



**Ni Una Más, Not One More:
Activist-Artistic Response
to the Juárez Femicides**

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, the cadavers of hundreds of women, many of whom were working in the *maquiladora* (border assembly plant) industry in the U.S.-Mexico border region, started appearing mutilated, tortured, and often sexually abused in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico across the Río Bravo/Río Grande River from El Paso, Texas, U.S.A. These murders became known as 'femicides' or 'feminicides' (Spanish *feminicidio*). To date, nobody knows the exact number of the slain and disappeared women, as most of the murders remain uninvestigated and much of the original evidence has disappeared. The unwillingness to investigate the crimes has frustrated all parties involved, prompting the victims' families and human rights groups to seek justice for the crimes through various grassroots measures.

The Juárez femicides also inspired a global activist-artistic movement to take a stand on the ways in which the victims were represented and commemorated in public discourses. This article discusses one such endeavor, the activist-art exhibition '*Ni Una Más, Not One More: The Juárez Murders*' that was featured in the Leonard Pearlstein Gallery at Drexel University in Philadelphia during May 15-July 16, 2010. The discussion draws from both the artwork – including photography, performance art, and installations – as well as interviews conducted with the artists from the United States, Mexico, and Europe. While the exhibition called attention to many of the issues that the nation-state, and its law enforcement agencies, had repeatedly failed to address, it also prompted a series of broader questions regarding visual/spatial contestations, individual vs. collective complicity, and the politicization of death.

Contributor Note

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depending on who does the counting, who is included in the statistics, and where they are published.⁷ Yet nobody knows the exact number of the slain and disappeared women.

Akin to reliable statistics, definitive motives for the murders are hard to come by, although there are multiple plausible explanations. Speculations abound whether the killers belong to street gangs, organized crime syndicates, powerful families, a satanic cult, underground snuff film industry, the police – or all of the above (See Rodríguez 2002; Staudt 2008; Rodríguez, Montané and Pulitzer 2007). But we never will know for absolute certainty, for most of the Juárez femicides have remained uninvestigated to date, and much of the original evidence, including medical and autopsy reports, has disappeared.⁸ As things stand, facts about the women's murders remain shrouded in uncertainty, ambiguity, and secrecy.

The lack of verifiable documents and uncompromised evidence is a source of perennial dismay for the families, grassroots activists, and the legal system alike.⁹ According to Marcela Lagarde y de

⁷ For recent human rights organizations' statistics, see Agustin (2012).

⁸ On the compromised handling of the evidence, see Washington Valdez (2006: 166-169). See also the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2003).

⁹ The existing state of affairs has important scholarly ramifications: How, for example, do academics make sense of what is happening in Juárez without access to verifiable records? Whom do we turn to if we cannot trust the so-called 'official' sources of information? The established premises under which we are accustomed to conducting academic research may well become less relevant than the sheer fact that the issue is being talked about. If so, from the perspective of the everyday and academia alike, story-telling, grapevine, and the

los Ríos, the families 'have been treated unjustly, with contempt, paternalism, lack of professionalism, negligence, and violence, by the widest array of authorities from the police, public ministries, prosecutors, female attorneys (*procuradoras*) and directors of mechanisms put in place to serve women to governors and presidents of the republic' (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010: xii). Because of the Mexican law enforcement's unwillingness to get to the bottom of the crimes, the victims' families and grassroots coalitions early on began to form support groups to publicly speak against the violence.¹⁰

After finding no justice in the Mexican legal system, the mothers of three femicide victims, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, Claudia Ivette González, and Laura Berenice Ramos, pursued human rights complaints in first the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and later in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Organization of American States, The Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2007).¹¹ In 2009, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a landmark verdict that held the Mexican government accountable for the murders of three young women in Ciudad Juárez. Among the 15 stipulations made by the court, the state of Mexico was mandated to hold a public ceremony to apologize

word on the street might trump 'official' records, documents, and archives, with radical consequences for our research practices.

¹⁰ Such groups included *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, A.C. [Civil Association for the Return Home of Our Daughters] and *Voces sin Eco* [Voices without Echo]. The latter painted pink crosses on telephone poles to draw attention to the problem. See Amnesty International, *Intolerable Killings*.

¹¹ For a discussion of human rights organizations' and NGO's battle against femicide, see Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ravelo Blancas (2010: 182-196).

for the crimes; to step-up and coordinate efforts to find missing women; to build a monument to the three murdered women in Ciudad Juárez; and to publish the sentence in official government records and in newspapers (Inter-American Court on Human Rights 2009).

While there was still no closure to the crimes, the verdict was a moral victory for the grassroots protest movement. As an internal report prepared for the European Parliament puts it:

the judgment establishes the first basis for interpreting the right of women to live free from violence and the responsibilities of States to guarantee this right. It is also important because the cases are about a specific type of violence against women, documented using the concept of femicide. (Oikarinen 2011)

The European Union, the United Nations, the U.S. Congress, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women are among the several official bodies that have taken a stand against femicide in Mexico.

The actions taken by these global forums suggest that femicide is best treated as a transnational issue, one which cannot be resolved within the national context alone. Here I concur with Alicia Schmidt Camacho's contention that:

How Mexican women may exert rights in the border space is thus fundamentally an international, not a national problem. By this I mean that the implementation of human rights conventions is not simply a matter of remaking the Mexican

state but of addressing the global processes that make Mexican women convenient targets for discrimination, exploitation, and assault. (Schmidt Camacho 2005: 277)

Because both the causes and ramifications of the violence are inherently transnational in nature, the prospect of a possible solution on a grassroots level must also be a conjoined transnational effort by which the local serves the interests of the global, and vice versa.¹²

In addition to the grassroots protest movement launched by the victims' families, the Juárez femicides prompted vigorous cultural responses by activist-artists whose works began to take issue with the silencing of the murders from official public memory.¹³ This article focuses on one such activist-artist endeavor, the art exhibition *Ni Una Más, Not One More: The Juárez Murders*, which was featured in the Leonard Pearlstein Gallery at Drexel University in

¹² William Paul Simmons and Rebecca Coplan suggest concrete transnational measures to intervene in the situation, such as individual human rights petitions; civil suits in U.S. federal courts under the Alien Tort Statute; and withholding or issuing loans by the Inter-American Development Bank. See their 'Innovative Transnational Remedies for the Women of Ciudad Juárez' (in Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 197-224).

¹³ Although my focus here is on visual art, various other cultural practitioners have addressed femicide in their work: see, for example, the novels by Roberto Bolaño (2004); Carlos Fuentes (1995); and Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2005). Moreover, seventeen films have been made on femicide, including notably the documentary Lourdes Portillo, dir., *Senorita Extraviada [Missing Young Woman]* (ITVS, 2001) and the feature films by Gregory Nava, dir., *Bordertown* (THINKFilm/Capitol Films, 2006) and Carlos Carrera, dir., *Backyard/ El Traspatio* (Indigo Films, 2009).

Philadelphia during May 15–July 16, 2010.¹⁴ My discussion draws from both the work exhibited there, including photography, performance art, and installations, as well as interviews conducted with the artists from the United States, Mexico, and Europe.¹⁵

The agendas of individual activist-artists vary. Some of them make a point of identifying the victims by giving them names and faces in an effort to refute their repression from official versions of cultural memory. Others call attention to their absence. Yet others underscore the personal and/or collective moral outrage prompted by the murders. By using art to acknowledge the crisis, to break the silence, and to give voice to the victims and their families, these artists call attention to many of the issues that the nation-state and its law enforcement agencies have repeatedly failed to address. But beyond merely voicing the victims' families' concerns, these artistic statements also prompt a series of broader questions regarding visual/spatial contestations, individual vs. collective complicity, and the politicization of death. Unlike Arlene Love's assessment in the epigraph above, in the case of *Ni Una Más*, art transcends from being a mere 'canary in the coal mine', turning into an important niche of cultural signification, while revealing a complex nexus of power relations between the multiple parties involved, within a transnational context.

¹⁴ *'Ni Una Más'* was originally a grassroots campaign launched by family members, human rights activists, and representatives of the border community to end femicide in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. See Fregoso (2007: 35–66) and Wright (2010: 312–330).

¹⁵ On the reporting of the exhibition, see Baxi (2010).

Visual Representation, Spatial Contestation

On a grassroots level, representations of femicide have signified a fierce contestation over different versions of reality distributed in official, media, and cultural texts. In its most elemental, this battle has been waged over public space. The protest movement launched by the victims' families in the 1990s first demonstrated the ways in which urban spatiality could be appropriated for activist agendas. In an effort to call attention to the unresolved murders, the victims' mothers began to paint telephone poles across Juárez in pink, with a black cross symbolizing the lost life of an anonymous daughter. These 'eerily barren crosses', Rosa-Linda Fregoso writes, served as 'silent witnesses to symbolic and experiential instances of violence' (Fregoso 2007: 54). As visual communiqués, the crosses also exemplified how such tactics could be deployed to claim public space for individual activism.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the orders of the mayor of Juárez to the contrary, the mothers stubbornly insisted on continuing to paint the crosses across the city. Alicia Schmidt Camacho characterizes the city officials' attempt to repress the protest movement as a 'second wave of gender crimes' by which the mothers, too, become implicit targets of violence:

Police routinely tell mothers that if they wish to see their daughters alive again they should refrain from 'creating scandal in the

¹⁶ Here I am drawing on Henri Lefebvre's insistence that space cannot be viewed as 'neutral', a passive locus of social relations, for any social dynamics derive their meaning *through* spatial organization – to the extent that they have 'no real existence save in and through space' (Lefebvre 1991: 44).

streets'. Local media, business leaders, and civic organizations in Juárez echo this threat, arguing that the protest movement threatens the economic viability of the city, particularly in its precarious relationship to foreign industry and tourism. (Schmidt Camacho 2005: 273)

These acts of defiance, then, serve multiple purposes. They are a collective refusal by the mothers to succumb to the symbolic violence that represses the families' memories of their loved ones; they are a personal intervention to claim physical space within the city; and they are a statement of agency to combat the gendered spatial power relations in the border region ('Photo Essay: Images from the Justice Movement in Chihuahua, Mexico', in Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 263-269).

Cultural representations of femicide are unavoidably contradictory sites. On the one hand, they address many of the issues that official discourses have sought to repress; as with the pink crosses, such commemoration is liberating. On the other hand, some representations may reify the violent impulses. The press in Mexico, for example, operates under paradoxical circumstances: some journalists have been harassed about reporting on femicide and have been forced to operate under excessive censorship machinery; others have become targets of violence themselves (Washington Valdez 2006; González Rodríguez 2002; Rodríguez et al 2007). Yet at the same time, John Gibler observes, 'there is *la nota roja*, the crime beat or blood news, an entire newspaper industry built on publishing daily, gruesome front-page photographs of the newly dead' (Gibler 2011: 54). Such sensationalist depictions

serve the interests of the perpetrators and/or proponents of the crimes themselves. 'What' then, to invoke Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim's important question, 'is the relationship between knowledge about violence and action? That is, how does one speak about violence without replicating and perpetuating it?' (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 10)

The diverse depictions of femicide complicate any singular conceptualization of representations; rather, they urge us to consider the multiple simultaneous scales at which violence is experienced and commemorated: as physical realities, as cultural depictions, and as what Slavoj Žižek refers to as 'systemic violence', subtle forms of coercion that sustain 'relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence' (2009: 8). While the bodies of the young women bear the brunt of the physical violence, the socioeconomic, political, and ideological dynamics are responsible for perpetuating the perennial threat of violence. Given this complexity, the divergent versions of real life events are best analyzed within the particular context in which they appear. To quote Lawrence and Karim again:

Violence always has a context. Context shapes not just the actors or victims but also those who represent them. What is celebrated in one place may be mourned in another. Memory is never an equal balance, or a neutral lens, of human experience and history. (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 1)

Representations of violence, too, are processes that touch upon both history and cultural memory, for the 'city', as Charles Bowden puts it, 'erases not just lives, but also memory'. 'History', Bowden

continues, 'erases itself in Juárez' (Bowden 2010: 93, 104).

According to the curators' statement, the exhibit *Ni Una Más* claimed to be 'unabashedly activist in intent', drawing attention to the murders taking place in Juárez for 'the sheer pleasure of the violence', and also connecting the issue of gender violence to broader societal power relations (Gregory, Dean, and Pellicia 2010: 5). Artist Andrea Marshall defines the role of activist art as follows:

When we read the newspaper and see a police photograph of bloody body bags strewn on the sides of highways . . . most of us cringe and flip to the entertainment section. But art forces you to look at something you haven't seen before or that you have closed your eyes to . . . and see it in a new light.... It causes a reaction'.¹⁷

Against this background, consider Marshall's 'The Rice Bath Diptych', a self-portrait of a fictional femicide of Maria Gonzales, killed by her husband while preparing a *mole poblano* dish for him.

The 'before' part of the work portrays a sassy-looking young woman, a cigarette in her mouth, defying conventional notions of feminine *latinidad*, all the while preparing a traditional dish for her husband. The 'after' picture shows her naked, bloody corpse dumped in a bath tub, complete with the leftover mole and rice, with no indication as to what took place in-between. As with the Juárez femicides, the viewer is left in obscurity about the details of the murder. The clues that we can draw from the images,

¹⁷ Email interview between Andrea Marshall and author, September 27, 2010, notes in possession of author.



Fig.1 Andrea Marshall, 'The Rice Bath Diptych'
Photo: Courtesy of Andrea Marshall

however, suggest a clash of gender values in domestic space, one which may result in drastic consequences. According to the artist, her intention with these images was to evoke an emotional reaction of 'shock and sadness' akin to that of her own towards the femicides taking place in Juárez (Marshall email interview). Here, then, the motive is not to celebrate or reproduce violence; rather, the violent images function as rhetorical devices to express outrage and solidarity toward the femicide victims within the semi-public space of the art museum.

Marshall's self-portrait is inspired by a personal relationship, and she purposefully draws a connection with experiences of womanhood on a personal level and within broader societal structures (Marshall email interview). The artist's position hearkens back to that of Lawrence and Karim's, which underscores the agency of the various parties involved in experiencing violence: 'the reader-observer-participant

must be alert to how her own life experience, location, and options frame the violence that seems to mark both her individual and collective existence' (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 10). The ways in which Marshall's images resonate with the heterogeneous viewers will, evidently, depend on their respective circumstances, but the point worth emphasizing here is that *looking* at these images will necessarily entangle the viewer in them, be it implicitly or explicitly.

Whether the images elicit in the viewer emotional resonance, make her or him shun away in horror, or perhaps trigger explicit action turns the beholder into a witness of the gendered power relations they portray. An act of looking, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright so aptly argue, 'is a social practice, whether we do it by choice or compliance. Through looking ... we negotiate our social relationships and meanings' (Sturken and Cartwright 2009: 9). Looking is, moreover, a spatially contingent practice, suggested by Lydia Martens' characterization of the 'situated quality' of looking practices (Martens 2012: 40). Here the implication is that the *where* of looking is equally important as its *how*, epitomizing the interrelationship between 'the *politics, purposes* and *practices* of looking in interpretive work' (52). Given the disempowering nature of the massive censorship machinery silencing femicide, such a participatory process in an art exhibition may provide an important site for personal reflection or public intervention.

Another robust activist viewpoint exhibited at *Ni Una Más* is Teresa Serrano's *La Piñata*, a performance video featuring a piñata in the shape of a young woman, dressed in a *maquiladora* worker's uniform, being torn apart in a misogynist act of violence by an

anonymous man (Serrano 2012). The video portrays a simultaneous act of violent seduction and repulsion. The seducer first gazes at the object of his desire, as if estimating her value for his purposes. He then slowly begins patting her body parts, at first gently, but only to transform into a vehement fit of rage, and then again momentarily ceasing, to caress her with seeming affection. As the strokes get more ferocious with each swing, the object is first beheaded and gradually demolished into pieces. Serrano's initial plan to project the video on the Plaza of Ciudad Juárez was to 'make the murderers', as she herself puts it, 'look at their own images committing the crimes', but it was refused by the local authorities.¹⁸ Yet the very act of silencing by the local officials exposes their implicit complicity in the crimes.

Serrano's attempt to appropriate public space for her activist effort sheds light on art that can make a difference beyond the spatial context of the gallery alone. This spatialization of art is important because 'the victimizers', Serrano explains, 'can be among others, a father, a lover, a husband, a friend, an acquaintance, a stranger or a boyfriend... The religious systems and ideologies have contributed to the escalation and the legitimizing of violence' (Serrano email communication). As Serrano's disconcerting performance video attests, the complex question of representation involves multiple linkages between the grassroots realities, official responses, and cultural expressions as well as the spatial contexts within which they are exhibited. The opportunity that anybody with access to the Internet has

¹⁸ She was also given the impression that returning to Juárez might prove 'very dangerous' to her. Email interview between Teresa Serrano and author, September 16, 2010, notes in possession of author.

to watch the video online, in turn, makes the viewer witness to femicide as one form of violence against women in a global context.¹⁹

Representing Absence, Claiming Visibility

Femicide victims are often talked about in the public not by their name but as numbers. Whereas their body count is subject to multiple debates, the victims' identities – or personalities – have largely been ignored in public discourses. Few people on either side of the border could likely name a femicide victim by heart. They are certainly not

household names. How, then, is such a staggering absence converted into representation? A powerful impetus for the artists of *Ni Una Más* was specifically to reinstate the women's identities from anonymity, and in so doing, to restore their individuality and humanity. Such an effort is, for example, Lise Bjørne Linnert's '*Desconocida, Unknown, Ukjent*', an international community art project initiated in response to the Juárez murders in 2006.

This 8-by-30-foot wall raises awareness to femicide by asking the participants to embroider the name of one Juárez victim on a white small cotton label. The layout of the labels entails a hidden



Fig. 2 Lise Bjørne Linnert, '*Desconocida, Unknown, Ukjent*'. Photo: Courtesy of Lise Bjørne Linnert

¹⁹ In her broader work, Serrano specifically emphasizes the global dimension of violence against women. She describes one such project as follows: 'I started to embroider a wig made of natural hair of women from all over the world, I bought hair in Chinese stores in NY; they import all kind of hair since they do wigs. The killing of woman from Arab and Indian countries unified my willingness to do this work which I called 'The Field', a 5 x 2.5-meter blanket, a battlefield the world's women'. Serrano interview.

message with a Morse code for the Mexican national anthem – the artist's political evocation of the specific geographic context within which the atrocities are taking place (Bussmann 2010). This 'politicized embroidery' on a pink surface resembles the names of fallen soldiers on a war memorial, with the distinction that each of the names

are the handiwork of the individual embroiderers and, as such, different and unique. The artist herself characterizes the act of embroidering – a typical women’s endeavor – as ‘an act of love and care’:

Each person leaves a trace of them when embroidering in their choice of colors, of handwriting. This brings an individual back to the name. The name is no longer just on a list. It has become personalized. (Linnert 2010)

Akin to Andrea Marshall’s view of activist-art, Linnert underscores the reciprocity of the participants engaging in the collective politico-artistic process.

In addition to a femicide victim’s name, the participants embroider the word ‘unknown’ in their own language, as in

the title of the project, where the word is listed in Spanish, English, and Norwegian, the latter being the artist’s mother tongue. Linnert explains her activist agenda:

I choose community participation and embroidery for several reasons: First of all, because I wanted to spread the awareness in a way that we couldn’t stay ‘outside’. Often when we read or hear about such things we shut off, thinking this has nothing to do with me. I wanted a way to connect us and create a work that was about US and not about THEM. By asking each one to embroider a name of one murdered woman in Ciudad Juárez, and to also embroider *unknown* in their own language, each person has time to reflect on

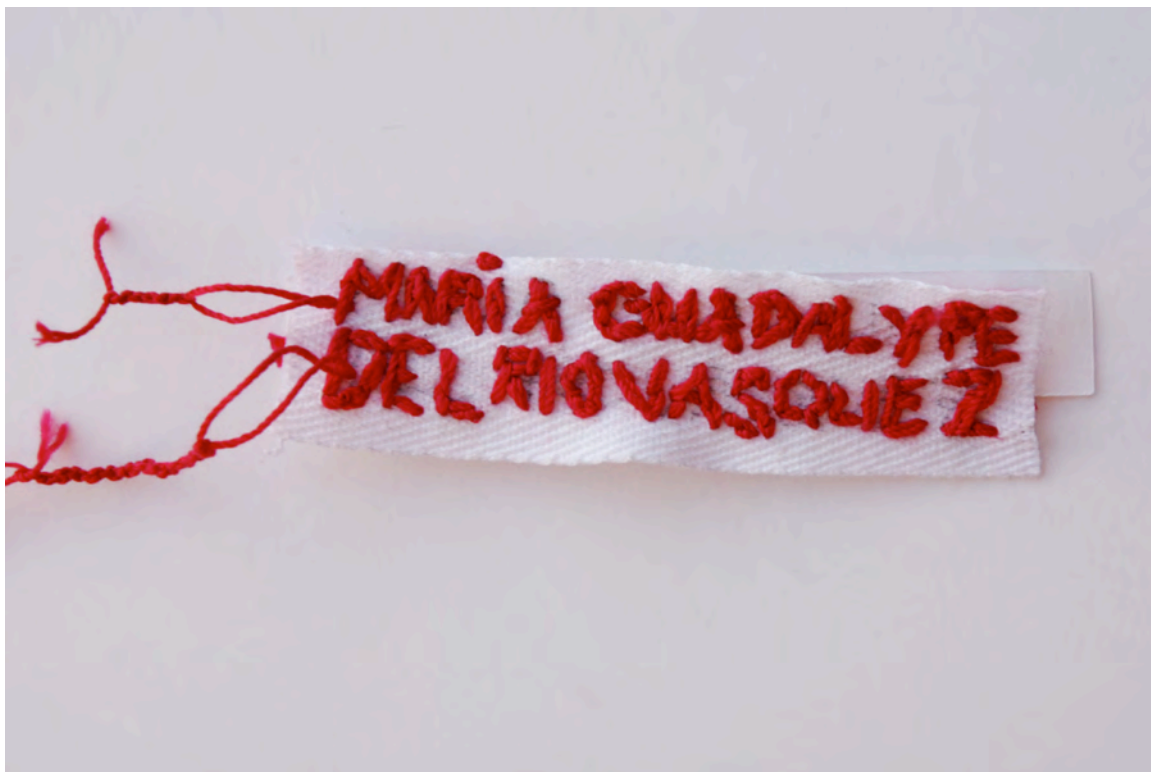


Fig. 3 Lise Bjørne Linnert, ‘Desconocida, Unknown, Ukjent’, Detail Label
Photo: Courtesy of Lise Bjørne Linnert

that girl.²⁰

By bringing the project to the community, she also draws attention to the spatial situatedness of activist-art on a grassroots level worldwide.

By 2012, 6,100 labels had been embroidered by some 4,500 people, and the project continues as long as the situation in Juárez remains the same. Linnert characterizes the political urgency of femicide as follows:

Regarding the situation in Ciudad Juárez, I think the most pressing issue is to *admit it is happening there*, and has been for the last 18 years and nothing has been done from the Government's side that reduces the violence. (Lise Bjørne Linnert, via email)

The Norwegian Linnert's work, then, is a statement of the global reverberation of femicide, as she calls attention to a critical connection between art-activism, agency, and cultural commemoration in and out of the spatial context of the art gallery.

Celia Álvarez Muñoz's work exhibited from her collection '*Fibra y Furia* [Fiber and Fury]: Exploitation is in Vogue' specifically contextualizes femicide within the transnational dynamics of the U.S.-Mexico border region. Her installations displaying a range of women's garments without bodies are a critique of the fashion industry, with subtle cues linking the Juárez femicides with the surrounding transnational economic affairs. In an oral history interview conducted in 2004 for the Smithsonian



Fig. 4 Image by Celia Álvarez Muñoz. Photo: Courtesy of Abbie Dean.

²⁰ Email interview between Lise Bjørne Linnert and author, October 1, 2010, notes in possession of author. See also www.lisebjorne.com.

Institute, Álvarez Muñoz critiques the fashion industry, on the one hand, for the way it ‘constructs women or the image of women’ and, on the other hand, for its ‘feminization of poverty’ (Muñoz 2004). The maquila worker’s outfit, which is also featured on the cover of the *Ni Una Más* exhibition catalogue, is a case in point.

The dress serves as a reminder of the gendering of the maquila labor force – and the conditions within which the women work – while the razor blade, with traces of cocaine at its edge, ties the maquiladora industry to its equally powerful cross-border sibling industry: *narco*-trafficking. The murdering of the maquila workers, Álvarez Muñoz implies, is to be understood within the transnational context of both the licit and illicit cross-border economies, each of which serves to satisfy the need of what she refers to as ‘globalized greed’.²¹ A sinister aspect of such greed, evidently, was that working-class Mexican women had become disposable objects of violence that was sanctioned by the transnational corporations – and the society within which they operated – through their stubborn refusal to intervene in the crimes and to provide safety measures for their employees to prevent further atrocities.

Another prevalent theme in Álvarez Muñoz’s *Fibra y Furia* is the sexualizing of the female body, and in particular the fashion industry’s detrimental impact on young girls’ gender identities. An installation of a series of jeans cut-offs, with a piece of glimmering red cloth conspicuously placed on the crotch is the artist’s portrayal of child abuse, and its bloody consequences.

²¹ Email interview between Celia Álvarez Muñoz and author, September 13, 2010.



Fig. 5 Celia Álvarez Muñoz, ‘*Fibra y Furia*’
Photo: Courtesy of Abbie Dean.

As Diana Washington Valdez points out, femicide victims were known to be as young as five years old: ‘Little Berenice Delgado Rodríguez, who was only five years old, was abducted by a stranger near her home. Her killer or killers raped her, and then stabbed her five times’ (Washington Valdez 2006: 50). While there were certain patterns endemic to femicide victims’ background, it is, indeed, important to recognize that neither the murders nor the victims were monolithic.

Álvarez Muñoz’s installation of a red prom dress, in turn, calls attention to a rite of passage of the youthful female body, with large red roses strategically placed on the breast, crotch, and behind, the artist’s ‘what-could-have-been’ vision of the slain women’s prospect to enjoy the fruits of their own labor that was never to be.



Fig. 6 Celia Álvarez Muñoz, '*Fibra y Furia*'. Photo: Courtesy of Abbie Dean.

Álvarez Muñoz describes *Fibra y Furia* as a 'coming-of-age journey of sexualized garments, suspended from the ceiling, without bodies. A journey so many of the women never experienced due to their brutal and abrupt deaths' (Muñoz 2004). These installations display what Asta Kuusinen eloquently describes as 'a dazzling dream of modernity and a toxic nightmare disturbingly placed side by side, together but separate, conjuring up the missing female bodies' (Kuusinen 2006: 242. For a discussion of Álvarez Muñoz's work, see also Tejada 2009). The transgression of national boundaries into a cross-border economy resulted in various unintended social consequences blurring the roles between the nation-state and the transnational industries, whose monetary interests trumped the wellbeing of the local workforce.²²

²² The creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which removed trade barriers between Canada, the United States, and Mexico

The sexualization of the lower-class Mexican labor force is related to the tendency by which femicide victims became targets of vicious character

in 1994, has been at the crux of the cross-border economic relations. Soon after its launching, NAFTA became a target of criticism for its detrimental effect on labor and human rights on a national level. Because transnational corporations 'contribute to the conditions in which human rights abuses are committed', they may, Deborah Weissman claims, 'act in ways that avoid the reach of traditional state governance.... The dependence of the state on transnational economic actors weakens government incentives to prevent and seek redress for human rights violations'. (Weissman 2010: 236). Alicia Schmidt Camacho, too, emphasizes the interconnection between the transnational economic undercurrents that are inextricably linked to the women's murders, one which calls for finding 'new ways for thinking about rights from the vantage point of young girls and migrant women, whose new mobility and emergent sexuality challenge existing relations between women's bodies, the state, and global capital' (2005: 283-284).

assassinations questioning their social 'respectability' and 'morality'. A resident of the border region explains her personal experience of the class-based justification of femicide as follows:

The way that my dad had illustrated it was that it was, we call them *maquileras*, lower-class women, and he made it seem like they were promiscuous women. Later on when I really started understanding different angles of the story – I thought this is not an issue about prostitution but that this was about violence against women.²³

Alicia Schmidt Camacho explains the tendency to conflate the sale of labor with the sale of women's bodies as follows: 'For the dominant classes in Juárez, girls and women exercising mobility beyond the sanctioned spaces of patriarchal supervision are immediately suspected of living *la doble vida* [a double life] as prostitutes' (Schmidt Camacho 2010: 265-266).

The women workers' morality, or lack thereof, was linked with preconceived notions of gendered spatiality. By entering the maquila workforce, the women had, to quote Julia Estela Monárrez Fregoso, 'transgressed public spaces: They became breadwinners, and when several women pooled their money, they could buy cars and go out dancing' (Fregoso 2010: 63; see also Tabuenca Córdoba 2003: 411-37). This diverging from their assumed 'place' in society made the women suspect. 'By day', Melissa Wright writes, 'she might

²³ Interview with author, April 23, 2010, El Paso, Texas, notes in possession of author. This interview was conducted on the condition of anonymity.

appear the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, sister, and laborer, but by night she reveals her inner prostitute, slut, and barmaid' (Wright 2007: 187). Reactionary viewpoints were quick to deduce that such acts of transgression not only challenged traditional women's domesticity in Mexico; they threatened the entire familial organization and social structure of the Mexican society.

From this it followed that the women's lower class status, relative independence as working women, and their physical attractiveness were used to legitimize the crimes committed against them. According to criminologist José Parra Molina, the erosion of traditional values was caused by contact with 'liberal American Society' and that this 'social shock' in and of itself made the women targets of violence (187).²⁴ Leslie Salzinger's ethnographic research in a maquila in Juárez, an eye-witness account of the factories' overtly sexualized atmosphere, depicts the perception of the women as 'embodiments of availability – cheap labor, willing flirtation ... paradigmatic workers for a transnational political economy in which a highly sexualized form of femininity has become a standard "factor of production"' (Salzinger 2007: 161). Whether the women were considered as economic pawns, morally deviant, or just naïve innocents, the maquila's sexualized

²⁴ The insinuation that the women were complicit in their own deaths, Andrea Marshall explains, became a key motif for her delineation of 'The Rice Bath Dyptich' (fig. 1): 'I read in a report by Amnesty International, stating the Attorney General's office scolded parents for raising daughters whose 'conduct did not conform to the moral order because they went to nightclubs at late hours'. . . This statement was extremely significant to me in regards to my interpretation and character development of *Maria Gonzalez*. Marshall interview.

ambience invokes the question of the women's own agency within the existing power relations.

One claim that has frequently been made in conjunction with femicide was that the women were making themselves prey to harassment/violence. This thinking was not restricted to Juárez alone; it resonated across Mexico. According to reporter Diana Washington Valdez, criminals in Tijuana, for example, were known to engage in a pastime labeled as '*noches Juarenses*' [Juárez nights], where women were killed for sport (Washington Valdez 2006: 181). Yet the argument that women's visibility in public space explains the backlash against them – that they 'asked for it' – not only blames the victims, it also purges societal responsibility for them. A border resident explains:

After becoming participant in different protests, I started having conversations with those individuals who had really been affected or touched by femicide. Maybe one of their sisters or daughters had been killed. That's when I felt that it was an injustice swept under the rug.... I never once felt like Mexico took an initiative or proposed a plan – or anything – so I felt disgusted. It was their women, our family, our *raza* [race] – and they were not doing a damn thing. (Interview, April 23, 2010)

However, while the ideological function of personalizing femicide was to depoliticize the crimes, exactly the opposite ensued. 'The crimes became political', artist Brian Maguire points out, 'when the state ignored them, hence the need for a public demonstration of what

has been lost to the community'.²⁵ Maguire took issue with the absence of the murdered girls from public memory by beginning to paint their portraits based on surviving family photographs: 'I have used a kind of formal portrait format to challenge the social invisibility of the murdered female/Mexican factory worker'.²⁶ Esmeralda Juárez Alarcón, for example, was a 16-year-old maquila worker who went missing in January 2003, and her body was found in a cotton field next to other murdered teenagers.



Fig. 7 Brian Maguire, Esmeralda Juárez Alarcón
Photo: Courtesy of Brian Maguire

²⁵ *Ni Una Más, Not One More: The Juárez Murders*, Exhibition Catalogue, 21.

²⁶ Email interview between Brian Maguire and author, September 13, 2010, notes in possession of author.



Fig. 8 Brian Maguire, Rebeca Contreras Mancha. Photos: Courtesy of Brian Maguire

Rebeca Contreras Mancha, a mother of two, was killed at age 23, with her children left behind.

Whereas Álvarez Muñoz's work highlights the bodily absence of the women, Maguire combats the cultural repression of their memories by reconstructing their faces on the painter's canvas. By representing the absence of the murdered women, the artist simultaneously reclaims their spatial visibility, complete with their full names and personal idiosyncrasies.

In his work, *Space, Place, and Violence*, James Tyner insists that violence is necessarily both a social and a spatial practice, one which acts 'to regulate people through a discipline of space' (Tyner 2012: ix). The works exhibited at

Ni Una Más demonstrate that the ramifications of violence, too, have both social and spatial ramifications, invoking broader questions of agency in representing, commemorating, and discussing femicide. Some of the artists specifically allude to the question of collective complicity in commemorating femicide. Claudia DeMonte's mixed media installation 'Our Lady of Juárez', for example, invokes the familiar figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Patron Saint of Mexico, to contextualize femicide within a religious/historical continuum of gender violence.

Akin to many of the other artists' works, the seven hundred red and white roses to honor the victims suggest a communal grassroots ritual of sorts as a way to contemplate the murders, while the work



Fig. 9 Claudia DeMonte, 'Our Lady of Juárez'
Photo: Courtesy of Claudia DeMonte

itself becomes a site for grieving, commemoration, and/or a process of healing. While this religious icon is easily recognizable throughout the Catholic world, it also takes us beyond the borderlands context, prompting us to contemplate what our own role – as individuals, artists, and academics – is in the broader scheme of things. Who is complicit in or culpable for the existing state of affairs? According to artist Alice Leora Briggs, at stake in the violence beleaguering the border region is ultimately 'our impending demise as individuals, as a culture, as a species'.²⁷ Beyond the context of Ciudad Juárez, femicide undoubtedly touches upon human rights issues that transform the local into the global, and vice versa. The work of the victims' families, artist-

²⁷ Email interview between Alice Leora Briggs and author, September 23, 2010, notes in possession of author. At the *Ni Una Más* exhibition, Briggs exhibited several images from her collection *Abecedario de Juárez*. See www.aliceleorabriggs.com.

activists, border scholars, and human rights organizations have poignantly brought these issues to our global awareness.

Reflection: Politicizing Death

In 2008, the U.S.-Mexico border region saw another harrowing wave of violence emerge because of a turf war between warring drug trafficking cartels. As these organizations began recruiting local gangs for their enforcement strategies, the violence soon spiraled beyond the context of the narcotics industry, generating mayhem, thousands of deaths, and social decay in all of Juárez.²⁸ During the years 2008-2012, the estimated death toll in Juárez amounted to 10, 882. During 2010, the most violent year on record, there were some 3, 622 deaths, equaling an average of 9.9 bodies a day (Molloy 2013; see also Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012). As with femicide, most of these crimes labeled in public discourses as part and parcel of the 'drug war' were uninvestigated and unresolved. This continuum of violence from the early 1990s to the present has impacted residents of the border region in devastating ways. Moreover, it has become a topic of heated public debate.

In addition to explicating the multiple simultaneous scales at which violence operates, the diverse reactions to violence in the border region revealed symbolic representational meanings attached to the various groups of victims. In both the United States and Mexico, a curious identity politics of death evident

²⁸ A report from March 2010 cited the violent death rates in the city of 1.2 million as 192 homicides per 100,000 citizens, although entirely reliable data is impossible to come by (Whitney 2010).

in public discourses either legitimizes or delegitimizes individual mourning, official responses to the deaths, and commemorations thereof. Moreover, it creates a hierarchy of corpses based on the national, gender, and class backgrounds of the deceased.

Because death itself has become a politically loaded issue, it has led to debates valorizing one form of violence over another. Central to this discussion has been the politicization of femicide as a feminist issue, and the flip-side claiming that discussing femicide in this way undermines the *narco*-violence as a broader human rights issue. The issue at stake, then, is equally about what is being talked about as well as who does the talking. Rosa-Linda Fregoso, for example, accuses Charles Bowden of a 'misogynist gaze', 'symbolic violence', and 'male rage' in his discussion of femicide in his writings 'I Want to Dance With The Strawberry Girl' and *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (Fregoso 2007: 47-50; Bowden 1998: 114-118). In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Charles Bowden, in turn, takes issue with the focus on femicide in discussing violence in Juárez:

I'm told that seventeen films – commercial and documentaries – have been made about the murder of women in Juárez. They are a way to avoid both facts and the city. The murder rate of women in Juárez over the past fifteen years is about the same as Mexico in general – about ten per cent of all homicides.... Juárez kills everyone. (Blake 2010; Powell 2012, chapter 16)

Should femicide, then, be considered a feminist issue? Why, absolutely. The whole point is to place women's

experiences at the center of the discussion, and it is thanks to feminists' efforts that these horrendous crimes have been brought to international awareness in the first place. Is femicide also a part of a larger human rights crisis in the border region? Without a doubt it is. Does one form of discourse necessarily exclude the other? I do not see how it would.

From my perspective, pitting one form of violence against another is not only an unfortunate but also a lose-lose proposition. I consider a much more fruitful approach that of Marisa Belausteguigoitia and Lucía Melgar, who call attention to both the differences and similarities between the causes and effects of different forms of violence that Mexico continues to grapple with (Belausteguigoitia and Melgar 2008). All border violence is a part of a larger phenomenon of violence that affects both real life experiences and discussions of it; moreover, the different forms of violence intersect and overlap. Indeed, 'violence is', as Lawrence and Karim remind us, 'always and everywhere a process. As process, violence is cumulative and boundless. It always spills over. It creates and recreates new norms of collective self-understanding' (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 12). The question is: Do we want to look at it as such? If we do, and if we – writers and scholars from privileged positions outside of Mexico – decide to intervene in the local affairs of a nation-state to bring about social justice, would it not make sense to forge coalitions, rather than to impose boundaries, amongst one another? After all, are not all of the parties involved sincerely trying to make an impact on the existing state of affairs?

That is not to say that problematizing various aspects of the violence were not

absolutely central in academic discussions; of course they are. Rather, it is to ask how we intend to explain these power struggles to one another without engaging in dialogue first? Western identity politics do not ameliorate the problem of violence ravaging the border region, but they do create antagonisms. An alternative approach would be to examine the ways in which these different forms of violence are interrelated as well as to consider the ways in which we explicate them in our everyday lives, work, writing, or the classroom setting.

As evidenced by the international artists discussed in this article, there are a

number of ways to take a stand regarding violent phenomena. Violence in Juárez has penetrated all levels of society, and its ramifications reach far beyond the border context at multiple spatial scales. The culture of impunity that allowed femicide to occur in the first place is the very same culture of impunity that later caused the *narco*-violence to spread in Juárez and elsewhere in Mexico. Looking at one phenomenon will necessarily inform about the other. At the end of the day, then, we need to determine whether violence – femicidal and homicidal alike – concerns us, them, or all of us.

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