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AIR BUBBLES

Death in the Air:

Exploring Tension, Threat, and (In)visibility in Teresa Margolles' *En el Aire*

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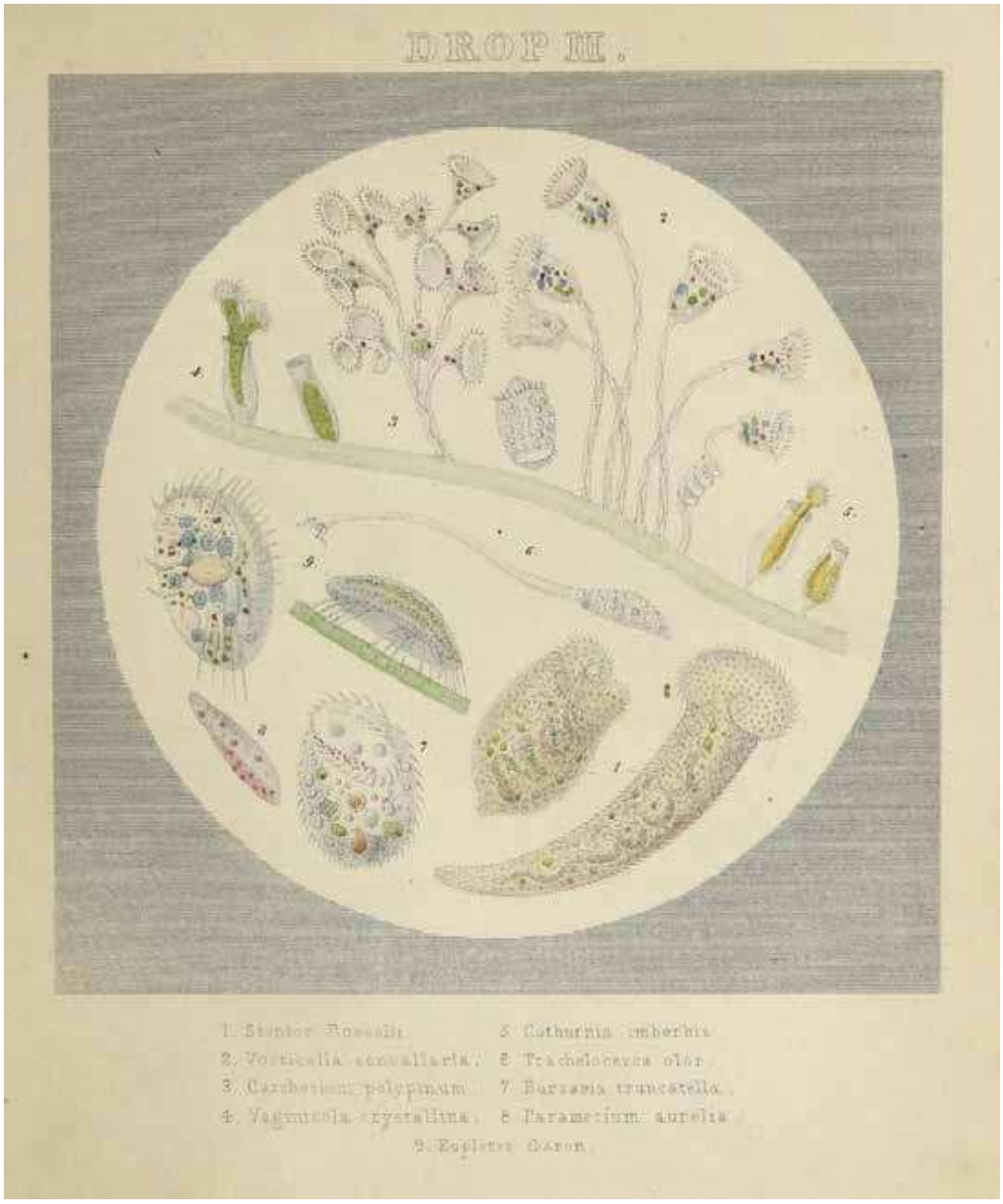

Agnes Catlow, "Drop II," *Drops of Water: Their Marvelous and Beautiful Inhabitants Displayed by the Microscope* (London: Reeve and Benham, 1851) Courtesy of University of Toronto Libraries and the Public Domain Review.

What is an air bubble? Perhaps, a mixture of soap, water and air; but we do not normally consider where a bubble's water comes from or what might be contained in a single droplet. Agnes Catlow's "Drop II" from her book *Drops of Water* exposes unseen organisms that are microscopically set in the enclosed bubble-like world. We forget that life flourishes in the places that we take for granted, or on such small scales, and this realization greets us with enchantment of marvelous worlds and the fear of the pathogenic and molecular unknown. In her essay "Death in the Air: Exploring tension, threat, and (in)visibility in Teresa Margolles' *En el aire*," Julia Banwell explores the darker-side of bubbles, in which the unseen, dead, and unknowable take life. Focusing on a contemporary Mexican artist's 2003 installation of bubbles floating in the air, Banwell uncovers the associated meanings behind the origin of Margolles' water, which formerly served to wash bodies in a morgue. Microcosms of beauty and violence, the bubbles drift around the room, allowing dead matter to come into contact with the viewer's living body. Rather than seeing bubbles or water as a simple, clean entity, Banwell demonstrates the power of unknown traces in reminding us that death and life are closely intertwined and together form an integral aspect of the elemental.

- The Editors

Death in the Air: Exploring Tension, Threat, and (In)visibility in Teresa Margolles' *En el aire*

Julia Banwell

The notion that air, which is so fundamental for our survival, may also be a bringer of death, is deeply threatening. At the beginning of this year, our attention turned to the air we breathe as double agent, simultaneously life-giver and plague vector. Within this context of a pandemic, art that deals in air and death takes on new resonance.

The Mexican neo-conceptual artist Teresa Margolles (b.1963) has devoted her career to the forensic examination of the aftermath of trauma. She has worked since the 1990s with the living and the dead, forging relationships that blur and transcend the boundaries between interior and exterior, presence and absence, death and life. The artist's actions and interventions are threads that connect dead and living bodies, and link disparate locations across the globe. Participants in her works, and viewers of them, are positioned as witnesses, present to the reality of death and post-mortem processes such as decay, dismemberment, and burial. All of her work is concerned with traces — that which is left behind following the death of the material body. By uncovering fragments and remains, she mines the relationship between violence and apparent absence, revealing the ways in which multiple forms of violence are enacted on the bodies of individuals and, by extension, the social body of the collective.

Working with the materia of bodily death and decay, Margolles' art has consistently employed visually confrontational tactics, unflinchingly showing the bodies of people who have died violently. She has worked directly with corpses, body parts, and also with substances such as blood and fat. *Lengua* (*Tongue*, 2000) is the pierced tongue of a young man who was killed in a street fight and is displayed with the permission of his next-of-kin. *Grumos sobre la piel* (*Lumps of Grease on the Skin*, 2001) is a short video in which the artist smears fat, collected from barrels used to boil bones prior to medical study, onto the skin of a living person who gave informed consent to the action. These and other Margolles works are not unproblematic; uneasy questions around the nuanced ethics of agency and power are posed. Nevertheless, the directness of the contact between the substances of death and the living body exposes the fragility and porousness of our own bodily boundaries — and of the boundary between life and death — and forces us to witness that which we would perhaps rather ignore.

The early part of Margolles' career was intensely (but not exclusively) focused on the morgue, and she coined the term "la vida del cadaver" ("the life of the corpse") as a descriptor of a secular life-after-death. Her use of the morgue as workshop invited us into this usually restricted space, where we saw exposed the fallacy of death-as-leveler. The artist revealed and confronted us with inequities in the way that corpses are handled and the forgetting which is done to the un-commemorated dead. She drew our attention to the dead who were unidentified, whose families could not afford to bury them, who had slipped through the cracks and been erased. In this way, Margolles highlighted unpalatable truths about the invisibility that disproportionately affects people who are poor and people in marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Over the past fifteen years or so, the loci within which the majority of Margolles' works are created have shifted from the enclosed space of the morgue into the public realm. We tend to think of our own body as private and essentially ours; bodily pollution by unseen particles poses a direct threat to this privacy. Inhalation of droplets, or absorption of fluid through the pores, are movements from exterior to interior that invade the sanctity of our insides. Dead matter becomes

dynamic, takes on a defiant kind of life that unsettles our consciousness of space and materiality. As artist-mourner, artist-activist, and forensic investigator, Margolles continues to trouble the boundaries between public and private — the living and the dead — by the inhabiting of and presence within and alongside corporeal spaces; the inter and the intra.

Employing a minimal aesthetic language that plays with awareness, visibility, and invisibility, the artist makes it impossible to regard her work from a safe distance. She calls on multiple senses, undermining the primacy of the visual in the gallery space. *Vaporización* (*Vaporization*, 2000) is a room filled with mist made using water that has washed bodies in the morgue. The mist touches skin; it is inhaled, incorporated. *127 cuerpos* (*127 Bodies*, 2006) consists of short sections of autopsy thread that are knotted together and suspended at waist height. The thread is bloodstained and emits a faint odor. *Sin título* (*Untitled*, 2006) uses smell and sound: a noise reminiscent of a gunshot occurs when drops of morgue water fall onto a hotplate, and a burning smell hangs in the air. The hotplate itself conjures mental images of an operating table, a morgue trolley, or equipment in an industrial kitchen.

In many of her works which use water that has washed bodies in the morgue (as well as other vectors, particularly air), these dissolved or suspended substances are brought into direct contact with the body of anyone who enters the exhibition space, carrying traces of the dead onto and into the living. The "waste" produced by postmortem dismemberment, disintegration, and decay is thus recycled, even resurrected, via the artist's transgressive collapsing of any notion we may have clung to that death and life are separate.

With *En el aire* (*In the Air*, 2003), soap bubbles float in the air and burst upon contact with skin. The gallery space is bright, high-ceilinged, and open. People move about it freely. The bubbles are visible; therefore, contact can be avoided, and the threat of contamination evaded by simply sidestepping them. In the gallery space, there is no wind to blow them, only the faint current produced by people moving sedately around the room. They seem harmless, pretty, playful. Bubbles may bring up memories of childhood — of blowing bubbles made from soapy water, competing with siblings and peers to see who could make the most or the largest, the most impressive of which would inspire awe as it floated and trembled to its inevitable bursting on the ground or on skin. The fragility of a bubble floating in a breeze, the beauty of the patterns in its flexing surface as the light hits it, the awareness of its death, contrast with the sense of its being contained, the wrapping of air inside it, the surface tension that maintains its shape. This tension makes the soap bubble as a microcosm both simple and compelling, a delicate miniature body without the ugly, slip-slide mess of organs and the leakiness of skin.

En el aire gives an aesthetically pleasing nod to vanitas while simultaneously transporting traces of matter — of bodily death — into an encounter with living, breathing individuals. The innocuousness of these bubbles reveals an inherent violence that uncomfortably exposes the impossibility of our separation from death. Unlike *Vaporización*'s cloying and inescapable mist, *En el aire*'s bubbles are not tiny, atomized particles that fill the entire space; rather, they are discrete and self-contained. This apparent separateness gives an illusory sense of safety. As gently as they appear, these bubbles still pose a threat, and this is not diminished for all their seeming pleasantness. Their beauty invites curiosity and touch, but they are still death in the air. If one of these bubbles should burst on the skin of the face or the tip of a finger, a residue would be left behind and absorbed into the pores. Threat and beauty are juxtaposed.

In looking at *En el aire* through the lens of the present, to what extent can we say that the balance between play and danger is shifted or upset by the intensity of the current threat of death in the air? Being faced with such a widespread, destabilizing presence (which at the time of writing shows no sign of definitive resolution) has brought air to the forefront of individual and collective consciousness. From the early days of lockdown — with the usual traffic disappeared and the air smelling so clean, our lungs granted a temporary reprieve from choking on exhaust fumes while we learned to fear the new threat to our bodies' vulnerable interiors — to the gradual re-emergence into shared public spaces with (or without) masks, we are all breathing less easily. Death feels closer, but the reality is that in the current moment it is demanding our attention in a more palpable sense, both visibly and invisibly asserting itself.

Julia Banwell is a Lecturer in Hispanic Studies at the University of Sheffield, UK. Her principal area of research focuses on encounters with death via its depiction and representation in photography and contemporary art.