

Walking with Margolles

Patrice Giasson

Alex Gordon Associate Curator of the
Art of the Americas, Neuberger Museum of Art

On Tuesday, January 20, 2015, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Teresa Margolles visited Bay Street on Staten Island where Eric Garner was killed to make an imprint of the site. As we gathered materials and prepared on Monday for the intervention, we assumed everything would go smoothly the next day. It was a surprise for all of us when we arrived at the site with our tripods, buckets, blankets, and cameras on the morning after the celebration of Dr. King's birthday and discovered that television cameras and police were already there to investigate and report on the burning of the memorial to Garner during the previous night. Who had set fire to the memorial? Had it burned by itself because of the surrounding candles, or had it been, as many assumed, deliberately set on fire? In either case, the memorial had burned and the tension was high. This was not a big concern for Margolles, who had spent years defying boundaries and going to critical sites—rushing to places after recent assassinations, filming in dangerous areas, exploring neighborhoods run by drug lords and gangs, and witnessing exchanges of gunfire. I, on the contrary, was beginning to

seriously worry, as my role as curator was being pushed further than I had expected. Suddenly, I was fully invested in this controversial intervention.

Margolles calmed us all, suggesting that we would go for some tacos and wait for the area to clear. We entered a local taquería with the television playing a Mexican telenovela aestheticizing drug violence through depictions of gang fights, and *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) and hitmen with prostitutes in extravagant villas. Although romanticized, the portrayal recalled Ciudad Juarez, a place where Margolles had worked for several years creating works that explicitly addressed the extreme violence inhabiting the city. But with no precise references to place, the telenovela became a blanket stereotype for the endemic drug violence across Latin America. The action on the screen demonstrated the fetishization and banalization of violence, and its possible exportation to anywhere in the Americas. While Margolles's works had pushed us to understand the gravity of the situation, these telenovelas seemed to tell us that killing people was "cool." In my eyes, this stressed the persistent urgency of making works that would challenge these daily massacres.

After an hour and a half in the taquería, Margolles decided that it was time to go back to Garner's site. I was still very anxious, not knowing if the authorities and the press were still present, and wondering how the locals would react when they saw us dragging a fabric embedded with glue through the site to make the imprint. While we were walking back, Margolles ran into a young woman she had met the previous day in the street, who decided to help us. This woman, who knew the neighborhood very well, magically transformed herself into a movie director. She found people to drag the sticky sheet on the site where Garner had died, directing them on what to do while Margolles and her team filmed. Everything went on smoothly, and, strangely enough, nobody asked questions, probably because the locals were involved in the process. After an hour and a half the work was done, and we left Staten Island with the imprint of Garner's site.

I now understand that Margolles wanted me, the curator, to experience the fear and tension at the base of most of her work, to get my hands dirty with the subject, to surpass the traditional function of the curator and become fully invested in the making

of the work. She gave me the opportunity to follow her in these hidden territories that she has been meticulously investigating for more than twenty years. This is how Margolles and her team work—they go to places where nobody goes, or wants to go, and they shed light on these spaces that people prefer not to see. I realize now that this experience has been essential to my understanding of the profoundness of her work.

Another critical episode of Margolles and her team's visit to New York was the walk we took through the streets of Harlem. While walking from 110th Street to 145th Street, from the Hudson River to the East River, I thought we had seen most of Harlem, but when we reached the end of 125th Street, Margolles suddenly asked, "What's over there?"

"The East River," I said.

"But that highway?"

"It's the FDR Expressway," I replied.

"What is under the highway? Are there people sleeping there?"

Astonished with the question, I replied: "I don't know, I have never looked."

It was getting dark, and I suggested that she could perhaps come on another day to investigate. I realized that this was precisely her strength and most significant characteristic. She was able to make us see what we would not see or did not dare look at—who really looks under bridges? She, as an artist, investigates these nearby yet completely foreign territories, and through her work makes these spaces visible.

A few days after going to Staten Island, we brought the “shroud” of Eric Garner to Harlem Needle Arts members Michelle Bishop, Sahara Briscoe, Laura R. Gadson, and Jerry Gant, all artists who generally work individually, so they could come together and work on it collectively. Their reaction was immediate, and they began thinking about how they would address the matter. This fabric, prepared by Margolles, was intended to trigger a new work by these artists that would address police violence toward dozens of other African Americans who had died while in the hands of authorities. During the first working session, the fabric was displayed on a table and Bishop burned herbs in a ceremony to Garner. While pouring water into a bowl placed at the center of the fabric, she called out, her voice echoed by the rest of the group, the names of “Amadou Diallo, Eric Garner, Ramarley Graham, Carlos Alcis, Shereese Francis . . .”—all of those who had recently died while in police custody. And thus began the collective creation of this new work called *american Juju for the Tapestry of Truth*.

I remember how, during the first session, Gant felt the need to touch the work in order to get his hands into the spirit of Garner. He rubbed colorful neckties onto the stained fabric, neckties that would eventually be sewn onto it as a symbol of power and establishment, while also taking the shape of a noose. During the three sessions, Margolles and her team filmed while the Harlem embroiderers were at work on the textile. They also recorded their stories and conversations as they talked about

their situation as African Americans today, recalling the injustices and social problems that they faced, and the profound impact the increasing numbers of incarcerated black people had on their families. One of the questions they asked Margolles was very significant: Should this work exclusively focus on the status of women or could it also talk about their men? They explained that black men were the most stigmatized in American society, and thus the most vulnerable to daily injustices. This explains why most of the names in the work are those of men—they are the majority of the victims in the African American community.

The opportunity to work with Margolles was taken very seriously; at certain moments they engaged with passion, fury, and anger, yet their conversations demonstrated a sense of calm and sagacity. As they progressed, the textile gradually merged into a single powerful topic, four unique sections harmonizing into one single work of art. By recalling the injustices and the need to improve the rights of black people through this project, these artists were also expressing a desire to improve American society as a whole. From the beginning, while watching Margolles’s videos featuring embroiderers from other parts of the Americas working on stained fabrics, the Harlem group understood that this work was to leave their neighborhood and travel, carrying their voices around the world, joining with the other textiles to tell a collective story.

I’m not superstitious, but I should recall this anecdote. As we left Michelle Bishop’s apartment we noted a stylized logo with the letters E.G. in the elevator. We looked at each other and exclaimed, “Eric Garner!” In the entrance the same two letters reappeared on a large mosaic. We discovered later that the letters referred to the name of the building, Esplanade Gardens. But for me these letters demonstrated, like the shroud itself, the possibility of inscribing any name and recalled that the search for justice is a universal reality.