

Urbanism

Ruben Gallo (2004)

CHAPTER FOUR

URBANISM

In chapter three, we discussed Juan Villoro's assertion that Mexico City, like most sprawling megalopolises, cannot be represented. Taniel Morales, however, proved that there are still ways of representing Mexico City and capturing its anarchic spirit, and radio is one of the most effective. Perhaps Villoro's statement needs to be qualified: The city can no longer be depicted by traditional media, like painting and photography, that aspire to a certain totality, but it can be represented by new, creative strategies that, though fragmentary, capture the most striking aspects of life in the capital. In this chapter we will discuss five artists from different walks of life who have come up with fresh, innovative proposals for representing the city.

How does one represent Mexico City? In 1946, Salvador Novo, the irreverent poet who later became known as "the chronicler of Mexico City," came up with one answer after he was asked to write a book about the new, modern city of skyscrapers and boulevards, Packards and restaurants that had sprung up in the two decades after the Mexican Revolution. The poet realized that capturing the city in all its complexity and diversity was a tricky endeavor: Even in the 1940s, Mexico City was already too large for a single poem or a single novel, and any text would inevitably leave out entire aspects of life in the capital (unlike, for example, Bernardo de Balbuena's seventeenth-century *Grandeza mexicana*, an epic poem that aspired to represent Mexico City in its entirety). Faced with this challenge, Novo came up with an ingenious solution: He proposed practicing the city—he used the verb *ejercer*, to "practice"³¹ in the sense that doctors practice medicine or lawyers practice law—by walking through its streets, wandering through its neighborhoods, and exploring its hidden nooks, as the basis for any form of representation.¹

"Practicing" the city was a highly selective exercise, and one destined to remain incomplete. In the same way that a doctor practices medicine,

but can never achieving a total expertise in medical science, Novo “practiced” Mexico City without ever achieving a total mastery of the capital. And this is precisely the experience that Novo chronicles in his *Nueva grandeza mexicana*: a striking literary portrait of the city that narrates an individual—and fragmented—journey through its neighborhoods, streets, and hidden nooks. With the excuse of entertaining a foreign visitor, Novo crisscrosses the city, walking through the Centro, strolling down Reforma, marching through the Zócalo. The book focuses only on a few streets and a handful of select locations. By the 1940s the capital had grown too large to be covered on foot, and Novo is not afraid to embrace the changes brought about by modernity: He boards an automobile and takes his friend for a ride through gleaming roads and freshly paved highways. One “practiced” the city by exploring its neighborhoods, and Novo saw no reason why this practice should not be automated, along with other aspects of modern life: He became a motorized *flâneur*.

But not every city can be “practiced” in this way. Take Brasilia, for example. Marshall Berman, who like Novo was an avid *flâneur*, complained bitterly that Brazil’s capital could not be “practiced”—explored on foot or by car—because there was nothing to look at except buildings. “From the air,” writes Berman, “Brasilia looked dynamic and exciting: in fact, it was built to resemble the jet plane from which I (and virtually all other visitors) first observed it. From the ground level, however, where people actually live and work, it is one of the most dismal cities in the world . . . one’s overall feeling—confirmed by every Brazilian I met—is one of immense empty spaces in which the individual feels lost, as alone as a man on the moon. There is a deliberate absence of public space in which people can meet and talk, or simply look at each other and hang around. The great tradition of Latin urbanism, in which city life is organized around a *plaza mayor*, is explicitly rejected.”²

In contrast to Mexico City, Brasilia cannot be “practiced.” It is a city of buildings and not of people, and the streets are dead. Though millions of people live in the city, they are nowhere to be seen: There are only “immense, empty spaces” and a complete “absence of public space.”

Brasilia is a textbook example of what the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has called “the generic city”: a planned urban space where the urbanist’s tyrannical design rules over every aspect of life in the city. The generic city has been planned so rigidly that it cannot accommodate street life—a disorderly concentration of people on its thoroughfares. Generic cities cannot be “practiced” because their streets are dead—one could wander endlessly through their vast boulevards and open spaces without encountering anything except buildings designed to be looked at from an airplane.

And though Koolhaas predicted that in the future all cities would become generic (“the model for the generic city,” he wrote, “is the modern airport—all the same”³), Mexico City has—at least so far—escaped this fate. While today’s Mexico City, like other megalopolises around the world, is crisscrossed by expressways, pedestrian overpasses, subway and suburban transit lines, it has still managed to keep a vibrant street life. Unlike Brasilia, where there are only towering buildings and vast but deserted stretches of empty space, almost every corner of the Mexican capital is packed with people, day and night. One can still “practice” Mexico City like Novo did in the 1940s and find much to see: all kinds of people, young and old, rich and poor, locals and foreigners, meeting, talking, arguing—just like in Berman’s ideal city.

A crowded street is proof that the city still lives, that it has not yet become generic. It is not surprising, then, that a number of contemporary artists have taken the streets of Mexico City as inspiration for work that constitutes a modern version of Novo’s urban “practice.” Can the city be represented? “Yes,” they answer, and like Novo, their efforts begin with an exploration of the chaotic jumble found on Mexico City’s streets. Like Novo, the five artists discussed in the chapter are avid *flâneurs* who find the inspiration for their work in the capital’s public spaces and hidden nooks.

Francis Alÿs

Francis Alÿs, a Belgian-born architect who has lived in Mexico since the 1980s, has devoted much of his work to exploring the varieties of street life in the capital. Alÿs keeps his studio in the Centro, Mexico City’s downtown district, in a once grand colonial building on Plaza Santa Catarina that has now been taken over by squatters. The Centro is one of the most crowded, chaotic, and animated neighborhoods in the world. To say that its streets are lively would be an understatement: Street vendors peddling everything from handicrafts to gay porn cram the sidewalks; hundreds of honking, fuming VW beetles, buses, motorcycles, and even ecological cycle taxis clog its avenues; on street corners, impromptu restaurateurs offer roasted corn cobs, hot dogs, hamburgers, and tacos cooked on improvised grills. And in the Zócalo, the City’s central square, the following motley crew rubs shoulders every day: busloads of peasant activists carrying signs; troupes of neo-Aztec dancers clad in loincloths and feather headdresses; stalls selling crucifixes and rosaries as well as Buddhas, Mandalas, and portraits of Gurumai; lines of

construction workers, plumbers, house painters, and electricians—all holding signs announcing their professions—waiting to be hired by passers-by in need of home improvements; Indian women—wearing braids and white dresses and with one to four children in tow—sitting on the floor and begging for alms in heavily accented Spanish. And these characters don't just meet and talk and flirt, as Berman would have it; they also yell and scream and squabble.

The streets of downtown Mexico City—and their jumble of people from all walks of life—provide the setting for most of Alÿs's performance pieces. *Ambulantes* (1995–2001) focuses on the hurdles faced by those whose livelihood depends on their ability to walk the streets: the thousands of street vendors who peddle everything from miraculous ointments to pirated computer programs. They are known as *ambulantes*, a term derived from the Spanish verb *ambular*, to wander. Like their name implies, they wander the streets, pushing their carts until they find an appropriate spot to set up shop for the day. Most of the vendors are unlicensed, unregistered, and uninclined to pay taxes. They form the backbone of Mexico's "informal economy," and they are one of the most visible signs of the city's life (there are no street vendors in generic cities).⁴ This kind of wandering street work provides a means of subsistence for several million Mexicans—an impressive feat, especially in times of recession and rampant unemployment. (In 2003, the city government, following a recommendation by Rudolph Giuliani's security consulting firm, attempted to remove the *ambulantes* from their spots.⁵ They were chased away repeatedly, but eventually they always managed to return to their place of business.⁶)

Alÿs's *Ambulantes* depicts the variety of ways in which street vendors make a living: There are those who sell food on the streets (they push carts loaded with candies and vats for steaming *tamales*); others work as *bricoleurs*, picking and recycling garbage (several photos depict *cartoneros*—men who collect discarded paper and cardboard and sell it to paper mills); there is a plant vendor pushing half a dozen cacti through the streets (Figure 19), and a balloon vendor whose face and torso are obscured by her colorful wares (the photo seems to depict a walking bunch of balloons, Figure 20).

Unlike the English word "vendor," which stresses the act of selling, the Spanish *ambulantes* puts the accent on the experience of wandering. In keeping with this etymology, Alÿs's series depicts several individuals who push or pull carts not in order to sell something, but merely as the simplest—and most efficient—means of transporting merchandise through the Centro's narrow streets: A man carries two mattresses on the back of his bicycle; others lug linens, lumber, inordinately long plastic pipes



Figure 19: Francis Alÿs, from the series *Ambulantes I* (1995–2001). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

(Figure 21), eggs, rolls of fabric, and vegetables. There is even a young man pushing a girl on a handcart (Figure 22)! As we can see, pre-modern modes of commerce and locomotion survive at the heart of the modern city.

At a time when Mexico City's vendors have come under fire from politicians, the public, and the press (they have been accused of blocking the streets, causing traffic jams, littering the sidewalks, and destroying the neighborhood's colonial buildings,⁷ and historian Enrique Krauze blamed them for turning "the Centro's streets into a garbage dump and a breeding ground for rats"⁸), Alÿs's series can be read as a tribute to these wandering merchants. *Ambulantes* highlights the inventiveness and creativity with which the vendors transport their wares—arranged in stacks, piles, heaps, or bunches. The artist seems to identify with his subjects: Like them, he lives in the Centro; like them, he has to walk through the clogged streets daily carrying a heavy load (art materials, in his case); like them, he is an *ambulante*—a wanderer who left his native Belgium for Mexico; like them, he travels from place to place—through the international art circuit of biennials, fairs, and museum shows—selling his wares. But Alÿs also invites us to see how the *ambulantes* are like *him*: By stressing the care they put into the arrangement and transportation of their wares, he shows us



Figure 20: Francis Alÿs, from the series *Ambulantes I* (1995–2001). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

that they, too, are artists. The series makes us see Alÿs as an artworld *ambulante* and the *ambulantes* as unacknowledged urban artists.

In other works, Alÿs takes his identification with the Centro's residents a step further. Many of his *Mexico City Walks*—performances in which he wanders through the city streets carrying out a single action—can be read as efforts to put himself in the shoes of the Centro's inhabitants.⁹ Alÿs once staged a street performance, *The Collector* (1991–92, Figure 23), that is a clear allusion to the plight of Mexico City's *pepenadores*, or garbage pickers, who roam the Centro's heaps of refuse in search of scraps to be resold for profit. "Like the cigarette peddlers, the street-corner fire-eaters and cartwheel turners, the windshield washers and parking-space finders, the pot menders, the sidewalk violinists and portrait painters, the curtain-rod fixers, and the outright beggars who swarm through the city, the *pepenadores* are a result of Mexico's constant failure to find a social space for its very poorest," writes cultural critic Alma Guillermoprieto.¹⁰

For *The Collector*, Alÿs walked through the Centro pulling a tiny magnetic cart that picked up metal scraps as it moved. "The magnetized collector," writes Alÿs in his description of the piece, "takes a daily walk through the streets and gradually builds up a coat made of any metallic



Figure 21: Francis Alÿs, from the series *Ambulantes I* (1995–2001). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

residue lying in its path. The process goes on until the collector is completely covered by its trophies."

For the duration of the performance, Alÿs became a *pepenador*. Like these impoverished pickers, he walked the streets, picking up bits of garbage. And, like the *pepenadores*, he turned refuse into a source of income: While the garbage pickers sell savaged materials to paper mills and glass factories, Alÿs sold the waste-covered *Collector* to a real-life art collector. The piece not only demystifies collectors—powerful individuals at the top of the artworld's pecking order—by inviting us to see them as glorified garbage pickers who roam the artworld, picking up bits and pieces of artistic refuse, but it also suggests a number of similarities between the working methods of contemporary artists and *pepenadores*. Both trades consist in taking things out of their cultural context and inserting them in another. Alÿs's work is a case in point: His performances are exercises in artistic garbage picking. He roams the streets, picking up bits of cultural refuse that he then sells for profit. Artists, he seems to imply, are cultural *pepenadores* as much as *pepenadores* are artisans of garbage.

In *Paradox of Praxis* (1997), Alÿs pushed a large block of ice through the Centro's streets until it melted away. This action—a postmodern



Figure 22: Francis Alÿs, from the series *Ambulantes I* (1995–2001). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

version of Sisyphus's curse—can be read as a metaphor for the daily struggle endured by *ambulantes* and other poor Mexicans: Ultimately, their daily travails are as senseless as the artist's performance; at the end of the day, after buying a few necessities, they will see their meager earnings evaporate—like melting ice—and be forced to start again at square one. ("Sometimes," the artist has said in relation to this piece, "making something leads to nothing."¹¹) As in *The Collector*, the artist identifies with the plight of his neighbors to the point of becoming like them, even if only metaphorically.

In other performances, Alÿs stages elaborate metaphors of loss: In *The Leak*, he roamed the Centro's streets holding a punctured paint can, leaving a trail of colorful drips behind him; in *The loser/the winner* (1998), the artist wore a knit sweater that unraveled as he walked the streets.¹² These actions can all be read as elaborate allegories for the declining fortunes of the Centro's residents. In the 1940s, the neighborhood was solidly middle class: Most of its residents held well-paying jobs, many of them in nearby government offices, and they benefited from the country's post-revolutionary boom. But their prosperity came to an abrupt end with the collapse of oil prices in the 1970s, the peso crisis of the 1980s, and the financial collapse of 1994. During the last 30 years, the Centro's residents



Figure 23: Francis Alÿs, *The Collector* (1991–92). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

have seen their fortunes plunge, their savings evaporate, and their well-being disintegrate.

José Joaquín Blanco, a writer who blames the Centro's deterioration on the presidential decree on rent control introduced in the 1950s, has described the neighborhood's waning fortunes as follows: "In the fifties, the middle classes abandoned the Centro *en masse* . . . faster than a war or a revolution could have chased them out. Landlords left their buildings to rot. (The owner of a house in the Centro was dubbed, by presidential decree, a 'bourgeois exploiter' to be punished by means of 'frozen' rents; whereas the owner of entire blocks in the fancy districts of Lomas, Polanco, Pedregal, or Satélite was a progressive capitalist, worthy of special privileges.) Nobody was prepared to invest in rental buildings downtown. Controlled rents dealt the final blow to this district as any kind of self-respecting place to live. The great murderers of the Centro have always been, first and foremost, the Mexican presidents."¹³

A case in point is the building on Plaza Santa Catalina where Alÿs keeps his studio: In the 1940s it was occupied by upwardly mobile government

workers and professionals; by the 1960s its residents were working-class families paying “frozen” rents; and by the mid-1990s the entire edifice, now severely dilapidated, had been taken over by destitute squatters. Like Aljys’s sweater, the tenants’ finances have slowly unraveled: Many who were once middle class now live in complete poverty, and more than one has quite literally lost the shirt off his back (in contrast to the artist, who loses the sweater off his back only metaphorically).

In the past few years, rising poverty has turned the Centro into one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. The area of Tepito—merely a short walk from Aljys’s studio—has devolved into a hotbed of drug and weapons trafficking, a hideout for thugs, and the city’s largest marketplace for contraband. Violence is another element that sets Mexico City apart from its generic counterparts: The generic city is free of violence just as it is free of street life and free of public spaces. And though Mexico City’s astronomical number of homicides might lead us to suspect that generic cities might not be so sinister after all, Aljys’s performances suggest that the city’s violence is the flipside of its intense street life.

Re-enactments (2000), one of Aljys’s most controversial performances, alludes to the wave of violent crime that has descended upon the Centro. For this performance, the artist strolled through downtown Mexico City carrying a loaded gun (and wearing dark shades) for 20 minutes, until he was finally stopped by a passing police car. He was detained briefly until he identified himself as an artist, whereupon the officers not only let him go but agreed to participate in a reenactment of the events so the artist could properly document his piece. As Cuauhtémoc Medina has written, “*Re-enactments* would have been impossible to produce in almost any other place in the world. Had Aljys staged this piece in Los Angeles or New York, he would have been arrested and probably shot to death. Only in Mexico would the public allow a man to walk busy streets with a gun for more than 10 minutes; only in Mexico could an artist make simple arrangements with police commanders for his own release; only in Mexico would a suspect end up receiving help from his own captors.”¹⁴

Though Medina reads the piece as a reference to police corruption and its culture of violence, I would suggest that *Re-enactments* demonstrates one extreme of Aljys’s efforts to identify with the Centro’s residents: Since some of these residents are thugs, the artist had to experience walking through life—even if for a few minutes—as a thug.

Aljys’s *Walks* constitute a postmodern version of Novo’s tour of Mexico City in 1946. If Novo “practiced” Mexico City by exploring its streets and marveling at its modern constructions, Aljys “practices” the modern city

by wandering through the impoverished streets of the Centro and identifying with the plight of its residents.

Minerva Cuevas

The city’s vibrant and chaotic street life has inspired other representations in which it does not appear as explicitly as in Francis Aljys’s photographs and performance pieces. Although the streets of Mexico City are apparently absent in the work of Minerva Cuevas—an artist and activist with a penchant for web projects—we will see that all of her projects stem from a prolonged meditation on the street and its problems. Like Aljys, Cuevas has her studio in the Centro; like Aljys she makes works about the experience of living in a working-class neighborhood; and like Aljys, she identifies with her subjects.

In 1997, Minerva Cuevas founded *Mejor Vida* Corporation, an enterprise devoted to improving the quality of life of Mexico City’s residents. Imitating the business practices of transnational corporations, *Mejor Vida* opened its headquarters at the Torre Latinoamericana, the Centro’s tallest skyscraper, occupied mostly by small businesses and modest offices (rich corporations establish their headquarters in the ritzy neighborhoods of Polanco and Lomas, far away from the Centro and its grimy chaos). But unlike most corporations, *Mejor Vida* is a one-woman enterprise: Minerva Cuevas serves as its president, CEO, CFO, public relations officer, secretary, and receptionist. And unlike most businesses, which are designed to make money, *Mejor Vida* was conceived to lose money, since all its products and services are given away for free. And instead of collecting a salary, Cuevas spends money to sustain the company.

Mejor Vida’s mission is to make life in the city more bearable (its name translates as “better life”). It offers products and services designed to counteract the numerous inconveniences that plague the city’s poorer residents. Take the metro, for instance. As we saw in the previous chapter, getting around the city by subway can be a hair-raising experience—as Carlos Monsiváis has put it, “every day close to five million people fight a vicious battle for oxygen and inches in the city’s metro”¹⁵—so *Mejor Vida* came up with a number of ingenious remedies.

Gargantuan lines form in front of ticket booths at rush hour, so the corporation (read: Minerva Cuevas) eases the bottleneck by handing out free tickets. There are not enough employees to clean up after the five million daily passengers, so the corporation sweeps the platforms for free (Figure 25). Exhausted riders who fall asleep in the subway cars risk being



Figure 24: Mejor Vida Corporation webpage (www.irational.org/mvc). *Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.*

robbed, so the corporation distributes caffeine “safety pills” to keep them awake and alert. Thieves and other thugs pose a constant threat, so the corporation offers free canisters of pepper spray.

Other products (which clients can retrieve at the corporation’s office or order through its website) are designed to increase the purchasing power of those with limited means. The corporation offers official-looking student ID cards (Figure 26) that can then be used to obtain discounts and free admissions (clients send a recent photo and they receive a card in the mail); doctored barcode stickers, to be affixed on meat, cheese, and other products sold in the city’s supermarkets, designed to trick the checkout scanner into registering absurdly low prices (so that, for instance, a pound of meat can be bought for \$1 instead of \$10); and packaged seeds, which the corporation leaves on banks and ATMs, encouraging consumers to short-circuit consumerism by growing their own food.

✘ The corporation offers another service designed to help those between jobs secure gainful employment: letters of recommendation, which are



Figure 25: Minerva Cuevas cleaning the Mexico City Metro—a free service provided by Mejor Vida Corporation. *Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.*

required for all employment applications in Mexico and carry a disproportionate weight in a country where so much hinges on personal connections. To make up for their lack of friends in high places, job seekers can submit the letter’s content (unabashedly praising their years of experience, punctuality, reliability, and hard-work), and the corporation will then print it and stamp it on Mejor Vida letterhead. In the past, Minerva Cuevas has convinced some of the world’s most prestigious art galleries—Lisson Gallery in London and Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris—to provide recommendation letters on their own letterhead for the corporation’s “clients.”

Cuevas uses her Mejor Vida Corporation to address many of the same social problems tackled by Francis Alÿs’s performances—her work, like Alÿs’s, is an attempt to identify with the city’s poor. But though both artists make works about the vagaries of life in Mexico City, their approaches are quite different. They both allude to the constant threat of violence that hangs over Mexico City, but while Alÿs walks the street with a loaded gun, Cuevas distributes pepper spray and caffeine pills so residents can protect themselves from thugs with guns. Both artists allude to the gradual erosion of the middle class’s purchasing power, but Alÿs performs metaphorical actions—like pushing a block of ice—to identify with the poor man’s troubles, while Cuevas circulates products—doctored

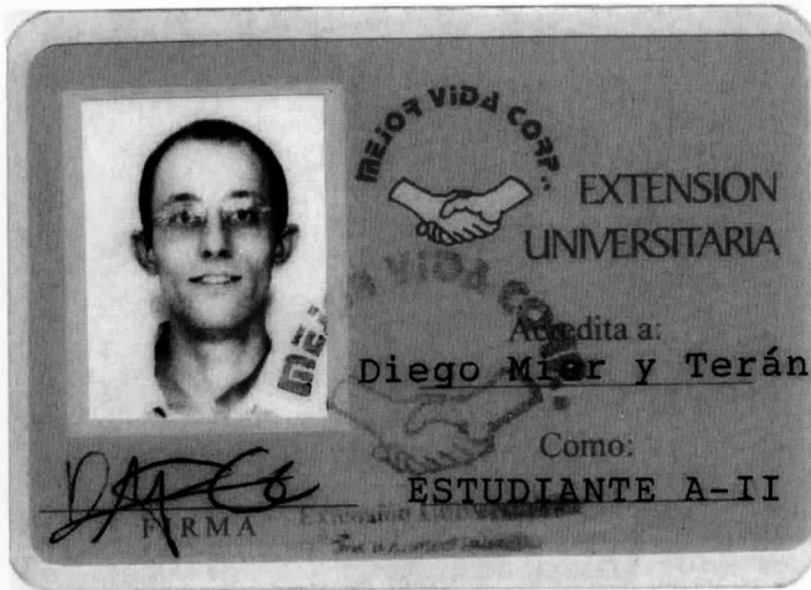


Figure 26: Meior Vida Corporation, student identification card. Image courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

barcodes and phony student cards—designed to stretch the value of the poor man's peso and reverse the trend of impoverishment. Alÿs merely points to problems; Cuevas tries to fix them. Both artists identify with the plight of the underdog, but Cuevas carries her identification a step further than Alÿs by proposing concrete solutions to the nightmares faced by the city's residents.

Both artists roam the streets of Mexico City, but if Alÿs is a *flâneur*, Cuevas is a *handywoman*: Like Alÿs, her inspiration comes from exploring the city streets, but her goal is to devise ingenious ways to fix the many things that are wrong in the capital, as if she were the superintendent of a rickety old building. And though her proposals are modest, they achieve actual results. Her services can be seen as politically committed *talachas*—the improvised, quick fixes that the city's mechanics are so skilled at applying. For Cuevas, “practicing” Mexico City entails mending the tattered lives of its poorer denizens.

Minerva Cuevas's work belongs to a long tradition of utopian art projects: Like the Soviet constructivists and the Mexican muralists—to give only two examples—she believes that art has the potential to transform society. Her goals, however, are much more modest: Unlike Alexandr

Rodchenko or Diego Rivera, she does not dream of using art to build a radically new world—a revolutionary utopia—but merely makes a few concrete proposals for improving the lot of Mexico City's residents. She is more interested in finding solutions than in promoting revolutions. “I don't intend to create an ideal world,” she has declared, “I don't think it can be done, but I do think we can change small things for the better.”¹⁶

It is easy to understand why Cuevas makes her goals so modest, and why she rejects the notion of a radically utopian, revolutionary art. Most of the twentieth century's revolutionary projects—including both the Mexican and the Russian revolutions—degenerated into dystopian nightmares along with the artistic projects they inspired. As French historian Frédéric Rouvillois has observed, radical utopian projects laid the foundations for totalitarian states, “as if utopia were nothing more than the premonition of totalitarianism and totalitarianism the tragic execution of the utopian dream.”¹⁷ Living in Mexico, Cuevas witnessed the sad outcome of the revolutionary project: The Mexican Revolution became “institutionalized” and ultimately fossilized, and the utopian art movements it inspired, including muralism, devolved into state-financed propaganda. It makes sense that after living through this catastrophic failure, Cuevas would renounce grand goals in favor of modest proposals like distributing free metro tickets and cleaning the subway.

But we should not underestimate the importance—and subversive character—of Cuevas's actions because of their modest scale. The mission of Meior Vida Corporation is best understood in light of Georges Bataille's theory of expenditure. According to the French theorist, modern societies are based on the principle of production, in which gain is the ultimate goal. The modern world privileges all that leads to accumulation—and maximizing productivity—and discourages all that is nonproductive. In the logic of production, all actions are a means to an end, and that end is always attaining the maximum gain.

There are certain actions, however, that subvert the logic of production because they are not means to gain profit but ends in themselves. Rituals, cults, spectacles, perverse sexual acts, art, and poetry are all actions that are both useless and unproductive. In a world that privileges *gain*, these actions introduce a *loss*—of time, money, or energy. Bataille calls them “expenditures” and writes that “these constitute a class in which what is emphasized in every case is a *loss*, one that must be as great as possible in order to give the action its true sense.”¹⁸ Acts of expenditure are extremely subversive because they threaten the most elementary principle of the modern world: accumulation.

The products and services offered by Meior Vida Corporation are all forms of expenditure. Not only are they free—Bataille reminds us that the

gift is one of the most archaic forms of expenditure—but they also require an expenditure of time, money, and energy on Cuevas's part.¹⁹ Like the examples given by Bataille, all of the corporation's activities are exercises in loss. The corporation's campaigns are to business practices what perversions are to reproduction: If perverse sexual acts are expenditures because they use up libido but do not reproduce human life, Mejor Vida's services are expenditures because they consume labor but do not produce earnings.

The corporation, however, is an unusual form of expenditure. Most activities that produce losses—from orgiastic experiences to poetic experiments—exist outside what Bataille has called “the realm of labor.” In all of his examples, work and expenditure are mutually exclusive: One can either work or make ritual sacrifices, hold a job or join a cult. Minerva Cuevas, on the other hand, proposes a form of expenditure that is also a form of work. To subvert capitalism's accumulative logic, Mejor Vida's sole employee does not have to join an orgy (one of the ultimate forms of expenditure celebrated by Bataille); she merely has to go to the office.

What is most striking about Mejor Vida is that it is an exercise in expenditure masquerading as a corporation. Cuevas pretends to be a legitimate player in the capitalist game, though in reality she is a secret agent working toward its demise. Mejor Vida is a Trojan horse of expenditure, one that Minerva Cuevas successfully smuggled into the citadel of Mexico City's corporate world.²⁰

Santiago Sierra

Santiago Sierra—a Spanish artist who has lived in Mexico City since 1995—also produces work about the harsh life endured by Mexico City's poorer residents. As in the work of Alÿs and Cuevas, the streets of Mexico City play a crucial role in his projects, and in some cases the street itself becomes the support of the work.

Sierra inserts his practice in the tradition of conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s like Gordon Matta Clark and Vito Acconci: He stages actions and interventions in buildings and public places, then documents the outcome in black-and-white photographs bearing long, descriptive titles (for instance: *Bundle of 1,000 x 400 x 250 cm Composed of Waste Plastic and Suspended from the Front of a Building. 5 Isabel la Católica Street, 1997*). The photographs are also accompanied by a paragraph or two describing the purpose and results of the artist's interventions.

Like the artists discussed earlier in the chapter, Santiago Sierra has been influenced by the experience of the Centro: His apartment on Calle

Regina—blocks away from Alÿs's studio on Plaza Santa Catarina and Mejor Vida's headquarters at the Torre Latinoamericana—served as the setting for several of his early actions. And, like the projects of Alÿs and Cuevas, his work deals with the city's most marginal inhabitants and the problems they face in their daily struggle for survival.

Several of Sierra's interventions, for example, allude to the endless transportation nightmares that complicate the lives of poorer residents. His 1996 *Pedestrian Bridge Obstructed with Wrapping Tape* (Figure 27), was installed on a pedestrian bridge located over one of the busiest intersections in the city: the corner of Viaducto Tlalpan and Río Churubusco, two multilane, high-speed highways traversing the city from north to south and from east to west. To get across this intersection, pedestrians must climb the bridge, an ugly structure towering 20 feet above street level, and cross over eight lanes of traffic before descending on the other side. Sierra's piece consisted in blocking off access to the bridge by cordoning off the stairs with a roll of masking tape. The artist describes his action as follows: “In broad daylight, and without anyone feeling uncomfortable or in anyway affected by what I was doing, I obstructed the entrance to the bridge with wrapping tape, preventing the pedestrians from crossing the Tlalpan expressway. They simply moved down the street looking for another bridge.”²¹

Sierra's intervention points to the precarious situation of Mexico City's pedestrians (a marginalized class in a city dominated by over five million cars). Since the 1950s, the city's exponential growth has required the construction of multilane highways, inner expressways, *viaductos* and *periféricos*—public works that have had the unintended consequence of making life nearly impossible for anyone without a car. Pedestrians can no longer walk more than a few blocks without running into formidable obstacles like retaining walls for elevated highways and concrete ramps. Poor planning makes getting across ubiquitous expressways a life-threatening experience: Pedestrians either dart across these roads, running for their lives and dodging cars racing at 80 mph (not an uncommon sight on the Periférico), or they climb several stories to reach poorly planned bridges like the one in which Sierra set his action. As Jorge Ibargüengoitia wrote in the 1970s, what was once a paradise of *flâneurs* became a city of traffic jams and one of the worst pollution problems in the world (Ibargüengoitia, who did not drive, wrote dozens of bitter articles denouncing the city's building projects as an all-out attack on pedestrians; eventually he gave up, packed his bags, and moved to Paris).²²

José Joaquín Blanco, another writer and avid *flâneur*, denounced the dehumanizing effects of an urban planning designed exclusively for motorists. “For several years,” he wrote in 1978, “the city government



Figure 27: Santiago Sierra, *Pedestrian Bridge Obstructed with Wrapping Tape* (1996).
Image courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

has launched spectacular highway projects that benefit motorized individuals . . . The constructions favoring the individual transportation of the privileged not only take precedence over public transport for the masses, but positively hamper it, making it even slower and more tiresome; they destroy the lifestyles of the neighborhoods they cut through; they tend to ghettoize the poorer enclaves (some of which were not so badly off before, when a mixture of social classes brought with it better services). These areas are thus turning into quasi-underground slums, covered by fast, streamlined bridges carrying the privileged driver across and preventing him from touching or even seeing what lies beneath as he cruises in a matter of minutes from one fancy neighborhood to another. The proliferation of bypasses, urban freeways, expressways, turnpikes, and the like has a twofold purpose: to link together the city of affluence while insulating it from the city of indigence by means of the retaining walls of these grand constructions.”²³

Expressways, tunnels, and highways are some of the landmarks of the generic city, and one way to read these writers’ dismay at the proliferation of these pedestrian obstacles is as a warning that Mexico City might be on its way to becoming generic. We can see why the streets are dead in generic cities: All pedestrians have been killed—literally or figuratively—by speeding cars.

Santiago Sierra makes the plight of Mexico City’s pedestrians painfully obvious: His action on the pedestrian bridge over Tlalpan—one of the “grand constructions” derided by Blanco—is a repetition, on a smaller scale, of what the city’s urban planners have been doing for decades: making life impossible for the city’s careless residents by erecting formidable obstacles throughout the city.

But pedestrians are not the only ones to suffer as Mexico City grows: Drivers have it pretty bad as well. Many of the ambitious public projects designed to ease the flow of traffic last only a few years before they, too, become clogged and outdated—and require the construction of an even grander, newer project. As an example, take the Periférico, the main ring road connecting the northern suburbs to the city. In the 1960s this multilane expressway allowed drivers to zoom from north to south in a few minutes; now, it is perpetually jammed during rush hour, forcing commuters to spend up to two hours to get across the city. Those who live in the north and work in the south, or vice versa, experience what was once a symbol of Mexico’s modernity as an inhuman torture worthy of inclusion in Dante’s *Inferno*.

One of Sierra’s 1998 interventions, set in the Periférico, alludes to the city’s perpetual traffic problems. For this piece, the artist convinced a curator at Jumex—the country’s leading fruit juice producer and owner of

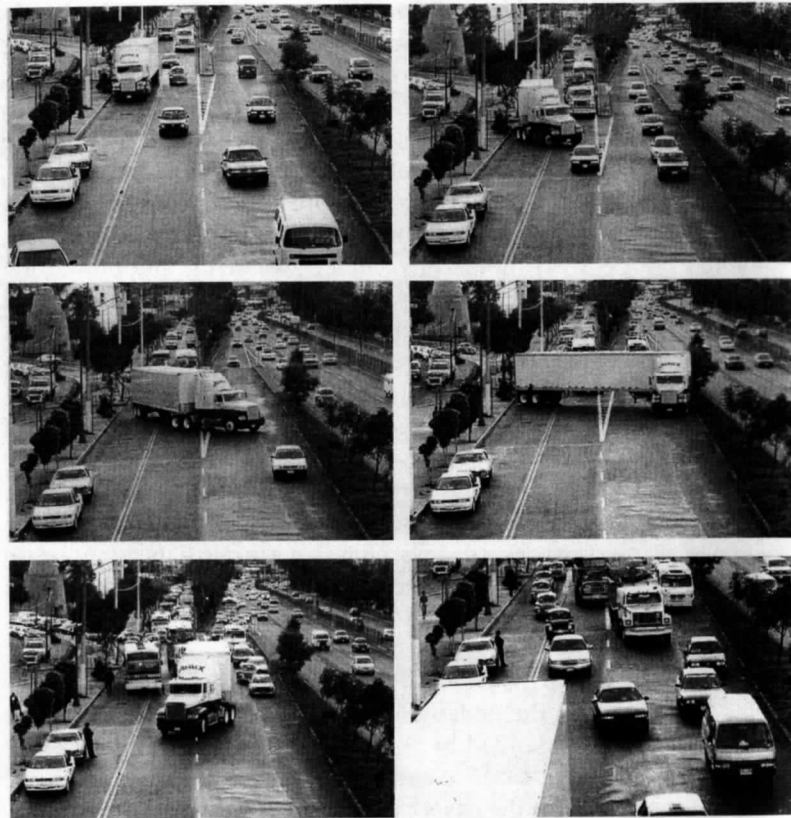


Figure 28: Santiago Sierra, *Obstruction of a Freeway with a Trailer Truck* (1998). Image courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

one of Latin America's most impressive art collections—to lend him one of the company's eighteen-wheeler trucks to block off one of the Periférico's exits for five minutes. The artist filmed the events from a nearby pedestrian bridge and described his *Obstruction of a Freeway with a Trailer Truck* (Figure 28) as follows: "I asked to borrow a company's truck without concealing my project. The driver did not object when he was asked to block the side lanes of one of the city's busiest roads for five minutes. This piece consisted in installing a white prism on the road, and the end result was a traffic jam."²⁴

But not all of Sierra's work deals with traffic and its vicissitudes. Since 1998 many of his actions have focused on the experiences of those living

on the margins of society: unskilled day laborers, drug addicts, prostitutes, and—in works done in the United States and Europe—illegal aliens. For several museum and gallery exhibitions Sierra has paid social outcasts to perform actions highlighting their precarious position in the world. He once hired several hundred working-class Mexicans to fill an exhibition room at the Museo Rufino Tamayo and stand, for several hours a day, as human sculptures.²⁵ For the opening of an exhibition of his work at ACE—the Mexico City branch of the Los Angeles gallery—Sierra paid a boy to approach guests and shine their shoes without their consent.²⁶ The artist has hired people to lie inside wooden boxes, masturbate in front of the camera, and have their heads shaved.²⁷ He has tattooed lines on people's backs, bleached their hair blond, and once made eleven indigenous women repeat a Spanish phrase they could not understand—all in exchange for a few pesos.²⁸

These interventions focus on one of Mexico City's gravest social problems: underemployment. Lacking steady jobs, millions of residents make a living as day laborers—a precarious existence that makes the lifestyle of *ambulantes* seem stable and desirable in comparison. Many of these occasional workers line up every morning outside the Cathedral, waiting to be hired for the day and holding signs announcing their profession—"construction worker," "electrician," "plumber" (Francis Alÿs once joined the lineup, holding a sign reading "tourist," Figure 29). These day laborers—also called *milusos*, or thousand-use workers—juggle dozens of occasional jobs without contracts, benefits, or even guaranteed paychecks. Ricardo Garibay wrote a striking portrait of these jacks-of-all-trades in *El milusos* (which inspired the 1986 eponymous film—one of the biggest box-office hits in Mexico), the story of an illiterate peasant named Tránsito Pérez who arrives in Mexico City in search of a better life, and, over the course of a few weeks, holds a long string of odd jobs that includes stints as bearer, butcher's assistant, public baths attendant, construction worker, street sweeper, night watchman, and messenger. He ends up penniless and depressed ("¡Lo matan a uno," he exclaims in untranslatable slang, "quieren gato, bañero, excusadero y jeringa! . . . ¡Méndiga movida!").²⁹

Though they are treated like criminals (in Garibay's text Tránsito Pérez is arrested and imprisoned), the city's *milusos* are a pillar of the economy: their presence in the city ensures an almost unlimited supply of cheap, expendable labor.

Sierra's projects draw attention to the precarious conditions in which the city's *milusos* live. Most of these laborers are desperate for money and will take any job, no matter how demeaning or risky. For an exhibition at Acceso A (Figure 30), a short-lived gallery in one of Mexico City's most



Figure 29: Francis Alÿs, *Turista* (1996). Image courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.

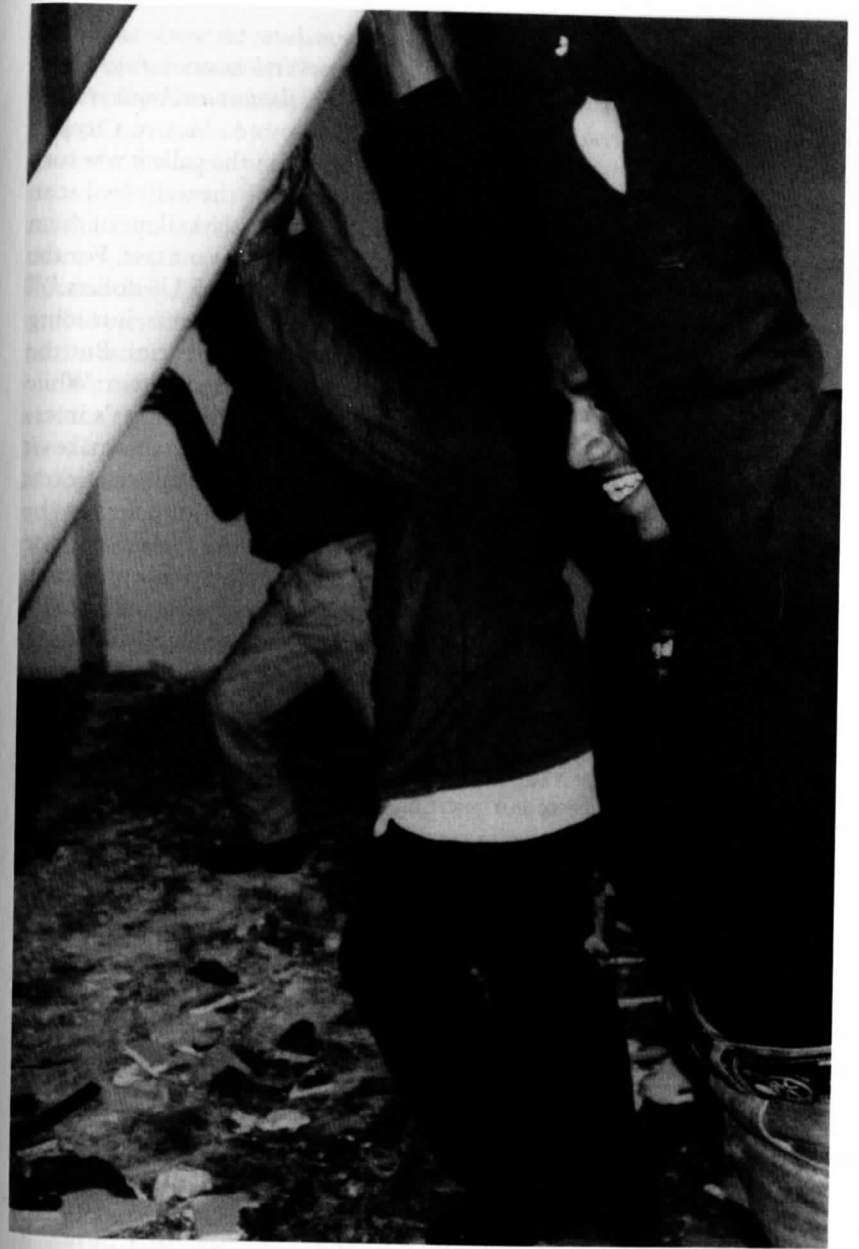


Figure 30: Santiago Sierra, *Wall of a Gallery Torn Out, Tilted at an Angle of Sixty Degrees, and Supported by 5 People* (2000). Image courtesy Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

elegant shopping districts, Sierra hired five *milusos* to work as human columns, holding up a wall of sheetrock for several hours a day. Sierra describes the piece, *Wall of a Gallery Torn Out, Tilted at an Angle of Sixty Degrees, and Supported by 5 People* (staged at Acceso A, Mexico City, on April 2000) as follows: "A sheetrock wall installed in the gallery was torn out. Four workers served as human buttresses, keeping the wall tilted at an angle of sixty degrees, for four hours a day during five days. Four of them supported the wall, while a fifth checked that the angle was exact. For the five working days, each worker earned 700 pesos, about 65 US dollars."³⁰

Sierra addresses many of the same issues as Minerva Cuevas, including the capital's grave transportation and employment deficiencies. But the approaches taken by these two artists could not be more different: While Cuevas's services make life in Mexico City more bearable, Sierra's interventions make it less so. Take transportation, for instance: Cuevas makes it easier for people to get around the city (by handing out free metro tickets and cleaning the subway), while Sierra throws obstacles in their way (by blocking off pedestrian bridges and expressway exits). And faced with the city's employment crisis, Cuevas helps the unemployed by providing recommendation letters, while Sierra exploits them by paying them a pittance to perform cruel and demeaning tasks—like pointlessly holding a piece of drywall for hours at a time.

If Alÿs is a *flâneur* and Cuevas a handywoman, then Sierra is a vandal, spreading destruction throughout the city in the name of art (one of his early pieces, *Gallery Burned with Gasoline* [Art Deposit, Mexico City, November 1997], consisted in torching the walls of a newly opened artist-run gallery). And if Sierra had a company, it would be called "Peor Vida Corporation."

Sierra's actions and interventions raise a number of important questions: Is it ethical for an artist to block traffic, inconvenience pedestrians, and exploit workers in the name of art? Curiously, most critics have applauded Sierra as a politically engaged artist determined to raise the public's awareness about social problems. Spanish curator Rosa Martínez has praised Sierra for exposing "with jarring clarity the repetitive mechanisms of labour exploitation and human oppression for economic ends";³¹ Mexican critic Cuauhtémoc Medina defended Sierra's hiring of day laborers as an intervention that defied "the productivist logic of modern capitalism" by "exposing the power structures inherent in labor practices."³² Coco Fusco argued that "Sierra's work flies in the face of a longstanding tradition of romanticizing Mexico's poor."³³ And Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa admonished offended viewers that "turning away" from Sierra's work is analogous to "avoiding the real world."³⁴

But how do these critics reach such enthusiastic conclusions about Sierra's interventions? Their reasoning seems to go as follows: Social ills like exploitative employment practices are unethical but generally overlooked by most middle-class Mexicans; by staging them inside a gallery, the artist forces the art public to confront the injustices that they generally choose to ignore. When gallery visitors discover that they are accomplices to the exploitation on display—the laborers are paid to perform for them—they recognize Sierra's intervention as a metaphor for the world outside the gallery, where they are passive spectators of the social injustices that abound in Mexico City. And, as in the gallery, their passivity translates into a tacit endorsement.

But there is a flaw in this reasoning: Critics like Medina and Pedrosa assume that staging an act inside a gallery, for an allegedly good cause, frees it from the constraints of ethical rules. Though we usually consider hiring a laborer to perform a demeaning task as unethical, these critics argue that doing so inside a gallery and for the purpose of enlightening the public transforms it into a principled action. But to demonstrate the problem with this line of reasoning, we only need to consider the scenario that would result if we were to substitute Sierra's exploitation of laborers with another, much graver, unethical act—murder, for instance. Staging a murder inside a gallery—even if the victim were "compensated" for dying—would certainly shock the art public into thinking about the evils of killing, but it would not justify the murder in the eyes of the law. Neither the gallery context nor the artist's intention to raise awareness would make him immune from prosecution (and this is perhaps the only reason why Sierra has not added murder to his catalog of exploitative practices). And just like murder is a criminal act whether it occurs in the gallery or on the street, human exploitation is unethical regardless of the context in which it is produced or the artist's intentions.

What Sierra's enthusiastic critics have failed to realize is that Sierra's interventions are *acts* and not *representations* of exploitation. And all acts have to be judged according to the same standards, whether they take place on the street, in a gallery, or inside a circus. Indeed Sierra's work would have been more effective—and more ethical—if it consisted, like Francis Alÿs's photos and performances, of representations. There is a vast difference between *representing* the numerous obstacles faced by Mexico City pedestrians (by taking photographs, making a film, or simply writing about their experiences) and *acting* to create more obstacles, as Sierra does by roping off pedestrian bridges and blocking traffic. His interventions become a mere repetition—an *acting out*—of the misdeeds they are meant to address.

In psychoanalytic theory, “acting out” is the opposite of representation. Psychoanalysis—like art—is an exercise in representation: Patients represent themselves by translating their experience into words for the analyst. But Freud discovered that some patients find it easier to act out: An angry patient, for example, can either represent his feelings by putting them into words, or he can act on them by smacking the analyst (or performing other similar actions, like withholding payment, missing sessions, arriving late). In the latter case, Freud explains, the patient acts out his aggression “before us, as it were, instead of reporting it to us.”³⁵ The acting out of emotions can also occur outside the consulting room, leading to criminal acts ranging from vandalism to murder. In their *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis show how in all of these cases “the subject is deemed to proceed from an *idea* or *tendency* to the corresponding *act*.”³⁶

Sierra’s interventions are good examples of this kind of destructive acting out. The artist does not represent the causes of the city’s problems; he merely acts them out. And if representation fosters analysis and understanding, acting out consists in a series of unexamined repetitions. In acting out, the subject “yields to the compulsion to repeat,”³⁷ and this is precisely what we find in Sierra’s interventions: By blocking the Periférico, Sierra merely repeats the destructive gestures of arrogant drivers; by hiring day laborers to perform demeaning tasks, he repeats the exploitative actions of unethical employers. In contrast to Francis Alÿs and Minerva Cuevas, Sierra has found a way of “practicing” Mexico City that spreads inconveniences and destruction.

Teresa Margolles

The three artists discussed so far find the inspiration for their work on the streets of Mexico City. We will now consider a fourth artist, Teresa Margolles, who finds the material for her work not on the street but in one of the darkest recesses of Mexico City’s underworld: The morgue—a place that is nowhere to be seen in the generic city’s aseptic spaces where anything signaling dirt or death is concealed from view.

Margolles was born in Culiacán, a city in northern Mexico with one of the highest murder rates in the country, and since the early 1990s she has used the Mexico City morgue as an artist’s studio. Unlike the generic city, in Mexico City the morgue is not hidden from view. The central morgue, also known as SEMEFO (an acronym for “Servicio Médico

Forense” or “medical forensic services”), is a scary place, even from the outside: Its volcanic stone façade looks like a pre-Columbian temple, and its main entrance is flanked by a stone replica of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of life and death, a monstrous monolith wearing a skirt of serpents and a necklace of human hearts. The morgue is located in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city: Colonia Doctores, a working-class district where the streets are named after eminent Mexican physicians (from “Doctor Vértiz” to “Doctor Lucio”). It is an irony of the city’s geography that the road to the morgue is paved with good doctors!

Margolles began frequenting the morgue in 1993, when she enrolled in a course on forensic medicine designed for doctors and medical students. The artist belonged to neither category, but no one asked any questions; she successfully learned to perform autopsies and was granted a diploma.³⁸

Since then Margolles has produced dozens of gory sculptures and installations made with fragments of the human body retrieved from the morgue. Her work includes the following little shop of horrors: a corroded metal casket freshly unearthed from a cemetery (*Larvario*, 1992);³⁹ hospital sheets bearing the bloody silhouettes of human figures (*Dermis*, 1995); a series of tattoos on human skin sliced from cadavers (*Tatuajes*, 1996); an installation consisting of metal drums for boiling corpses in a medical school (Untitled, 1997);⁴⁰ a set of *Cards for Cutting Cocaine* (1998) bearing bloody photos of men killed in drug-related violence; a human fetus buried inside a minimalist-looking cement block (*Burial*, 1999); an old couch reupholstered in raw cow stomachs (Untitled, 1998);⁴¹ a severed tongue perforated by a silver piercing (*Tongue*, 2000, Figure 31); a coat of human fat (retrieved from a medical school) applied like paint on the façades of various government buildings in Havana (*Havana Biennale*, 2000); and a museum gallery filled with steam from water used to wash corpses in the Mexico City morgue (*Vaporization*, 2000).⁴²

Contrary to what the reader might expect, these works never caused a stir in Mexico City. Margolles held her first major exhibition, as part of the aptly named artists’ collective SEMEFO, at Carrillo Gil, one of the city’s most prestigious museums (the 1994 show—featuring several horse carcasses and a set of foul-smelling mare fetuses—went by without attracting the attention of journalists),⁴³ and since then she has shown in most of the city’s government-run museums as well as in private galleries. And although these bloody installations have been reviewed in the art press, mainstream news media have shown little interest in her case. Compare this generalized indifference to the avalanche of outraged

articles sparked by Daniela Rossell's photographs of the "rich and famous": Mexico City's residents, it seems, find death less shocking than wealth.

Surprisingly, Margolles has never shown a human corpse taken from the morgue, though such an act would seem to be the ultimate realization of her necrophiliac aesthetics. Indeed her work contains everything that one could possibly smuggle out of the morgue—from body parts to bloody drums—*except* for an actual corpse. But though there are no corpses in her work, everything she has done seems to point back to the dead body. The dead body is represented indexically (by the contours imprinted on the bloody sheet), photographically (in the *Cards for Cutting Cocaine*), synecdochically (by the severed tongue and human fat—body parts that stand in for the missing whole), literally (the fetus contained in *Burial*), and even *in absentia* (the body is what is missing inside the metal drums taken from the medical school).⁴⁴ The artist's entire oeuvre could well be titled "variations on a corpse," but the corpse is always conspicuously absent (even in *Burial* the corpse is nowhere to be seen, and the artist's assertion that the block of cement contains a dead fetus could only be confirmed by destroying the piece). The body is always implied, never present.

The body is missing, as in the scene of a puzzling crime. "Where's the body?" the viewer asks after perusing this assortment of severed organs, stained sheets, and fetid vats. It is as if the artist wanted her viewers to assume the role of detectives and go in search of the *corpus delicti*. But we don't have to look very far: There are no bodies in Margolles's installations, but there are plenty of corpses in recent Mexican history. The missing element in Margolles's work can be read as an allusion to the countless bodies that have surfaced during the nineties, a decade plagued by a gruesome wave of violence—from political assassinations to drug murders—that has left behind a pile of corpses, some as hideously mangled as the cadavers found in the city's SEMEFO.

Body number one: In October 1996, a dead man was found buried in a ranch belonging to Raúl Salinas, a brother of the infamous ex-president. Before stunned reporters and television cameras, a government prosecutor announced that the body belonged to Manuel Muñoz Rocha, a minor politician and the prime suspect in the 1994 murder of the PRI's secretary general, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, who was gunned down as he was leaving his office in Mexico City. This had been the third assassination of a prominent politician in less than a year: In May 1993, Juan Jesús Cardinal Posadas, the archbishop of Guadalajara, was shot point-blank as he was leaving his car to board a plane; and in March 1994, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI's presidential candidate, was killed by a gunman during a

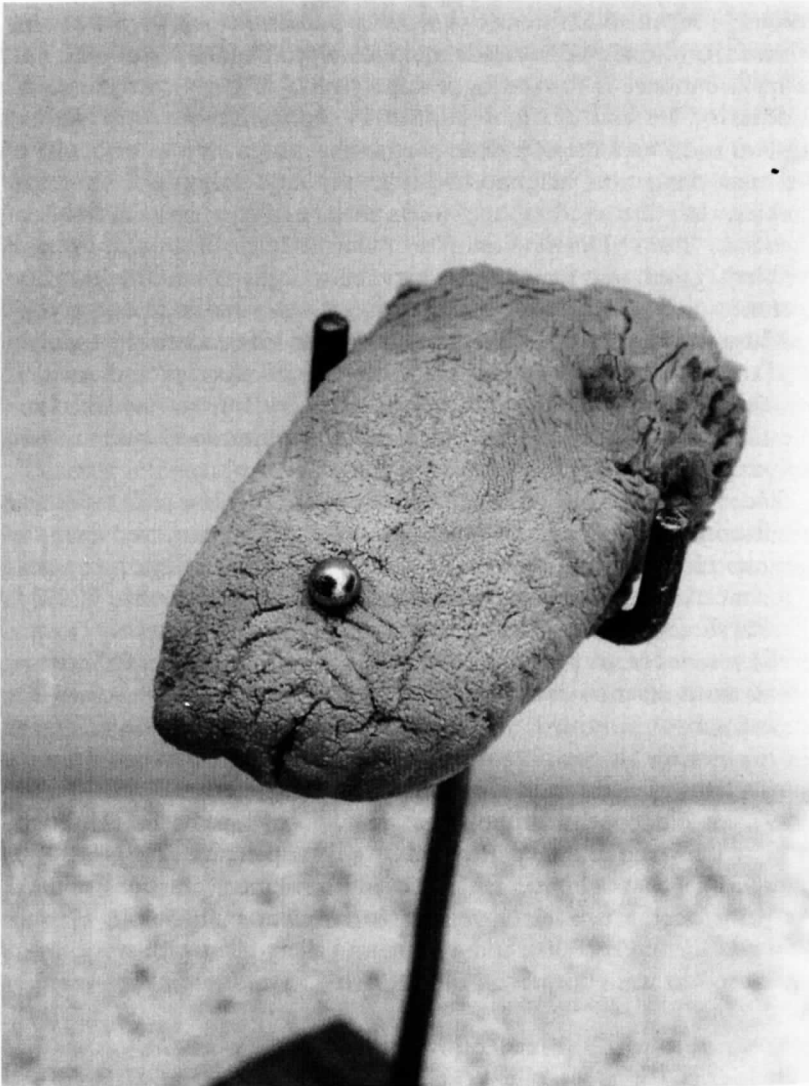


Figure 31: Teresa Margolles, *Tongue* (2000). Image courtesy of the artist and Enrique Guerrero Gallery, Mexico City.

campaign rally in Tijuana. In these two murders the bodies were found, but the crimes were never solved.

When the body surfaced in Raúl Salinas's ranch, the special prosecutor appointed by President Zedillo to investigate the Ruiz Massieu murder claimed victory: At least one of the three political assassinations that shook the country, it seemed, would be resolved. The found body would prove not only that Muñoz Rocha had played a hand in the secretary general's killing, but also that Raúl Salinas was the mastermind behind the entire scheme (overzealous prosecutors did not wait for this piece of evidence; they had put Raúl Salinas behind bars back in 1995).

But rather than solving the murder mystery, the found body merely complicated the plot. Reporters discovered that the prosecutor had enlisted the help of a fortuneteller—a woman nicknamed “La Paca,” who, after smelling one of Muñoz Rocha's old t-shirts, was led to Salinas's ranch by her extrasensorial powers. “He rose up from his tomb to point to his assassins,” she boasted.⁴⁵ They also noticed that the body's skull had been sawn off—a common practice in autopsies—and that its fingers and teeth were missing, thus complicating the prospects of its easy identification.

Months later, DNA tests showed that the body did not belong to Muñoz Rocha, but to one of La Paca's relatives: The special prosecutor had paid a large sum to the psychic and instructed her to plant a body—any body—in Salinas's ranch. The fortuneteller pocketed the money and ordered an accomplice to dig up the family grave, retrieve the remains of her in-law, and drive the body to the ranch. When the plot came to light, the special prosecutor and La Paca were sent to prison. Her in-law's body, mutilated and severely damaged from all the comings and goings, was buried for the third time. Muñoz Rocha's body—the real *corpus delicti*—was never found.⁴⁶ It is still missing, like the body in Margolles's work.

Bodies number 2 to 101: More than 100 women have vanished in the northern state of Chihuahua since 1993—poor, unskilled workers in Ciudad Juárez's *maquiladoras* who were abducted, raped, and dumped in the desert. And though more bodies keep surfacing every month, the police have been unable to solve the crimes or even to suggest a plausible motive. Scores of equally implausible scenarios have been suggested: that the women have been killed by organ traffickers; that they were the victims of human sacrifices performed by a narco-satanic cult; that they had been tortured and shot by bored police officers. Wild theories abound, but, despite the growing number of bodies, the police have been unable to come up with a single believable hypothesis.

The women's mangled bodies turn up in the desert, months after their disappearance, often so badly disfigured that their relatives cannot identify them. Most of the victims have been beaten, raped, and

tortured—sometimes for days—before being strangled or executed.⁴⁷ And, as in the Ruiz Massieu investigation, the police forces have proven to be incompetent, corrupt, and unable to ascertain the correct identity of the found bodies. In an article on the murders published in *The New Yorker*, Alma Guillermoprieto reports a disturbing number of “incidents in which disfigured corpses have been returned to grieving parents—only to have the parents subsequently conclude that the corpse, though dressed in recognizable remnants of their daughter's clothing, isn't their daughter.”⁴⁸

In one case, a mother discovered the authorities had delivered the wrong body after the family had already buried it. “When the mother insisted on an exhumation of the girl's remains, police managed to dig up the wrong coffin.” In another case, the father of a missing girl was summoned to the Chihuahua morgue, and shown “photographs of a corpse, swollen and bruised from the waist down, a skeleton from the waist up”; with the pretext of sparing the man more pain, the authorities urged him not to see the body, and to identify his daughter from the photographs alone. He agreed, only to discover eventually that the mangled body was not his daughter's.⁴⁹

Bodies number 102 to 5,957: In Mexico City, more bodies—thousands more—turn up every year at the Mexico City morgue. In the year 2000, Mexico City's SEMEFO received 5,855 bodies.⁵⁰ Hundreds of these bodies are never identified or claimed, and eventually they are dumped in a common grave at Panteón Civil. One of the city's other morgues maintains a website with photographs of the corpses, in the hope that someone will recognize and help identify them.

If we now return to Teresa Margolles, we see that the missing body in her work points to the culture of violence that prevails in Mexico City and to the countless deaths it has produced. The missing body in her work is the most effective representation of the thousands of bodies left behind by the spiraling crime rate. Take her *Cards for Cutting Cocaine* (Figures 32–33), for instance. In recent years, cocaine has become the recreational drug of choice in Mexico: It is now a trendy drug—one associated with glamour and decadent fun—and it is not uncommon to see well-dressed teenagers snorting it openly in the city's hippest bars and discos, blissfully unaware of its connection to the culture of violence that lies beyond the dance floor.

Margolles's piece is designed to bring back the repressed: One side of these cards is blank; the other shows the mangled, bloated faces of those killed by drug violence. The artist distributed these cards at art world parties where cocaine use was rampant. She would approach a would-be snorter and leave a card, lying face down, close by. Upon taking the card to



Figure 32: Teresa Margolles, *Cards for Cutting Cocaine* (1998). Image courtesy of the artist and Enrique Guerrero Gallery, Mexico City.

“cut” a line, the user would discover the photograph. “Some partiers were so revolted that they got up and left,” the artist reports.⁵¹

Margolles’s cards are designed not only to cut lines of cocaine but also to make users see the link between their party favors and the drug trade’s brutal reality (drug lords are responsible for much of the violence that has descended upon Mexico in the last decade; they are suspected of having played a hand in the Juarez murders and in the Ruiz Massieu assassination). To use Margolles’s cards, users must look the drug traffickers’ victims in the face—disfigured, bloodied faces, bloated beyond recognition—and, in order to follow through with the act, they must cut lines using body parts. These cards constitute a grisly *memento mori*, a reminder of the thousands of bodies left behind by Mexico’s *narcos*.

Dermis, another work (Figure 34), consists of the impression left by corpses on white sheets. During one of her routine visits to the morgue, Margolles stumbled upon two young men, lying side by side, covered in blood: Gay lovers who had taken their lives in a double suicide. She put a white sheet over the bodies to create a ghostly imprint of the men’s silhouettes, and then placed the imprint on a stretcher. The result is an eerie, *indexical* representation of the corpses, one that—like footprints or plaster casts—bears the physical trace of its referent (an index, explains



Figure 33: Teresa Margolles, *Cards for Cutting Cocaine* (1998). Image courtesy of the artist and Enrique Guerrero Gallery, Mexico City.



Figure 34: Teresa Margolles, *Dermis* (1995). Image courtesy of the artist and Enrique Guerrero Gallery, Mexico City.

critic Denis Hollier, “is less the representation of an object than the effect of an event.”)⁵² *Dermis* is such a disturbing work because it is made with physical residues of the dead bodies. The men’s outlines, formed by bloodstains, constitute an incontestable proof that where there is now only an absence there was once a living presence. And what could be a more striking representation of violent death than a human body reduced to a bloody splotch?

After such gory sights, the reader might conclude that Margolles’s work is not much different from Santiago Sierra’s interventions. Here again, we seem to have stumbled upon an artist who stages unethical acts—the desecration of human remains—in museums and galleries. And if we found that Sierra’s practice amounted to a dangerous form of acting out, shouldn’t we reach the same conclusion about Margolles’s irreverent (and often stomach-turning) manipulation of corpses and body parts?

Despite the apparent similarities, there is one important difference between Sierra’s interventions and Margolles’s installations. Sierra uses people, while Margolles works with corpses and human remains. And if ethics demands that we treat living beings justly, there is no equivalent code of conduct for handling corpses. As Georges Bataille—a writer often quoted by Margolles as an inspiration for her work—reminds us, it is not ethics but social taboos that are responsible for the mixture of fear and respect that corpses inspire. A lifeless human body, explains Bataille, is no different from an animal carcass or from inanimate matter like rocks and dirt. But man regards it with awe because “the corpse is the image of his destiny. It is witness to a violence that not only destroys one man, but which will destroy all men.”⁵³ In most cultures the corpse is taboo—it is not to be seen or touched—because it reminds us of our inescapable fate: death.

But the taboo concerning corpses, which Bataille locates in most societies, does not have much force in Mexico. The corpse found in Raúl Salinas’s ranch, the careless and sloppy handling of the dead women found in Juárez and Chihuahua, and the daily tours offered by the Mexico City morgue are all evidence that human remains inspire neither fear nor respect in Mexico. In other cultures, human bodies are expediently buried and put to rest; in Mexico they are routinely mutilated, transported across town, left for days in the morgue, unearthed, planted as evidence—even displayed in museums as mummies or contemporary art.

Readers might be tempted to link this generalized disregard for corpses to the much-celebrated Mexican attitude toward death—a phenomenon that has been described extensively in exoticizing accounts of the “Day of

the Dead” festivities. What Margolles’s work demonstrates, however, is that there is a dark, gruesome flipside to this special stance toward death: It is not merely an exotic cultural difference but one of the most visible signs of the generalized violence that has torn the country apart in recent years.

Margolles’s work can be read as an effort to draw attention to the breakdown of the taboo against corpses in Mexican society and to its dehumanizing effects. The cultural attitudes and institutional practices that make her work possible are also what make possible the horrific treatment of bodies that we have seen in the Ruiz Massieu case and in the Juárez murders. And her work demonstrates that the weakness of this taboo in Mexican society can be seen as the root of many recent evils.

Cuahtémoc Medina reads Margolles’s work as an unmasking of institutional corruption in Mexico: “Her art practice owes its existence to the laxness of police services in Mexico. Her works are both a candid exposé of their current state and a product of her complicity with that same system.”⁵⁴ I would argue that institutional corruption is but one of the many aspects of the culture of violence that has spread throughout the country as a result of the breakdown of the taboo against corpses.

Every taboo is related to an interdiction, and Bataille shows that the taboo concerning human remains stems from the fundamental interdiction that guides most societies: Thou shalt not kill. A dead body—especially one that is the result of a violent death—is taboo because it is evidence that the interdiction against taking human lives has been broken. Thus a society in which the corpse no longer inspires fear is also a society in which murder is no longer prohibited. The flip-side of Mexico’s famously irreverent attitude toward death, as Octavio Paz argues in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, is “an indifference towards life.”⁵⁵ Mexicans are not afraid of looking at bodies because they are not afraid to kill—or to die: Margolles makes this explicit by linking the disregard for human remains that makes her work possible to the spiral of violence that has terrorized the country for most of the 1990s.

If Alÿs is a *flâneur*, Cuevas a handywoman, and Sierra a vandal, then Teresa Margolles is a tinkerer. She “practices” Mexico City by roaming its underbelly in search of abject materials and bloody organs that are striking signifiers of the widespread violence, cruelty, and indifference toward human remains. And in most cases, she simply moves them from one place to another: from the morgue to the gallery, from the forensic department to the museum. In the same way that Duchamp moved a urinal from the restroom to the gallery to bring the gallery a step closer to the restroom, and art a step closer to filth, Margolles brings the museum closer to the morgue, and art to Mexico’s culture of violence.

Jonathan Hernández

We will discuss a fifth and final artist who gets the inspiration for his work from the streets of Mexico City: Jonathan Hernández, who has devoted several pieces to what might be termed urban dysfunctionism. For one work, the artist took dozens of posters that had been taped to lampposts around the city, offering cash rewards for missing dogs, and exhibited them in a museum (*Se busca recompensa*, 1998–2001); another time he created a series of “Explore Mexico City” postcards showing not idyllic streetscapes but images of broken streetlights and confusing street signage that included traffic arrows pointing the wrong way. But the piece that is most relevant to our discussion is a photo-conceptual series from 1995 titled *Credencial sordomudos* [deaf-mute ID card].

The inspiration for this piece came not from the Centro but from the southern confines of the city: the “university city” housing the country’s largest public university. The artist traveled south and pretended to be a deaf-mute student at UNAM in need of a replacement student ID card. He approached university officials wearing a sign around his neck that read “To whom it may concern: we students are deaf-mute but we still need our ID. Please write down the next step in order to get a replacement ID card.” The series consists of nearly three dozen photographs and post-it notes documenting the labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures required for this simple task: Polaroid snapshots showing the artist walking through a maze of offices (Figure 35) alternate with post-it notes on which university employees wrote—in a language plagued by grammatical and spelling mistakes—the steps required to get a replacement card. These telegraphic messages reveal the convoluted, kafkaesque atmosphere that prevails in the university: “Go to your departmental library and ask for a confirmation that no books are owed. Take that sheet to the central library and get it stamped, then come back here,” reads one; “We can do it after 12:00. It is 11:00,” reads another (Figure 36).

Though the reader might be tempted to dismiss this piece as a light-hearted joke or a photo-conceptual equivalent of “Candid Camera,” *Credencial sordomudos* exposes many of the problems plaguing what was once Latin America’s most prestigious university.

UNAM is the world’s largest university, with more than 250,000 students and almost 30,000 professors.⁵⁶ It was planned in the 1950s as a utopian modernist project: Mario Pani and a team of architects designed an autonomous “university city” in the southern suburbs and artists from Diego Rivera to Juan O’Gormann created murals for its buildings. One critic has called the university project “the mythical *topos* for the creation

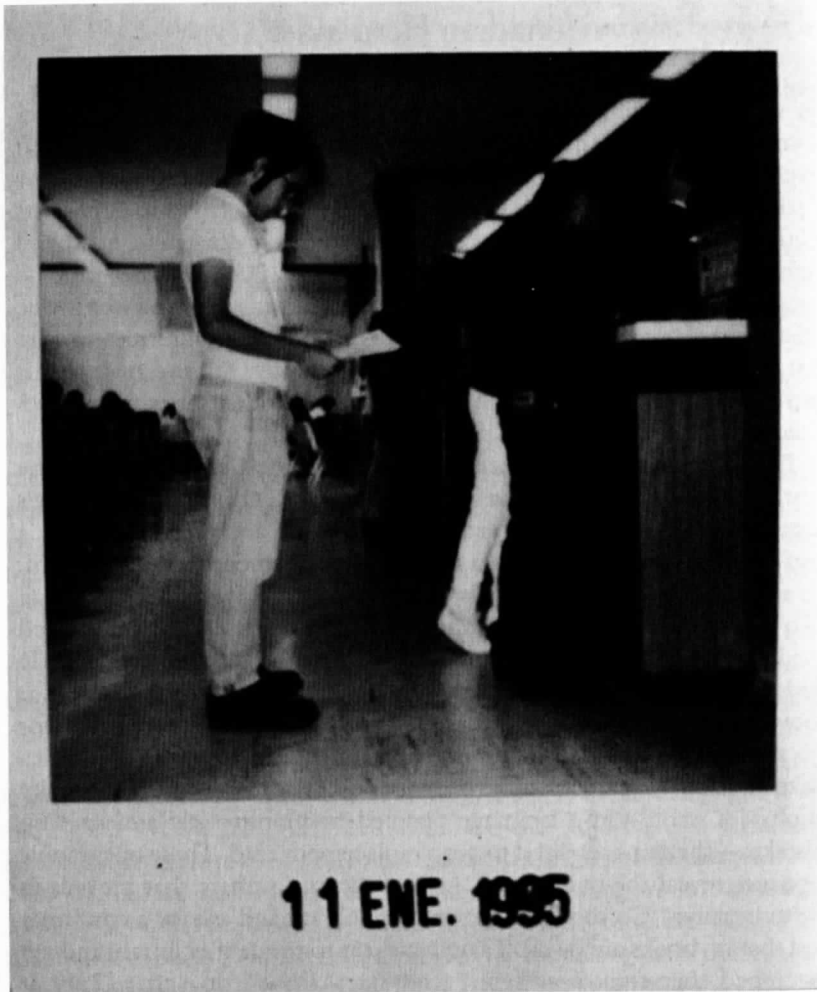


Figure 35: Jonathan Hernández, from the series *Credencial Sordumudos* (1995). Image courtesy of *La Colección Jumex, Mexico City, and Kurimanzutto*.

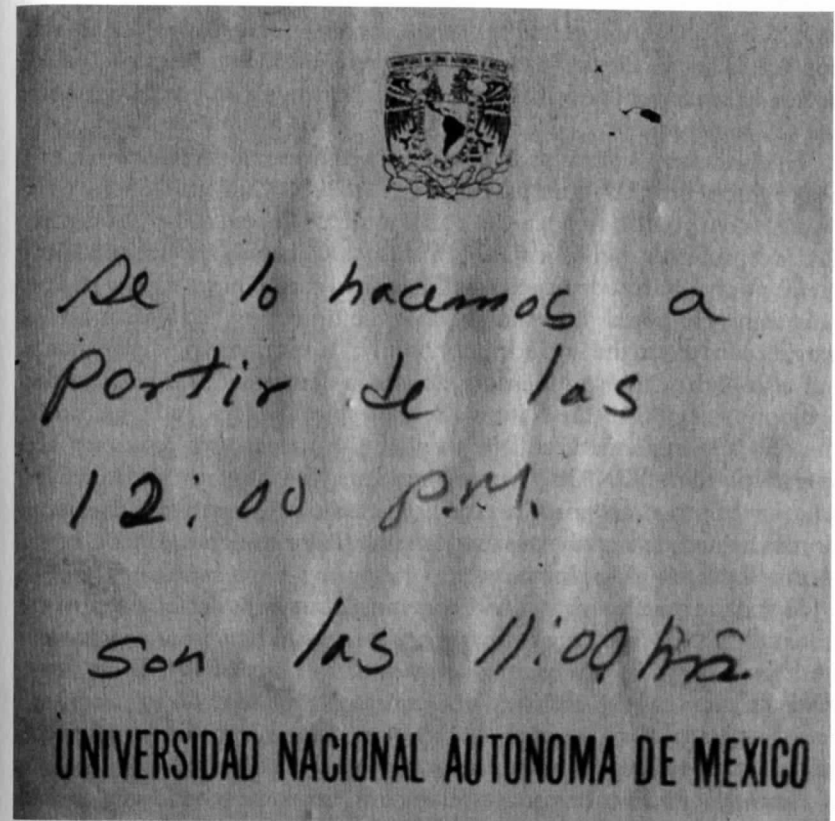


Figure 36: Jonathan Hernández, from the series *Credencial Sordumudos* (1995). Image courtesy of *La Colección Jumex, Mexico City, and Kurimanzutto*.

of the new Mexican . . . the environment where a modern society would be born."⁵⁷ Ironically, the University City was inspired by Le Corbusier's theories of urban planning—the same ideas that inspired the proliferation of generic cities.⁵⁸ And though the university is still known as “la casa máxima de estudios,” in recent years it has gone from utopian project to dystopian nightmare, and it is now a disorderly campus plagued by labor tensions, shrinking budgets, and student strikes (the most recent lasted almost ten months, from April 1999 to January 2000). As the latest strike dragged on, Mexicans feared that this episode would lead to another student massacre like the one at Tlatelolco in 1968, the bloodiest moment in the 71 years of PRI rule. This time around, however, the strike led not to tragedy but to a comedy of the absurd: Months went by, and student

leaders and government officials proved equally inept at resolving the conflict. The deadlock finally ended when President Ernesto Zedillo ordered a special police task force to enter the campus and reclaim it from the striking students.

The university's grave problems, however, were not solved when the police forces broke up the student strike. In 2000 Guillermo Sheridan, a regular contributor to Octavio Paz's journal *Vuelta* and a long-time UNAM professor, published *Allá en el campus grande*, a scathing indictment of the bureaucratic culture that was threatening to choke the university. He noted, for example, that the university had grown into a gargantuan system that included not only academic units and departments but also high schools, publishing houses, a department devoted to the promotion of culture, the National Seismological System, and even movie theaters and supermarkets! No wonder the university's resources are spread too thin. "UNAM," wrote Sheridan, "is a fat whore exploited by an army of procurers: multifaceted politicians, avid union leaders, occasional cheguevarists, political careerists, mediocre academics, incontinent sloths, alienated gang members."⁵⁹

Sheridan lamented that it had become all but impossible to get work done at UNAM, either as a professor or a student. When the university was not closed down by strikes, it was paralyzed by bureaucracy. To give the reader a sense of the absurd that permeates every day life on campus, Sheridan transcribed a series of dialogues, which read like the perfect textual companion to Hernández's *Credencial sordomudos*.

A professor arrives on campus, hoping to get some work done, on the day of the Constitution, a national holiday in Mexico. He engages in the following absurd—and untranslatable—dialogue with the guard:

- ¿Puedo pasar a mi oficina?
- Quistá cerrado. Sólo sentra por la puerta principal.
- Entrar por esa puerta me obliga a manejar seis kilometros. Mi oficina está aquí a la vuelta.
- ¿Y qué quiere quiaga?
- Pues que utilice su sentido común y me deje pasar.
- No.
- Mire, me doy cuenta de que solo soy un miserable académico y de que usted es un empleado muy importante, pero, por favor, déjeme pasar.
- No.
- ¿Por qué?
- Pus porque no.
- Hable a la puerta principal con su güokitoki y pregunte si me dejan pasar.
- No.
- ¿Por qué no?

- Porquel güokitoki es palas emergencias.
- Y si me infarto, ¿califico como emergencia?
- Pusí.
- Pues mire: ya me infarté.
- Éjele, nisierto.⁶⁰

In another dialogue, Sheridan recounts a scene that is uncannily similar to the those portrayed in *Credencial sordomudos*:

- I've come for my paycheck.
- The lady in charge isn't here.
- How can she not be here? Today is payday.
- That's why.
- What do you mean that's why?
- She's gone to get her paycheck.⁶¹

Credencial sordomudos, a work completed four years before the latest student strike, can be read as an uncanny premonition of the disaster to come. Hernández's piece suggests that even when the university is in session, its labyrinthine bureaucracy prevents it from operating efficiently. How can a university function, the work seems to ask, when it takes three dozen steps—standing in line, filling out countless forms, securing numerous stamps—to merely get a replacement ID? We can only imagine the number of steps required to register as a new student, sign up for classes, or—even more gravely—graduate and receive a diploma. *Credencial sordomudos* can be seen as a timely critique of the UNAM's greatest problem—the excessive bureaucratization that undermines its teaching mission.

Getting an ID card, however, is merely a metaphor for a more important—and more difficult—process: becoming a UNAM student. The university embodies one of the Mexican Revolution's most utopian ideals: to provide education, free of charge, to all who are qualified. During the 1950s and 1960s hundreds of thousands of poor Mexicans benefited from the university's mission: Armed with UNAM degrees, they secured stable jobs—often government positions guaranteed for life—and joined the ranks of the middle class. And the UNAM was not only for the poor: Until recently, virtually all of Mexico's presidents and high-ranking government officials studied at the university and flaunted their degrees as proof of their allegiance to what was then called "the Revolutionary family."

All this, however, has changed drastically in recent years. As enrollments have swollen to unmanageable numbers, a UNAM degree is now seen as a liability, and many job postings explicitly discourage applications

from the university's graduates. Since the advent of neoliberal governments in the 1990s, the credential of choice for Mexican presidents and ministers is not a UNAM education but an ivy-league degree, preferably in economics. And the free university education that was once seen as a utopian accomplishment has become a bitter bone of contention: The 1999 strike erupted after the university's president attempted to raise matriculation fees from a few cents to a few dollars and replace the tradition of "automatic admissions" with a more competitive process.

But perhaps the worst time to be a card-carrying UNAM student was in October 1968, in the wake of the Tlatelolco massacre. *Credencial sordomudos* can be read as an allusion to this somber episode, in which UNAM ID cards became tickets to jail. Hundreds of students around the city were arrested and accused of promoting social unrest, and those carrying UNAM ID cards fared the worst. Carlos Galván, one of the students arrested in the massive crackdown, recounts how in jail, he destroyed his UNAM ID card because the police were roughest on the university's students. "The first thing I did," he writes, "was to tear up my student card and flush it down the toilet."⁶²

When he made this piece, Hernández was enrolled at UNAM, and thus *Credencial sordomudos* is a documentary piece allowing us a glimpse of a day in the life of a student enrolled at the university. Unlike the other works discussed in this chapter, Hernández's is a straightforward, autobiographical representation. He needed to get an ID card, and when he discovered the convoluted procedure, he decided to bring his camera along. Unlike Alÿs, he did not stage a performance in order to identify with the plight of his peers; he did nothing to either improve the lot of his fellow students (as Cuevas would have) or aggravate their problems (as Sierra might have done). And luckily all UNAM students were alive and well, so he could not have followed Margolles's lead to create a post-mortem installation. Hernández merely "practiced" the University City by following his usual routine, though accompanied by a camera operator.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen five strategies for representing Mexico City that move from traditional forms of representation into more active endeavors. There is a common theme running through all of these works: an interest in the experience of Mexico City's poorer residents, who are unemployed, work as jacks-of-all-trades, live hand to mouth, are the victims of violence, don't own cars, use the metro, study at a dysfunctional

and overcrowded university, and risk their lives whenever they cross high-speed expressways.

Each of these five artists has found a highly original approach to the experience of poverty: Alÿs puts himself in the poor man's shoes by staging elaborate metaphorical performances—pushing a block of ice or walking with an unraveling sweater—that represent the rising poverty rate. Despite Alÿs's empathy, the poor remain poor, a situation that Cuevas tries to remedy by handing out free products and student ID cards (so poor Mexicans don't have to go through the three-dozen bureaucratic steps captured in Hernández's *Credencial*). But Cuevas's good deeds are cancelled out by Santiago Sierra's actions, which leave the poor exploited, physically exhausted, and probably depressed. And when a poor person dies and turns up at the city morgue (only the bodies of impoverished Mexicans end up at SEMEFO), Margolles takes their remains and puts them on display in a museum, granting them a kind of post-mortem poetic justice.