

Claudia Bernal's *MONUMENT TO CIUDAD JUAREZ: ONLY WOMEN WHO DIE A VIOLENT DEATH GO DIRECTLY TO A PARADISE.*

By Mariette Bouillet

Each civilization deals with death its own way, which makes it different from any other, and each has its own ways of marking graves; but it would cease to be a civilization if it did not deal with death at all.¹

Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en occident.*

Anything visual involves the optic nerve, of course, but this in itself does not make it an image. The sine qua non condition for it to be an image is alterity.²

Serge Daney, *La Rampe, Cahier critique, 1970-1982.*

In March 2002, the Mexican director Lourdes Portillo received the best feature film award for her documentary *Señorita Extraviada*³ at the 3 Americas Film Festival in Quebec City. Constructed in

¹ Translated from the French.

² Translated from the French.

³ The English version is called *Missing Young Woman.*

the form of an investigation based on testimonies, with an approach that is both poetic and somewhat distant, her film sheds a disturbing light on the atrocious crimes that have been committed, with total impunity, upon young women and girls in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez, the twin city of El Paso, Texas. This premiere screening of the film within Quebec enabled festival-goers and the general public to find out about a terrifying state of affairs that has become an issue of national proportions in Mexico and that remains unresolved to this day.

From 1993 to 2002, in abandoned cars and run-down motels, in wastelands, the outlying desert and the suburbs of this cursed city, the bodies of more than three hundred women and girls were discovered murdered, after having been kidnapped, tortured, mutilated, sexually brutalized and strangled according to some sort of fixed ritual. To these three hundred mutilated corpses must be added an unknown number of disappeared women whose bodies were never found or claimed. While the women of Ciudad Juarez continue to be at risk, a true killer has yet to be arrested. Many innocent people have been forced to plead guilty under torture; most of the lawyers of these falsely accused people have been threatened, and some have even been murdered, like the lawyer Mario Cesar Escobedo Anaya who was executed by a commando. In this no-rights zone, this nightmarish world where it seems that police protect murderers and act as their accomplices, accuse the innocent and threaten investigators, there is increasing evidence of connections between the homicides, the mafia, the police and the military. The wave of murders therefore exposes with remarkable clarity the unlimited power of drug dealers in this frontier zone and the strength of their influential connections; the links between criminal circles and the economic and political powers-that-be in the *maquiladora*⁴ city of Ciudad Juarez

⁴ The city of Ciudad Juarez is known for its numerous *maquiladoras*, mainly US-owned sub-contracting plants, where a cheap labour force, made up mostly of women escaped from rural poverty, works assembling export goods. These factories are no-rights zones where any union

represent a threat to Mexico as a whole.

Mired in grief mixed with despair in the face of such utter injustice, fearful but courageous, the victims' families, poor for the most part, are haunted by unending questions that never get answered: Why such relentless rage towards their wives and daughters? Why such sadism and such impunity? Do the murders have to do with satanic rituals, perverted Mafia orgies, organ trading, human sacrifices for "snuff" movies whose victims are raped, tortured and murdered before the camera; or are these spree murders⁵ (murders for fun) sponsored by wealthy men of unlimited power?

Before 2001, the raped and strangled women's bodies were discovered regularly, but now that the level of investigations has stepped up, it is nearly impossible to find them. This is because the murderers use a corrosive liquid of quicklime and acids that quickly dissolves flesh and bones without leaving any evidence. Such systematic procedures to wipe out any trace, to obliterate all signs of cruelty, recall the endless efforts of the Nazis to suppress any sign of their barbarous acts.

To prevent this process of annihilation and waste, of disappearance, dust and silence, there is a need, more urgent than ever, for memory and testimony. A memory that is individual and collective, polemic and political, one that generates archives and creates citizenship. In the face of the unthinkable, thinking matters. The very impossibility of these crimes, their extreme horror, engenders an acute and urgent command to speak out in the name of silence, thus transforming muteness into a condition for testimony.

activity is prohibited. Most of the murdered women were poor *maquila* workers. Everything indicates that this is where the killers generally located their victims.

⁵ See Robert K. Ressler, *Whoever Fights Monsters*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993.

Probably the best artistic form for testimonies is the documentary⁶ -- when it is approached admirably, that is, like in director Lourdes Portillo's film. Here, the artist stands back and the subjects are in the foreground. Putting the subjects forward makes it possible to restore their authentic and dignified "embodied language," without dispossessing them of their images and voices so as to present some pre-made argument or to turn them into marketable products. However, there are other actions besides making documentaries that are available to creators who believe in art linked to reality, art arising out of life itself so that it becomes a place of memory, keeping loss alive and posing social and political questions.

Long before "memory" became some sort of banality, a source of contemporary kitsch where certain creators have their "Shoah" period like others have their "blue" period, artists like Christian Boltanski or Jochen Gerz worked long and very thoughtfully on the elaboration of different monuments to the dead, paradoxical, sometimes ephemeral, sometimes invisible, and dedicated to the Holocaust victims. Other artists, like the Latin Americans Teresa Margolles and Constanza Camelo, presented conceptual forms of mourning, organizing collective ritual acts that testified to the disappearance of people murdered during the Colombian civil war⁷ and to the butchery of street children and prostitutes by armed commandos in one of Bogota's poorest neighbourhoods.⁸ All of these examples involve linking ethical and political concerns, on the one

⁶ Of note are Claude Lanzmann's great documentaries entitled *Shoah*. They gather the testimonies of concentration camp survivors.

⁷ See Cuauhtémoc Medina's article «Zones de tolérance : Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO et (l')au-delà» published in the magazine *Parachute*, number 104 : «In August 1999, Margolles went to Colombia thanks to a binational residency program. Infield, she organized a collective ritual action during which she picked up and buried different objects in a 36 meters concrete sidewalk, each object representing a testimony for every single person that has been disappeared during the civil war.» (Translated from the French).

⁸ See Mariette Bouillet's article "48 heures/hours, 48 chambres/rooms" published in *Inter* no. 74: "These killings occurred on days given the terrible name 'Social Cleansing Days.' After one of the massacres, Constanza Camelo jointed up with prostitutes and together they created a collective street performance, in that same street where they risk being killed, in order to resist,

hand, with a rigorous formal approach, on the other.

It was here, where this linkage is formed, that multidisciplinary artist Claudia Bernal created a nomadic place of memory dedicated to what can surely be called the genocide of Ciudad Juarez. Her *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* took the form of an ephemeral installation, a monument to the dead built with the help of the families of the victims during an actual funerary ceremony.

In March 2002, she developed and created a first version, on her own at the *Zocalo*, an immense public square in the heart of Old Mexico City. She decided to re-install it that November, upon joining up with the Ciudad Juarez association called "*Nuestras hijas de regreso a casa*" ("Our Girls Returning Home"). This is a group created by victims' families; they travelled to Mexico City in order to take part in demonstrations that were organized by citizens groups in time for the International Day of Non-Violence Against Women.

In the first version as well as the second, both of which were installed on the *Zocalo* in front of the Presidential Palace, the monument retained the rigour and simplicity of its minimalist formal composition, based on syncretic, everyday mortuary signs that Mexican people could easily interpret. The installation consisted of large white cotton cloths, stretched between two wooden crosses and hung over a spiral made of three hundred urns. The latter, set upon the ground, bore names of victims or the inscription, "unknown." Tortillas were laid on top of each urn. Upon the white, shroud-like cloths, Ciudad Juarez landscapes were projected – wastelands, fragments of the desert and streets - juxtaposed with staring eyes of solitary women. These projected images were accompanied by a sound track of voice off readings of police reports, as well as the traditional Mexican music that is played on the Day of the Dead.

with only their bodies, the atrocious, the unspeakable. A dangerous experience of body-resistance, pushing confrontation to the limits of art and engagement." (Translated from the French).

We shall here comment on how soundly these images relate to reality. Even though Claudia Bernal had access to Ciudad Juarez police archives where photos of the dead bodies can be found, the monument's images avoid using them directly. This raises the question of the representation of the genocide, of its legitimacy and its possibility. It appears to be impossible to visually express the horror of these crimes. Any image set forth (even, or perhaps especially the "true image" provided by the archives) would inevitably fall far short of what we would expect it to transmit. Even worse: because of its essential inadequacy, the image would run the risk of becoming a screen (hiding what it pretends to show) or even a fetish (becoming the medium for perverse entertainment). Bernal's approach avoids the danger of what Louis Vincent Thomas calls "cannibalism of the eye:" "Degrading the value of death by dishing it up on every occasion in order to satisfy voyeurism," he says, "is without a doubt the best way to deny it: it makes death banal, reducing it to an ordinary event whose omnipresence defuses its tragic nature."⁹

Like a Greek tomb facing outwards perpetually calls on the living to "Remember," the first appearance of this monument, paradoxically fragile, made up of cloth, lights, sounds, clay and wood, immediately touched onlookers by its symbolic and funereal aspect: people would come back to leave offerings and candles at the urns. Interventions on the monument, the latter carried out by strangers to signal their empathy and grief, became even more striking when, on the International Day of Non-Violence Against Women, the victims' families themselves, veiled and dressed in black, carried the urns bearing their daughters' names throughout a long and silent march down the streets of Mexico City. When the procession was done, the families carried out a ritual to mark the end of a funerary ceremony, setting the fragile clay vases down

⁹ Translated from the French. Louis Vincent Thomas, *Le Cadavre. De la biologie à l'anthropologie*, Ed. Complexe, Bruxelles, 1980.

on the ground of the *Zocalo* in a spiral form, at the base of the white shrouds.

This meaningful appropriation of the monument by those who will forever mourn their dead combines the work of mourning with the work of remembering. It is a common thing to erect a highly visible stele or marker in order to keep memory alive. Through this collective action of invented funerals, the victims' relatives were led to heal their wounds together, to assuage their grief, to share their pain in expressing it openly. Here, art has recovered its ancient and forgotten function of mediating between the living and the dead, creating a linkage, a social and community connection, around a collective trauma that had been in need of symbolic healing. It is a very different vision than the privatized and individualized one characterizing our visual era, and it avoids the trap of self-sufficiency that can lead to inhospitable, cold and devitalized art with which we can feel no connection, so little does it elicit our feelings or resonate within us. the *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* demonstrates how much more a work of art can live up to its symbolic potential, the more the artist withdraws from the scene, steps back and becomes anonymous, thus leaving talk and action up to the Other in whose name it is indecent to speak.

Here, in obtaining shared meaning through collective ritual, the concept of "symbol" recovers its original signification denoted by the Greek verb *SYMBALEIN*, which means "to unite, to throw together, to bring closer." In effect, the symbolic dimension of this installation corresponds to the etymological meaning of "symbol as a sign of recognition, meant for healing a rift (...), as a conventional object whose purpose is to bring about a reconciliation, a meeting, of minds and subjects, or, instead, as a procedure and ceremony: not for a farewell, but for a reunion (of friends, family, people within one's circle)."¹⁰

¹⁰ Translated from the French. Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en occident*, Ed. Gallimard, Collection Folio/essais, Paris, 1992.

The convocative power of *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* thus brings to light the ideas, generally considered out of date nowadays, that a work of art can obtain its strength not from itself but from the community, for whom it serves as symbol, and that through the work of art, the community speaks and hears the echo of its past and the voice of its present. In the words of Paul Klee, who wanted to see the artist become a kind of intermediary, “there must be a common ground between artist and lay person, a meeting point where artists no longer inevitably appear marginal but, rather like their fellow humans, tossed unmasked into a multifaceted world, and, like them, obliged to make the best of it.”¹¹

This “common ground,” this “meeting point” advocated by Klee, raises the question of alterity and, ultimately, of politics, in the sense of the *polis* (city) meant to be inhabited, activated and shared.

In this regard, we can say that mourning customs are a perfect example of the intertwined relationship between private and public experience. As an ephemeral construction put up for a funerary ceremony in front of Mexican government headquarters, the *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* is a good example of this. A place of collective memory for a living community, it also embodies the will see justice served in the incompetent, indifferent, not to say complicit government, so that the atrocious assassinations of young women and girls not remain unpunished.

Corresponding with this approach is a responsibility to keep memory alive. As conceptualized by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, “[this responsibility] has to do not only with preserving the material evidence of past events, whether in written or other form, but also with keeping alive the feeling

¹¹ Translated from the French. Paul Klee, *Journal*, Ed. Bernard Grasset, Coll. Les Cahiers rouges, Paris, 1959; available in English as *The diaries of Paul Klee, 1898-1918*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968.

of being obliged to these others of whom we will say, they are no longer here but they once were. (...) The victim [being] the victim other, other than us.”¹²

From this perspective -- of the related duties of preserving memory and seeing justice served -- the death procession implicitly obtains the status of a popular protest march. Taken together, the hundreds of female murders and the complete impunity enjoyed by the killers so far reveal all the violence of a country where the mortuary has become, according to writer Federico Navarrete, one of main representative spaces of the nation: “It would not be exaggerating to say that in Mexico, the morgue has become the central stage of public affairs.”¹³

The violence against women, victims of poverty, male domination and patriarchal traditions; imprisoned in archetypes ranging from the *Virgin of Guadalupe* or pure and protective Mother, to the *chingada*, the popular expression for whore. “In this system of unrealistic representations,” writes Patricia Martin, “a woman cannot obtain value except by practicing self-abnegation; she is not able to demand social recognition except by refusing to speak out and by refraining from participating in public affairs.”¹⁴

The violence of corruption and mafia networks that infiltrate government and economic circles.

The violence of a ferocious war on the poor, whose basic educational, health and cultural needs remain unsatisfied.

¹² Translated from the French. Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ed. Du Seuil, Coll. L'Ordre philosophique, Paris, 2000; available in English as *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.

¹³ Translated from the French. Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Zones de tolérance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO et (l')au-delà,” in *Parachute* no. 104.

¹⁴ Translated from the French. Patricia Martin, “*Horizontal/Vertical: comment peut-on éviter les questions de genre?*” in *Parachute* no. 104.

The economic violence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the destruction of the peasantry and the multiplication of *maquiladoras* with their low-skilled jobs, low wages and their often inhuman working conditions.

The political violence of a government that “distrusts the slightest signs of social movements and unhesitatingly bludgeons them with its instruments of propaganda – the mass media, the cultural apparatus – when it is not with direct repression.”¹⁵

The social violence of a country where denigration and annihilation of communities marginalized on the basis of their culture, ethnicity, social class and sex (women, indigenous people, the poor, homosexuals and Protestants) are part of its historical-cultural experience and remain deeply embedded in the behaviour and mentality of its political elite and bourgeoisie. The Zapatista movement is fighting against this generalized social violence, demanding that all these marginalized groups be included in a social and political system that, in turn, would have to stop preventing them from exercising their citizenship.

This never ending, limitless cycle of endemic violence may be what inspired the spiral formed by the three hundred earthenware urns of the *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* on the *Zocalo* square grounds.

In emblematic fashion, the ongoing tragedy of genocide against the young women of this frontier city exemplifies the “unrealizable society” to which the Mexican people seem to be condemned.

However, even though this monument to the dead carries the wounds of a desperate community

¹⁵ Translated from the French. Sub-commandant Marcos in “Rencontre avec le sous-commandant Marcos. By Manuel Vazquez Montalban,” in *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 1999.

forever in mourning, it is also the eloquent collective expression of a “YA BASTA”¹⁶ stubbornly refusing to give up the dream of a society that is more just, more human and, most importantly, less violent. Etched in the movement of a popular protest march organized by various citizen groups, this artwork has the courage to confront the cynicism and determinism staining Mexico’s social and political life. As the intellectual Carlos Monsivais declared, “(...) it is not inevitable that the worst people always win, it is not inevitable that ethical and moral reactions be of no use, it is not inevitable that unbridled capitalism triumphs.”¹⁷

Considering the contextual and public dimension of Claudia Bernal’s artwork, distinctive for both the quality of its local inclusion in a specific social and political entity and the strength of its symbolic insertion in a community to the point of almost becoming anonymous, it is worth asking whether *Monument to Ciudad Juarez* will not suffer when eventually it is moved in order to be presented, under the artist’s signature and far from its original context, in art galleries here and abroad.

Displaced from the local to the international, from Mexican public space to the terrain of contemporary art, what will be the meaning and impact of this nomadic and ephemeral creation dedicated to the victims of Ciudad Juarez?

¹⁶ YA BASTA: Enough is enough!

¹⁷ Translated from the French. Carlos Monsivais, “*Lutter contre le déterminisme,*” in *Parachute* no. 104.