological developments’ impact on social and political life (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 132). Accordingly, he explores subjectivity, identity, body, space, architecture, and surveillance (Fernández 2014, 276). Over almost two decades, he has produced performances, photography, kinetic and sound sculptures, and video installations. The most characteristic of his works are grand-scale interactive environments that combine architecture and people’s movement through the mediation of robotics and surveillance technologies. The artist calls them “relational architectures,”<sup>37</sup> a term that he defined in 1994 as “technological actualizations of urban environments with alien memory”<sup>38</sup> and in 2002 as “anti-monuments of public dissimulation” (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 148). *Under Scan, Relational Architecture 11* (2006), for example, is an installation composed of multiple video portraits he projected over Leicester’s pedestrian thoroughfares and main squares and made unperceivable through potent xenon lights. A tracking system predicted the pedestrians’ future position to locate the video portrait on their route. As people walked, their shadow revealed the video portrait, which looked at the viewer and engaged in various behaviors, such as sleeping, dancing, or mimicking. With this installation, Lozano-Hemmer invited the spectator to consider what it would be like to be another person (Fernández 2008, 84). Nonetheless, according to Fernández, many spectators described the experience as uncanny and uncomfortable instead of humanizing and touching, which shows that art can provide insight into the complexity of human interactions (84). As this example illustrates, interactivity, participation, and social change are at the core of Lozano-Hemmer’s work (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 132). Fernandez characterizes his work as “virtual openings” that users explore performatively (2014, 277). The scholar understands “the virtual” after Elizabeth Grosz and Brian Massumi

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<sup>37</sup> There are twenty-one works in Lozano-Hemmer’s relational architecture series. Some other examples are *Re:Positioning Fear* exhibited at the 3rd Internationale Biennale Film +Architektur, Graz, Austria, in 1997, and *Frequency and Volume* shown in Mexico City in 2003.

<sup>38</sup> The author used the word alien in the sense of foreign or not belonging to a site (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 135).

as a realm of possibility that cannot be detached from embodiment (2014, 277). In this way, the virtual in Lozano-Hemmer's work is not disembodied data but is necessarily connected to the bodily experience.

Like Dan Graham, Julia Scher, Bruce Nauman, and other contemporary artists, Lozano-Hemmer is interested in the "panoptic and post-panoptic gaze" (Lozano-Hemmer 2007, 144). Through their practice, these artists explore the different dynamics of seeing and being seen with all their psychological, political, and social implications.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, surveillance technologies are a common component of Lozano-Hemmer's work, which, among other purposes, have served to reflect on the pervasiveness of the state's control with its classificatory and discriminatory purposes. For example, in *Surface Tension* (1992), Lozano-Hemmer used a computerized surveillance system and custom-made software to create the image of a giant eye that follows the participant's movements with high precision. *Level of Confidence* (2015) is part of this corpus of artworks. In this case, he used this technology to explore its role in constructing a counter-narrative, as it refers to one of the most painful episodes of recent Mexican history: the enforced disappearance of forty-three students from the community Ayotzinapa, in Iguala, Guerrero.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.2 Enforced Disappearance in Ayotzinapa

On the night between September 26 and 27 of 2014, state forces detained and made disappear forty-three students from the Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa at Iguala municipality in Guerrero, Mexico, a male-only institution of higher education. Until 2021, the hegemonic narrative, known as "la verdad histórica" (the historical truth), maintained that drug traffickers kidnapped and murdered the students under the instruction of Iguala's local government. The criminals, the General Attorney claimed, burned the bodies in a dumpsite at Cocula town, erasing all material evidence (Noble 2015, 422). Although the local authorities' participation is evident, the official narrative is full of gaps. Consequently, skepticism dominates public opinion. Searching for answers, in 2018, civilian associations asked for the support of the Argentinian Forensic Anthropological Team (EAAF) and the research agency Forensic Architecture.<sup>41</sup> The joint investigation results expose the discrepancies and omissions of the official report (Redacción Animal Político 2018). The students' whereabouts remain unknown, and the search for answers continues.

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<sup>39</sup> In his analysis of visual surveillance in contemporary art, the visual culture scholar Antonio Somaini situates the origin of the theme of the panoptic gaze in the visual arts in the theatrical tendency of late 1960s arts. Since theatricality supposes a dynamic relationship between the work of art and the spectator, it paved the way for the exploration of different forms of interactivity (Somaini 2010, 149).

<sup>40</sup> Although completely different in terms of scale, the installation can be related to *Loud Voice* (2008), a relational architecture project developed for the 40th anniversary of the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. Both works address episodes of state violence in contemporary Mexican history.

<sup>41</sup> The EAAF report can be accessed at <https://centroprodh.org.mx/2018/11/29/comunicado-del-eaaf-sobre-la-recomendacion-de-cndh-en-caso-ayotzinapa/>. The results of Forensic Architecture's research can be accessed at <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-enforced-disappearance-of-the-ayotzinapa-students>



Enforced disappearance as a form of intimidation and state repression has a long history in Mexico and other Latin American countries. In this case, commentators argue that the Ayotzinapa events are the visible expression of structural violence targeted against political dissidents and marginalized communities (Meneses and Castillo González 2018, 266). After the Mexican revolution, the state created rural teachers' colleges to combat extreme poverty and promote education. Nonetheless, located away from the urban centers, these schools were neglected by local and federal authorities. Consequently, they have a long history of political mobilizations demanding better conditions. Besides, due to their socialist orientations, the indigenous origins of most of their teachers and students, and recently their opposition to the education reforms put forward by President Peña Nieto, the state has perceived them as a threat to its political agenda (Noble 2015, 420). The journalist Sergio González Rodríguez argues that, because of these tensions, the Ayotzinapa events are an operation of counter-insurgency akin to the social cleansing strategies implemented in El Salvador (González Rodríguez 2015, 25). From the extended concept of violence perspective, these events illustrate how visible violent events emerge from the interaction between other forms of violence: the exploitation and repression of indigenous and rural populations, the racism and classism ingrained in Mexican society, and the state's use of the discourse of the uncontrollable narcoviolence to justify and cover state crimes.

Ayotzinapa aroused a widespread, unprecedented outrage, which Andrea Noble has argued was a "shared political feeling" (2015, 422). Although thousands of people had disappeared in Mexico under the war on drugs by that time, none of these events had triggered a public reaction of such magnitude. Not even the so-called "Marchas Por La Paz" (Protests in favor of peace) had the national and international impact of the protests against the student's disappearance. Los 43 de Ayotzinapa (The 43 of Ayotzinapa) were the dead that were finally counted (Emmelhainz 2016, 181). According to the poet Juan Villoro, Ayotzinapa had such an effect because, in contrast to other events, it was clear that people —the students— who were supposed to be protected by the state were instead annihilated (quoted in Noble 2015, 422). There was no space to frame them as casualties of drug trafficking, as it was evident that the state was attacking the population using the figure of the "narco" as a cover. In other words, it made manifest the precarity that the population suffers. According to Villoro, Ayotzinapa articulated a general discontent with the sociopolitical situation —the dysphoric state Reguillo describes (2015, 69)— with empathy for the Other. This structure of feeling<sup>42</sup> was channeled through public protests and mobilizations in social media, known as "Global Actions for Ayotzinapa." These demonstrations "united people from across the social and political spectrum to mobilize and demand the return of the missing students" (Villoro quoted in Noble 2015, 422). For Noble, these demonstrations resulted from an "affective contagion" spreading in national politics and abroad (429).

Notably, traditionally, rural schools have received little, if not null, attention from other sectors of society. More generally, rural areas, mostly occupied by indigenous populations, suffer systematic marginalization and

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter two section 2.1.3

racism. Nonetheless, in the case of Ayotzinapa, the racial component seems to be erased as it was not articulated in the media coverage. The students were even popularly called the “niños heroes” (children heroes) in reference to a group of Mexican historical figures. Interestingly, this way of perceiving the victims did not increase attention to the structural problem affecting those communities. Instead, the claim for justice stayed limited to the forty-three victims. The focus on the subjects and not on the broader picture perhaps reflected the fear before the threat of violence that most of the population felt: The events of Ayotzinapa were an eloquent reminder that the state could eliminate people with total impunity and that not only those involved in criminal activities were in danger. The revelation of enforced disappearance as a biopolitical technology of the Mexican state constitutes a permanent threat (Domínguez Galbraith 2019, 99). Seen through Žižek’s model of violence, this permanent threat is an expression of systemic violence. Nonetheless, the focus on the victims concealed the fact that a racial component sets these groups apart from the mesocratic citizenry. Correspondingly, many mediations of these events created the illusion that all people are equally exposed to state violence. Such an idea might explain the vast production of journalistic research and artistic projects that resulted from the “affective contagion” —to speak in Noble’s words— as diverse authors, like the writer Elena Poniatowska, the film director Alejandro González Iñárritu, the artist Francisco Toledo, and, more recently, Ai Weiwei, have produced works that form part of the national and transnational cultural memory of these events.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.3 On the search of Los 43

*Level of confidence* is one of the artistic expressions responding to Ayotzinapa, which Lozano-Hemmer exhibited for the first time in Montreal on March 26, 2015, exactly six months after the students’ disappearance (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). The artist conceived the interactive media installation to keep the ongoing search for the students as an active element in the media. In an interview, Lozano-Hemmer stated:

When I heard from Canada, where I have my studio, that there was an ongoing search; that the parents, the communities kept an ongoing search, I thought about using an algorithm, a series of algorithms of military and police origin used for face recognition. I thought about developing a tool not to search for the guilty. We know who they are: they are in power, but to search for the victims. The work is trained with the faces of the 43 students and works almost like a mirror. (...). I am interested in keeping their search as a living element in the media (Lozano-Hemmer and Badani 2017).<sup>44</sup>

The work consists of an installation of simple appearance, which nonetheless incorporates high technology. It is composed of a USB camera connected to face-detection software programmed to search for the faces of the

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<sup>43</sup> Some examples of these cultural expressions are Ai Weiwei’s installation *Resetting memories* (2019), Francisco Toledo’s installation *43 Kites* (2014), and Elena Poniatowska’s book *Los Jóvenes Mexicanos: De 1968 a Ayotzinapa* (The Mexican Youth: From 1968 to Ayotzinapa, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Cuando yo oí desde Canadá que había una búsqueda, que los padres las comunidades, seguían haciendo esta búsqueda por encontrarlos yo pensé en un algoritmo, en una serie de algoritmos, que tenemos aquí en el estudio, que provienen de una génesis militar y policiaca, de identificación de rostros, entonces se me ocurrió hacer una herramienta, una plataforma, no para buscar a los culpables, los culpables sabemos quiénes son, están en el poder, sino para buscar a las víctimas, para buscar a los desaparecidos. La pieza está entrenada con los 43 rostros de los normalistas y funciona casi como una especie de espejo. (...) Me interesa mantener su búsqueda como un elemento vivo en nuestros medios de comunicación (Lozano-Hemmer and Badani 2017)(Lozano-Hemmer and Badani 2017)(Lozano-Hemmer and Badani 2017)(Badani and Lozano-Hemmer, 2017). My translation.

disappeared students. When the camera is inactive, the system shows a mosaic of the students' black and white photographic portraits, indicating their names below it. The pictures contain damaged areas that resemble wounds, but they are just the paper marks of use. The forty-three faces, all of remarkably young non-white males, stare ahead, reflexive, impenetrable as if they were looking at the viewer. The mosaic moves slowly and randomly from left to right and from down to top. It zooms in, focusing on a portrait, staying there for a few seconds, then zooming out and moving to a different picture.

As the spectator stands in front of the work, her face appears on the screen, and a set of schematic white lines appears delineating the jaw, eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth. Next to it, the software flips through the students' portraits while comparing both sets of facial features. The process is performed using Eigen, Fisher, and LBPH algorithms, which military and police forces employ to trace suspicious subjects (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). After comparing the faces, the software identifies which student is more likely to look like the viewer. The work marks the similarity through thin red lines that grow next to the portraits that the algorithm selected and that illustrate the "Detected similarity score," a value in points located at the screen's upper part. This score is placed above the sentences "With the face of the disappeared Ayotzinapa student" and "Level of confidence," which shows a percentage of accuracy in the resemblance. Unless one of the students stands in front of the camera, the work will always fail to make a positive match. In this way, the artwork performs a relentless search for the students and maintains the demand to know their whereabouts. Although the work appears as a coherently organized object, its structure suggests that the students' and the spectator's facial features are set clues. In addition, the artwork's processual and performative dimensions are a crucial component of the spectator's aesthetic experience. These two features connect the installation with forensic aesthetics, as characterized by Rugoff (1997, 72), more than other artworks that also use surveillance technology, such as *Surface Tension* described above.

Lozano-Hemmer designed the software's architecture with an open-source code to allow people anywhere to modify it and use it as a memorial in other circumstances (Austen 2015).<sup>45</sup> Besides, as Lozano-Hemmer wanted the artwork to become viral, he made the software available for free download from his website (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). Anyone with enough coding knowledge can download it to set it up and run it anywhere.<sup>46</sup> The work's design facilitates its circulation without institutional or copy-right constraints. As a result, four years after it was released, the installation has been exhibited in almost every region in Mexico and in more than 45 institutions worldwide (Badani and Lozano-Hemmer 2017).

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<sup>45</sup> This adaptation process is called forking. The software has been forked twice: once in 2017 as a memorial to the more than 1000 Canadian indigenous women who have disappeared during the last five years, and secondly by an Argentinian group to commemorate the thousands of people disappeared by the government during the dictatorship (Austen 2015).

<sup>46</sup> The public dissemination of the artwork can be observed through a YouTube video uploaded by a user in 2015, where we see the work displayed at what seems to be a public demonstration in a small venue, accompanied by the projection of a documentary about the mass disappearance. See, "Level of Confidence." YouTube video, 1:05, Posted by Gabitsiki Kleine Mami September 28, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pdyHL3carQ>. Similarly, Kat Austen (2015) writes about the artwork after having experienced it at her living room.

### 3.4 Counter-forensics in *Level of Confidence*: Portraiture as Evidence and Biometrics as a Virtual Opening

Displaying portraits of victims of violence in public spaces to articulate spontaneous memory sites is a common practice (Senie 2006, 41). Consequently, scholars have interpreted *Level of Confidence* as a memorial (Marquis 2017, 57; Mandolessi 2019, 14). Nonetheless, when he developed the artwork, the artist stated that a memorial would have created a sense of closure, neglecting the lack of satisfactory explanations about this event (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). Instead, he sought to keep the search active because, in his view, as long as there is no convincing proof that the official version is accurate, there is an ethical imperative to continue with the investigation (Lozano-Hemmer 2015). In other words, the artist conceived the installation as a rhetorical device that calls into question the so-called historical truth, additionally implying that the estate exerts direct and structural violence over the population. Correspondingly, akin to what Alvarez and Zaiontz describe as performance forensics (2018, 285-289), this installation aims to contribute to the multiple civil organizations' claim for justice, such as Tlachinollan, Prodh Center, and Internacional Amnesty. The will to search for justice independently from the state aligns the work with the ethos of the neoliberal era and the human rights logic, which were described in the second chapter of this thesis.

Besides problematizing historical truth, Lozano-Hammer explains, the work seeks to bring the human dimension of the tragedy to the forefront to trigger a sense of responsibility for the other (2015). To achieve its twofold goal, *Level of Confidence* builds on photography's capacity to work as evidence of someone's absence and on biometrics' potential to operate as what Fernandez calls a "virtual opening," a realm of possibility enabled by the corporeal (2014, 277), in this case leading to a reflection on the threat of violence. As will be discussed in section 3.5, this virtual opening works through the experience of "watching," as conceptualized by Ariella Azoulay (2008, 14).

#### 3.4.1 Portraiture as Evidence of a Present Absence

In addition to appropriating photos to explore memory, some artists use portraiture to reflect on violence-related issues. Occasionally, they have employed criminals' portraits to stress the perpetrators' humanity or explore the "nature of evil" (Stoker 2017, 434). For example, in the controversial painting *Myra* (1995), Marcus Harvey reproduced serial killer Myra Hindley's portrait using digitized childrens' handprints to comment on what he considered to be Hindley's role as a scapegoat in the infanticides committed by her partner (Cashell 2009, 60). Like Hindley's portrait, many of these works have been considered controversial and received with rage. In contrast, portraits of victims are often used as expressions of mourning or to demand reparation. As Rosenberg argues, victims' photographic portraiture traditionally has carried out "the status of a body of evidence and representation of the absent in the context of public demonstrations" (2016, 99). Seen from a rhetorical point of view, then, they function as prosopopoeias.<sup>47</sup> In addition, even though they do not reproduce atrocity, both victims' and

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<sup>47</sup> See chapter one, section 1.3.

perpetrators' photographs work as evidence of violence because they evoke the crimes; nonetheless, they can only play this role if there is a context allowing the spectator to know the referred situation.

Similarly, when used in art, photo-portraiture sometimes operates as “evidence of a present absence” to demand reparation, especially in artworks related to human rights and post-conflict political processes (Rosenberg 2016, 99). For instance, in Chilean art, Campos Pérez relates its use to what she denominates the aesthetics of disappearance (2015, 6). Rosenberg puts forward a similar argument and uses as an example the work entitled *30,000* (1998-2005) by Argentinian artists Nicolas Guagnini (2016, 99). In this installation, the artist reproduced the photograph of his father, who disappeared during the Argentinian dictatorship, over an outdoor sculpture composed of multiple metal bars. According to Rosenberg, the result is a fragmented image that can be seen complete from only one angle, which evokes the destruction of Guagnini's father's identity after his disappearance and his symbolic —if fleeting— return as a sign of reparation (99). As Guagnini's sculpture illustrates, the artist transforms the portrait's indexicality into an artistic icon to demand physical, economic, or symbolic reparation for the missing (99-103). Notably, the photographs used with this aim are usually “sourced” rather than “found.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, in contrast to some artworks that appropriate photos found by chance to reflect on memory or photography as a medium, works that denounce violence usually use purposefully select pictures.

In *Level of Confidence*, Lozano-Hemmer used sourced portraits that play a similar role to the one described by Rosenberg in the artworks produced within what he calls the human rights era. The artist appropriated the students' ID photos published during the initial search campaign, which already have circulated in multiple forums —e.g. official press conferences, newspapers, and public demonstrations (Gutiérrez Galindo 2019, 362). As a result, they immediately became the students' icons and unequivocal symbols of the Ayotzinapa events. As the scholar Blanca Gutierrez notes, the photographs —along with the number “43” (written with numerals) and the slogan “*Fue el Estado*” (The state did it)—<sup>49</sup> stand for the students' enforced disappearance and constitute residues that haunt the violent episode of Ayotzinapa (2019, 360). Correspondingly, in this installation, the portraits are icons that make the students present in their condition of missing. Through their felt absence, they urge society to keep searching for answers as a gesture of reparation, because, as Keenan and Weizman explain, “the missing person possesses a ghostly agency, an immateriality that is not simply present, but which nonetheless has effects, and even demands responses” (2012, quoted in Domínguez Galbraith 2019, 94). In short, these photographs are active agents demanding society to act (Reguillo 2015, 71).<sup>50</sup>

Notably, although the work looks objective and dispassionate, Lozano-Hammer enhanced the portraits' affective capacities through multiple mediation techniques, reinforcing the political agency they already had. He

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Godfrey makes a distinction between artworks made with pictures found by chance, and others in which the choice of images is purposefully (2005, 101).

<sup>49</sup> My translation.

<sup>50</sup> Another iconic reference is the photograph of the student Julio Cesar Mondragon's corpse, whose murderers skinned his face. For a reflection on the impact of this image, see Reguillo (2015).

chose to present the pictures as they have circulated in most media. Nonetheless, compared to other iterations, the artist increased the images' contrast, making it easier to perceive their materiality *qua objects*, also through their signs of damage, despite being digitized. Some of these marks are reminiscent of wounds as stated above, which, in addition to the thin red lines that signal the "Detected similarity score," involuntarily reinforce the sensation of violence. The only indication about the context of these pictures is the sentence that reads "Disappeared student." Together, these characteristics dispassionately convey a sense of artlessness that emphasizes the photographs' document character. Besides, the software's interface and the process of facial comparison give the spectator the impression that she faces a research dispositive rather than a work of art. In other words, although the artist used multiple mediation techniques, the spectator does not perceive the resultant image as shaped by subjective choices but as an artless, scientific object devoid of any pathos. Nevertheless, as discussed below, these mediation techniques enhance the photographs' affective operations and political agency.

### 3.4.2 Surveillance Technology as Virtual Opening

Photographic technologies and biometrics are related to the forensic gaze, as both allow the collection of evidence in a way that is perceived as objective. Kelly Gates points out that contemporary biometric technologies are extensions of historical methods like institutional portraiture, used to categorize and codify the body of those perceived as criminals (2011, 17). In a counter-forensic effort —borrowing Weizmann's term— *Level of Confidence* uses portraiture and biometrics not to trace the criminals but to search for the victims. In this way, the artwork uses technology to invert the forensic gaze.

Notably, since there is no probability of the work finding the students, it might seem to have no real purpose. Nonetheless, through the act of searching, the assemblage of pictures and the face recognition device "speak" at the forum —the spectators— about the students' disappearance to foster a personal connection with them. As will be discussed in the following section, this is achieved through the software's capacity to encourage what Ariella Azoulay describes as "watching" photographs instead of merely looking at them (2008, 14). Using technology in this way makes photography and biometrics a virtual opening for the encounter with the other and for the feeling of the threat of violence, as it connects the virtual to the corporeal. Correspondingly, it challenges the hegemony of the scopic regime that Tatum describes as a preoccupation addressed through forensic aesthetics (2006, 132). Ultimately, it demonstrates that even surveillance has a bodily dimension. Besides, it is noteworthy that by searching for the students, the work reaches two other objectives: it problematizes the so-called historical truth and displaces the police in searching for the disappeared. Accordingly, it reflects people's mistrust of state institutions, which Weizmann argues is the force moving counter-forensic research.

## 3.5 Experiencing *Level of Confidence*

As mentioned above, *Level of Confidence* aims at keeping the search for the students alive by triggering a personal connection with them. In Lozano-Hemmer's words: "[t]he idea is that they are not just others, that this can

be ourselves. That there is a certain fraternal bond to it” (Lozano-Hemmer 2018). The artist hopes that with kinship comes a “sense of responsibility with the students [...] a condition of fraternal, biometric connection” (Lozano-Hemmer, quoted in Austen 2015). Lozano-Hemmer’s statement suggests that he hopes to trigger a form of empathy involving a projective relationship that simultaneously maintains a certain distance and results in a sense of kinship. In other words, the notion of empathy he is describing is one in which the spectator is supposed to imagine she could undergo the experience lived by the other, while she is still aware that she does not know exactly how it feels. This form of empathy is akin to what film theorist Lisa Cartwright has called “empathetic identification:” a form of empathy that opens the space to feel “responsible” for the other, that is, to feel compelled to act on the other’s behalf (2008, 24). According to Cartwright, empathetic identification is at the core of empathetic spectatorship, which she describes as follows: “In the model of empathic spectatorship, we may downplay the factor of knowledge in the experience ‘I know how you feel,’ and analyze the nature and experience of that projective relationship in which I am myself ‘made to feel’ and subsequently act ‘on your behalf.’ Importantly, you may not reproduce in me the same feelings that I witness in you” (2008, 24).

The following sections elaborate on how the installation seeks to foster empathic spectatorship through the artwork’s interactive components by forcing the spectator to “watch” the portraits and integrating the spectator’s body into the image. The visual culture scholar Ariella Azoulay distinguishes between “looking,” the act of recognizing what is in the picture, and “watching,” which involves paying sustained attention to the photograph and intentionally reconstructing the event (2008, 14) –which reminds Rugoff’s argument that in forensic aesthetics the spectator relates to the work by reconstructing the events through a scanning gaze (1997, 18). Through the practice of watching, the spectator enacts “the civil contract of photography,” a civil skill, which implies adopting an ethical position that opens the space to share with others the claim made by the photograph (2008, 14). Azoulay applies the term to documentary photographs that depict violent events. Although *Level of Confidence* does not fit this criterion as it conjures up violence by evocation, the act of watching static portraits does trigger the reconstruction or speculation about the events, as Azoulay describes. Nonetheless, the resultant experience does not always lead to sharing with others the claim made by the installation —feeling responsible for the students— rather to experiencing uncomfortable emotions that make the spectator think about the lived experience of violence. In other words, “watching” portraiture, it will be argued, has the potential to reveal invisible dimensions of violence, in this case the threat of violence.

### 3.5.1 Interactivity, watching, and the threat of violence

Although every work of art engages the viewer’s body to some extent, in contrast to traditional media, interactive works necessitate the spectator to activate the art by implicating the subject’s body into an instantiation of the artwork. Interactivity, then, is mobilized by a series of affective operations through which the work and the viewer affect each other: while the work reacts and activates in the viewer’s presence, the spectator moves her

body and experiences diverse sensations and emotions. Besides, interactivity creates a durational dimension that sometimes extends the spectator's engagement with the piece.

In *Level of Confidence*, the interactive experience starts when the spectator faces the installation, and the work, in turn, detects or “observes” her, which adds an estrangement effect to the artwork, because in contrast to standard surveillance systems, the device analyzes the subject and simultaneously makes her stare at the students’ faces and compare them with her own. Consequently, the software largely shapes the viewer's experience by making her wait for the results while directing her attention towards specific points in the image, such as her nose, chin, mouth, and eyes. In this way, although gender and race differences might compromise comparing faces, focusing on concrete facial features facilitates finding similarities with students’ faces. The face recognition device, then, influences the subject's physical perception of the portraits by making strange the observation of her face and guiding and sustaining her attention.

Ariana Azoulay calls to the act of paying sustained attention to photographs —as it happens in *Level of confidence*— “watching,” which is at the core of what she calls the civil contract of photography (2008, 14). According to the scholar, instead of just looking at them, images of injustice must be watched. In other words, the observer must scrutinize them to reconstruct the events referred to and share with others the demand the photograph is making. Consequently, “watching” implies actively engaging with the image, evoking the events it refers to through the imagination. “Watching,” then, is akin to what Bennett describes as “embodied imagination” (2005, 56) as it entails expressing what one feels and thinks when faced with the mental image that one conjures when encountering the photograph.

Despite the guidance provided by the software’s architecture, the experiences of watching and waiting are not passive. The spectator decides which points in the image to look at first or pay more attention to while actively comparing her face with these of the students. As the Mexico-based journalist Julie Schwieter Collazo describes: “As the program scans for possibilities of a “match,” viewers find themselves comparing their images against those of the students, doing their version of the matching. “Do my cheekbones seem as high as his?” “Wow, my ears are just like his.” “Hmm. We have the same slightly sad expression in our eyes” (2015). As mentioned above, this design aims at connecting the spectator and the missing. In the scholar Kat Austen (2015) words:

This technical arrangement is deliberate: Lozano-Hemmer wanted the matching process to take long enough that viewers would have the chance to connect with the images and to see themselves in everyone. By matching our faces to those of the students, Lozano-Hemmer aims to make us feel a kinship that often gets lost with today’s global news information overload.

However, not every participant immediately experiences the sense of kinship that Lozano-Hemmer expects. For instance, after watching the work in Mexico City within the context of an exhibition about the 1970s and 1980s Mexican political art, the American Ph.D. student Jeffrey Peer (2016) stated that he felt curiosity about the student with which the software matched him and reflected about the pervasiveness of violence and the need of political artworks like *Level of Confidence*:



One of the group's old posters caught my eye. It was made for a conference in 1983 of the "Latin American Federation of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared." I recognized the slogan: "¡Vivos los llevaron! Vivos los queremos!" ("They took them alive! We want them alive!"). The protestors for the missing Ayotzinapa students are demanding the same thing as Grupo Proceso Pentágono back in 1983. On my way out, I walked through an exhibition of works by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Piece after piece reverberated with political implications. By the front door, I passed one that reminded me of those posters from the 1970s. In "Level of Confidence" (2015), a screen displayed the faces of the missing Ayotzinapa students. Facial recognition software matched my face with the face of the disappeared student whom I most resemble. The young man's name was Carlos Lorenzo Hernández Muñoz. Later, on my way home, I read about Carlos on the internet. He was 19 years old two September ago. He liked to play soccer, and he was usually the goalie. Perhaps the crimes of the 1970s and '80s are now history. Maybe they have been mostly forgotten, along with the artists who made art in protest against them. But the legacy of that art is still alive and well, and there seems to be just as much a need for it as ever.

Peer's statement suggests that the work affected him because of its similarities with another 1980s work called *Desaparecidos* (Missing, 1989) by the Mexican collective *Grupo Pentágono*, which is also composed of missing people's portraits and, additionally contains the claim "They took them alive! We want them alive!." Peer notes that this work, especially the slogan, caught his attention, which is already an indication of the affective transmission described by Massumi.<sup>51</sup> Although this slogan is not included in *Level of Confidence*, it is easy to relate it with the work if one knows about the historical reference. Considering Bennett's argument that influencing embodied perception allows using affect as art's operative element, it follows that the presentation of these works together influenced Peer's perception of the installation, setting him into an inquiry mode. In other words, the spatial, formal, and contextual relationship between these images moved Peer to write about them, investigate the Ayotzinapa student's identity, reflect on the role of the art that denounces state crimes, and, most importantly, to consider the prevalence of state violence. Notably, he did not indicate having experienced any specific feelings for the student or the urge to act on his behalf. Here, the "shock to thought," in Massumi's terms, came from the realization that there was a continuity in using enforced disappearance as a mechanism of political violence, a realization that the relationship between *Level of Confidence* and the other portrait-based works triggered through their compositional features and their presentation in the same forum. In sum, the work touched the spectator and set him into an inquiry mode because of its relationship with other similar artworks produced in different times. Experiencing these works together made him reflect and write about enforced disappearance as a form of state violence and the relevance of politically-engaged art and not about feelings of empathic identification—to use Cartwright's term—as Lozano-Hemmer intended.

In contrast with Peer, who does not stress having experienced any sensations upon encountering the artwork, other spectators described the encounter as "intense," as they reportedly felt discomfort while waiting for the result. For example, in her exhibition's review, Schwietert Collazo (2015) notes:

For a process that takes one minute or less, the experience is unexpectedly intense [...]. The minute of waiting is somber and uncomfortable—though it is nothing, of course, compared to the ten months that the students' families have spent trying to determine the true fates of their loved ones [...] Suddenly, one notices that it is possible to find some common aspect with any of the students, even the ones whose faces seemed, at first glance, not to resemble one's own. The thought is disconcerting, of course, because it leads, inevitably, to this one: What if I was one of the disappeared? And with that, the news does not seem quite so distant or impersonal."

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<sup>51</sup> See section 1.2.1

As this statement suggests, the emotions triggered by “watching” the photographs make the spectator reflect on the events that the work symbolizes. In this case, the journalist’s discomfort made her think, first, about the disappeared students’ families. Nevertheless, after discovering it is possible to find similarities with any of the faces, she considered the possibility of her own disappearance, a thought she describes as disconcerting.

Building on Deleuze’s argument about the triggers of critical thinking, the pass from feeling to thinking implied in Schwietert Collazo’s testimony can be explained as the result of the disconnection between sensation and cognition as looking at strangers’ portraits is not expected to be uncomfortable and somber as it was. Nevertheless, the experience did not lead her to consider in writing the cultural and structural conditions that produced the students’ disappearance, but some affective elements of these events. Her first thought made her reflect on how enforced disappearance affects the community’s attitude —to borrow Galtung’s term. Such a consideration might emerge from something close to Cartwright’s empathic spectatorship, as Schwietert Collazo acknowledges that what she was feeling is incomparable with the students’ families’ pain. Nevertheless, the journalist does not express feeling invited to act on their behalf. Her feeling is better described, then, as pity for the students’ relatives. According to Boltanski, pity is a feeling inspired by particular cases of suffering —such as Ayotzinapa’s— not by generalities, and most importantly, as he explains, to arouse pity, there must be a division and separation between those who suffer and the more fortunate (1999, 11-12). Such separation, he stresses, is the reason why the spectator is left powerless and, consequently, without the will to act (24).

Notably, the installation not only triggered pity in the journalist; she also felt disturbed after realizing that she as well was exposed to potential enforced disappearance, as she worked from the country at that time (Schwietert Collazo 2015). This idea was fostered by the installation structure, which emphasizes the similarities instead of the differences between the faces. Her statement suggests that this realization made her experience what Žižek calls “the threat of violence” (Žižek 2007, 8). From this perspective, the threat of violence becomes a device of the technologies of fear: “apparatuses of power aimed at carving into the flesh habits, predispositions, and emotions conducing at erecting and preserving hierarchies” (Massumi 1999, viii). As there is no identifiable subject that performs the threat of violence, and this threat is not an event but a constant presence, it can be related to systemic violence.

The simultaneous experience of pity and everyday fear invites critical reflection as it breaks the usual distance that characterizes pity and the representation of distant violence. In this way, the installation can lead to the realization that, regardless of the cultural and structural issues that make indigenous and rural communities more exposed to political violence than the mesocratic citizens, the threat of violence affects all Mexicans’ everyday lives to different degrees. The following statement by Vice Magazine’s collaborator, Reuben Torres (2015), suggests something similar:

Lozano's approach is both sober and outlying, running contrary to many of the expectations we commonly hold for a work of such an overtly political bent. And yet, it does more than rub salt in a still-fresh wound or serves as yet another nettled indictment of corruption. Instead, it uncannily places the lens on the spectators themselves. We are ourselves, it would suggest, just a few percentages short of being the disappeared.

As the testimonies above demonstrate, feeling "the threat of violence" (Žižek 2008, 8) reveals to the spectator a dimension of systemic violence that can only be known through the body.

### 3.5.2 The face's Affective Operations

It is worth noting that recognizing facial movements or bodily gestures that express another person's feelings leads to empathic identification (Cartwright 2008, 24) or affective contagion (Bennett 2005, 38). In other words, recognizing the other's feelings moves the spectator to feel. However, in *Level of Confidence*, there are no facial movements or bodily gestures expressing feelings like suffering or happiness that the spectator can identify with. Instead, the spectators are faced with serious faces. Because of their severe character and the portraits' ID format, some viewers might even relate the photographs to mugshots when looking at the work.

Surprisingly, despite the lack of expressiveness of these ID photographs, different spectators report having profound experiences when encountering the work, which they describe as "unexpectedly intense" (Schwietert Collazo 2015), "poignant" (House of Electronic Arts Basel 2016), or "chilling and moving" (Austen 2015). Interestingly, these words do not clearly describe feelings, such as happiness or sadness, but also bodily reactions that already indicate affect transmission. Austen attributes the chilling feelings to the students' facial expressions, which she qualifies as haunting. However, the question arises as to how a face that is not displaying emotions in an obvious way can be experienced as haunting, poignant, or moving.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze explains that three functions have traditionally been attributed to the face: "Ordinarily, three roles of the face are recognizable: it is individuating (it distinguishes or characterizes each person); it is socializing (it manifests a social role); it is relational or communicating (it ensures not only communication between two people but also in a single person, the internal agreement between his character and his role)" (1986, 99). While there is general agreement about the individuating and socializing roles of the face, opinions differ on the face's communicative role because, as many observe, not everything the face communicates depends on conscious direction (Rushton 2002, 220; Black 2011, 6). For example, following Deleuze, Richard Rushton suggests that relating to a face involves an "intuitive mode of seeing" rather than interpreting and applying communication codes (2002, 220). More than communicating a particular message, he continues, the face "sets in play the process of communication" (225). For Deleuze, the face bridges two possible worlds: the worlds of the two people encountering each other because as Deleuze and Guattari explain in *What is Philosophy?*, the existence of another person is also the possibility of the existence of another world, as it is expressed in the other's face: "The other person appears here neither as subject nor object but as something very different: a possible world (...). This possible world is not real, or not yet, but exists nonetheless" (1994, 17). Accordingly, encountering the other's face opens a realm of possibility towards a different reality.

In his study of the face, Deleuze concentrates on the direction of the thoughts, feelings, and affects that energize the face rather than what it expresses. As a result, he characterizes faces in terms of the pairing reflective/intensive. While the intensive face refers to the face actively saying something by moving the different elements, such as the eyebrows or the cheeks, the reflective face does not express concretely; it instead seems to be thinking or wondering something. Deleuze writes: “[W]e are before a reflexive or reflecting face as long as the features remain grouped under the domination of a thought which is fixed or terrible, but immutable and without becoming, in a way eternal” (1986, 89-90). As Deleuze explains, the reflecting face remains frozen. In other words, it is un-dynamic and unexciting. It gives the impression that it is under the domain of a single thought. Its thoughtful expression evokes potential or possibility (Rushton 2002, 230). It does not obtain its value from its movements or its ability to change or even its ability to express but from its “impenetrable mystery, an indefinable richness that seems to tell us ‘something’ or maybe” (229). This impenetrability is given by the fixed and immutable character; it is without becoming, “in a way eternal” (229). If what defines a reflective face is its fixity or immutability, then when looking at portraits of static faces, we are necessarily faced with reflective faces which evoke potential or mystery.

In these portraits, the students’ faces are reflective faces. They do not seem to be expressing emotions concretely. They are just staring ahead, impenetrable and mysterious. Without saying anything, they seem to be saying something. According to Deleuze, encountering a reflective face triggers curiosity: one wonders, what is this face thinking? Since faces are generally perceived as communication instruments (Black 2011, 11), we have learned to expect communication from the face. Therefore, when confronted with an inexpressive face, there is a desire to know what is behind it. Thus, staring at the students’ reflective faces results in an uncanny experience that disorders the human faculties. While one expects communication, some movement, or expression, their faces remain impenetrable. In this impenetrability, they retain what Rushton describes as “the mystery and intrigue of the other and the insolubility of the infinite” (2002, 230). The encounter with the possibility of another world through the Other’s face results in an intense experience unrelated to the historical circumstances to which the work responds.

Nonetheless, when encountering *Level of Confidence*, the work is not isolated. It is generally presented within a context that introduces the fact that the people represented in the artwork are the disappeared students. Therefore, the affects produced by looking at the students’ reflective faces enhance the impact of the narrative about the violent events. Correspondingly, the spectator’s affective experience does not solely result from the students’ expressions but from a process akin to embodied imagination, through which the portraits suggest the existence of another world, one in which anyone is susceptible to being disappeared.

### 3.6 Conclusions

*Level of confidence* operates as a counter-forensic device by calling the so-called historical truth into question. Keeping the search going maintains the students’ status as disappeared instead of acknowledging the official version about their deaths. The work, then, contradicts the “historical truth” by constantly restating before multiple forums that the students have not yet been found.

The work's potential to maintain the search for the truth alive depends on its affective operations and capacity to prompt the spectator's critical thinking, which is mainly shaped by the assemblage of the portraits and the face recognition system. The latter forces the spectator to "watch" the pictures and compare them to her face emphasizing the physical similarities between them and making strange the experience of looking at the other and herself. The work, then, affects the spectator and makes any person—regardless of gender, race, or age— capable of finding commonalities. This process shapes the subject's bodily perception of the artwork and ignites her embodied imagination, further engaging with the student's reflective faces. As Deleuze suggests, the reflective face agitates the spectator's mind. It puts the spectator in contact with another possible reality: in this case, the possibility of disappearing, which is revealed to the spectator's body after mentally reconstructing the events in the way Azoulay suggests. As a result, some spectators felt pity and bleak feelings, which are not usually related to looking at portraiture. Such a discrepancy prompted them to consider their exposure to enforced disappearance. In other cases, the spectators' perception of the work was fostered by a connection with other artworks. In both instances, the encounter with the reflective faces of the missing people enhanced the installation's affective operations.

In sum, the installation shapes the spectators' relationship with the photographs. "Watching" portraiture—to borrow Azoulay term— can make sensible unapparent dimensions of violence, as it triggers a process akin to embodied imagination through which the spectator envisions and feels the referred events. In this case study, embodied imagination is enabled by the face recognition device, which enhances the portrait's affective operations. For some spectators, staring at the students' faces triggered pity and feelings of discomfort and fear, a mismatch that made them consider another possible reality: that of the students' disappearance and their exposure to it. Such thoughts resulted from the emotions that the spectator experienced after imagining the situation of violence. In this way, without explicitly showing violent events, the work can "shock to thought" to borrow Massumi's term.

Although the primary affective mechanism of the artwork is not centered on empathic identification, it is possible that the display of human faces enables some degree of identification with the victims, which facilitates the artwork's affective operations. Nevertheless, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, diverse scholars have related forensic aesthetics with multiple objects and materials, such as human remains and architectural ruins, the affective capacities of which cannot be associated with identification. How, then, can objects like these move the spectator? The following chapters explore how objects and materials that do not show human faces affect the spectator and move her towards critical thinking.

## Chapter 4. The Corpse as Evidence of Structural Violence in *Teresa Margolles' What Else Could We Talk About?*



“We can indulge the masochistic pleasures of the death drive safe in the knowledge that we are unkillable.”

Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 2009, 173.

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on human remains as an element of forensic aesthetics by analyzing *What Else Could We Talk About?* by Teresa Margolles, a series of installations made of materials impregnated with corpses' blood traces. In contemporary art, the use of human fluids, body parts, and cadavers as artistic media came into prominence during the late 1980s and 1990s in so-called abject art, which explores the transgression of cleanliness and properness (Arya 2014, 14). Abject art centers on the exhibition of aspects and parts of the body considered unclean or taboo, such as excretions, wounds, and corpses, which, in American and European art, scholars have related to the maternal body as means of disruption of the symbolic order (Foster 1996, 157).<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, in Latin American art —especially in post-dictatorship periods— artists have often used corpses, or images of them, to produce artworks that respond to political violence. Some examples are *Casa Viuda* (Widowed house, 1994) by Doris Salcedo, a sculpture composed of pieces of furniture and human bones that refers to violence in Colombia; and *Ordinário #2* (Ordinary #2, 2013) by Berna Réale, a performance in which the artist transports the skeletons of unidentified victims of violence in Brazil. In Mexico, artists developed most examples of this artistic device after the war on drugs started. In some cases, artists have displayed the materials directly in the exhibition space —as in *Alfombra Roja* (Red Carpet, 2007) by Rosa Maria Robles, an installation consisting of blankets covered in blood, in which criminals used to wrap and abandon corpses in the street— or mediated through photography —as in Fernando Brito's *Your Steps*

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<sup>52</sup> Notably, even though after the 1990s, many artists have continued using dead human matter to produce artworks, they rather seem to be interested in the material qualities of human remains than exploring issues of cleanliness, contamination and the body. See, for example, the work of the Dutch designer Weiki Somers, who produces 3D-printed objects from human ashes. Also of note are Gunther von Hagens' plastinated bodies, which are intended to explore and show human anatomy.

*Got Lost in the Landscape* (2012), mentioned in chapter two. Among these artists, the most influential is Teresa Margolles.

In 2009, Margolles represented Mexico at the Venice Biennale with *¿De Qué Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* (What else could we talk about?), which, as mentioned above, consists of a selection of artworks made with materials impregnated with traces of corpses' blood that Margolles retrieved from drug-related crime scenes. Scholars have interpreted the pavilion as a rethinking of the "national symbol of death" and a *memento mori* (Salazar 2009, 95-96). This argument, however, is problematic when considering that instead of embracing death as a part of life, Margolles used the corpse to denounce a regime based on the annihilation of subjects deemed unworthy. Correspondingly, this chapter argues that the exhibition contested the official narrative that framed the war on drugs as an operation of social security by presenting a forensic reconstruction not of a crime scene but of the experience of living surrounded by violence. Margolles' forensic reconstruction was not centered on visual representations but on uncomfortable sensations triggered by what Julia Kristeva has denominated abjection, and enhanced through theatrical devices. This artistic mechanism troubled the spectator's faculties as there was no commonsensical correspondence between what she was feeling and seeing. The discrepancy set the spectator into an inquiry mode and triggered critical thoughts about drug-related violence, which were, to some extent, guided by the pavilion's construction. By exploiting the affective capacities of human remains, the artworks influenced the spectator's embodied perception of the exhibition space to give a sense of the massive violence, vulnerability, and dysphoria that result from what Massumi calls "low-level fear" or everyday fear (1993, 24) which is comparable to Žižek's idea of the threat of violence. In this way, the pavilion revealed some usually invisible structural violence features to the spectator's body.

First, the chapter introduces the artist and the first two decades of her work. Next, it addresses the historical context that gave rise to the exhibition and describes how different scholars understand the previously mentioned regime of death that the artworks exposed. The third section describes the 2009 Mexican pavilion, which, in the fourth section, is analyzed from the perspective of forensic aesthetics. This part addresses how the artist draws on semiotic devices and sensory engagement to produce a forensic reconstruction that describes different forms of violence involved in the war. By bringing the abject to the public sphere in association with the idea of victims of the war on drugs, the artworks framed the conflict as an expression of a necropolitical regime exterminating dispensable subjects. Finally, the fifth section examines the exhibition's affective operations. By creating an atmosphere in which the corpse can be felt but not be seen, the work gave rise to an affective experience that, instead of numbing the spectators' mind, triggered the embodied perception of an invisible threat that resulted in the sense of unease. The disconnection between the uncomfortable sensation and the simplicity of the visual stimulus puzzled the spectator, moving her to reflect on different aspects of violence. Through its immersive qualities, the exhibition went beyond fostering empathy for specific subjects and brought attention to

the operations of invisible forms of violence, namely to the “low-level fear” that affects a large portion of the Mexican population.

#### 4.1 Teresa Margolles: From the Morgue to the Street

Born in Culiacán, Sinaloa (1963), Teresa Margolles is one of the most influential Mexican contemporary artists.<sup>53</sup> She has visited multiple media—e.g., photography, installation, and video— to produce works exploring, in words of curator Cuahutemoc Medina, “the institutional treatment of corpses and the materiality of death,” among other related topics, including also the precarity affecting Mexico and other Latin American countries (Medina 2009, 16). Trained as a forensic technician, Margolles started her artistic career as the only female member of SEMEFO, an artistic collective named after the Mexican Forensic Medical Service.<sup>54</sup> SEMEFO produced performances and installations using human and animal remains as well as other materials —e.g. in *Dermis* (1997), a piece of tattooed skin obtained from a dead prisoner was exhibited as an artwork (Gallo 2004, 117)— to criticize the failed promises of modernity made to the global south (Medina 2009, 17). SEMEFO’s work can be related to what the curator Cuahutemoc Medina characterized as the “aesthetics of the modernized” (Medina 2002, 40). With SEMEFO, Margolles produced multiple works using the morgue as a studio in which she explored what she called the “life of the corpse” (Medina 2009, 18). Some of these pieces were photographs or videos showing cadavers, as in *Autorretrato* (Self-portrait 1997), in which Margolles poses with the corpse of a homeless child, while others involved preserved body parts, like *Lengua* (Tongue, 2000), which consists of the pierced tongue of a murdered teenager. Through these artworks based on materials Margolles smuggled from the morgue, she intended to expose the laziness and corruption of Mexican institutions and show that precarity follows people to the grave (Carroll 2010, 109).

Because of their interest in abject materials, there are similarities between SEMEFO and Margolles’ work on the one hand and some examples of American and Western European abject art on the other. This is not to say that American or European artists directly influenced the practice of the Mexicans, but that there seems to be common ground between the anxieties mobilizing their work and those behind the 1990s abject art. According to Hal Foster, the fascination with the abject and trauma in American art resulted, among multiple factors, from the AIDS crisis and the destruction of the welfare state after neoliberalism which fostered inequality and class excision (1996, 166). Likewise, SEMEFO emerged in the context of NAFTA and the liberalization of the economy. As discussed in the second chapter, the neoliberal reforms increased Mexico’s poverty, inequality, and violence. Medina (2009,

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<sup>53</sup> Margolles has participated in multiple international art events and her artistic labor has been recognized through diverse prizes such as the Artes Mundi Prize in 2012 and the Prince Claus Prize in the same year. For an in-depth analysis of Margolles’ work until 2009 see, Banwell (2009).

<sup>54</sup> Margolles is not the only Latin American artist trained as forensic technician. Another example is the Brazilian artist Berta Reale, whose work came into prominence after 2013. For an analysis of a selection of Reale’s performances from a feminist perspective see, Berstein (2017). For a discussion of Margolles work from a feminist perspective see, Carroll (2010).



17) and Gallo (2004, 116-119) interpret SEMEFO and Margolles' works as responses to the disruptions of the social order brought about by late capitalism and globalization. Correspondingly, in contrast to American and European abject art, the interest of these Mexican artists in horror and death appears as a reaction to the brutality of the modernization in the global south (Medina 2009, 17). Scholar Amy Sara Carroll argues that there are parallelism between some of the themes explored by these artists and the art produced in Chile after the coup in 1973. As this moment marked the irruption of neoliberalism in the region, this corpus of works —despite having different loci of production— might reveal something about neoliberalism as a force shaping the world (Carroll 2010, 113). This something could be what Dominguez Galbraith characterizes as the naturalization of the destruction of humanity that came with the neoliberal era (2019, 90).

In the early 2000s, SEMEFO split, and Margolles started an independent career with international projection (Medina 2009, 19). The artist gradually turned towards minimalist conceptualism, making subtler references to death. Although still controversial, those works did not exhibit corpses. Instead, she displayed fluids — e.g. blood and body fat— in the exhibition space through various contaminated media, such as water vapor as in *Vaporization* (2001-2008) or the bubbles that formed *In the air* (2002). According to Carroll, works like these, which place the viewers in contact with the materiality of death, dealt with how globalization redistributes inequality and states of exception while simultaneously implicating the spectator as part of this system (2010, 114). This confrontational strategy became a frequent component of her work. Correspondingly, as discussed later, it is also central to *What Else Could We Talk About?*

Around the mid-2000s, as violence intensified at border cities, Margolles abandoned the morgue as a studio and turned to exposing the fatal consequences of narcoviolence. The artist said it was unnecessary to access the morgue as death rapidly spread into the streets (Margolles 2009, 20). She spotted crime scenes reported in the newspapers and gathered the residual evidence left by the police, such as blood and pieces of glass. For example, in the 2006 Liverpool Biennial, she presented *Sobre el dolor* (On Sorrow, 2006), an alley paved with broken glass she recovered from different Mexican cities, through which she sought to return some of the “death *en mass*” produced by modernization to the old continent (Margolles 2009, 87). The Mexican Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennial is another example of this corpus of artworks.

## 4.2 The War on Drugs as the Visible Manifestation of Structural violence

As explained in the second chapter, President Calderon's war on drugs, framed as a crusade for social safety, resulted in an explosion of expressive violence. Between 2006 and 2009 —when the 53rd Biennial took place— around 17,000 people had died due to it (El País, 2016). Enforced disappearances and mutilated corpses abandoned in the public space became frequent, especially at the northern border. Narcoviolence spread fear and anxiety —the dysphoric state described by Reguillo, discussed in chapter two— because, even though the perpetrators and the victims' identities and the circumstances surrounding their death were often uncertain,

corpses made explicit that a “necropower” controlled the territory, reminding the population about their vulnerability.<sup>55</sup>

While the international media often frames drug-related violence as a manifestation of a culturally ingrained tendency towards corruption and violence, others have argued that it is the consequence of a failed state (Halvey 2017, 13). Notably, the narrative that presents violence as a consequence of people’s natural behavior echoes the official discourse put forward by Calderón and later sustained by Peña Nieto that justified the country’s militarization under the premise that it was necessary for the so-called “institutional re-composition” (Emmelhainz 2016, 160). As discussed before, these arguments obscure that the war benefits corporate power by creating a long-durational war with a ubiquitous enemy that activates multiple markets —e.g. guns and personal security— and creates a discourse that justifies state violence, repression, and control (Calveiro 2010, 100-109).

It is worth noting that this form of state violence is not evident because it works through a politics of exclusion and exception, similar to that implemented in other neoliberal regimes: while the state protects the elites, rural populations, migrants, and other low-class groups live in precarity, exposed to injury and death, as they are considered disposable subjects whose death is insignificant and sometimes even necessary for economic development (Emmelhainz 2016, 35), as in the case of the activists protecting natural resources from private companies who have been intimidated or murdered. Such politics especially applies to the workers of the drug industries —generally low-class young, non-white men— whose annihilation is framed as beneficial for society. The war on drugs offers a framework that justifies eliminating all these groups by relating them to drug trafficking, as the label “narco” creates an Other regarded as a threat to the social order against whom the normative citizen is defined. Since necropolitics justifies the instrumentalization of life and the destruction of disposable subjects to eliminate political contestation (Mbembe 2019, 36), the war on drugs can be described as a necropolitical project aimed at destabilizing the country through paramilitary groups to reconfigure the territory in the benefit of economic interests.

By 2009, the failure of the war on drugs was evident in Mexico and abroad. Even the United States Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) claimed Mexico was under a rapid collapse.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, Calderón denied such accusations, advancing a discourse affirming that it was false that citizens were massacred in the streets and that militarization was necessary to continue with what he framed as a successful “institutional re-composition,” which became the backbone of the government’s foreign policy (Herrera Beltrán 2009). This discourse complemented Calderon’s initial efforts to legitimate his mandate, among which was a cultural diplomacy strategy that contemplated the reintroduction of Mexico to the Venice Biennial so that, in 2007, after more than fifty years of absence, Mexico installed a national pavilion (Rodríguez Barba 2012, 49). Taking part in international art events is

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<sup>55</sup> Achille Mbembe defines necropower as force subjugating life to the power of death (2019, 34).

<sup>56</sup> Under the argument of protecting the United States from drug-trafficking, the American government promoted a security agreement with Mexico and other countries in Central America to officially intervene in the combat against drugs.

culturally legitimating. For some countries, participating in them is a means to acquire a first-world status since presenting a pavilion is a tacit declaration of having achieved certain cultural power or, at least, aspiring to achieve it (Tang 2007, 248). Accordingly, the participation at the Biennial aimed at presenting Mexico as a modern nation with the economic and cultural power to occupy a privileged position within the globalized community (Rodríguez Barba 2012, 49).

In 2009, however, the selection committee chose Teresa Margolles' project curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, which did not comply with the image that the government intended to project abroad.<sup>57</sup> The exhibition provoked such discomfort that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stopped funding the project (Delgadillo 2016, 222). Nevertheless, as Delgadillo notes, it is impossible to affirm that the committee had subversive intentions since Margolles had been active for more than twenty years, and her work had never caused such an outrage. Daniela Rossell's photographic series *Ricas y Famosas* (Rich and Famous, 2000) about the lifestyle of Mexican elites was more controversial than Margolles's early works (222). In this case, the state's reaction was probably due to the explicit criticism of Calderón's core project that the pavilion intended, compromising the state's control over the imagery about the war on drugs.

#### 4.3 The Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennial: A place made strange.

*What Else Could We Talk About?* consisted of nine artworks displayed at the palace Rota Ivancich —a lapidated 16th-century luxurious building— most of which were part of Margolles's work based on materials appropriated from crime scenes at northern Mexican cities (Margolles 2009, 95). In *Bandera* (Flag, 2009) and *Narcomensajes* (Narcomessages, 2009), Margolles used fabrics with blood left behind after executions at the border: in the first, she attached the material to a stick and presented it as a flag;<sup>58</sup> and in the later, she integrated the cloth's pieces into a delegated performance enacted by the victims' relatives, who embroidered with golden thread menacing messages commonly found along with murdered bodies —“see, hear, and silence;” “Until all your children fall;” “Thus finish the rats;” “So that they learn to respect” (Margolles 2009, 50). Once finished, the artist hung the fabrics on the palace's walls, evoking goblins. In contrast, in *Sangre Recuperada* (Recovered Blood, 2009), although there is also blood, it is not visible: it is mixed with mud taken from crime scenes with damped rags, the appearance of which evokes the border's desertic landscape and uncarpeted streets (92). In these pieces, Margolles presented an ordinary material —cloth— in an unfamiliar way by adding blood, a strange material for an artistic context, the presence and origins of which became evident through signs placed on the walls.

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<sup>57</sup> According to the scholar Willivaldo Delgadillo, the selection of Margolles' and Medina's project was possible because the jury was composed by the directors of diverse Mexican museums who sympathize with the artists and the curator. After this experience, in 2013, the Mexican government imposed a series of restrictions about the type of works can be exhibited at the biennial (2016, 222).

<sup>58</sup> The work now forms part of the Tate gallery's collection.

Like *Narcomessages*, *Limpieza* (*Cleaning*, 2009) —which, according to Margolles, was the exhibition's central piece— was also a delegated performance. It consisted of an action in which the victims' relatives mopped the palace's floors with water mixed with blood recovered from crime scenes.<sup>59</sup> Margolles transported the fabrics impregnated with blood from Mexico to the biennial. Once at the venue, she immersed them in hot water to extract the human fluid, which she then also used to make *Mesa* (*Table*, 2009), a minimalist concrete structure that emulates a desk. *Cleaning* took place every day during the biennale. The idea was that the blood gradually accumulated on the floor to form a thin crust over which the visitors walked, transporting its traces on their shoes' soles. Notably, even though *Cleaning* was the most invasive of the artworks as it occupied half of the site and put the spectator inevitably in contact with death's materiality, it was invisible while it was not enacted. Correspondingly, the pavilion conveyed a sense of emptiness filled with a strange smell, a combination that rarified space. *Sonidos de la Muerte* (*Sounds of Death*, 2008/2009) —ambient sounds recorded in Ciudad Juárez's at places where the police found dead women's bodies— intensified the effect. While simple, like *Recovered blood*, the sound installation transported Juárez's urban and desertic outside to Venice, introducing the exterior of the border region to the interior of a European palace. In short, like *Narcomessages* and *Flag*, these pieces made an exhibition space strange through their materiality and aesthetic features.

Margolles also included *Ajuste de Cuentas* (*Score-Settling*, 2009) and *Cartas para Picar Cocaína* (*Cards to cut cocaine*, 1998-2009). The first is a set of gold jewelry encrusted with glass recovered from car shootings. The second is a business card with the photograph of a corpse on one side, and the work's title, the Biennale's logo, and the caption "Person murdered because of links with organized crime" on the other. This work echoes an action produced by Margolles in 1999, in which she asked cocaine consumers to prepare the drug with the laminated picture of a dead body. Like the 2009 version, the work's first iteration aimed at confronting recreational drug users with the uncomfortable implications of the narcotics trade (Banwell 2009, 80). For the biennial, the artist distributed ten thousand copies of the work among the assistants during the event's opening days, making these pieces operate as strange souvenirs and advertisements (Medina 2009, 81). The estrangement effect stems from the corpse's association with jewelry and souvenirs, which are not usually connected.

The venue's heritage character limited the interventions in the architectural space, yet the artist took advantage of these restrictions to establish a direct dialogue with the palace's decayed state (Margolles 2009, 88). When visiting the pavilion, the spectator found herself walking through a series of mostly empty rooms. There was nothing but a few rags dyed red hanging from some of the walls in a place where the visitant could expect a selection of art objects. The exhibition tour started with *Table*, placed as a reception desk. Next, the visitor climbed the stairs and reached the first floor, where she would find the rooms designated for *Cleaning*. After walking through a few empty rooms, the spectator would see a sign describing the performance and materials' origin next to a water bucket and a mop. The visitor encountered *Narcomessages* and a locked safe containing *Score Settling* in

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<sup>59</sup> A recording of the performance is available at <https://artofthemooc.org/wiki/cleaning-what-else-could-we-talk-about/>

the following spaces. Finally, when coming back downstairs, the viewer found an empty corridor, where she could hear *Sounds of Death* playing, followed by a long room where *Recovered blood* was hanging from one of the walls.

Like the rest of Margolles's art, these works had conceptualist and minimalist influences. Nonetheless, they were more artless than other pieces, like *On the air* (2003) or *On Sorrow* (2006), which also appropriated crime-related materials. Besides, in the works she presented at Venice, the artists emphasized more their production process through a photographic register published in the exhibition catalog. Also noteworthy is that, as a whole, instead of a selection of independent, self-contained objects, the pavilion was closer to a scene composed of different clues defined by their physicality and their capacity to evoke something absent. These features are similar to those Rugoff noted for the works he displayed in *Crime Scene* (1997, 60-72). Correspondingly, using Rugoff's argument as a reference, *What Else Could We Talk About?* is better described through the concept of forensic aesthetics than other Margolles' works, even if they all incorporate crime-related materials.

#### 4.4 The corpse as evidence: *What Else Could We Talk About?* as Forensic Reconstruction of the War on Drugs

While the government intended the pavilion to promote Mexico's image as a modern state, the curator and the artist sought to create a "space of friction" (Medina 2009, 83). Like other Margolles' pieces, these artworks aimed at confronting the spectator with violence. Building on Weizman's description of forensic aesthetics as articulating truth claims through a series of narrative, technological and performative devices, this thesis argues that the pavilion specifically contested the official narrative that framed the war on drugs as an operation of social security. Margolles' counter-narrative was presented as a forensic reconstruction of the lived experience of "everyday fear" based on the semiotic and affective qualities of materials that belong to what the artist calls the "periphery of the corpse" (Margolles 2007), especially human blood. Although it is not its only connotation, here, blood was used as a direct index of the cadaver, which was the central component of the exhibition. As Margolles' discourse aims at confronting state violence, it constitutes an expression of the structure of feeling described in the second chapter, in which a dysphoric state mixes with empathy for the Other and also aligns with the ethos of neoliberalism.

##### 4.3.1 The Corpse as Evidence

As discussed in the introduction, the corpse is a trope linked to 1990s North American and European abject art of the 1990s. According to Foster, in some cases, these artworks used the abject to test sublimation, and, in others, to contest the paternal law (1996, 118-119). Foster relates such gestures with fatigue with the politics of difference and with a "strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, a call for regression that goes beyond the infantile and the inorganic" (120). According to the scholar, such desire responds to a fascination with trauma. Correspondingly, some contemporary artworks composed of corpses —such as Joel Peter Witkin's *Harvest* (1984)— have been interpreted as contemporary *memento moris* that relate to the trauma of death (Lousa 2016, 382).

Similarly, art historian Mónica Salazar argues that *What Else Could We Talk About?* was a reworking of one of the country's most known symbols "(...) to confront the viewer with the inevitability of death and with the tragic reality of Mexico" (2009, 94). Others like Teresa Lousa share part of this interpretation, as they understand the work as "a reflection about 'the-being-towards-death' that constitutes everyone" (2016, 384). Salazar's framing of the exhibition as a rethinking of a national symbol is debatable as human remains are not exclusive of Mexican art. Besides Margolles' work, there are multiple examples in Latin American art of this aesthetic device, especially in response to extended periods of state violence. For example, *Unland* by Doris Salcedo (1995-1998) and *Emberá Chamí* (2008) by Rosenberg Sandoval integrate human bones. Importantly, unlike Salazar, Rubén Yepes relates Salcedo and Sandoval's work to forensic aesthetics and argues that bones are indexical signs of both the victims' bodies and the violence committed against them, a semiotic function, which, he states, is apprehended affectively (2019, 69). In other words, the bones are direct indices of subjective violence, which the spectator perceives as intensity, not as a concept. Correspondingly, in these artworks, the artists present the corpse as evidence of violence which is felt instead of apprehended through cognition.

Campos Pérez relates the corpse in Chilean art to the aesthetics of disappearance (2015, 6). She discusses *Lección de Anatomía* (Anatomy's lesson, 1983), a work by Chilean artist Arturo Duclós that consists of painted human bones, which, she argues, refers to the felt absence of those who were disappeared or murdered during the dictatorship and denounces the destruction of both the subject's body and the body politics (6). Notably, Beristein differently interprets the human bones that Berna Reale uses in her performance *Ordinário* (Ordinary, 2013), reading them as a denunciation of the naturalization of violence produced by social and economic inequality (2017, 284). Although emphasizing different aspects, both scholars refer to the corpse in relation to violence. The argument that frames the cadaver as a *memento mori* fails to capture how the relation to the historical context transforms the corpse's role from an invitation to acknowledge death as part of life to question and reject the uneven distribution of violence and death. In other words, the corpse appears as a symbol of precarity, as described by Butler (2009, ii). Framing politically engaged artworks like these as reminders of death as a precondition of life is problematic because it articulates a reception that deems the uneven distribution of death as inevitable, and consequently, acceptable.

Margolles' exhibition made the relationship to political violence explicit through a series of textual devices — the curatorial texts and the artist's declarations— that referred to the war on drugs, creating a semiotic context that influenced the corpse's meaning. Such meaning was connected to the role given to the cadavers by criminal organizations during the war on drugs. Narcoviolence used the cadaver as a communication tool with political value, the images of which circulated in the national and international media. Its exposure in the public sphere indicated that the territory was under dispute and that the state had lost control over it. The corpse, then, became a sign that put under pressure the myth of Mexican modernity and the neoliberal promises of progress (Carton de Grammont 2015, 17). In dialogue with this context, instead of an invitation to reflect on death as an inevitable part of life, the

corpse exposed how the hegemonic system has failed to guarantee social and economic stability, especially to the lower classes.

As will be discussed in the following section, according to Julia Kristeva, the corpse embodies the abject: whatever "disturbs identity, system, order," and consequently is rejected and expelled to secure the boundaries of the self (1982, 4). Kristeva conceived abjection —the impulse to reject— as a psychic process, which also emerges in the social realm. Marginalized subjects —e.g. the poor, migrants, and drug addicts— are made abject as they are seen as threats and consequently rejected and cast out. The mortal victims of the war on drugs are often marginalized subjects whose death seems necessary to maintain the social order. By bringing the corpse —an abjection trigger— in relation to them, Margolles articulated a symbol that speaks about the annihilation of those deemed unworthy, opening the space to consider the military intervention as an operation of social cleansing —an idea reinforced through the performance *Cleaning*.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, the presentation of human remains played a similar role to that of the portraits in Lozano-Hemmer's work as they lent presence to these abject and absent subjects and demanded justice for them. Nonetheless, instead of speaking about particular persons, the pavilion focused on conveying the idea of massive death, which complicated experiencing pity, sympathy, or empathy.

It is worth noting that, traditionally, the idea that an image can inspire moral action —like the search for justice— has been seen as a function of its capacity to trigger empathy for the victims, which is often associated with emotional identification with them (Dean 2003, 89). As discussed in the previous chapter, pity also necessitates concrete stories that facilitate a relationship with the sufferer. Significantly, in this case, identification was impeded by the lack of narratives and the almost complete absence of human figures. The scholar Maria Campiglia has criticized this strategy, arguing that "these works are incapable of triggering empathy in the spectator or recovering any details of the particular history of the victims or the families" (2013, 122).<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the exhibition does not reveal much about the victims as subjects, making it challenging to identify with them.

Nonetheless, this seemed not to be the point of these artworks. Instead, the exhibition presented a forensic reconstruction of different forms of violence involved in the war on drugs centered on direct engagement with sensation. In short, the corpse appears as a symbol that shows that the hegemonic system brings the uneven distribution of death that targets the abjected. The sign's affective register is at the core of the sensory experience, which is structured as a forensic reconstruction, as the next section discusses.

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<sup>60</sup> According to Hal Foster, abject art produced in the 1990s took two directions: to identify with the abject to explore the wound of trauma; and to identify and represent the condition of abjection as a provocation, risking that this mimesis would confirm a given condition of abjection (1996, 118-119). Margolles' work resonates with the last as it identifies subjects deemed unworthy with an abject material as an act of provocation.

<sup>61</sup> Las piezas tampoco parecieran ser capaces de despertar en el espectador un sentimiento empático, o recuperar la historia particular de aquel que ha muerto y su familia. My translation.

#### 4.3.2 A Forensic Reconstruction

In general terms, forensic reconstruction is a technique used “to gain explicit knowledge of the series of events that surround the commission of a crime using deductive and inductive reasoning, physical evidence, scientific methods, and their interrelationships” (ACSR 2020). This definition can be related to Margolles’ work because, although the artist did not recreate a concrete crime scene, the exhibition shed light on the lived experience of the drug wars by making the spectator feel violence as a force that manifests as “low-level fear” —the fear that infiltrates everyday life (Massumi 1993, viii). This kind of fear is not clearly experienced as an emotion. Instead, it is “a kind of background radiation saturating existence” (24). As discussed in what follows, the pavilion triggered such emotion while unpacking the relationship between different forms of violence at play in the conflict by using physical evidence of murder mediated through a series of performative, semiotic, and theatrical devices. In other words, Margolles placed the corpse as a sign of the uneven distribution of death in dialogue with other signifiers to elaborate on the different forms of violence. Through the affective register of this materiality, the artist allowed the spectator to engage with the fear that characterizes the dysphoric state described by Reguillo (2015, 69), discussed in the second chapter. Through this forensic reconstruction, then, the exhibition opened the space to learn about the relations between subjective violence and forms of objective violence that are invisible, such as precarity and the threat of violence.

In *Recovered Blood* and *Sounds of Death*, the corpse is present but cannot be seen. Correspondingly, their materiality’s affective operations are felt like a threat that evokes how death is embedded in the public space and transforms the fabric of everyday life by inducing a “low-level fear” (Massumi 1993, viii). Therefore it comes close to Reguillo’s description of dysphoria. Notably, the materiality of these artworks is site-specific. Margolles obtained the mud and the sounds from Ciudad Juárez, a city strongly affected by violence after the liberalization of the economy.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, these artworks expose the precarity of the border city. Displayed in the global north, they show that, as Butler has described, the condition of being exposed to injury is differentially distributed (2009, ii).

*Narcomessages* points to the role of the struggle for economic and political power within the context of narcoviolence. By associating the corpse, threatening expressions, and gold —as a signifier of wealth— *Narcomessages* described the forces leading to the “denaturalization” of the corpse and its transformation into a communication device at the service of economic accumulation and power. Differently put, at a symbolic level, the work described how the ethos of neoliberalism that privileges economic profit has resulted in the corpse’s transformation into an expressive tool, and as Valencia has explained, a means of financial gain (2016, 51). Simultaneously, it also captures how the instrumentalization of the corpse transforms everyday experience by making the subjects aware of the little value attributed to life by power groups —both criminal organizations and

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<sup>62</sup> The situation of Ciudad Juárez is discussed in chapter five.



the state— and consequently, of their corporeal vulnerability, a message which is grasped through the materiality's affective register.

According to Margolles, again, *Cleaning* was the exhibition's central artwork (2009, 82). With this piece, the artist exposed the symbolic dimension that enables subjective and systemic violence. The hegemonic view of the war on drugs is marked by a binary discourse of "us" —the civil society— versus "them" —the bad people (García Reyes 2020), and the casualties are usually framed as criminals, which justifies their annihilation. The dominant discourse is materialized through images that circulate in the media and popular culture. These expressions of symbolic violence are necessary to legitimize the assassination, repression, and exploitation of low classes. In this work, Margolles decentered the identity of the murdered by using anonymous human remains, disrupting the hegemonic binary discourse and bringing attention to the human condition of all casualties —whether criminals or not. This perspective is reinforced through the involvement of the victims' families as the spectator cannot know the story behind them or the identity of their dead relatives (if they were criminals or not). Besides, it indicates that all the mortal victims are connected to a community that is wounded when they are murdered, even if this network is also considered unworthy. Correspondingly, the artist produced forensic evidence that exposed the symbolic structures that legitimized the annihilation of abject subjects and simultaneously made visible both the victims and their families that the state has neglected.

Margolles' exhibition not only intended to produce forensic evidence of the necropolitical order sustained by the Mexican state and the felt experience of exposure to violence. By transporting the materiality of death to a high-class international event, the exhibition also suggested that violence is not an aberration of Mexican reality but the flip-side of the global political and economic orders. *Cleaning* shares ground with works like *In the Air* and *Vaporization*, in that they are all based on water mixed with corpses' fluids spread to fill the space in such a way that the spectator could not avoid entering into contact with the substance. As discussed before, Carrol has argued that the artworks in which the spectator is inevitably surrounded by the materiality of death signal that globalization redistributes inequality and corporeal vulnerability. Accordingly, the blood in *Cleaning* stuck to the spectators' shoes opened the space to consider that, as Springer suggests, violence cannot be understood as an isolated and localized event. Instead, it is an "unfolding process, derived from the broader geographical phenomena and temporal patterns of the social world" (2011, 90). This consideration was reinforced by the act of distributing *Cards to Cut Cocaine* during the parties of the opening days.

In short, *What Else Could We Talk About?* can be read as a forensic reconstruction based on the assemblage of signs that unpacked the relationship between visible subjective violence and non-evident forms of objective violence, revealed to the spectators' bodies through the corps' affective register. In these artworks, human remains operated as a sign that denounced the necropolitical regime sustained by the Mexican state against those deemed unworthy, lending them presence and demanding justice for them. Through the corpse, Margolles displayed a forensic reconstruction of the different forms of violence that construct and enable the war on drugs:

the symbolic register of violence that allows the annihilation of marginalized subjects, the precarization of life, and the instrumentalization of death.

#### 4.5 Feeling *What Else Could We Talk About?*: the Pavilion's affective operations

Unlike *Level of Confidence*, which has been mostly well-received, Margolles' project triggered positive and negative responses. For some, *What Else Could We Talk About?* was a "gritty and ethically potent" work (Garret, 2009) or "the most eloquent work on display" (Wilson-Goldie, 2009), capable of inducing a "collective, empathic state of mourning and loss for lives ignored by their government when still alive" (Newman 2013, 23). For others, like the assistant editor of *Frieze Magazine*, Christy Lange, it was "the most talked about but underwhelming off-site pavilion" (2009). These contrasting opinions relate to the works' affective operations, which were based on multiple features, such as the materials' authenticity, the abjection triggered by the corpse's materiality —its invisible but proximate presence, the smell, the atmosphere—, the theatricality, and the estrangement effect that influenced the spectator's embodied perception of the pavilion.

##### 4.5.1 The role of the materials' authenticity and the artist's reputation in the artwork's affective operations

Alvarez and Zaiontz argue that in forensic aesthetics, the spectator plays the role of a witness testifying to the evidence's existence and "realizing the victim's right to appear" (2018, 289). Notably, whether or not the spectator embraces the role of the witness depends on the artworks' persuasiveness, which in turn depends on the index's affective power and the artist's reputation, because, as Weizman points out, evidence and expert —the artist in this case— constitute a "rhetorical unit" (2010, 11). The fact that Margolles was trained as a forensic technician and born in Culiacán, Sinaloa —a city connected to drug trafficking since the 1970s— seems to add to the credibility of her work, as the multiple mentions of these two facts in both academic and non-academic articles demonstrate.

Still, some are skeptical about the origin of the materials she employs, which indicates that their authenticity is part of the works' affective power. For example, Lange states: "[M]y major problem with the work is this: if any of the rules are bent over the course of the six-month exhibition —the blood not real or the buckets filled with ordinary tap water— then the work loses its efficacy and authenticity. A work like this cannot simply be a metaphor: the execution should be strictly faithful to the concept; any deviation cheats the audience and makes the whole work disingenuous" (2009). Likewise, the Mexican art critic Avelina Lesper writes: "It is surprising that the state's cultural institutions, the selection committee, and the critics who applaud the artwork frantically as a work of

denunciation have not analyzed if the work is done with the materials that the artist claims. Obtaining these materials is an act of corruption that adds to these horrible crimes in the name of pseudo art” (2009).<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, Lange and Lésper’s comments echo Rebatés’ criticism of Ralph Rugoff’s decision to frame artworks unrelated to real-life documents as examples of forensic aesthetics, as they looked fake (quoted in Scott Bray 2014, 94). These statements, then, suggest that believing in the materials’ presumed authenticity plays a crucial role in experiencing forensic artworks. In contrast to other cultural productions —fiction, for instance— where readers are often willing to suspend disbelief, in these artworks, viewers demand a correspondence between the narrative about the artwork and the piece’s materialization. Such a demand can be explained by the evidentiary role of materiality in forensic aesthetics which takes the object out of representation and brings it into the realm of presentation. Besides, refusing to believe in the authenticity of the materials can be an expression of the spectator’s unwillingness to accept the evidence, and consequently, the narrative put forward by the artist.

#### 4.5.2 Corpse and abjection: the role of invisibility, proximity, and smell on its affective operations

In addition to authenticity and the artist’s reputation, Yepes observes that the artwork’s persuasive power stems from the indices’ affective force. The encounter with remains of a corpse can be an unsettling experience. In this case, such discomfort was manifested through expressions that described the exhibition as “disturbing,” “gut-wrenching,” (Thayer and Och, 2009), or producing “a visceral shock” (Prince Claus Fund, 2012). These remarks describe physical responses to the corpse’s presence, which can be considered manifestations of what Julia Kristeva denominates abjection.

According to Kristeva, abjection manifests as violent body sensations, such as spasms and vomit, simultaneously bringing repulsion and desire. Although abjection usually arises from being exposed to bodily fluids associated with dirtiness —like urine, feces, and blood— Kristeva argues that the lack of cleanliness does not define this affect. Instead, abjection is triggered by the encounter with what compromises the subject’s boundaries and the sense of self. It is a disruption in the symbolic order. According to Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate expression of the abject, which she describes as follows:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is a cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and puss, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse, and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border (1982, 3).

For Kristeva, the corpse is disturbing because it reminds the subject of her material condition and mortality: “it is death infecting life” (4). Notably, although disturbing, the encounter with the corpse has a

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<sup>63</sup> Es sorprendente que las instituciones culturales del Estado, el comité seleccionador y la crítica -que lo aplaude frenética como una obra de denuncia-, no hayan analizado que si en verdad la obra está realizada con los materiales que la artista afirma, su obtención es un acto de corrupción que se suma a estos horribles crímenes en nombre del pseudo arte. My translation.

component of fascination. In other words, while it triggers abominable sensations such as terror and disgust, simultaneously, undergoing experiences that threaten the sense of the self is alluring. According to scholar Rhina Arya, one of the reasons for the fascination with the abject is that it is cathartic as it causes the release of accumulated tension (2014, 29). In Arya's words: "Abjection gives voice to feelings that are often repressed, and confrontation may engender a sense of release" (29).

It is worth noting that the corpse triggers a sensory disturbance not because it means death. As Kristeva points out, it is not "signified death" that is intolerable, but the corpse's presence as it "shows" the subject what she "thrust[s] aside in order to live." (1982, 3). Accordingly, the sense of abjection and the catharsis it might bring often occurs through sight (Arya 2014, 102). In *What Else Could We Talk About?* nevertheless, although the corpse's materiality was present, it was not visible. Instead, the corpse was recreated in the viewers' imagination after they realized the nature of the artworks' materiality. If the corpse is not visible and its presence is mainly recreated in the viewer's mind, how could these works shock the spectator?

In literature, corpses' graphic descriptions might trigger abjection because they enable the reader to visualize them. These visualizations "can ultimately have the same function and affective impacts as material images" (Van Alphen 2008, 27). However, the corpse was not described but only named in this case. This observation suggests that the belief of being in the presence of the corpse was central to the experience: even if it is invisible, believing that the corpse is there is already an anxiety trigger. Nevertheless, not only the presence of the materiality of death was unsettling but also the sense that the corpse was everywhere at a close distance. Since abjection is mainly centered on the sense that boundaries are compromised, proximity is a crucial component of this affect (Arya 2014, 40). In Arya's words: "As the danger increases in magnitude or draws nearer, fear mounts as the possibility of dissolution or collapse becomes more pressing" (41). Besides, proximity is central to abjection as "it requires sensory stimulation to activate perceptual awareness" (Arya 2014, 41). In this case, sensory stimulation was not achieved through sight but through other bodily senses, as the following statement by curator Rob Garret reveals:

One after the other, cool, shaded, slightly damp, the rooms were empty of "art" except for a single mop and bucket standing against a wall in each. With my poor timing, I had not been there to see the daily mid-afternoon ritual in which the attendants wet-mopped these floors as the artist had instructed.

Moving reasonably quickly, I was still waiting or looking for something, but not sure what. The last of these upstairs rooms didn't care whether I was ready, waiting, or distracted: it packed an unmitigated punch that assaulted all my senses as soon as I crossed the threshold. The room stank. It was warmer and slightly fetid. It was darker: crimson dark. The walls of this room were hung with blood-soaked shrouds. It was a sweet, cloying, humid, and claustrophobic chamber that stopped me in my tracks, and I wanted to hold my breath, turn away, seek the calm coolness of the previous two rooms, but I was at least momentarily transfixed and found myself breathing the room in.

Garret explains that, although he was aware of the exhibition's content, it was the warm and fetid atmosphere of the last room that shocked him and "assaulted" his senses. Similarly, Wilson-Goldie notes: "the smell, the soberness of the site and the heaviness of the atmosphere can all be palpably felt without any words

being spoken or written” (2009). Together, these statements indicate that skin sensation and smell played a crucial role in feeling the corpse’s presence and sparking the spectator’s embodied imagination.

Teresa Brennan argued that smell is critical in the perception of an atmosphere. Through unconscious olfaction, people react to other people’s emotional states, such as depression or aggression, even if there is no verbal communication (2004, 9). Correspondingly, Brennan’s argument suggests that the blood’s smell took part in the viewer’s affective experience beyond the fact of being unpleasant. Putrescine, a byproduct of the decomposition of fatty acids, is present in corpses’ blood. Research in behavioral sciences shows that even brief exposure to this component unchains chemosensory warning signals. As a result, the exposed subject experiences impulses related to escape and threat, as well as increased hostility toward other people (Wisman and Shrira 2015, 1.) Garret’s urge to hold his breath and turn away may have been triggered by the increased concentration of this chemical compound in the last room. All these arguments show how, although the corpse was invisible, its materiality directly affected the viewer’s body through sensory stimulation.

#### 4.5.3 Theatricality and Estrangement

In addition to the affective capacities of the materials, the artist used a series of theatrical devices to intensify sensory stimulation and perceptual awareness of the corpse’s presence, stimulating in this way the spectator’s embodied imagination. The impact of these artistic strategies in the audience’s experience is evident in the critic Kaele Wilson-Goldie’s (2009) description of her encounter with the work during the opening days:

Even within the actual building, the show is arranged in such a manner that viewers experience the work as both a carefully orchestrated performance and a sprawling, interactive installation through which you must find your way. When you walk through the door, the curator, Cuauhtémoc Medina, greets you with the words: “Go through the exhibition, and then we can talk. Those are the rules.” From there, you proceed up the stairs, through the rooms, and back down again, guided by assistants, all young women who are silent, sober, and do not smile.

As can be read in Wilson-Goldie’s statement, the artists and the curator carefully constructed a mysterious and somber atmosphere that contributed to the place’s estrangement effect. Such an atmosphere was partly enabled by the assistants’ presence, the palace’s decayed appearance, and the artworks’ disposition within the space.

Although none of the works can be considered examples of interactive or participatory art, the artworks’ placement within the palace and the slow revelation of their content endowed the exhibition with a durational component. As a result, as Wilson-Goldie notes, the exhibition was perceived as an extended installation more than as multiple independent artworks. The experience of this installation was packed with suspense created through the expectation of finding something in the empty rooms and the presence of the assistants and the performers enacting *Cleaning*, as their silent and dispassionate expressions compelled the visitor to adopt a more somber attitude. As the following statement suggests, the experience of entering into this strange environment triggered a gradual change in the visitor’s mood: “Concealing something is often a more effective attention-grabbing strategy than openly revealing it. The sepulchral silence in the Mexican pavilion and visitors’ increasingly somber mood as they walked the rooms of the Palazzo Rota-Ivancich prove this” (Hernández 2009).

Besides, in the case of *Cleaning*, its durational component might have caught the viewer's attention, and the disconnection between moping and the idea of art contributed to the sense of defamiliarization. Such a sensation engaged the viewer in a continuous inquiry, as the student Indrani Saha explains (2009):

[T]he act itself serves to be quite the sight. On the surface, the cleaner's effort appears out of place within a greater art space. The task is being completed in full view of others rather than after hours. Secondly, it appears as though mopping is endless. This leads the viewer to question, "What is being cleaned?" and "Why won't the cleaning end?" and "Why won't the mopping end?" With knowledge of the bucket's contents, one may begin to comprehend the futility of the cleaner's efforts. Nothing is being cleaned, and instead, blood is being layered onto the floor. The traces of blood illustrate the relentless killings, while the action of mopping provides a jarring embodiment of the families' struggles.

When the performance was not being enacted, the visitor found nothing but a bucket of water with a mop. Finding one empty space after another had a double effect, disorienting the viewer and triggering her curiosity about what is there to be seen. In the next rooms, the visitor found *Narcomessages* and *Recovered blood*, suddenly changing the mood of the visit, as the curator Rob Garret (2009) described in the statement discussed above.

Some visitors characterized the experience of transiting through the pavilion as marked by negative affects. For example, Wilson-Goldi writes:

One could argue, convincingly, that Margolles' exhibition is too earnest and too self-righteous, that the works serve to silence and humble rather than challenge or provoke, and that the whole thing is just too much. Nevertheless, that creeping sense of unease and the initial impulse to reject might also be precisely the point. After all, the show ultimately hinges on excess: Why so many pieces? Why so many permutations of the same idea? Isn't the point sufficiently made by the one young man mopping the floor? But then again, the excess of permutations corresponds to the excess of violence about which the exhibition speaks.

The journalist described the exhibition as too somber and smug. She found it silencing and mortifying rather than challenging or provoking. Interestingly, her words do not indicate she experienced a catharsis of negative emotions in the sense of releasing tensions. Instead, it seems she felt charged with an affective burden that made her consider the exhibition was "too much." Notably, this affective burden made her reflect that the excess of permutations of the same theme was indicative of the quantity of violence that the work aimed at addressing. This remark suggests that artistic representations of violence, such as Margolles' exhibition or Lozano-Hemmer's work, do not necessarily dialogue in peace with the spectator. Instead, it seems that bodily experiences interpreted as uncomfortable at the level of awareness play an essential role in making the spectator think about violence. For example, Garret finishes his blog entry by writing: "[the work's] visceral power and by association its ethical impact hit home sharply as if everything that I could, or would have lingered over, reflected on, in situ, was collapsed into that one brief moment when my nostrils and skin took in the blood-soaked room" (2009).

#### 4.5.4 Low-level intensity as a means to "shock to thought"

The fact that shocking and uncomfortable sensations are involved in the process of thinking about violence does not imply that shock is the key to inviting reflection. As discussed before, Valencia and Sepúlveda note that the overstimulation of the viewer's body numbs her capacity to think (2016, 81). This observation has been echoed by other scholars, like Ruíz (2018), in discussing Mexican photojournalism. Nevertheless, the statements above,

together with Valencia's and Sepúlveda's argument, suggest that the limit between the possibility of triggering critical reflection on violence and numbing the viewer is not a matter of shocking or not shocking, but of the shock's intensity. As discussed in chapter one, Brian Massumi has called the type of shock that "does not so much reveal the truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry" a "shock to thought" (quoted in Bennet 2005, 11). The exhibition shocked some viewers to thought by triggering an affective experience of low intensity by making the corpse invisible but still making its presence felt. Aria has argued: "An awareness of a corpse lying behind a closed door in an adjoining room may cause anxiety, but it does not compare with the increase in fear caused if the offending object was in front of our very eyes" (2014, 41). Similarly, in this case, the works managed to induce a shock of less intensity than the shock that the presence of a wounded corpse would induce. Such observation may indicate that an oblique representation of violence can cause a low-intensity shock rather than an explicit representation, and this low-intensity shock is a productive way to open the space to thinking.

Notably, Margolles intended to actively intervene in the crisis of violence and make a difference, as she explained in a recent interview: "When I thought about mopping with blood, I thought that art could stop the violence. However, I have realized that art does not stop anything throughout these ten years. Art is not a shield for anyone" (Margolles 2019).<sup>64</sup> Although, as Margolles has affirmed, *What Else Could We Talk About?* did not make a difference in the political and social circumstances that produce violence, the work successfully arrested the audience's attention, sparking multiple conversations about the relationship between art, death, and violence in academic and non-academic contexts. These discussions often address the distribution of precarity in the globalized world. For example, the initial shock or rejection that Wilson-Goldi reports experiencing takes her later to reflect on the excess of violence. Earlier in the same statement, she writes:

What makes Margolles' exhibition so strong is more than just the horrors present in her work. *What Else Could We Talk About?* directly challenges what a national pavilion could or should be. (...). It uses the space and time of the Biennale to take a position, articulate a condition and make visible a situation of explosive inequity that currently afflicts much of the world, even as those inequities tend to remain out of sight in the rarefied setting of an event such as the Venice Biennale.

Similarly, the scholar Cynthia Cruz (2017) remarks:

We flinch when confronted with death or Mexico's issue, drugs, poverty, and violence. We react in empathy and understanding, or else we turn away. In either case, we step into a semblance of knowing and then revert to the safety of death's absence, proven by the representation of death before us. There it is, we think. I would recognize death now, and death is nowhere around me. Margolles' work intervenes in our comfortable knowing.

As it is evident from these lines, *What Else Could We Talk About?* brought the ugly side of modernity to a high-class event. By calling attention to the human costs of the drug wars, Margolles shed light on the rationality about who is killable within this conflict. This is of central relevance because, as Sánchez-Prado (2019) suggests, the cultural dynamics making possible the act of killing can only be traced if there is a shift in the attention from who

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<sup>64</sup> Son diez años que en el país no ha pasado nada, ha aumentado la violencia. Cuando pensé al principio trapear con la sangre, pensaba que el arte podría detener, y en estos diez años me he dado cuenta que el arte no detiene nada. El arte no es escudo para nadie. Si este premio logra una sola mujer salvar, entonces sí, si sirve. My translation.

has been killed to who is vulnerable to be killed (Sánchez Prado, 2019). In addition, Margolles' work invited the audience to consider their situatedness in the present world.

In sum, *What Else Could We Talk About?* fostered an experience of understanding mobilized by affective capacities of materiality. Statements like Wilson-Goldi's about how her discomfort with the exhibition made her consider the excess of violence may indicate a grasp on the issue not available to her before. In other words, the affective experience articulated by *What Else Could We Talk About?* triggered in some viewers a state of critical inquiry. It is by rendering the viewer sensitive to reflect on the workings of systemic violence that a piece like *What Else Could We Talk About?* intervenes in the public sphere.

## Conclusions

This chapter explored the corpse as a forensic aesthetics' trope through the 2009 Mexican pavilion at the Venice Biennale by Teresa Margolles. First, it argued that the corpse takes a rebellious role in forensic aesthetics. While in other contexts, the corpse operates as a *memento mori*, in forensic aesthetics, this trope aims at exposing necropolitical regimes. Correspondingly, instead of inviting the viewer to reflect on the inevitable end of life, the corpse condemns the uneven distribution of death and demands justice for the victims. In this specific case, the corpse called into question the discourse that frames the war on drugs as an operation of social security, suggesting instead that it is a necropolitical project that brings death to the masses. Differently put, the pavilion contested the hegemonic discourse about the war on drugs by displaying a forensic reconstruction of the lived experience of witnessing massive death, which opened the space to feel the consequences of violence as a force that manifests as what Massumi calls "low-level fear."

In this forensic reconstruction, Margolles references the role of the economic and political systems through symbols that juxtapose blood, as a signifier of mass death, to other signs like the flag and gold. Similarly, the references to the most affected areas, the border regions with the United States, consist of similar juxtapositions but, in this case, with sounds and soil transported from the zone. The result was an experience centered not on visual representations of the conflict but uncomfortable sensations derived from the abjection triggered by the corpse.

The convincing character of Margolles' forensic reconstruction was based on its affective operations. These resulted from the spectator's belief in the materials' authenticity, the estrangement effect created by the association of materials that usually do not belong together, and especially the experience of abjection triggered by the blood. Although invisible in most cases, blood was perceptible through its smell and its presence enhanced by the multiple theatrical and narrative devices the artist used to make direct indices of death, indirect indices of violence. Together, these artistic mechanisms influenced the spectator's embodied perception of the installation.



It is worth noting that abjection involves both fascination and disgust. Nonetheless, by making the corpse invisible, Margolles partially removed the corpse's fascinating component, leaving the spectator with a complex of disgust coupled with a sense of anxiety derived from the impossibility of seeing it. Correspondingly, although shocking, the intensity of the experience was not enough to numb the spectators' minds. Instead, the mismatch between the discomfort created by the blood's proximity and the simplicity of the visual stimulus riddled them, sparking their embodied imagination and critical thinking. This state opened the space to consider the precarization of life and the workings of systemic violence. Correspondingly, it can be said that the display of unidentified human remains can trigger critical thinking. Changing political and economic regimes that promote the precarization of life is outside the reach of artistic practices. However, art offers a powerful platform to foster critical thinking and better understand the processes that constitute the reality that surrounds us.



## Chapter 5. Topographies of Ruin: Found Objects and Ruins in Teresa Margolles *The Promise*.

“Our freedom of choice often functions as a mere formal gesture of consenting to one’s oppression and exploitation.”  
Slavoj Žižek. “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” (2008a, 667- 668)

### Introduction

This chapter explores the use of found objects, which are a common element of forensic aesthetics, as Rugoff and Yepes have observed. Specifically, it focuses on the affective encounter with decayed or ruined objects through the analysis of the installation called *La Promesa* (The Promise 2014) by Teresa Margolles. The notion of “found object” refers to an early 20th-century artistic form based on ordinary objects that the artist presents as art, either intact or as part of an assemblage (Tate n.d.). The earliest examples of this expression are Picasso’s use of newspapers in some collages and what Marcel Duchamp called the “readymade.” This term describes manufactured objects Duchamp exhibited as artworks, such as *Fountain* (1917), consisting of a urinal presented on its back and signed by the artist.

While some readymades use ordinary objects to reflect on art’s relation to commodity (Iversen 2004, 47), this chapter argues that in the context of forensic aesthetics, the artist chooses an object because of its potential to “speak” about events of violence which, as discussed in chapter one, is centered on its indexicality. For example, in *Atrabilarios* (1992), Doris Salcedo displays female shoes behind calfskin screens as indices of their owners’ disappearance (Bennett 2005, 61). Nonetheless, in artworks like *Atrabilarios*, the artist approaches the found object as what Domínguez Galbraith describes as “asymptotic,” that is, at the limit between the evidential and allegoric registers. In other words, although real, the chosen objects also come close to representations. For example, in the polemical *Barca Nostra* (2019), Christoph Büchel displayed a ruined vessel that sunk into the Mediterranean while transporting hundreds of Libyan migrants, who died

inside the ship. Although the work is tangible evidence of the shipwreck, it has also been framed —not without criticism— as an allegory of precarious migration and a memorial to the victims of the migratory crisis (Pes and Rea 2019).

As the examples listed above illustrate, found objects displayed as indices of violence vary in scope, from personal items, like shoes, to ships. However, a common feature is that they often are in a physical state of material decay. By examining *La Promesa*, a time-based installation made from the rubbles of an abandoned house, this chapter argues that the work questions the hegemonic discourse that frames late capitalism as a synonym of progress and well-being by exposing enforced displacement as one of its painful and destructive consequences. As a delegated performance activates the work, the thesis suggests that the installation conjures the pain of abandoning one's home in different ways for the participants and the viewers. For the formers, it is through physical pain; and for the latter, through an engagement of bodies in a rarified atmosphere and the relation with the crumbling structure through simulative processes, that is, the human capacity to imagine and feel the forces affecting an object. In addition, building on Rudolf Arnheim's theory of entropy (1971), the chapter argues that the crumbling wall is akin to a highly structured object losing tension: tending towards disorder. Engaging with this eroded object simultaneously brings unsettlement —because of the encounter with a chaotic display— and pleasure —due to the loss of tension. The estrangement effect and the contradictory sensations puzzle the spectator and critically reflect on enforced displacement.

First, this chapter contextualizes *The Promise* against the rest of Margolles' artistic production. As chapter four addressed the early years of the artist's career —paying attention to the works that use human remains— this chapter does not discuss that portion of her practice. Instead, it focuses on Margolles' use of found objects and the part of her production that centers on living subjects. The second section starts by sketching some issues of Ciudad Juárez's recent history and then moves to suggest that these historical events connected to systemic violence have transformed Ciudad Juárez's structure of feeling. The third section offers a description of the work of art, followed by the analysis of the piece as an example of forensic aesthetics. Following Eyal Weizman's concept of forensic architecture (2014, 19), the section shows that Margolles presented the installation as evidence of the city's recent decay that is not centered on the legal aspects of the problem but on the affective domain, that is, the community's pain. Finally, the fifth section studies the artwork's affective operations. First, it frames the installation as what Bennett would call Margolles' "enactment of a state of grief as a form of embodied perception" (2005, 54). Later, it addresses the volunteers' experience and, subsequently, the spectators' relationship with the piece, informed by Gregory Currie's work on simulative processes or empathy for objects (2011, 82), Gaston Gordillo's theory of rubble (2017, 9-10), and Rudolf Arnheim's research on entropy (1971, 55).

## 5.1 Teresa Margolles and Those Who are Left Alive

As explained in chapter four, for many years, Margolles' oeuvre primarily focused on the political life of death, and around the late the last years of the first decade of the 21st century, she became interested in what she denominates "the periphery of the corpse," that is, what is situated behind the cadaver (Margolles, 2007). Although many of her artworks explore this theme through bodily fluids, she also uses objects. For example, in *Encobijados* (Blankets, 2006), she displayed blankets used by criminals to wrap their victims' cadavers, and in *Muro Baleado I*

(Shot-up Wall I, 2008), she showed a fragment of a wall marked with bullet holes during a shooting in Culiacán. Margolles developed these works through found objects that she transferred to the exhibition space and displayed as evidence of direct violence. Accordingly, they can be framed as examples of forensic aesthetics.

In the years that followed the 2009 Biennial, Margolles' practice became more concerned with the everyday life of the communities affected by violence than with the "life of the corpse" (Margolles 2015). *The Promise* is part of that corpus of work interested in the experiences of the living. Other examples are the pieces she developed during her research in the border region between San Antonio de Táchira, Venezuela, and San José de Cúcuta, Colombia, such as *Trayecto— Fase 1. La Entrega. Fase 2. A través. Fase 3. Inclusión* (Trajectory— Phase 1. The Remittance. Phase 2. Through. Phase 3. Inclusion, 2018). In this project, Margolles engaged with groups of people forced to migrate after the economic and political crisis in Venezuela and developed a series of actions centered on the subjects' sweat in connection to labor.

*The Promise* results from Margolles' ten years of research in Ciudad Juárez, a creative strategy previously used by other artists, like Doris Salcedo, who also produced part of her 1990s work after research trips to the interior of Colombia (Bennett 2005, 60). During this time, Margolles got involved with the community and investigated the social issues that affect the city. Juárez is widely known for a large number of femicides perpetrated in total impunity since the late 1990s. Although most of these crimes are framed as sexually driven, as many point out, the origin of the femicides seems to be the result of the complex interplay of the geographical location of Juárez, the workings of the neoliberal regime, and a patriarchal structure deeply ingrained in Mexican society. In addition to these crimes, Juárez has been deeply affected by narcoviolence and other structural problems. In other words, the case of Juárez is one of the most explicit expressions of systemic violence.

## 5.2 Systemic Violence in Ciudad Juárez: From the Maquiladora Economy to Enforced Displacement

Ciudad Juárez is located at the border between Mexico and the United States in the middle of the desert. Together with El Paso, Texas, it constitutes the binational metropolitan area known as the Borderplex. As the scholar Ana del Sarto notes, during the 1990s, many asserted that Juárez —as Mexicans call it— would turn into the most successful example of neoliberal globalization in Latin America (2012, 73). Although the economic transformation made Juárez one of the Mexican cities with the highest per capita income, it also brought excessive exploitation, unemployment, impunity, corruption, organized crime, gender inequality, and atrocious murders (73). The coincidence of the high levels of profit and high levels of violence make Ciudad Juárez one of the clearest examples of systemic violence, that is, of the catastrophic consequences of the fluid functioning of the hegemonic economic and political systems.

Juárez started its trajectory towards modernization in the 1960s through the National Borders Program, a project aimed to promote the economic and cultural development of the region, rebranding border cities from gambling, drinking, and prostitution sites to touristic destinations (Bunker 2011, 201). Within this context, at the end of the Bracero program in 1964,<sup>65</sup> the state established the Border Industrialization Program to employ the thousands of —mostly male— workers returning from the United States (del Sarto 2012, 78). The program fostered the installment of the so-called maquiladora economy and constituted a dramatic change in the demography and urban landscape. The maquiladora economy gave tax facilities to corporations for opening assembly plants, which, in turn, offered low-wage employment with almost null labor rights (del Sarto 2012, 78). After the establishment of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s —especially after NAFTA— maquiladoras proliferated exponentially in the region as the Mexican state saw in the maquiladora economy an antidote to the economic crisis.<sup>66</sup> The assembly plants attracted a large migratory flux from rural areas to border cities, especially Juárez, which by 1986 hosted one-fourth of the maquiladoras in the country (Stockton 1986). The modernizing programs and the maquiladora economy caused the border to pass from functioning under the necessities of the social structure to serving the interests of multinational corporations. In other words, it prioritized the growth of global capital over the population's needs.

As del Sarto notes, migrants came to constitute a new precarious working force: they are excluded from social rights, do not enjoy secure access to economic goods and services, and have limited agency or self-determination (2012, 79). Notably, many of these migrants were women. The maquiladoras preferred female over male employees as their ideal worker model is based on values patriarchy traditionally attributes to women: submission, docility, and responsibility (del Sarto 2012, 78).<sup>67</sup> Increasing employment opportunities resulted in a massive arrival of women from rural areas who could enjoy a certain economic and personal independence, in this way transgressing the traditional family's structure (Tabuenca 2011, 117). The exponential arrival of female migrants during the mid-1980s coincided with the now infamous wave of feminicides.<sup>68</sup> Most of these cases remain unsolved as local and federal justice institutions have demonstrated a lack of commitment to addressing the crimes.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The Bracero program was a guest-worker program fostered by the American government to receive Mexican laborers in the United States after the Second World War.

<sup>66</sup> According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the number of maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez augmented from 12 in 1965, to 3630 in 2001 (quoted in Valencia 2014, 134).

<sup>67</sup> This conceptualization of the ideal worker shows that, although the maquiladoras allowed many formerly relegated women to enter into the country's productive life, the employment conditions offered by these corporations reinforce segregatory and discriminatory practices, as women are relegated to low-wage jobs and are paid less than men.

<sup>68</sup> Between 1993 and 2018, there have been more than 1,700 reported cases of girls and women sexually assaulted and brutally murdered in Ciudad Juárez. The magnitude of the phenomenon resulted in the creation of the term feminicide, to distinguish the assassination of women because they are women—designated as “femicide”—from the murder of women as a form of systemic violence which is now termed “feminicide.” For a detailed discussion see Fregoso and Bejarano (2010).

<sup>69</sup> Scholar Sayak Valencia suggests that, in a patriarchal society like Mexico's, the existence of a female working force pressures traditional gender roles (2014, 133). In other words, in a community traversed by nineteenth-century gender structures, the

The rapid proliferation of maquiladoras meant chaotic and uncontrolled industrialization and urbanization of the area, which, as early as the 1980s, was already facing shortages of drinking water, power supplies, housing, schools, and health services (Stockton 1986). In this development, private real estate agencies saw an opportunity to expand the city into the desert. Since the early 2000s, cheap prefabricated houses proliferated in new urban neighborhoods without access to essential services, schools, or leisure spaces. Factory workers acquired these houses through affordable state-mortgages that became impossible to pay after the 2008 financial crisis (Caselli 2017). As a result, empty houses started to escalate in the city's landscape.

Although Juárez has been linked to organized crime since the early 20th century, during the 1980s, the displacement of the main routes of distribution of cocaine from Florida to the city intensified drug-related violence (del Sarto 2012, 79). After the demands of international human rights organizations to take responsibility for the feminicides, in 2003, President Vicente Fox started an operation to strengthen the police's presence, which was further reinforced after 2006 by President Felipe Calderon through a military intervention within the context of the war on drugs. Nonetheless, violence peaked due to the fights over the control and distribution of the profits of drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime (del Sarto 2012, 81). This was the start of what some locals call *el tiempo malo* (the bad time) (Reguillo 2012, 103). The perception of 2006 as the start of "the bad time" stands out, considering that feminicides and other forms of violence have been known worrisome issues since the late 1980s. For Valencia, drug-related violence and what González Rodríguez calls "the femicide machine" result from "gore capitalism" (2014, 133).

After 2009, intensified violence forced many businesses to close and people to abandon the city. As Sergio González Rodríguez wrote in 2012, the war on drugs transformed Juárez "into an even more dangerous and desolated place than it was in the previous decade, with 116,000 abandoned dwellings, 80,000 small business shuttered, 10,000 orphan children, and 2,000 families exiled" (2012, 3). For many years now, the experience of Ciudad Juárez has been marked by fear and impunity, which further weakens the already damaged social tissue. Nevertheless —as some testimonies Margolles recorded during her research demonstrate<sup>70</sup>— many people are still attached to Juárez, despite the fear and the ruined landscape. This suggests that Juárez's recent history is marked by a structure of feeling composed of a complex of frustration, anxiety, pain, and hopelessness that coexists with a sense of rooting. In other words, although it could be argued that such change was set in motion much earlier, there seems to be a dramatic transformation of the lived experience of the city after 2006. This change in the city's felt experience is perceptible in the idea of the "bad time," and it is also visible in González Rodríguez's statement

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twentieth-first century model of the working woman is seen as an emasculating force (133). In the face of these changes in the biopolitical order, Valencia argues, the heteropatriarchal system responds through concrete individuals who seek to reconstitute the traditional order by punishing women with extreme violence. The crimes are informally enabled and supported by an institutional scaffolding shaped by patriarchal interests that the journalist Sergio González Rodríguez calls the "Femicide Machine" (quoted in Valencia 2014, 133). In short, paradoxically, although liberated from their gender roles to some extent, these women are exploited and subjugated by the socio-economic structure.

<sup>70</sup> These interviews are available in the catalogue of the exhibition called *The Witness* displayed in Madrid in 2014.

discussed above. This structure of feeling responds to the gruesome consequences of systemic violence. As Deborah Weissman has written, the Ciudad Juárez feminicides illustrate that privileging free market and privatization, and abandoning welfare programs, produce hopelessness and death (quoted in del Sarto 2012, 64).

Juárez has been the target of much cultural interest since the late 1990s. Multiple books, documentaries, fictional movies, and artistic projects have addressed the city's violence. For example, for the exhibition *Project Juárez* (2006 -2007), fourteen male Mexican contemporary artists analyzed the relationship between masculinity, violence, and power within the context of the city (Matadero Madrid 2011), and Francis Alÿs' production *Hotel Juárez* (2015) explored survival strategies in the face of the city's decay. *The Promise* is among these artistic projects that have engaged with Juárez to analyze its violent present.

### 5.3 *The Promise*: On Forced Displacement

*The Promise* is a time-based installation activated through a delegated performance that reflects on the loss of the home due to violence. It draws on “the house” as a symbol of the progress' promises within Mexican culture and shows “the abandoned house” as the signifier of their failure. As the scholar, Alpha Escobedo —a Margolles' collaborator— notes, for Mexicans, owning a house is a crucial life goal as it means certainty and success. Therefore, having to abandon one's home, Escobedo continues, is a devastating experience (2012).

The installation is constituted by twenty-two tons of rubble shaped as a sixteen-meter long structure that resembles a low wall. Margolles obtained the material from a social interest house she bought from people who abandoned Juárez after their daughter was murdered and they received murder threats (Margolles 2012, 14). During the demolition, the artist wanted the construction to be treated as a “body that is slowly deprived of illusions, hopes, legacy, and future” (2012, 14). Through eleven days, workers carefully dismantled the structure and crushed the rubble.<sup>71</sup> Afterward, Margolles replaced the house with a cultural center known as *La Promesa*, collaborating with the Ford Foundation, the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (University Museum of Contemporary Art, MUAC, Mexico City), and civil organizations (2012, 6).

The gravel was packed and transported to the MUAC to build the installation, where it was mixed with water, turning it into a moldable mass that could be poured into a formwork. The work was activated once a day during the whole length of the exhibition through a one-hour action in which local volunteers manually eroded parts of the structure (Margolles 2014, 136). As the days passed, the installation slowly turned into ruins until it completely lost its form while the rubble extended into the room, evoking the sand of Ciudad Juárez's desert.

With Margolles' conception of the work for the MUAC in Mexico City, she intended for the transportation of the structure from Juárez to evoke an inversed route of migration —from north to center— and brought

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<sup>71</sup> A detailed photographic documentation of the dismantlement is available in *La Promesa* exhibition's catalogue (2012).

attention to the border issues often neglected in the city (Margolles 2012, 13). After this exhibition, *The Promise* has been displayed three times abroad.<sup>72</sup> In these exhibitions, Margolles contextualized the work with a photographic record of the house's destruction and other artworks, many of them based on archival materials such as local newspapers collected in 2010 (*PM*, 2010) and testimonies Margolles obtained from people who tell their life stories linked to the acquisition, loss, or abandonment of their houses (*Around loss* 2010-2013) (Margolles 2012, 108).<sup>73</sup> As a result, similar to the strategy she followed in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, in these projects, Margolles partially transported Ciudad Juárez to the exhibition space, presenting images and materialities that constitute evidence of its violent present.

## 5.4 Speaking Ruins: *The Promise* as a Forensic Architecture

*The Promise* is the result of Margolles' research on the impact of violence on Ciudad Juárez's built environment. Her approach shares ground with what Weizman denominates forensic architecture, a practice that understands architecture as "an analytic and probative mode for enquiring into the present through its spatial materialization" (Weizman 2014, 19). Margolles' interest in architecture as an index of violence was born from the rapid urban transformations around the maquiladoras that the artist observed while registering feminicides' crime scenes (Margolles 2012, 9). These observations led her to produce the photographic series *Esta Finca No Será Demolida* (*This property Will Not Be Demolished* 2009-2013), in which she portrayed abandoned buildings. Working on these photographs brought her to ask why people left the city, abandoning their properties, a question that was *The Promise*'s starting point (Margolles 2012, 9-10).<sup>74</sup> Margolles concluded that it is often the fear that arises from the threat of violence and the consequent loss of hope for a better future that forces people to leave (Margolles 2012, 18). Accordingly, as will be discussed in what follows, these abandoned and ruined buildings appear as a symptom of forced displacement —the necessity of leaving one's home to avoid situations of generalized violence (Migration Data Portal, n.d.). Through *The Promise*, Margolles turns the abandoned house into evidence that speaks about the embodied experience of this form of structural violence.

### 5.4.1 The Ruin: From Creative Destruction to Evidence

Ruins have been a topic of artistic inspiration, at least since romanticism. Within contemporary art, diverse artists have worked with ruined objects and structures, often exploring ruination as a creative force. For example, Gordon Matta-Clark engaged profusely with ruined buildings, in some cases through photography — e.g. in *Fake Estates* (*Little Alley Block 2497, Lot 42*) (1973)— and in others by cutting holes in the construction. According to

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<sup>72</sup> The work was shown in the exhibitions *Power to the Powerless* at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2013), *El Testigo* at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) in Madrid (2014), and the exhibition *Mundos* at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, in Montreal (2017).

<sup>73</sup> In Montreal, for example, *The Promise* was displayed next to the earlier works *In the air* (2003), *Irrigation*, and *36 bodies*. In Madrid's exhibition, it was shown next to the photograph entitled *The witness*, the installation called *PM*, the audio *Sounds of death*—also displayed as part of *What Else* (2009)— and the photographic series *This property will not be demolished* (2009).

<sup>74</sup> Some pictures of this photographic series are accessible in the catalogues of the exhibitions *The Promise* (Mexico City, 2012), and *The Witness* (Madrid, 2014).



Bruce Jenkins, works like *Conical Intersection* (1975) —which consisted of two adjacent ruined houses located a block away from the Centre Georges Pompidou and were traversed with holes— reflects on the social impact of the museum’s construction and offers a new way of looking at these residences (2011, 22).

In contrast, in Margolles’ work, ruination is not so much presented as a sign of creative destruction but rather as evidence of the devastating effects of systemic violence. With one in four houses abandoned —115,000 in a city of 1.3 million constructions— ruined buildings have become a common element in Juárez’s landscape and a topic of social concern. The so-called *tapias* —as the locals know abandoned constructions— are perceived as object entities as many of them became garbage dumps, criminal hideouts, or squats (Caselli 2017). Many of these houses are low-quality constructions that were never inhabited because of the financial crisis or the poor urban planning. In other cases, the houses were abandoned during “bad times” because of the threat of violence. Ruined constructions in Ciudad Juárez are, then, indices of the forces that have mobilized the city’s violent history: whether feminicides, drug-related violence, or the violence exercised by the economic system. As Weizman argues, “objects may contain the social relations that produced them” (2010, 13). The tensions of Juárez’s historical context remain inscribed in the materiality of its built environment.

Because of their strong symbolism, ruined constructions are a frequent topic of artistic projects that explore violence in Juárez and its memory. For example, in Francis Alÿs’ video work *Children's Game #15: Mirrors* (2013), children run among abandoned houses playing light battles using mirrors. The work proposes the imaginary childhood space as a strategy for survival in the face of destruction, signified by the empty buildings. Mayra Martell’s photo book *Ciudad Juárez* (2010-2015) portrays Juárez’s downtown ruined buildings to keep the city’s memory. *The Promise* stands next to these projects that deal with Juárez’s ruined landscape. In Margolles’ work, nonetheless, the ruin speaks about the loss that results from displacement.

According to Margolles, ruined constructions are the products and the witnesses of the city’s decay (2015). They are indices of the failure of the promises of progress and well-being implied by the neoliberal project and the maquiladora economy. Violence and the precarious working conditions have turned many into displaced persons. By transporting the materiality of one of these abandoned houses to the exhibition space —or the “forum” to borrow Weizman’s term— Margolles turned its materiality into evidence of forced migration, a consequence of systemic violence. The evidentiary character of the work is mainly enabled by its contextualization through archival materials. In other words, the viewer’s physical perception of the installation as a document or a piece of evidence is influenced by the fact that she is witnessing a real house’s rubbles. This perception, however, is supported by the work’s formal and material characteristics. The installation has a raw and humble appearance that results from its construction, which is almost wholly trusted to the affordances of materiality. This confers to the work a relative artlessness that conveys a sense of objectivity. Besides, as the rubble is dispersed on the floor, the structure reveals material evidence of everyday life: buttons, chords, hairs, and pieces of paper that remained at the house when it was demolished (Margolles 2012, 14). These remains of human activity can be noticed when scrutinizing the

material, strengthening the sense of reality or authenticity. Together, all these mediation techniques construct the physical perception of being in front of a document demonstrating that the economic system has brought “hopelessness and death” to the city (Weismann quoted in del Sarto 2012, 64).

#### 5.4.2 *The Promise* as Evidence of Pain

Because of her interest in the built space as evidence of violence, Margolles’ work parallels Weizman’s conceptualization of forensic architecture. Nonetheless, in contrast to Weizman, Margolles is not so much interested in the legal and political aspects of forced migration but especially in the affective dimension of the experience of displacement seen through the loss of home. To register and turn this experience perceptible for others, instead of taking pictures of the ruined house —as Martell did in her photo-work and Margolles herself in *This House Won’t Be Demolished*— the artist chose to present it as a “deconstructed” structure. As she stated, she wanted that “it was clear it was a house but that it was not perceived as the kind of rubble that can be found in Ciudad Juárez,” she wanted “a more poetic image” (2012, 16-18). With such transformation, Margolles aimed at making the house a poetic symbol that operated as evidence of the loss, pain, and hopelessness that affects the city.

Notably, the act of transforming the house relates to what Tatum describes as a “ritual of purification of contagious, polluting violence,” which he identifies as a frequent component of the Western American forensic paradigm (2006, 131). In this case, however, this ritual does not seek to redeem the materiality from violence, exchanging the experience of life’s pain for a vision of a right or just world, as Tatum suggests (131). Instead, by shattering the house and transforming it into a minimalist structure, Margolles released it from its abject character and elevated it into the condition of a piece of physical evidence of the community’s pain and sense of hopelessness. This suggests that the justice that this work seeks to achieve is not legal —as in Weizman’s view; instead, it lies in acknowledging the community’s pain. Correspondingly, *The Promise* lends presence to those who lost all hope of a better future in the city and pushed by fear were forced to leave. In contrast to the works that speak for the disappeared or the murdered, this work speaks about people who perhaps are still alive but are not in the city to talk about their experiences. They have left a spectral presence that is impressed like a scar in the built environment.

#### 5.5 *The Promise’s* affective operations

The following lines address the artwork’s affective operations. First, the section contends that *The Promise* was conceived as a piece of evidence that gives expression to the pain affecting Ciudad Juárez. Next, as the installation is activated through the participation of volunteers, the second part considers their interaction with the work, specifically, the mechanisms that lead them to critical thinking about enforced displacement. Finally, the section addresses the spectator’s experience, which is substantially different from the one of the volunteer.

### 5.5.1 *The Promise* as an expression of Pain

As previously discussed, with *The Promise* and other artworks related to the installation, Margolles aimed at registering and giving expression to the dysphoric state that characterizes Juárez's recent history.<sup>75</sup> Although Margolles addresses the Other's suffering, she does so from the perspective of her own experience living in Ciudad Juárez, connecting with people's stories of violence. In other words, she works on the Others' pain not as an outsider but from what Jill Bennett calls "a particular cultural affinity" as an insider (2005, 53). In an interview, she expressed: "[W]hat Juárez was, a border city, a city of music and food, has disappeared. What should we keep? Should we forget everything and tear everything down or accept that maintaining a ruined building is keeping the memory of its inhabitants?" (Margolles 2015). Margolles' statement reflects her preoccupations with Juárez's recent transformations and the maintenance of the memory of what she perceives as a city that has lost its life. Her words reveal a sense of distress associated with the injury inflicted by violence, also present in the testimonies registered in the interviews that together form *Around Loss* (2010 -2013). Following Sara Ahmed, it is possible to understand the distress caused by the experience of feeling injured by others as pain (2014, 31). Accordingly, *The Promise* registers the pain that springs from Juárez's unmet promises, as it is felt and expressed by Margolles, which aligns the work with the structure of feeling described in the second chapter, like the other two cases studies.

Pain, Ahmed explains, in a strict sense, is a private experience. No one can feel the Other's pain, and it can never be accurately described (2014, 29). Yet, she writes, "pain 'surfaces' in relation to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence" (31). In other words, pain demands to be acknowledged (29). Similarly, Jill Bennet argues that a specific grammar marks expressions of pain: "Pain can be conceived of as a call that is bound up to a response" (2005, 48). Such a call has agency of its own, with a force that changes both the subject and society (49). In other words, the Other's pain compels acknowledgment, which might be given or denied. In any case, the expression of pain affects the community that surrounds her.

Margolles responded to the community's pain through *The Promise* by giving it a visible manifestation. The work can be understood as what Bennett describes as the enactment of "a state of grief as a form of embodied perception" (2005, 54). In other words, Margolles embodies the community's pain and enacts its grief through the house's destruction. As she states: "[t]his piece is not rubble. It is the displacement of a family. I speak about the void. About very painful issues" (2015).<sup>76</sup> In other words, in *The Promise*, materiality is displayed as evidence of the community's pain and an expression or a manifestation of pain in itself. Accordingly, the work embodies the memories of Juárez's painful recent history. As an expression of pain, *The Promise* is a call for acknowledgment with its own force. "There is something innately uncontainable about the phenomenon of pain within representation,"

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<sup>75</sup> For instance, the artists recorded the testimony of some of Ciudad Juárez's inhabitants in *Around Loss* (2010-2013), a work consisting of interviews in which people of different ages tell stories of violence related to their houses, their feelings of fear, powerlessness, and frustration, which are often mixed with strong attachments to the land (Margolles 2014, 146-157). The work was originally a video. A transcript of these testimonies is available in the catalogue produced for the exhibition *The Witness* (2014).

<sup>76</sup> Esa pieza no es un escombros. Es un desplazamiento de una familia. Hablo del vacío. Cosas muy dolorosas. My translation.

Bennet writes (50). In other words, representations of pain, including the Other's pain, have a force. This is not to say that pain is transferred from one entity to the other, but that its expression has the potential to "shock to thought" (50). In other words, as an expression of pain, *The Promise* can engage the spectator at an affective level and move her to think.

Ahmed argues that one reads pain on the Other's body (2014, 30). Nevertheless, as in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, the Other's body is absent from the artwork. Unlike *Level of Confidence*, Margolles' installations do not present an identifiable human body to facilitate a personal engagement. Besides, as was discussed in chapter four, *What Else Could We Talk About?* managed to "shock" and induce a state of reflective thought in many viewers, mainly because of the mismatch between the experience of abjection triggered by the exposure to human remains and the lack of visual stimulus. *The Promise*, however, does not use bodily substances that could trigger sensations of abjection. How does this work facilitate an affective connection between bodies? How does it put the viewer in touch with pain as Margolles intended?

Understanding *The Promise*'s affective operations first demands acknowledging that the installation has a time component that slowly unravels as it changes every day after it is activated. The piece exists in-between permanence and impermanence as it transits towards disintegration at a pace that is difficult to perceive for a museum-goer. As a result, the work engages the viewers in different ways as it transforms during the exhibition.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, the viewer experiences the work differently when it is activated and when it is not, when it exists as an installation and when it is part of the performance. When it functions as an installation, the viewer encounters a structure of "imponent dimensions" (Carton de Grammont 2017), yet of rough and dull appearance, the affective operations of which are performed by the work's materiality. When the work is activated, the transmission of affect is enabled by both the house's materiality and the volunteers' bodies. It is worth noting that, since the performers are museum-goers who voluntarily engage in the performance, they can also be conceived as spectators who interact with the work at a different level. Accordingly, examining their experience is relevant not only because their body participates in the artwork's affective operations but also because they experience the work and, consequently, bear witness to the evidence.

### 5.5.2 The volunteers' experience: Physical pain as a medium for critical thinking

Margolles asks *The Promise*'s performers to relate to the work of art by focusing on their own experiences of pain (MUAC, 2012). In this way, the performers' bodies are intended to become a medium for the transmission of affect, as the following statement by a Margolles' collaborator shows: "we must feel it so that we can transmit it to the spectators. This will hurt. It must hurt" (Margolles, 2015). In Mexico, Margolles asked the participants to establish a personal connection through shared emotional experiences concerning Mexico's recent history (MUAC, 2012). Abroad, Margolles invites the volunteers to focus on their pain when faced with failed promises of a better

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<sup>77</sup> Besides, the materiality of the artwork does not disappear after the exhibition. It can be re-displayed multiple times.

life (Margolles, 2014). This engagement dynamic suggests that Margolles' performance —perhaps inadvertently— may invite a kind of identification that Kaja Silverman calls "idiopathic identification." This type of identification "involves taking the other into the self, based on a projected likeness, so that the other becomes like the self. Similar features are enhanced in the process; features that remain irreducibly other are cast aside or ignored" (quoted in van Alphen 2006, 196). Scholars argue that idiopathic identification is problematic as it risks reducing the experience of the Other to the experience of the self, occluding the specificity of the Other's subjectivity (van Alphen 2008, 28). To avoid such reduction, it is necessary that the identifying subject —the performer— stay aware of the Other's particularity as a different subject.

Because common or shared experiences are critical for Margolles' understanding of identification, she notes a distinction between the volunteer's relationship to the work between cities affected by difficult circumstances and those that are not. In an interview, she stated: "Right now, the work comes from Germany. From countries where capitalism works. (...) Baden Baden is a rich touristic zone. The people who activated the work there had their promises fulfilled, but they wanted to experiment with other people's promises" (2014). In contrast, Margolles commented about the work's iteration in Madrid: "I believe that Spain, in previous exhibitions, had not identified with the works so much. Now this country is getting closer because of the crisis" (2014). For the artist, while Madrid's difficult circumstances facilitated the participants to come close to the artwork, the people in Baden Baden could not identify as much with Ciudad Juárez through their own experience. Consequently, the work brought them to investigate the Other's pain. Although Margolles seems to see the lack of common ground as a disadvantage, this exercise of examining the Other's pain can open the space to "heteropathic identification." In this type of identification, the person "takes the risk to —temporarily and partially— 'become' (like) the other" (van Alphen 2008, 28). In other words, the identifying subject is rendered sensitive to the Other's experience, while she also realizes it is not like her own experience. Heteropathic identification is often related to ethical ways of representing violence and trauma, as it recognizes and allows the otherness of the Other. Besides, as van Alphen notes, unlike idiopathic identification, it is "exciting and risky, enriching and dangerous, but at any rate, affectively powerful" (2008, 28).

Although it is impossible to determine the type of identifications the different performers engaged in every case, it is essential to emphasize that the performance in itself —the action of eroding the sculpture— may allow any of these experiences to happen. In some cases, performers might tend to think about the victims of violence through their own experience, and in others, they might attempt to become the other momentarily. Since there are no physical representations of the victims and there is no apparent connection between the performed action and the narrative about the violence, a performer's engagement in one or the other type of identification will depend on her interpretation of the instructions and her perspective about the performance.

When activating the work, the volunteers engage in a ritual that is "upsetting and purifying" (Carton de Grammont 2017). Because of the structure's low height, they must bend, crouch or kneel, making their faces come

closer to the structure, forcing them to smell and look at the rubble in detail (Figure 5.1). Alejandro Hernández (2012) describes his experience performing the work at Mexico City as follows:

Being alone inside the room, kneeling in front of this house turned into a grave, the first thing you feel is the aridity of the earth and that small torture of the stones digging into your body. A memory that remains is that dry dust that you breathe until you feel like you are drowning, and that reminds you of the desert in which Ciudad Juárez is immersed. Margolles' work mirrors the pessimistic view of a promise of happiness that the state could not fulfill. For those who participate in its perennial transformation, it is, above all, a cluster of physical pain, which mixes and intensifies with the burden and frustration of trying to tear down an indestructible wall with your hands. It is a sort of border that seems to grow minute after minute, making your efforts to destroy it insignificant.<sup>78</sup>

The performer engages in a challenging full-body experience that involves movement, touch, sight, smell, and sound. Smelling the floating dust and feeling the concrete in their hands and knees while holding uncomfortable positions, as Hernández notes, makes the experience difficult. After a few minutes, the slow progress turns the activity frustrating, which, according to Hernández, intensifies the physical pain. In addition, Hernández's statement reveals that his experience was marked primarily by physical pain and frustration, which made him consider the pessimism resulting from the failed promises of happiness that the state was incapable of meeting. Hernández's testimony suggests that the performance involved a passing from feeling to thinking in his case. The experience first triggered frustration in him, which is an affect that excites or increases the body's energy as it manifests as "the feeling of being upset or annoyed, especially because of inability to change or achieve something" (Oxford English Dictionary). Nonetheless, the state of high energy is slowly undermined by physical exhaustion. Although the volunteer might feel the urge to quit, she is being watched by other spectators, which encourages her to put up with the fatigue and the bitter emotions that might emerge throughout the activation: "You stop being a spectator to become a character that is observed," writes Hernández (2012).

Notably, Hernández's testimony suggests that the performer's affective experience might be more influenced by the interaction between the volunteer's body and the artwork's materiality —hurting her skin, opposing resistance to be demolished— than by the volunteer's identification with the victims as Margolles wanted. As Hernández explains, the physical pain, exhaustion, and frustration "makes one forget that what one is manipulating is the rubble of an abandoned house in Ciudad Juárez, the owners of which left the city running away from violence and extortion" (2012).<sup>79</sup> This bodily experience —the frustration and physical pain— is at the core of the volunteer's perception of the artwork and her reflections on violence and not the other way around. Such thoughts seem to occur once the performance has finished when the subject recollects her event memories. The

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<sup>78</sup> Al estar solo dentro de la sala, de rodillas frente a esta casa vuelta tumba, lo primero que sientes es la aridez de la tierra y esa pequeña tortura de las piedras clavándose en tu cuerpo. Un recuerdo que permanece es ese polvo seco que respiras hasta el ahogo y te remite al desierto en el que está inmerso Ciudad Juárez. La obra creada por Margolles refleja esa mirada pesimista hacia una promesa de felicidad que el Estado fue incapaz de cumplir. Para quienes participan en su perenne transformación resulta, sobre todo, o por lo menos para ti, un cúmulo de dolor físico, que se mezcla e intensifica con el agobio y la frustración de tratar de derribar con las manos un muro indestructible. Una especie de frontera que pareciera que crece a cada minuto y que vuelve insignificante tu esfuerzo por expandir sus despojos en la sala. Una especie de frontera que pareciera que crece a cada minuto y que vuelve insignificante tu esfuerzo por expandir sus despojos en la sala. My translation.

<sup>79</sup> Deja de lado el hecho de que estás manipulando los escombros de una casa abandonada en el sur-oriente de Ciudad Juárez, cuyos dueños salieron huyendo de la violencia y la extorsión que padece gran parte del país. My translation.

performance appears to put the participant on a mindset centered in her physicality. The effect of this experience can be understood as enhancing the “perception of one’s vitality; one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability” (Massumi 2002, 36). Such a sense of aliveness opens the space to reflect on enforced displacement. In this way, exhaustion, frustration, and physical pain —more than the act of identification— become the primary medium of reflection as experiencing an artwork is not supposed to bring these affects. In Hernández’s words: “Impunity and violence take a different dimension. Those deaths and abandoned houses that become a simple statistic daily literally hurt your body. Pain is an unavoidable means to think of violence, that heavy stone that feeds on your frustration” (2012).<sup>80</sup> On a similar note, the Spanish architect Patricia Sendin has underlined the role of physical sensation in her experience, which she sees as potent: “it is very powerful to have a reconstituted wall in front of you and be able to touch and demolish it. You connect to the story with the senses rather than with the mind. Apparently, feeling an issue rather than understanding it, is what takes to care about it” (2014).

In short, as Hernández and Sendin’s statements suggest, the performers’ physical engagement with the artwork fosters critical considerations about violence and not necessarily a personal connection with the victims. Notably, in contrast to *What Else Could We Talk About?*, the physical engagement with the work is not promoted by a shocking sensation but by physical pain and frustration, which are intertwined with the performers’ progressive exhaustion. Critical thinking about violence, then, seems to be less influenced by identification with the victims than by the disconnection between the negative physical sensations the participant experiences and the idea of engaging with an artwork.

In every activation, the volunteer’s body becomes part of the artwork and a medium for the work’s affective operations. Her facial expressions and body movement affected by frustration and the physical pain while displacing the material becomes a central component of the spectator’s experience. While the performer’s facial expressions and the body language might trigger “empathic identification” in the viewer —the viewer might recognize the feelings she perceives in the performer’s expression, which according to Cartwright, moves the subject to feel for the Other (2008, 24)— the movement of the body attracts the spectator’s attention to the rubble, causing her to note the material traces mixed with the gravel. In other words, the viewer is rendered sensitive to the installation’s material features and the volunteer’s experience during the performance, which influences the spectator’s physical perception of the artwork.

### 5.5.3 The Spectator’s Experience: Estrangement, imagined pain, and the encounter with rubble

In contrast to the volunteers, the spectators engaged more indirectly with the artwork’s materiality. Accordingly, neither the act of touching nor physical pain played a role in the viewer’s experience. Nonetheless,

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<sup>80</sup> La impunidad y la violencia adquieren otra dimensión. Esas muertes y esas casas abandonadas que cada día se vuelven una simple estadística, aquí literalmente lastiman tu cuerpo. El dolor como medio ineludible para pensar en la violencia, en esa pesada loza que se nutre de tu frustración. My translation.

despite the physical distance and the artwork's humble appearance, some spectators described their encounter with it as "powerful," denoting the work's capacity to affect or move the viewer.

#### THE ROLE OF MATERIALITY

For some, what made the experience touching was that they were looking at authentic material evidence. The Spanish curator Octavio Zaya, for instance, wrote: "Watching this process [the performance] at CA2M, I discovered pieces of pottery, human hair, bits of paper, and other unexpected fragments in the rubble, which, I believe, stand as examples of the power of honest, unembellished, and uninflected images" (2014). For Zaya, the materials mixed with the rubble are indicative of the "truthfulness" of the work, which he perceived as powerful. Similarly, in the statement discussed above, Sendin used the word "reconstituted" to emphasize that she was looking at the actual materiality of a house that used to be elsewhere. As these statements suggest, like in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, looking at what the subject believes is authentic material evidence influenced the spectators' embodied perception of the artwork, heightening their feelings.

Both Zaya and Sendin, nonetheless, belong to the European audiences and experienced the work in Madrid. In contrast, for some spectators in Mexico City, the artwork was rather underwhelming. For example, the journalist Concepción Moreno wrote:

*The Promise* (...) is one of those more exciting projects as a concept than an object. That is not necessarily a defect: art not only exists to be appreciated with the senses but also to apprehend it with reason, discuss it, and think about it. Furthermore, yes, *The Promise* makes one think, although the work left this reviewer cold. Margolles had opted in other of her works for more direct paths to address public sensibility. After visiting Margolles' installations, I have left horrified, disgusted, moved, but never cold. It is a surprise not to get excited after watching a Margolles work. [What] one sees is a small wall that, at knee height, diagonally crosses the very dark room. The rest of the room is empty if not for the dust and fragments of what looks like a site under construction. Some dust rises when walking. The sensation is on the one hand of bewilderment, on the other of desolation: one feels very alone in the middle of that darkness, of that dust, of those remains of something.<sup>81</sup>

Although Moreno acknowledges that the installation made her think, she describes the overall experience as leaving her cold, not making her feel interested or excited. In her eyes, the work "is more interesting as a concept than as an object." In contrast to her encounters with other works by Margolles, she explains, *The Promise* did not excite her. Although *The Promise*, like *What Else Could We Talk About?*, emphasizes materiality as evidence of violence, concrete is not as prone to trigger intense bodily sensations as blood. Concrete, the architect Adrian Forty notes in his study of this material's history in the Western world, is a material that denotes poverty and simplicity (2012, 9). It has been perceived as "dumb or stupid material" (9). Accordingly, where Moreno was expecting to experience intense sensations, she found a simple structure made of a "dumb" material that made her perceive the artwork as not impactful. Unmet expectations might have played a role in shaping Moreno's judgment of the

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<sup>81</sup> Uno llega a una sala del Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) y lo que ve es una bardita que, a la altura de la rodilla, cruza la sala, muy oscura, de manera diagonal. El resto de la sala está vacío de no ser por tierra y restos de lo que parece fragmentos de un sitio en construcción. Algo de polvo se levanta al caminar. La sensación es por un lado de desconcierto, por otro de desolación: se siente uno muy solo en medio de esa oscuridad, de ese polvo, de esos restos de algo. My translation.



installation. Besides, the contrast between Moreno's view and the opinions of the Spanish spectators could also have derived from the difference in value attributed to the transportation of the house's rubble from one place to another: while Moreno ignored this fact, Sendin identified it as part of the work's power. For the Spanish audience, the geographical and cultural distance between Mexico and Spain might have contributed to intensifying the impact of the material's authenticity, and, consequently, the artwork's perception.

Even though Moreno stated the work did not excite her, she also described feeling bewilderment and desolation. As discussed in chapter one, for Massumi and Brennan, feelings are narrativized affects. Accordingly, referring to them is indicative of affective transmission. Paradoxically, in Moreno's case, then, the mismatch between the expectation of having an intense experience and encountering instead what looked like an unfinished structure in an exhibition room was the stimulus that triggered bewilderment in her, that is, a state of perplexity or confusion that arises from an unfamiliar situation (Cambridge Dictionary). As van Alphen notes, conventionalized images have often lost their affective power, and strange images and environments —as in *The Promise*— are more likely to trigger affective responses (2008, 28). Moreno's perplexity associated with bewilderment indicates a shock that interrupts the body's automatic flow, even if this shock is not as intense as it is, for instance, in the experience of fear.<sup>82</sup> In addition to bewilderment, Moreno also describes feeling desolation. Being in an unfamiliar setting induces the body into alertness, intensifying the sense of being alone. Loneliness is also enhanced by darkness and the smell of dust, which is associated with stagnation and abandonment.

As Moreno's statement clarifies, the discrepancy between the spectator's expectation of amazement and the encounter with a simple and artless work influenced her physical perception of the artwork, which, in this case, resulted in sharpening her senses. She describes the darkness of the room and the sensation of walking enhanced by the rising dust, which, it is safe to assume, she could smell, see, and even listen to as it cracked with every step she took. The presence of dust was also noted by a viewer who watched the work in Montreal: "By the time I saw *La Promesa* in early May, the wall had been chipped away significantly, the air thick with dust that would not settle" (Sharpe 2017). Dust changes the smell and the physical sensation of the environment, influencing the viewer's embodied perception of the artwork. As Joseph A. Amato writes, contemporary societies live relatively free of visible dust, as it is associated with dirt and disease (2000, 9). Consequently, encountering a dusty atmosphere —especially at a space like a museum associated with neatness— contributes to the space's estrangement. In short, the illumination, the artwork's simplicity, and its unruly materiality shaped the spectator's perception and interpretation of the installation.

#### 5.5.4 Perceived Pain and Empathy for Objects

Like Moreno, other spectators in Mexico experienced sensations and feelings operating at negative registers. For example, the curator Tatiana Cuevas describes the work as "mute, and grieving" (2012), and the

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<sup>82</sup> For a study of fear see Massumi, (2005).

scholar Nuria Carton de Grammont compared it with an “open corpse” (2017). These statements suggest that the installation ignited the spectator’s embodied imagination, evoking painful feelings and triggering a certain sense of grief in some viewers. Bennet argues that art can express pain by “playing on the body’s capacity to perceive pain” (2005, 69). In analyzing Sandra Johnston’s and Doris Salcedo’s work, she argues that these artists attend to how the body perceives and remembers trauma and loss. Accordingly, they invite the viewer to relate to the artwork through her own embodied memories of grief or, in her words, through her “sense of bodily memory” (69).

For example, in *Casa Viuda* (Widow House 1994), Salcedo deals with the pain of loss, not as it is experienced in a single moment but when present in everyday life. By attaching human bones and other objects to pieces of furniture, she makes everyday items strange. In this way, the work registers the disorienting experience of loss (67). Similarly, through *The Promise*, Margolles invites the viewers to relate to the artwork through their physical memory of grief, which she evokes through the crumbling structure. Expressions like “I am crushed” or “I am destroyed” in English—which also exists in Spanish—show that analogies between material destruction and grief are common. Emotional pain and the physical sensation of being injured seem to be inextricably connected. In this work, then, Margolles plays with human identification with non-human materiality.

Human identification with inanimate objects was the focus of interest of a group of early 20th century philosophers and psychologists known as the “Empathists,” who contended the aesthetic experience was based on empathy (Currie 2011, 83). In his late 19th century writings, the German philosopher Theodor Lipps called this relationship *Einfühlung*—which is the origin of the English word “empathy”—and which literary means “feel into” (quoted in Curry 2011, 83). For Lipps, the term referred to the projection through which people felt an object’s properties as their own (84). Although this theory of empathy for things based on personal projection is highly problematic and has lost currency, the Empathists’ program opens the space to consider the bodily experiences triggered when looking at an aesthetic object. Inspired by the Empathists, Gregory Currie engages with this philosophical question through research on cognitive science and claims that the idea of empathy for things can be related to cognitive “simulative processes” (2011, 82). Currie argues that looking at both aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects triggers simulative processes through which, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, people mentally simulate the object’s shape or texture, the movement involved in using the thing, or how the object was made (85-88). In other cases, he explains, people mentally simulate the forces affecting an object, like the pressure in a load-bearing column: “the column feels no pressure, but my simulation of pressure contributes to an appropriate aesthetic response to the structure and informs my appreciation of the way the column joins the entablature” (87). Currie’s argument suggests that, when looking at *The Promise*, the disaggregating structure might evoke the physical sensations associated with grief, which are simulated and consequently felt in the body. These simulatory processes may be what allows the “bodily memories” described by Bennet to be felt.

### 5.5.6 The Promise Seen Through Entropy Theory: Ruins and Rubble

Another dimension of the work's affective operations results from the artwork's relationship to the ruin. In *Nostalgia for Ruins*, Andreas Huyssen argues that there is a contemporary obsession with ruins in the "countries of the northern transatlantic" (2006, 7). According to the scholar, this "ruin craze" responds to the twentieth-first century's nostalgia for modernity and the fear of and obsession with time (11). This ruin craze has given place to so-called "ruin porn," that is, the fascination with looking at images of ruins (Hoogland 2014, 115). In *The Promise*, however, Margolles denies the viewer the pleasure of looking at a recognizable object in a state of ruination, as the installation resembles first a minimalist sculpture, which slowly transforms into a rubble mound.

In his study of rubble, historian Gaston Gordillo argues that both ruin and rubble are inextricably connected. For Gordillo, the fascination with ruins implies a rejection of rubble because it signals the "disintegration of recognizable forms" (2012, 9). Building on Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno's valorization of the ruin as an allegory of the critical disintegration of the positivity of the given that ruptures the "bourgeois dream-world," Gordillo argues that more than the ruin, rubble is the genuinely disruptive force. While the ruin, he states, evokes rupture, it is also a "unified object" fetishized and sacralized by elite sensibilities built on a disregard of rubble. The perception of rubble as formless makes it unsettling, as it "deglamorizes ruins by revealing the material sedimentation of destruction" (10), a destruction that the bourgeoisie cannot bear to witness as it emerges from its maintenance as a class (254). By turning the house into rubble, Margolles not only denies the pleasure of looking at ruins, but she also faces the viewer with the destruction of systemic violence without filters. The discomfort of looking at the crumbled structure is palpable in the statement by the scholar Nuria Carton de Grammont, who, as stated before, compares it with an open corpse (2017). Although Gordillo's argument is compelling as it opens the space to consider class concerns, it may be reductive to claim that in every context, the unsettling produced by rubble is exclusively experienced by the upper classes. This is not to say that Gordillo is wrong, but the phenomena mobilizing the affective encounter with rubble seem more complex than his argument admits. There is a pre-personal component or at least less influenced by culture behind the discomfort of looking at the rubble, which is related to entropy.

In *Entropy and Art*, Rudolf Arnheim suggests that the human mind —like other living and non-living structures of the universe— seems to display an inherent "pervasive striving for order" (1971, 4). Nevertheless, the Second Law of Thermodynamics contradicts this tendency towards order, establishing that the material world moves from ordered to increasingly disordered states. The measure of disorder in a system or structure is called entropy. Both entropy and the striving for order coexist in the physical world, and, consequently, in human experience. As people naturally strive for order, encountering a chaotic display, such as rubble, might be experienced as unsettling (55). Considering Arnheim's argument, Gordillo's observation about the tension between ruin and rubble becomes clearer.

Seen from Arnheim's theory of entropy in art, Margolles' sculpture can be interpreted as a highly ordered structure that slowly loses tension. In other words, it tends towards chaos or disintegration through the volunteer's intervention. About art that is based on decay, Arnheim writes: "these products, although often substandard artistically, reveal strongly positive objectives: an almost desperate need to wrest order from a chaotic environment, even at the most elementary level; and the frank exhibition of bankruptcy and sterility wrought by that same environment" (1971, 55). Margolles' transformation of the abandoned house into a solid block that is slowly eroded, then, may be read as a representation of the disturbance of Ciudad Juárez's order and the lack of fulfillment of the will to order the city's chaotic environment. In this way, borrowing Arnheim's words, Margolles puts the spectator in contact with the failure and desolation that infects the city as a force that can be felt.

It is worth noting that, when seen from this point of view, it appears that looking at the artwork — especially while the activation is taking place — might trigger discomfort, but also some sort of pleasure. Arnheim suggests, destruction can be felt as grim and foreboding: "A wreck, unless it assumes a shape of its own, will be disorderly and therefore more or less unreadable to the eye, but it can be ominous and foreboding as subject matter" (1971, 53). Nevertheless, he also notes a particular pleasure from witnessing tension reduction within a system (2). It is the convergence of these two conflicting affective states —one positive and one negative— that triggers critical thinking in the spectator, as Moreno's conclusion shows when she states: "Is *The Promise* art? I do not know. At least, it is not conventional art. Art is not about decorations or beautiful objects; it is about experiences that transform our perception of the world. Undoubtedly, *The Promise* serves as evidence of a horror that most Mexicans do not want to face."<sup>83</sup> Although skeptical about the work's artistic features, Moreno explains that *The Promise* transformed her "perception of the world" by making her face a horror many refuse to see. Accordingly, she considers the work "makes one think" (2012). Valencia and Sepúlveda argue that the overstimulation of the consumer body is often used as a tool to maintain the spectator at a pre-reflexive level (2016, 82). In other words, overstimulation may produce a "gap between affect and understanding" (Bennett 2005, 64). Through Moreno's and Sendin's statements, it becomes clear that *The Promise* does the opposite. Although it engages the viewer's body through its affective operations, the intensity of the encounter does not numb the viewers' minds. The affective response that the installation triggers does not seem to be perceived as a "shock" at a level of awareness, although the shifts in the spectator's moods indicate the transmission of affect. As Bennett contends, however, what is relevant is where the work of art might take the spectator once the affective connection has been established (2006, 64). Moreno's statement shows that what the work did for her was to make violence visible, suggesting that Margolles successfully triggered conversations in Mexico City about violence at the country's border. Making visible, Bennett argues, has an educative benefit, as to view is to be informed (2005, 63).

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<sup>83</sup> ¿Es arte la promesa? No lo sé. Al menos no es arte convencional. El arte no se trata de decorados, ni de objetos bonitos, se trata de una experiencia que mueve nuestra percepción del mundo. Sin duda La promesa nos sirve como evidencia de un horror al que la mayoría de los mexicanos no quieren ver de frente. My translation.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored ruined objects as an element of forensic aesthetics. Ruins are displayed as found objects that the artist chose because of their indexical value and capacity to refer to violent situations. In *The Promise*, the house transformed into rubble attempts to refer not to a specific event but to the extended circumstances of forced migration in Ciudad Juárez that result from systemic violence. By transporting the house's rubbles from Juárez to other cities, Margolles assembled a forum —to borrow Weizman's term— to make the house speak about the failure of the hegemonic economic system. The house's evidentiary character is not compromised by its transformation into a sculpture. Instead, it negates the pleasure of looking at ruins while it still faces the spectator with destruction.

As the work of art is a time-based installation activated by local volunteers, the artwork is experienced by both spectators and performers. Their relation to the issue of violence is mediated in different ways: while the performers undergo a challenging physical experience, the spectators enter into the atmosphere created by the work of art without touching it. In the performers' case, although it seems that the performance is intended to trigger identification with the victims of violence, physical pain and frustration move the performers to reflect on violence. In contrast, for the spectators, the work triggers low intensity affects, which they interpreted in different ways at the level of awareness: from the absence of feelings to grief. Nevertheless, in all these cases, the viewers described responses that indicate affective transmission. The spectator's affective relationship with the artwork is based on its estrangement effect and unruly materiality. In other words, the rarified atmosphere produced by the floating dust triggers affective responses that increase the viewer's attention, facilitating her engagement with the work's formal properties, which play with the subject's capacity to identify with non-human materiality through simulative processes —or embodied imagination— by displaying a crumbling structure that evokes bodily memories of emotional pain. The falling rubble simultaneously arouses discomfort and a degree of pleasure because of the loss of tension that the increase of entropy produces. These contradictory affects set the spectator into an inquiry mode and make her think about enforced migration as a destructive force. This case study, then, suggests that an object in the process of ruination constitutes a powerful way of thinking about the multiple ways in which violence manifests as a disastrous force.

## Final Conclusions

This thesis analyzed a selection of artistic representations of violence in contemporary Mexican art produced after the war on drugs through the lens of forensic aesthetics. Specifically, it examined an artwork by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and two installations by Teresa Margolles, which are examples of an artistic trend that incorporates materials, objects, or images related to violent events. The objective was to explore how forensic aesthetics in contemporary art represent violence and promote critical reflection. This thesis argued that to convey violence through forensic aesthetics, the artists mediate objects and materials to stress their indexical character and evoke violent events without explicitly showing them. In this way, the artwork puts the spectator in contact with violence as a force felt in the present. The artistic mediation techniques enhance the affective operations of materiality and influence the spectators' physical perception of the work and, consequently, their interpretation. Through a process akin to embodied imagination, when the spectators encounter these artworks, they usually experience uncomfortable or contradictory affects which do not derive from identification and that commonsensical thinking cannot relate to the object or affective image. As a result, the artwork puzzles the spectator, forcing her to investigate the sensations and emotions she experienced, placing them against the artwork's content. Hence, the work reveals to the spectator felt dimensions of violence that can only be known through the body.

The three chapters dedicated to case studies each explored the affective operations of a different trope related to forensic aesthetics: photographs, human remains, and ruins. In each of them, building on theorizations inspired by Eyal Weizman's research on forensic aesthetics, this thesis first analyzed the mechanisms of mediation used by the artists to present objects and materialities as evidence of violence. Second, the project focused on the artworks' affective operations, that is, on describing the mechanisms through which these works of art contribute to revealing the forces that produce violence by using concepts derived from affect theory.

The analysis of the three installations reveals that estrangement is the primary mechanism through which forensic aesthetics in the visual arts affects the spectator. In other words, presenting ordinary objects or materials in unusual ways puzzles the spectators' minds, making them more susceptible to the affective operations of materiality. In *Level of Confidence*, for instance, integrating the spectators' faces into the artwork and forcing them to "watch" —in Azoulay's terms— and compare them with the missing students' faces fostered defamiliarization of the portraits and the viewers' face, making them more susceptible to the affective operations of the students' reflective faces. According to Deleuze, engaging with the reflective face troubles the mind as it triggers curiosity and opens the space for the existence of another world. As a result, where Lozano-Hemmer expected to trigger what Cartwright calls empathic spectatorship —which implies a sense of responsibility for the Other— the work aroused uncomfortable affects, such as anxiety and fear. These negative sensations also made the spectators reflect on their exposure to disappearance and realize the "low-level fear" —to borrow Massumi's term— under which the viewers themselves live. This "low-level fear" is a component of structural violence that is not easy to perceive as it is part of what can be described as the normal state of things.

In Margolles' *What Else Could We Talk About?*, the estrangement effect resulted from the space's emptiness and the palace's state of ruination. Such an effect made the visitors more sensible to the affective operations of the artworks' materiality primarily constituted by corpses' remains. Although the corpse was invisible, the spectators felt abjection because of the dense atmosphere composed by the smell and the realization of being exposed to real blood. The repulsion and anxiety produced by being surrounded by the materiality of death, which was invisible in most cases, catalyzed the spectator's feelings and ideas related to the fear of death or, in Žižek's terms, the threat of violence. Finally, in Margolles' *The Promise*, the dark and dusty environment and the work's formal simplicity promoted the defamiliarization effect and made the spectator more sensible to the work's affective operations. The loosening of tension and the tendency towards the chaos of this installation triggered conflicting sensations of low intensity that opened the space to think about enforced migration critically.

It is worth noting that the examination of the three case studies suggested that the affective experience disturbs the spectator with puzzling sensations and uncomfortable affects of low intensity. In other words, for an affective experience to lead to critical thinking, it can be upsetting but must not be shocking in order to avoid making the spectator look away and numb. The sensations the spectator experiences must be disconnected from the affective image or the stimulus to the degree that make them intrigued and uncomfortable.

Having discussed the main conclusions that respond to this thesis research question, the remainder of this thesis' section presents some reflections on the concepts used as a theoretical framework, seeking to stress the opportunities that this conceptual apparatus offered to this research and other relevant remarks about them that could be useful for other projects.

#### ON THE EXTENDED DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE IN THE STUDY OF THE VISUAL ARTS

As described in the first chapter, structure-based theories of violence contend that violence is more than interpersonal attacks. Violence is need-deprivation. Multiple forces prevent people from reaching their full potential, such as poverty and exploitation. Importantly, these forces are invisible, but their effects can be felt in people's everyday life. As a result, usually, people do not manage to grasp what is harming them, triggering frustration and discomfort.

Examining artistic practices through the lenses of the extended definition of violence—specifically understanding that objective violence works as a force—opens the space to comprehend how art can contribute to expose and unpack the invisible mechanisms that impede people from reaching their full potential, as the analysis of the three case studies used in this thesis demonstrate. Evaluating the spectator's experience of *Level of Confidence* and *What Else Could We Talk About?* in light of this concept revealed how what Massumi calls "everyday fear"—which is a form of structural or systemic violence according to Galtung and Žižek's theory—is integrated into the Mexican social tissue because of the permanent threat of becoming a victim of enforced disappearance or murder. On the other hand, analyzing *The Promise* through the extended definition of violence allowed us to understand

enforced migration as a form of structural violence fueled by fear and lived with pain and frustration. In short, applying the extended concept of violence to the analysis of the visual arts opens multiple avenues to better understand the forces that impede human well-being and development by transmitting knowledge based on sensations that can only be revealed to the body.

#### ON THE CONCEPT OF FORENSIC AESTHETICS

Diverse authors, within and outside the field of the visual arts, have engaged with the concept of forensic aesthetics in artistic practices. Interestingly, most of these authors state that the artworks they analyze conjure violence about whether actual or fictional events. Such observation suggests that artists use forensic aesthetics, either deliberately or not, to reflect on violence as a phenomenon, whether in abstract terms or to denounce specific circumstances.

Notably, many of these sources share the emphasis on the evidentiary or indexical character of forensic aesthetics but differ in two important respects: they propose a different relationship with the historical and political context—either independent from historical context or directly conversant with it—and, in that, they define forensic aesthetics either in terms of spectators' response or as techniques of mediation. These differences seem to derive from the influence of their primary sources: Ralph Rugoff and, more recently, Eyal Weizman. Although Rugoff was the first to use the concept of forensic aesthetics, Weizman's work—although not developed from the visual arts—is more influential in recent research, mainly when it is focused on socially-engaged cultural expressions. Rugoff's framework presupposes a disinterested artwork and defines forensic aesthetics as the inquiry mode the artwork triggers in the spectator. On the other hand, Weizman theorizes a research practice with political implications—of not merely artistic expressions—focusing on how objects and materials are constructed as persuasive evidence of the course of historical events.

Adopting Weizman's perspective in the analysis of the visual arts expands the idea that forensic aesthetics consists merely of displaying material traces of violent events to consider how technologies and materialities are transformed into devices aimed at exposing and contesting power structures. Methodologically speaking, the concept of forensic aesthetics invites us to consider the work of art in terms of the triad object, mediator, and forum. In artistic terms, these elements are the objects or materials, the artists and how they make objects or materialities "speak" for themselves when constructing the artwork, and how the works relate to the forum or exhibition space. Such an approach reveals that performative and theatrical devices are central to this aesthetic form. Hence, forensic aesthetics invites reflection on how materiality is transformed into the evidence of a counternarrative produced outside official institutions meant to reach the public sphere. Seen from this perspective, the work of two artists that at first glance might appear dissimilar, such as Lozano-Hemmer and Margolles, share common ground.



It is worth noting that, although Rugoff's concept of forensic aesthetics is less instrumental in analyzing artistic representations of actual circumstances of violence, his observations about the spectator's attitude should not be discarded. This research showed that even though the artworks are not conceived as autonomous, decontextualized expressions, they trigger an inquiry mode in the spectator and invite her to reconstruct the referred to events. Enhanced attention and curiosity play a central role in the persuasive capacity of the work of art. In turn, as the analysis of the spectators' testimonies showed, the work's persuasiveness —and not only the exploratory attitude— takes part in the aesthetic experience.

Drawing from the work of Weizmann, Rugoff, and the other reviewed scholars, this thesis proposed understanding the concept of forensic aesthetics as a material-oriented aesthetic form at the intersection of art, law, and science, which is organized by the human experience of violence and death, as it emerged amid the processes of globalization and economic liberalization. Forensic aesthetics in the visual arts manifests as artworks that establish a dialogue with contexts of violence by integrating material evidence, archival materials, or testimonies, mediated through various technological, theatrical, and narrative devices that aim to make the artwork persuasive. The presentation of these materials might convey a sense of ruin or contamination or comply with the leitmotif of high technology and visual surveillance. In these artworks, the artist uses the exhibition space as a forum to display evidence that makes the case against state violence. This material evidence makes public the information necessary to make power structures accountable and mediates the encounter between the victims of violence and the spectator. Accordingly, the works address the viewer as a tribunal responsible for making justice possible.

In this research, applying the concept of forensic aesthetics demanded paying attention to the materials and objects presented as evidence, placing them against the historical and political context that the work of art addresses, and analyzing the techniques of mediation employed by the artists. The corpus of artworks studied in this thesis uses various materialities as evidence of violence: photographic portraits in *Level of Confidence*, human remains in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, and found objects in a state of ruination in *The Promise*. As stated in the introduction, these materialities are described by Yepes in his analysis of forensic aesthetics in contemporary Colombian art. In this research, it became evident that, although most of these categories accurately describe materials commonly used in forensic aesthetics artworks, they are not exhaustive, and consequently, they were not fully applicable in the context of this thesis. First, it is worth noting that the objects and photographs used in these artworks were sourced rather than found, as Yepes mentioned; differently put, they were specifically searched and chosen by the artist because of their relationship with the violent events they seek to expose. Second, it must be noted that other materials, such as written documents and maps, are also used in artistic practices as evidence of state violence. More importantly, Yepes does not contemplate the leitmotifs of surveillance technology, digital media, and ruination, which are also frequently used in socially-engaged artistic practices.

The work *Los Senderos de Iguala Que se Bifurcan* (The Paths of Iguala that Bifurcate) developed by the agency Forensic Architecture and displayed at the University Museum of Art (MUAC) in 2017, for example, consists

of a series of diagrams that schematize the counternarrative of the Ayotzinapa students' disappearance that emerged from Forensic Architecture's research.<sup>84</sup> This work does not display any material evidence directly obtained from the crime scene. It shows a graphic illustration of the different accounts about these events in a single image. In addition, it is also worth noting that some artworks combine material evidence and testimony. For example, Alvarez and Zaiontz describe *Poker de Damas* (Ladies Poker 2016) by Teresa Margolles and *Garden Speak* (2014) by Tania El Khoury as examples of "feminist forensic performance." Both works integrate testimonies of friends and relatives of victims of violence. These works show that testimony and forensic evidence do not necessarily have an antagonistic position in the context of artistic practices.<sup>85</sup> These two observations demonstrate that forensic aesthetics in the visual arts is a much richer category than theorized so far.

#### ON THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE THROUGH FORENSIC AESTHETICS

One of the central concerns of this research was describing the mechanisms through which forensic aesthetics contributes to revealing the forces that construct and sustain violence. This point will be addressed in the last pages of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is important to note now that forensic aesthetics contribute to reaching a deeper understanding of the workings of violence by revealing its affective dimension or, as Johannes Galtung calls it, the "attitudes" that different forms of violence trigger. Through their construction, *Level of Confidence* and *What Else Could We Talk About?*, revealed to the spectator that enforced disappearance and massive death bring "low-level fear" or the "threat of violence," which affects the people's lives. On the other hand, *The Promise* revealed the despair and desolation that the conditions that trigger enforced displacement bring to the community. In the three case studies, these forms of violence are evoked instead of explicitly represented. In other words, the artworks' content is not visible but revealed to the body through the affective engagement with the indexical materials.

In all the three case studies, the materialities presented as evidence closely connect with the events referred to. This connection, nevertheless, is not necessarily direct. While in both Margolles' works, the materials are transported directly from the physical context —the crime scene and the city of Juarez— this is not the case with Lozano-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence*. This artwork is centered on the students' portraits, which, although indexical of their existence, do not directly relate to their disappearance. They are indirect indices of the crime that came to constitute the symbol of these events in a broader context. This observation shows that forensic aesthetics does not necessarily demand the use of materials that exist in direct relation with events of violence —or direct indices of violence in Yepes terms. Objects or materials indirectly associated with violent events can also perform as evidence in artworks.

The materials employed by the artist do not operate as evidence by themselves. They are constructed as evidence through the techniques of mediation that the artist chooses. The two artists analyzed in this thesis use

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<sup>84</sup> The work is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgJjbBsAWA&ab\\_channel=AristeguiNoticias](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgJjbBsAWA&ab_channel=AristeguiNoticias)

<sup>85</sup> In the second chapter of this thesis it is explained that the forensic turn in the advocacy of human rights emerged as a response to the subjectivity of testimony.

different meditation strategies: While Lozano-Hemmer uses interactivity and surveillance technologies, Margolles resorts to theatrical devices, especially performance and dramatic settings. These techniques are what make materiality “speak.” It is worth noting that the role of the object as an index of violence is not straightforward. The object in forensic aesthetics, as Dominguez Galbraith notes, has an asymptotic relation to the real thing (2019, 93). Its insertion into the artistic context, or forum, forces material evidence of violence to operate between the realm of allegorical representation and the space of evidence to demand justice. Importantly, even though the things or materials that the artist chooses to construct the artwork are in an area between allegory and evidence and must not necessarily be direct indices of the violent events, they must convey an authentic character. As Rebaté’s criticism or Rugoff’s approach to forensic aesthetics and the analysis of Margolles’ works demonstrated, the sense that the materials are authentic plays an essential part in the aesthetic experience and in making the spectator accept the role of witness’ role. In short, although the materials that constitute the artwork can be symbols instead of direct indices of the violent circumstances they evoke, they must be perceived as authentic and not as staged materials.

As the analysis of the three case studies demonstrate, indexicality is used at the service of prosopopoeial, that is, speaking on behalf of non-living things or absent persons. In *Level of Confidence*, Lozano-Hemmer presents the students’ portraits as evidence of their disappearance. By mediating the portraits through the face recognition software, the installation suggests that the search for the students is still open. In this way, the work contradicts the so-called historical truth. In addition, the photographs also speak about enforced disappearance as a form of state repression against the population. In *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Teresa Margolles utilized blood recovered from crime scenes as evidence of state violence. By presenting it at the exhibition space mediated through cloths, mud, and water, the artist sought to make a crisis of violence visible that the state aimed to deny. Here, the information about the provenance of the work’s materials is critical for the perception of the objects and the performance as evidence of violence. It is until the materiality is framed discursively—in this case by the description of the materials’ origins—that the artwork’s sense becomes evident. Similarly, in *The Promise*, although the abandoned house is a direct index of forced migration, it only comes to symbolize violence through the artist’s act of destroying, transporting, and presenting the house at the exhibition space. Here, too, as in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, the text accompanying the work plays a central role in the artwork’s constitution as a piece of evidence that gives voice to the victims of enforced displacement.

In the three case studies analyzed in this thesis, understanding materiality as the evidence required first understanding their relationship with the social and political context. In *Level of Confidence*, for instance, knowing the competing narratives about the students’ fate is vital to read the artwork as a statement that contradicts the so-called historical truth. As the only information that the work reveals is that the students are disappeared, without this knowledge, the installation is likely to be read exclusively as a memorial for the disappeared students losing sight of its potential to denounce state violence. Similarly, understanding *The Promise* as a statement that exposes

systemic violence in the border region necessitates specific knowledge about how the economic liberalization, gender violence, drug-related violence, and the real estate crisis are intertwined within the city. Without this knowledge, it is hard to read the artwork as expressing a narrative about the material lived impact of the global liberal economy that shows the gruesome reality hidden by the accounts that focus on the growing per capita income in the city. This dependency between information and the counter-forensic potential of the work of art is particularly critical in *What Else Could We Talk About?*. This work powerfully underlined the human costs of the war on drugs, opening the space to consider the conflict as an expression of the necropolitical regime imposed by the neoliberal ethos. Again, such a reading is only possible when possessing specific knowledge about the systemic origins of drug-related violence.

As described in the theoretical framework, the mediation techniques largely determine these artworks' persuasive capacity and aesthetic experience. The persuasive power of these works, that is, their ability to touch the viewer, depends on the works' affective force. The artwork's affective capacity in these three case studies is given by the work's capacity to engage the viewer physically: *Level of Confidence* accomplishes this by engaging the spectator through the gaze, and Margolles does it by involving other senses —especially smell. The impact of these affective experiences on the artworks' interpretation is addressed in the following section.

#### ON AFFECT AS METHODOLOGY

In focusing on the relationship between the artwork's mediation techniques and its persuasive capacity, the concept of forensic aesthetics opens the space to analyze how the work intervenes on the discursive landscape about the events referred to. As affect theory centers on the spectators' bodily experience, it becomes a valuable tool to analyze the impact of these mediation techniques and engage with the narrative's reception.

Notably, although scholars like René Hoogland note that affect cannot be fully captured by language nor determined by form or signification, which complicates its study (2014,13), the methodology employed in this thesis proved helpful for its analysis. Teresa Brennan's argument that sensations and emotions are indicative of affect's transmission and Massumi's observation that bodily movements and attention shifts show affect in operation, in addition to Bennett's contention that the works' structure influences the artwork's affective dynamics, allowed this project to reach conclusions about what the artwork did to the spectators and how these effects influenced the viewers' interpretation of it. In *Level of Confidence*, for instance, the methodology showed that the face recognition device's capacity to force the spectator to pay sustained attention to the portraits and compare them with hers enhanced the pictures' potential to affect the spectator and influenced her interpretation of the artwork by making her feel the threat of her own body disappearing. In *What Else Could We Talk About?* Margolles crafted a rarified atmosphere through the empty space, its state of decay, and the blood's smell that made the spectator more susceptible to feel the presence of an invisible corpse, which triggered uncomfortable sensations that revealed to the spectator's body the "low-level fear" that is experienced when there are high violence thresholds. Similarly, in *The Promise*, the analysis of the spectators' testimonies against the work's construction revealed that the spectator

and the volunteer experience and interpretation of the artwork were substantially different. On the one hand, the volunteer's engagement with the installation was structured by physical pain. On the other, the spectator's experience was centered on bewilderment and a sense of loneliness created through the atmosphere and process similar to physical imagination or empathy for objects. In short, the examination of the three case studies allowed this research to corroborate the argument of scholars like Bennett and van Alphen, who propose that the bodily experience of the artworks plays an essential role in its interpretation. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that, although it is difficult to draw conclusions based on the testimonies of a small number of people, these testimonies are still informative when analyzed in the context of the artwork and prior art historical analysis.

It is worth noting that this thesis paid particular attention to Bennett's argument that using affect as art's operative element involves capitalizing on the subject's embodied perception. That is to say, using affect as an artistic component means exploiting the fact that sensations, emotions, and affordances influence how a person perceives an artwork and interprets it. For instance, in *The Promise*, the visitor's perception and interpretation of the artwork was highly influenced by its presentation in a dark exhibition room and the dust smell floating in the atmosphere. The room's darkness and emptiness, along with the simplicity of the installation, triggered bewilderment and a sense of loneliness that contributed to the perception of the artwork as poignant and its interpretation as an open corpse. In *Level of Confidence*, the uncanny sensation of looking at one face while scrutinizing the other's face sparked the spectator's embodied imagination triggering both pity and discomfort that influenced her perception of the photographs and her thoughts about enforced disappearance. Finally, in *What Else Could We Talk About?* the somber atmosphere and the space emptiness biased the spectators' perception of the pavilion, allowing them to relate the artworks through embodied imagination, triggering uncomfortable sensations and thoughts about the uneven distribution of death.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

The development of this project showed new research routes that future projects can follow. As discussed above, the work of Forensic Architecture has entered into the museum economy. However, the works they produce find themselves in the liminal space between documentation and art. Their work is not the only case. For example, the criminologist Amber Horning and artist Sara Jordenö developed the project *Time and Motion Studies* (2011), which investigates urban life in New York City. This project, which includes research on street pimps and their role in the sex industry, is at the intersection between social sciences and artistic practices, just as the work of Forensic Architecture and Forensic Oceanography.<sup>86</sup>

Chapter three explored the affective operations of the corpse's blood, centered on what Julia Kristeva denominates abjection. This affect involves a strong sense of rejection, which manifests as spasms, other physical

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<sup>86</sup> For more examples on this kind of projects see "Forensic Aesthetics - Roundtable II: Constructed Evidence," *The New School* (2011).

reactions, and a particular fascination. As discussed in that chapter, according to the scholar Ryna Arya, the intensity of this affect is such that it might lead the spectator to reach catharsis. According to the Hispanist Herman Herlinghaus (2009, 2013), the experience of catharsis in relation to the sacrifice of those deemed unworthy –such as drug traffickers and prostitutes— is problematic as it turns their suffering into a spectacle. There is no research addressing this topic, namely the relationship between the experience of catharsis and politically-engaged artworks. From an ethical point of view, it is worth exploring this connection.

Another relevant question that emerged in the course of this research is that of the ethical implications of *prosopopeia* in forensic aesthetics. As explained in the first chapter, the object is made to speak on behalf of the absent. Correspondingly, as a researcher and interpreter, the artist chooses the narrative exposed through the artwork, which reflects the absent Other's voice. Nonetheless, it is unclear which procedures are necessary to make ethical such a claim, avoiding the traps of appropriation of the Others' experience. By tracing different artworks that use the strategy of speaking on the Other's behalf through an object and dissecting its characteristics and artmaking processes, it would be possible to grasp this issue better.

## List of Figures

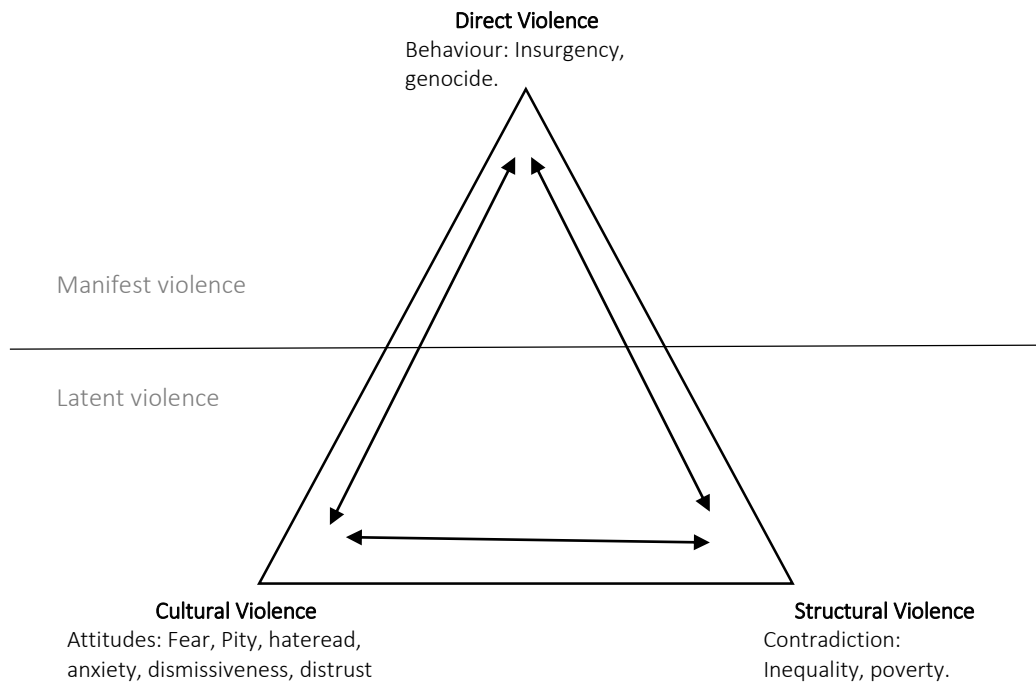


Fig. 1.1 Illustration showing Johannes Galtung's triangle of violence. Adapted from Demmers (2012).

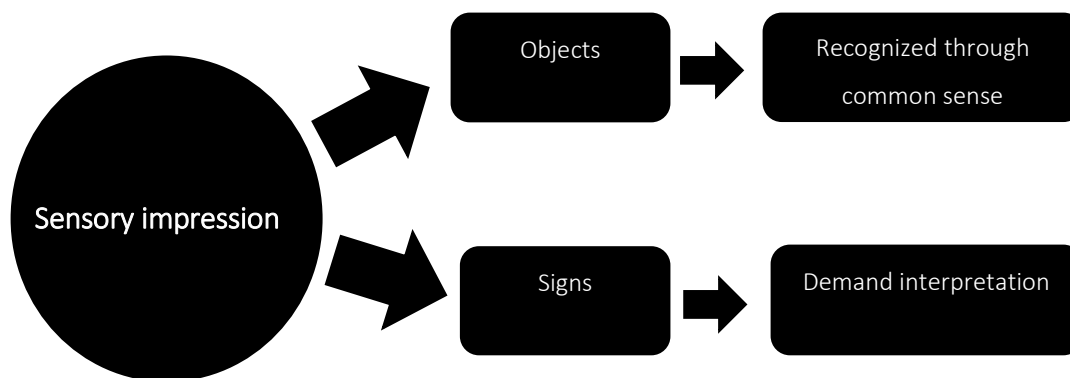


Fig. 1.2 Illustration showing Deleuze's distinction between objects and signs.

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