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The Performative Corpse
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How do we fight against an ideology that continually ranks some human lives above others? If racist, sexist, and classist attitudes rest on an abstract categorization of people into echelons of human-ness what do we turn to in order to subvert this hierarchy?

Object oriented ontology (OOO) is a metaphysical reckoning with the truth that objects are a *part of* and not *apart from* our humanness. The dominant tendency in the West is to believe that humans and objects are ontologically separate, thus making it easier for humans to justify violence on the environment and “de-humanized,” or “objectified” subjects. The aestheticization of mortality—or, perhaps, rather, the concretization of mortality radically destabilizes this tendency by putting us, the viewers, face to face with our object-ness. Plucking us from our perch atop a (human-constructed) taxonomy that uses language and reasoning as metrics for subjecthood, the image of the corpse is a turn toward an object oriented ontology. Beyond the vision of mortality, *experiencing* the materiality of the corpse, that is, experiencing human remains within art installations, is a way of leveling ourselves with objects in such a way that their agency cannot be denied. It is this specific distinction I would like to lay into in the unfolding of this essay. Making death visible is a gesture, a partial step in the right direction, but also one that keeps a particular power structure intact. Making death (phenomenologically) *present*, however, illuminates our own inherent, and future, objecthood.

This essay aims to reconsider performativity within the framework of death, the corpse, and visions of mortality, specifically, in the work of artist and forensic pathologist Teresa Margolles. Her mixed-media installations frame forensic postmortems in such a way that the remains are given the space to speak for themselves in their artistic settings. The use of the

corpse in her art allows the deaths of the victims to exist as a structure that reveals the violent conditions of their former lives. The performative corpse is able to reshape the oppressive narratives that too often accompany the media saturation of dead bodies of color and marginalized victims of violence.

Object oriented ontology and its close cousin, New Materialism, are twenty-first century branches of philosophy that seek to understand objects as something other than inanimate. This is a complex undertaking that requires enough nuance to recognize the difference between merely noticing objects and experiencing and believing them to have agency. Post Heidegger, a new era of understanding objects began, but an implicit hierarchy remained. Phenomenology did the work of orienting us better toward the external world, but kept the understanding that objects were lesser in value. So codified is this social belief that even when phenomenology is invoked by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a way to insist that subjects also ontologically include objecthood, there is still a privileging of subjectivity above all else. Elizabeth Grosz, via Luce Irigaray, draws attention to this, Merleau-Ponty's shortcoming, when she notes an implicit structural rank in his example of human hands being both subject and object. Locating objecthood within the self is not enough for either of them.

It will be recalled that Merleau-Ponty invokes the phenomenon of the double sensation, the case of one hand feeling another which is itself feeling an object. Re-fashioning these two hands, Irigaray instead evokes an image of the two hands joined at the palms, with fingers stretched: a relation of symmetry between the two hands rather than the kind of structural domination or hierarchy that Merleau-Ponty describes in giving one hand access to the other without in its turn being touched by the other.¹

¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 105.

Leveling the subject and the object within the human person laid the groundwork for OOO/New Materialism in the late twentieth century. Finding the animacy, or, vibrancy, within objects was the next step taken by the OOO-ists such as Jane Bennett who articulates the distinction between visibility and presence: “Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it *betokened human activity* [...], and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as *existents* in excess of their association with human meanings [...].”² Typically, objects are seen as signifiers of human activity, their visibility devoid of all meaning except for their status in relation to people. Bennett here suggests a way of observing “things”—choosing to semantically distinguish between “debris” and “thing” is also of great importance and further illustrates the point—in such a way that moves them beyond their relativity to people. Rather than the human gaze mapping meaning onto them, objects become performative, and instead enact upon the human observer.

The work of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles functions in this same way. Her art objects are performative of Bennett’s “thing”-ness in the sense that they charge the space they occupy and demand a different kind of attention from their audience. Adding another layer to performative objects, Margolles’ materials are human remains and other ancillary objects from the morgue where she works as a forensic pathologist. In viewing these remains of those who died under violent conditions of northern Mexico, we are hearing the decedents’ stories as if their remains are speaking for themselves. Margolles’ art installations are not dependent on whatever meaning is brought to bear by the viewers confronting them. Furthermore, she is reorienting

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4. Emphasis added.

centuries of inculcated ideas around what it means to look upon a corpse. In doing so, she has not only laid the groundwork for objects to assert their ontological agency, she has also changed what it means to look upon a corpse.

Before the widespread fear of the visualization of death took hold in the West, the morgue was a site for spectacle.³ In France, particularly, audiences would gather to view corpses of unknown decedents at the morgue for a number of reasons. Besides identifying victims of drowning and other accidental deaths, the morgue provided a space for artists to practice anatomical renderings so that the human likenesses in their paintings were accurate. Specifically, Edouard Manet frequented the morgue to boost his skill in observing and painting the human form. He became so skilled at copying, in fact, that much of his work was the subject of widespread criticism for rendering portraits of people and saints—namely, the Messiah himself—who were meant to be alive look lifeless.⁴

The Paris morgue taking on the identity as site for “surveillance and spectacle” changed the way Modernist society understood death and the image of the corpse.⁵ I would argue that it further impressed upon the culture the idea that objects are not only ontologically separate from humans, but that the breach is so vast that objects are completely dependent on the human gaze to garner any meaning and agency in the world. Perhaps, had the Paris morgue developed a

³ The beginning to mid-nineteenth century was a time when visions of mortality were quite normal and even favored in the West. People’s relationship to death was extremely quotidian because people died at home, where funerals and wakes also took place. After the necessity to preserve dead bodies arose during the American Civil War, however, death became detached from the home. From here, a snowball effect swept North America and Europe, and the living’s proximity to death became greatly curtailed in the West.

⁴ Emily Beeny, “*Christ and the Angels* Manet, the Morgue, and the Death of History Painting?,” *Representations* Volume 122, No. 1 (Spring 2013).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

different kind of looking, as well as had the nearness of death *not* disappeared along with the dawn of Modernity, our relationship to objects could have taken a different course. Nearly 150 years later, Margolles' seminal work that reconstructs the bridge between artistic expression and the morgue is able to grant us a new closeness with mortality while also reconfiguring the way we understand our relationship to our own objecthood.

One significant distinction between the Paris morgue and Margolles' morgue-focused work is in exactly *how* each one centered the image of the corpse. In Emily Beeny's previously cited essay on the history of the Paris morgue and its effect on looking, she states this claim about how Modern Parisians came to view the decedents.

As the macabre theatrics of the curtain suggest, most visitors came not to identify but simply to look [...]. Thus, by midcentury, the Morgue had come to stand for a new mode of regarding bodies—a mode that implied a heterogenous mass audience; a mode at once coldly appraising and salacious, forensic and prurient; a mode that *denied expressive agency* to the body presented [...].⁶

Beeny points out how quickly corpses—once living and breathing bodies that belonged to, *were*, humans—become powerless objects in the eyes of those regarding them. It is interesting here to note the subtle shift between private and public death and how the Paris morgue further constructed that boundary. In the early nineteenth century, when someone died at home, an entire ritual was performed that centered the *person* who died. Wakes and funerals existed as rituals to honor the decedent's life and to celebrate his or her legacy. The Paris morgue was a radical contrast to that uniquely private experience of death. Expressly, in this “theatrical” setting at the morgue, decedents became corpses, objects. The living who came to view the products of the morgue were looking at “something that could not return a look,” which, in turn, meant that they

⁶ Ibid., 57. Emphasis added.

could project any sort of reality onto the corpses.⁷ The corpses became objects whose meaning was entirely determined only when they were being watched by living subjects; this relationship to the living made them ontologically separate from any kind of subjecthood.

The Paris morgue in the 1860s solidifies the corpse as being fundamentally divorced from the human subject who once was the now dead body. The implication here is that this separation cuts deeper into the divide between subject and object—or, between “debris and thing,” as Bennett describes—which, in turn, continues to harm the oppressed and marginalized by “objectifying” them, making their lives devoid of all meaning, allowing them to exist only relative to those with the liberty to gaze free and project their personal meanings onto the things and people in the world.

How, then, is Teresa Margolles’ forensic artwork different than the Paris morgue? She is, after all, using human remains as materials, thus exposing the decedents as objects. She is not spectacularizing the dead, however, by ushering audiences in to gaze at corpses lacking any background or context. Margolles’ oeuvre is a performative frame that affirms both the object- and subjecthood of the decedents she places in her work. Each sculpture, photograph, and installation *is* the decedent, *is* made up of objects (including the remains), and also *does* the work of representing the deceased person’s life. The work is performative not because it is pretending to be something it is not, but because it, equipped with its own agency, is charging its encounters with viewers with a new narrative around the fatality of marginalized life.

Sitting in a glass vitrine is a somewhat mysterious object that is hard to discern at first. Its most distinctive feature is a small, round, silver sphere resting in its center. This sculpture is

⁷ Ibid., 59.

Lengua (2000), and after seeing it in closer proximity, it is clear that this is a human tongue. This dismembered body part was cut out of an adolescent boy's dead body by Margolles after he was murdered. Margolles gained permission from the boy's family to use his tongue as an art object in exchange for a burial service. A dismembered tongue with its remaining piercing reminds the viewer that this tongue belonged to someone, a unique human being with his own life, ideas, and relations in the world. Through its preservation, visibility, and presence, this tongue is allowed to speak in perpetuity. Margolles gives language to the dead boy and the capacity to reject the claim that his bad death was somehow justified because of his entanglements with gangs.

In *Lengua*, as an oyster reveals its hidden pearl, this dead object reveals its hidden subjectivity that has been removed from this world. This revelation charges the gallery space with an energy that points to realities that its viewers are likely unaware of. *Lengua* offers the viewer an understanding of the violent events that were (and still are) taking place in northern Mexico. It makes death observable in a new context: the space of the art gallery, which is an institution that demands respect from the viewer. The dismembered, pierced tongue does not deny death at all, but rather denies the ever-familiar spectacle of the death of people of color. Margolles has displayed this tongue like a reliquary, asking viewers to think of the subject as someone in need of justice, rather than a criminal who deserved to die.

Margolles' photo series, *Linea Fronteriza* (2005), is made up of eleven photographs of post-autopsy, sutured corpses. Similar to *Lengua*, the body modifications on these torsos activate a reminder to the viewer that these people lead meaningful lives in the world where they made decisions that affected them and the world around them, lives that were undeserving of the criminal narrative thrust upon them in their death. In a number of photos in this series, Margolles

uses an age-old criminal identifying practice by making the tattoos of the victims—the visual identifiers—the subject of the image, and not showing any visage. Rather than lining up suspects and asking to identify the criminal by their markers, Margolles, once again, makes the viewer a witness to the subjectivity of these victims. The identifying tattoos do not criminalize these men depicted, rather they memorialize them. Importantly, though, Margolles also does not deny their death or allow you to forget it in this memorial; rather, you are forced to reckon with their death by seeing how these tattoos are deformed after the autopsy---this is the mark of a life disrupted.

En el aire (2003) is an installation is experienced by walking through an empty gallery space that is being filled with bubbles generated by a machine hanging from the ceiling. There is a continuous stream of bubbles floating through the space, and by the end of their drift they pop on the floor, the walls, and, occasionally, on the bodies of the viewers. The high volume of bubbles sometimes makes avoiding touching them impossible. From wall text in the gallery, viewers are told that the bubbles are produced with (disinfected) water from the morgue where Margolles works. This is the water that has been used to clean the bodies of victims killed as a result of the crime in Mexico.

In *En el aire* Margolles pushes the final boundary and puts viewers in as close to direct contact as possible with the corpses she encounters in her daily life. She invites us into a physical relationship with the victims by way of molecular drifting. By touching water that has touched the bodies, viewers experience the absence of the victims through the presence of the thing that once touched their dead bodies.

The use of bubbles is also evocative of the overall ephemerality of life; bubbles are here and gone again from one moment to the next. And, going one step further than the life-death

contrast, there is illustrated the stark difference between the jovial and the macabre. Bubbles, which connote a happy, childlike apparatus and the deathly image of spirits floating up and away from their dead bodies are playing double-metaphor-duty in this work. Margolles links these disparate symbols together in order to probe the viewers' minds, to remind them that the dead remain in ways beyond normal comprehension.

The through line between all of these works of art is that they are all making objects out of the human remains. By *not* denying that the decedents are, in fact, objects, Margolles is doing something similar to the aforementioned Irigaray maneuver whereby she subverts the dominant power structures at play. She is leveling the subject and object. This is important for the cause of resisting oppression and further marginalization because if “things” themselves can have their agency revealed and be reconsidered as “existents” acting in the world, then objectifying, or dehumanizing a person or group of people no longer holds the power it once did. The sustained—and now growing—hostility toward Mexican people and those who die from border-crossing attempts, or drug-related violence, results in rampant objectifying media focus. The deaths of Mexican/Latin American people are, in a way, justified due to this prevailing understanding of those lives not being understood to matter in the same way that white people's lives do.⁸ The media's glut of death in Latin America is functioning in the same way the Paris morgue did. The public is able to gaze upon the dead without the dead being able to look back. This objectification of an entire culture continues to drain the meaning from the lives lost; in turn,

⁸ I am specifically highlighting Mexican/Latin American people in this essay because they are the subject of Margolles' work primarily. This system of oppression exists across the board for people of color, and their deaths are distorted in the same way. Focusing on the marginalization of those in Central and Latin America is a microcosm of the problem at large.

those powerful enough to control their stories in the news can continue to justify oppression and violence.

Margolles forces her audience to confront the deaths of those she is remembering through an entirely new and different lens. Rather than presenting us with vague images of corpses, she displays human remains with astonishing levels of authentic subjectivity. The remains displayed in *Lengua* and *Linea Fronteriza* are so pointedly human that they are, in some ways, returning our gaze. The piercing on the tongue, the mis-aligned tattoos on the torso, these modifications denote human choice during life, and act as the agent in their mode of remaining. These distinguishable traits, put on by the decedents themselves, remind viewers that each person they encounter in the gallery had a singularly unique story that illuminated their life. And furthermore, viewers can be sure that they were not deserving of their violent deaths.

Margolles' transference of the morgue she works in counters the Paris morgue's because the remains she uses are not made to fit into a passive ontology; they are not "debris," but rather "thing." It is all in the way she highlights the subject within the decedent; she is providing these objects with the ability to look back at the public. Viewers are confounded by a new mode of looking: they do not see a corpse whose lifeless body means nothing except for the meaning imprinted on it by an oppressive media. Margolles transforms the corpse into materials that possess a singular "thing-ness" through her careful framing of the objects in the art gallery. She abstracts the remains enough so as to remove the "catalogue of waxwork" element.⁹ The work is not bodies rendered into objects, it is objects manifesting a new history.

⁹ Ibid., 57.

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