

Tragically Original, Their Proposal Presented in the Exhibition: What People Do For Money

In 2016, Christian Jankowski, the Austrian artist, was in charge of curating the eleventh edition of the Manifesta biennial in the city of Zurich, Switzerland. Very much in line with his practice, which often inserts itself into a variety of social and cultural contexts to produce an unexpected narrative, Jankowski invited his colleagues to explore the network of relationships between social identity and economy, in terms of a map of professions in Zurich.

The title was deeply ironic: *What People Do for Money*. This was an exhibition that, even without a critical orientation, understood society as being made up of a series of ways to make a living. The weight of its argument did not rest on the metaphysics of vocation and calling, but rather on the generalized resignation that, under capitalism, there is no other choice but to earn a living that, from the outset, is already lost.

Teresa Margolles' presentation at that Manifesta was tragically original, as it stemmed from the most undesirable outcome an artistic process could have: the violent death of its main protagonist. Margolles had proposed an action titled *Poker of Ladies*, which was to consist of a dialogue on June 10, 2016, at the Rothaus Hotel in Zurich's red-light district, between Mexican transgender prostitutes (Jacqueline, Valeria, and Karla) from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and an Ecuadorian trans woman, Sonia Victoria, who lived and worked in Zurich. The dialogue could not take place because Karla—who on official documents went by the name Hilario Reyes Gallegos—was beaten to death on December 22, 2015, by a client. The crime forced a reversal of the original plan: Sonia Victoria traveled to Ciudad Juárez to meet with other transgender sex workers, Karla's friends—Valeria, Berenice, and Vivian—in the basement of the Hotel Bombín in Juárez, to pay tribute to her through a dialogue among male prostitutes. The account captured by Margolles' camera, told by Valeria and Vivian, is deeply graphic in illustrating the intertwining of pleasure and sexist violence, and of money and desire, in the high-risk life of the male prostitute:

Va: *And she's no longer here with us. And she had her ideas, her future, her will to live [...].*



Vi: It was simply that she came across a bad person, whether because of his desires or his sexual needs [...]. She liked sex, like many of us do. The truth is, it was the position she found herself in; honestly, she was in a situation where she was trying to have a relationship with someone—a damn opportunist who took advantage of his physical strength—and she wasn't going to be able to defend herself. Like she just said, there wasn't a mirror in front of her to see what was happening, okay?

So that's what happened to her, and what led her to that—not so much financial need.

Her family came, claimed the body, took it away, and the case was closed.

There was nothing, we couldn't do anything; we didn't even have a place to go and say goodbye.

The exceptional nature of the work lay in the rare combination it offered: the warmest sense of fraternity joined with the most terrible rawness. Particularly stark was the way these Latina prostitutes, living in Mexico and Switzerland, described the dialectic of their own enslavement. The way they spoke of the financial foundation of their existence was at once fully accepted and yet unbearable: an experience without redemption or illusion, appearing with the clarity of the most harrowing self-awareness:

And as long as you pay me, and treat me however you want to treat me, I'll give you the service. Because we give pleasure, a service—15, 20, an hour—it's a payment. One doesn't feel because you can't feel satisfaction when there is none. No, I know what I am, because I am Edgar Flavio Ramírez Carranza. Being a prostitute means getting with clients and doing what they want, and wherever your limits are, they'll go there too; but it also includes drinking, doing drugs, and ending up in a world you didn't ask for. We endure anything, until they spit on us, piss on us, and shit on us.

The endless violence that in recent years has engulfed border cities like Juárez and, to a lesser extent, much of the metropolises of Mexico and Latin America had been captured in the mirror, with violent traces of lipstick. Margolles' skill, her greatness, lies precisely in having created the circumstances for this silenced speech to become effective.

This is exactly what was expressed by Sonia Victoria Vera Bohórquez, the transgender woman and masseuse who wrote the introductory text for Margolles' work in the *Manifesta 11* catalogue.

Working with Teresa Margolles was a great honor. I hadn't realized what a great artist she was. Suddenly, she was there, talking with my sister, with my uncle. It was very surreal: I found her incredibly stimulating, because of the way she talks and thinks. She taught me to look at life from a different perspective. When we met, we talked about many personal things—some not exactly pleasant. Teresa has also gone through hard times. I think that's what has made her a great woman and a great artist. Of course, we talked about my work. Most people know nothing about us. "What do people do for money?" That phrase applies to my work more than to any other I can think of.

In her own voice, the transgender prostitute is presented as a paradigm of stark objectification, as the extreme point from which the entirety of economically coercive relationships can be observed, and also as the place from which the whole chain of exchanges becomes transparent. This is a way of seeing "from another perspective."