

The Murderer in our Midst

Art, Denunciation and Death In Ciudad Juarez

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The Art of Living in Juarez

Ciudad Juarez is a grey and dusty city. It lacks the distinctive features that would provide it with any personality beyond the one that Juan Gabriel gave it when, a child prodigy, he became a world-famous singer. The city sits on the Mexican-American border and its identity, oscillating along a cultural divide, is sometimes acknowledged but usually goes unrecognized. Latin America begins here, only to end, thousands of miles further south, in Patagonia. Making the trip across the border bridge that separates Ciudad Juarez from El Paso, Texas, does not involve any socio-geographic transgression to speak of. The cities occupy the same kind of semi-desert land, have the dollar as their common currency and share *Spanglish* as their language of communication. Crossing over to the Mexican side has more to do with a change of attitude, with confronting a contagious Mexican trait that William Burroughs called the art of not minding anyone else's business. He made the remark upon noticing that in Mexico, you could collapse on a bench, completely drunk, and not a single soul would bother you.

But in Ciudad Juarez, “the art of not minding anyone else’s business” has gone too far: it has become an absolute chaos of impunity, femicide and influence peddling. Behind the discovery of more than 260 dead bodies and the listing of more than 500 disappearances, beyond all the theories of serial killers, organ traffickers, kidnappings for the porn and snuff movie industry, or police fraternities organizing orgies, we know what is going on in Juarez: the murderer is not one, nor many; the murderer is in our midst. Through our silence, we have all become murderers.

This, at least, is the conclusion that the plastic and performing arts movements communicate to Mexican society. Thus, they offer a permanent protest against the incompetence of Mexican authorities in stopping the wave of killings in Ciudad Juarez. “The Dead Women of Juarez,” to use the name relentlessly applied to the murder victims, represent the most outrageous femicide of modern times, a phenomenon that many voices from the artistic and intellectual scene have indignantly denounced.

The contemporary artist Margarita García, a performer, video artist and cultural promoter of the border zone’s artistic movements, says that “life is ten times as fast on the border” -- one year here is like ten years anywhere else. This may explain why Juarez society has not organized “witch hunting” squads to find the murderers, or why no one is out patrolling the streets or combing the suburbs. It may also explain why former FBI agent Robert Ressler, a mystic and astute New York detective who inspired the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, was sent home after he informed the Chihuahua State Police in 1998 that in two years of work, he could establish the murderer’s profile and capture him.

The government's pretext was that this would take too long and would be too expensive. Maybe these narrow-minded authorities converted those two years into border time, and thought that the investigation would last 20 years... and yet that seems to be the way things are headed anyway.

Protest as a Form of Art and Vice Versa

Avant-garde artists are expressing what is happening in Juarez using very innovative methods in the plastic and scenic arts: monologues, performances, happenings and installations, all of them unusual genres on the lethargic Mexican cultural scene. It is an admittedly difficult task to grasp the avant-garde concepts of these methods, and even more of one to understand the meaning of the protest they convey. Many works of art inspired by the dead women have received awards or have been presented in European cities such as London, Paris and Amsterdam. Take, for instance, Cristina Michaus's monologue *Las muertas de Juárez* ("The Dead Women of Juarez"), directed by Enóc Leño and presented in Mexico City. This work speaks of the feelings of powerlessness and insecurity felt by both the families of the victims and the population of Juarez in general, and of the fear of being killed or of losing a child. An actress for over 27 years, winner of an Ariel in 2002, and recipient of a bursary from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts of Mexico (FONCA), Michaus has had lead roles in a number of New Mexican cinema hits including *The Tiger of Santa Julia*. She shows no hesitation as far as campaigning is concerned, whether it be with *Paz para Juárez* ("Peace in Juarez"), or

by accompanying the national exhibition tour of 300 masks representing the victims' anonymous faces.

Other important Mexican actresses have denounced the killings, but none in the manner of activist Ofelia Medina, maligned by some as a radical and "crazy extremist." Nonetheless, nothing can shake the intelligence, sincerity and coherence of her protest discourse. In the field of theatrical monologues, the box-office success *The Vagina Monologues* attempted to bring together various feminine archetypes played by well-known Mexican actresses, TV hosts and journalists. Although it did try to adopt the "violence against women" discourse, this work lapsed into opportunism and failed to become a firm denunciation of femicide.

"Femicide / Dead for Being Women / Bone Bags / Without Organs / As if Unborn... Female Body, Danger of Death." These phrases, translated from the Spanish, convey some sense of the words that Lorena Glinz voices when reading a text by Isabel Vericat. Both artists are members of the *Epikieia* group. At one point, Lorena lets out a long and piercing cry that tears in two her performance entitled *Tributo y testamento* ("Tribute and Testament"). Lorena Wolffer, creator and protagonist of *While We Were Sleeping*, triggers feelings of deep sadness and consternation in her audience, making us feel guilty for accepting violence against women. Wolffer makes the point that while we were sleeping, the women kept disappearing and being killed; all that we felt was passive indignation. The map of violence is drawn on the artist's feminine attributes, on her

neck, legs, pelvis, breasts, head and abdomen, illuminated in the half-light. A great silent void is expressed, cold and endless, where only the silence of others can be felt.

On or off the stage, Mexican actresses unite in denouncing femicide and in demanding immediate, permanent and more effective action. Lilia Aragón, Pilar Pellicer, Susana Alexander, Eve Ensler, Bianca Marroquín and Vanessa Bauche are only a few of those who at one time or another have energetically spoken out against the crimes. Defying the authorities, marching at the forefront of demonstrations, financing organizations, distributing press releases, they accuse the authorities of silence and listlessness in the face of women being murdered.

Narrative Video Documentation and Creative Journalism

Director Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Missing Young Woman* is one of the works that has had the most impact. The year it was released, it received from the Mexican Academy of Cinema Arts and Sciences the Ariel Award for best feature-length documentary. The film was chosen over the documentaries *The Last Zapatistas* and *Niños de la Calle* ("Street Children"), and will be presented this year on Mexican national television (Channel 22).

Another woman, Alejandra Sánchez from the University Centre for Film Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), produced the video documentary

Ni una más (“Not One More”) in memory of Lilia Alejandra García, one of the murder victims in the state of Chihuahua. The work’s creative technique was very successful, and it was definitely the film most frequently screened and most often cited in academic and artistic circles.

Canadian artist Claudia Bernal, originally from Colombia, presented a video installation on the murdered women, with the powerful title *Monument to Ciudad Juarez: Only Women Who Die a Violent Death Go Directly to a Paradise*, at the *Zocalo* public square of the Federal District of Mexico. The work combines 300 ceramic urns, tortillas, ropes, cloth, and a video that the artist produced in Ciudad Juarez. The Canada Council for the Arts provided her with funding. Her important position in the cultural life of Latin American communities in Canada makes her one of the most prominent avant-garde artists on the Latin American scene.

A final work worth mentioning is the radio documentary *La cruz de Juárez* (“The Cross of Juarez”), produced by Sandra Vanesa Robles, Mario Mercuri and Gilberto Domínguez for the University of Guadalajara radio station. Honoured with the New Journalism Foundation award, this piece brings together testimonies of the victims’ families, the authorities, Robert Ressler and the Juarez community. Music and narration introduce the audience to the murky confusion that prevails in the border area, a muffled roar that transmits, amid silences, voices and weeping, the profound drama of living in fear.

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Whether we look at books, various forms of documentation, or more traditional exhibits by a new generation of artists, one thing is clear: the feminicide serves as a powerful theme. Inexhaustible source of inspiration for those wishing to inject social content into their artistic discourse, the theme can be subject, however, to the opportunism often found in the artistic milieu. Appropriating the protest while not actively participating in it can appear disengaged, even frivolous, if the artistic statement does not coincide with the attitude that the artist or communicator actually holds. Ever since Picasso placed his art at the service of the resistance against the Axis invasions in Spain, and his *Guernica* crystallized the relationship between aesthetic expression and horror, raising a fist to express discontent and creating protest art have become signs of modern times. Contemporary art illuminates its times, and the Juarez feminicide is unquestionably an issue in need of all the social commitment that artists can muster. But the theme is highly vulnerable to the actions of ignorant pseudo-artists starving for attention; murderers who, hypocritically, mutilate and ruin the public attention being paid to cultural spaces. This type of murderer is also in our midst.

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