



A Philosophy of Disturbatory Feminist Art

Author

GEMMA ARGÜELLO MANRESA
PHD

Affiliation

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO

Abstract: In this paper, I show how contemporary feminist artists whose works concern femicides address three senses of the term ‘to disappear’. These works can be particularly disturbing, along the lines of Danto’s notion of disturbatory art, since these kinds of works use artistic means to unveil the social and subjective implications of gender crimes.

When something disappears it stops being visible, so it is either lost (and never found) or it just ceases to exist. However, when someone disappears in the first sense, the person does not simply go missing as if he or she has vanished off the face of the earth. Rather, when a person goes missing there is always someone else who is trying to find him or her, and even if the person is never found, there is always the hope that the person is alive, though in some unknown place. For that reason the status of a missing person is neither dead nor alive. When someone disappears in the second sense, the deceased person’s disappearance can usually be explained by reasons such as natural causes, accidents, or because the person was killed. Nevertheless, if to disappear means to stop being visible, then there is another sense of the term, that is, to be absent from certain kinds of representations that are used to give someone or something visibility, so when someone or something ceases to be visible in those representations, the person or thing passes out of sight. In this paper, I will show how contemporary feminist artists whose works concern femicides address all three senses of the term ‘to disappear’. These works can be particularly disturbing, along the lines of Danto’s notion

of disturbatory art, since these kinds of works use artistic means to unveil the social and subjective implications of gender crimes.

Arthur Danto used the term disturbatory art to describe a kind of art that is intended ‘to modify, through experiencing it, the mentality of those who experience it.’¹ And the ‘point and purpose’ of this kind of art ‘is to make vivid and objective our most frightening subjective thoughts.’² For Danto, we can find cases of disturbatory art in performance and feminist art because artistic means are used as vehicles to produce an effect in the viewers that can prompt moral and social change. Then, if disturbatory art uses artistic means to intentionally modify the viewer’s thoughts, it is intended to have a specific function that goes beyond the aesthetic and artistic fields. Danto’s description of disturbatory art shares features in common with participatory art, since participatory art also intends to produce certain effects in the viewers in order to change their points of view and, in some cases, affects the context in which they live. However, participatory art is not necessarily disturbing. Danto argues that his concept of disturbance ‘is derived from its natural English rhyme, where images have physical consequences—fantasies are transformed into orgasms and hence into feelings of release and peace (when not infected by guilt).’³ For that reason, when he discusses feminist art he argues that it is ‘funky, aggressive, confrontational, flagrant, shocking, daring, extreme and meant to be sensed as dangerous’ using ‘nudity, blood, menstrual fluids and the like almost magically, as if seeking to connect the artists with the earliest forms of artistic magic as practiced by shamans and wonder-workers and personages possessed by higher powers.’⁴ As long as disturbance for Danto leads to ‘feelings of release and peace’ using what is ‘ugly, disordered, distorted and offensive’, it seems that his definition is inspired by the psychoanalytic interpretation of the concept of catharsis, such as Julia Kristeva proposes in her analysis of the abject.⁵ However, Kristeva’s notion of the abject confronts the reality of our body wastes, the women’s fluids, repressed by the symbolic order, that are released, purified, through religion and the artistic experience, yet still keep their sense as something ‘dangerous.’⁶

In contrast, when Danto describes disturbance as a state that is ‘not infected by guilt’, it seems he distances his conception from psychoanalytic approaches like Kristeva’s that is based in both the construction of a sense of guilt and the subject’s unconscious processes of repression and sublimation. However, Danto’s definition lacks an explanation of how the catharsis, or transformation of the disturbatory into ‘feelings of release and peace’, is produced. If there is such a catharsis, it is necessary to explain which properties the ‘disturbatory’ requires in order to produce its particular effect on the viewer. It is also necessary to give the sufficient conditions for something to be disturbing, in contrast of something that it is horrific, threatening, dangerous, distressful, etc. And finally, if something disturbing produces catharsis, what makes that experience different from the experience of the tragic, the horror, the suspense, and so on? For that reason it is preferable to use a

minimal definition of disturbatory art. Danto alluded to this definition later, when he discussed the difference between the Abu Ghraib photographs of torture infringed by the US Army and C.I.A. personnel upon prisoners under their watch and Botero's painting series that appropriate those photos. Danto maintains that 'Botero's paintings establish a visceral sense of identification with the victims, whose suffering we are compelled to internalize and make vicariously our own.'⁷ By referencing Botero, he shares the idea that 'a painter can do things a photographer can't do, because a painter can make the invisible visible.'⁸ For Danto, Botero's paintings 'call up the feelings of a Baroque evocation of martyrdom' and in contrast with Picasso's *Guernica*, these paintings are not about an 'incidental horror of war' we should know in order to get its meaning, but they refer to a 'world event' that 'immerse us in the experience of suffering.'⁹ Danto's claim about which events deserve to be worldly and historically meaningful and which do not is clearly disputable. However, Danto's suggestion that something disturbatory in the arts 'makes the invisible visible' is worthy of notice. The disturbatory artwork is able to 'make the invisible visible' as long as it can extend its meaning beyond the mere report of an event in order to engage the viewers and let them feel something for the depicted victims' experiences.

Consequently, a disturbatory artwork refers to the suffering of the victims of violence. However, even if the horrors of war prevail as disturbatory art's main leitmotif, disturbatory art could include other forms of violence. If we don't constrain it to political violence, it could include other types of violence and experiences of affliction, trauma, suffering and pain. Then, the disturbatory artwork shows shocking situations that carry pain, violence, humiliation, injustice and torment of others or ourselves, and those situations offend our moral feelings and values, that means, they produce moral disgust and indignation. Moreover, if we follow Danto, disturbatory art is intended 'to modify the consciousness and even change the lives of its "viewers".'¹⁰ It thus seems that it is committed to producing certain reactions in the viewer that may lead to social, political or even moral change. If this is the case, disturbatory artworks show shocking situations that deserve to be addressed in order 'to modify the consciousness' or 'change the lives' of the audience. However, it is clearly disputable to assert that the artwork per se is able to modify the consciousness of anyone, but not that it can affect the audiences' mental states, by letting them entertain different beliefs, feel various emotions or even think about the context in which they live. Therefore, even if the disturbatory artwork cannot modify any consciousness, it is intended to produce certain effects that are elicited by the shocking situations shown by different artistic means. Those situations are the result of violations produced by the human agency, and as long as those situations are related to different experiences of suffering, the artwork shows them publicly, as if they deserve to be denounced.

However, the disturbatory artwork does not simply denounce and report a tragic event but, by ‘making the invisible visible’, it is able to engage the viewers in the experiences of suffering depicted instead of merely letting them know what happened. The disturbatory artwork shows shocking situations that elicit moral disgust and indignation to acts produced by the human agency in order to affect what the viewers think about the situation shown, as well as to move the viewer to empathize and sympathize with the points of views of the victims’ experiences. The way the artwork shows those points of view depends on how much the artists are involved in the situation shown. For this reason, I next distinguish two kinds of disturbatory artworks:

(1) Artworks that show the pain, violence, humiliation, injustice and torment that people have suffered as a result of specific social, moral and political conditions that the artist has not suffered directly.

(2) Artworks that show the pain, violence, humiliation, injustice and torment that people have suffered as a result of specific social, moral and political conditions that the artist has suffered directly as an individual or as member of a community that has been affected.

Botero’s paintings are an example of (1), as are Joan Fontcuberta’s *Google-grames*, a series of photomosaics he created using a program that selected information from the Google web search engine according to criteria established by the user. For example, for the Abu Ghraib photomosaic *Googlegram 05* (2005) ‘the search engine was given the names of top officials, civilian contractors and enlisted soldiers cited in the “Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review DoD detention Operations” (August 2004) of the Schlesinger Panel, set up by the United States Congress to investigate the alleged abuses.’¹¹

Many feminist artworks are an example of (2), because feminist artists are committed to challenge and expose the conditions they suffer as females, individually and collectively. In this regard, many feminist artists have shown how women have been absent or how different dimensions of being a woman have disappeared from the symbolic representations in the media and the arts. And recently, disturbatory feminist art shows the commitment artists have for denouncing violence against females, specifically femicides, by using different artistic means.¹²

Femicides are not publicly recognised as gender crimes in many countries, and few admit that they are produced by the social structures and the institutions that have not taken the necessary measures to stop them and to prosecute the killers. For that reason, artists have been committed to show that femicides are gender-based hate crimes committed against females, and they have used different artistic means in order to show how these crimes should produce moral disgust and indignation in the audiences because they are violent, they are not publicly recognised nor prosecuted and they produce too much pain and suffering to the victims and their families. Specifically, Mexican and Latin American artists have played an important role in addressing femicides through performances, public interventions, photography,

installations, dance, theater and painting. They have shown publicly how females are disappearing as a result of the neglect of their subjectivity and autonomy, the obliteration of their bodies, and the silencing of their voices by the killers and the authorities, and, in consequence, the impossibility of giving the testimony about their own suffering. For example, the Mexican artist Lorena Wolffer has done different performances and art interventions in public spaces in order to denounce the violence against females in Mexico, the Mexican government's corruption and the remaining impunity for the perpetrators of femicides. For the performance *Mientras dormíamos (El paso Juarez)* (While we were sleeping (The case of Juarez), 2002, 2003, 2004), Wolffer describes her action as follows:

Based on police reports, I used my body as a symbolic map to document and narrate violence in fifty registered cases. Presented in a morgue-like atmosphere, the work consisted in reproducing on my own body with a surgical pen every beat, cut and gunshot those women suffered. In this way my body changed into a representation vehicle of the violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, that nowadays seems institutionalized.¹³

During the performance, people heard descriptions of the tortures suffered by the women in each case. At the end, Wolffer's entire body had the marks of the femicides. Another artist that has addressed femicides is the Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo. Galindo's work is motivated by the brutality of the massacres produced during the Guatemalan Civil War, the violence and normalised fear experienced by people living in Guatemala, the death of females and other topics regarding violence against females. In the performance *Perra* ('Bitch', 2005) at the Promote Gallery di Ida Pisani in Milano, Galindo carved the word 'perra' ('bitch') into her right leg with a knife. In this performance, she wanted to denounce femicides in Guatemala where the females' bodies are tortured and marked with knives or razors. With these performances Wolffer and Galindo not only make visible hundreds of females, otherwise invisible in the media, who have been assassinated or have completely disappeared in Mexico and Guatemala, but they also establish a performance-testimony for those silenced females, leaving audiences to infer how much those females suffered, as well as to sympathize with their suffering.

Finally, in contrast to Danto, who argues that photography cannot be used as a means to 'make the invisible visible', artists like the Mexicans Mayra Martell and Maya Goded have used photography to demonstrate how those who go missing can rather be represented as meaningful absences, as a presence that is derived from the objects kept by her families and the representation of their suffering. Their photographs show the pain of the families whose daughters, sisters, cousins, nieces and granddaughters have disappeared, without leaving any trace of where they have gone, where their

bodies were disposed of, if they are dead or who took their bodies away. But they also show how those females are still present in the memory of those who are still looking for them. In the series *Ensayo sobre la Identidad* (Identity Essay) (2005-2011), Mayra Martell took photos of the way people keep alive their memories of their female relatives disappeared in Ciudad Juárez. In her statement about this series she sustains that her 'primary intention was to validate the disappearance of woman, not to validate numbers', and she 'wanted to see their rooms almost as an intuitive movement, as a past necessity'.¹⁴ Martell's photographs show how families keep intact the rooms of their disappeared female family members, treasure family albums, still display their clothes over the bed as if they still lived there and hang religious images with photos of the disappeared females, which show that the families' hopes and faith are still intact. One photograph captures the missing woman's portrait with the label 'desaparecida' ('disappeared'), her name and the date of her disappearance hanging underneath another portrait of the same woman without any labels, which represents the tension families endure to keep memories of their loved ones alive and the suffering the constant reminder that they are still missing, meanwhile as any family they try to go on with their lives.

For the series *Desaparecidas* (Disappeared Women) (2006) Maya Goded took in Ciudad Juárez a series of photographs in which she depicted a mother crying sitting next to the portrait of her missing daughter, a family seated in the living room as if they were waiting, the desert where many female bodies have been found, the pink crosses put in the desert that have been used as public symbols that commemorate the victims, an image of a street graffiti saying 'te esperamos' ('we are waiting for you'), a photo that depicts portraits of a lost female displayed on the wall of her family home, among other situations that represent the absence. Since 2015, Goded has complemented that series with two video installations about girls who live in violent neighbourhoods that are sisters or daughters of missing females. Both Maya Goded and Mayra Martell sacrifice the supposed realism that photojournalism intends to achieve. In their photographs, they rather show how the disappearance of a female causes damages that go beyond being 'neither dead nor alive' since those females have social and group affiliations and affinities that shape their existence (even just as a memory) and give their absence greater meaning. Those women who have disappeared, those who might have been murdered but their bodies have yet to be found, and those women whose bodies have been found but whose suffering was completely silenced are portrayed in these series through their absence. Contrary to photography that usually depicts violent situations or that intends to show the massacres as if they were eyewitness reports (like war-photography, social documentary photography or yellow journalism), the absence of the females in the situations portrayed entails their existence as females with a name, a history, a family, with certain racial features and members of a socio-economic class, most of them being

poor. These photographs do not show the photographed subject, because the female cannot be depicted, she is disappeared from the representation. Since they do merely show portraits hanging on a wall, beds, a landscape or a woman crying, these photographs are appreciated as long as it is impossible to take the photograph of the subject. Her existence is derived from the way the photographers capture the different objects the female possessed, her mother's face, the place where her body might be or found, and photographs of her portraits taken to emphasize her absence showing the value portraits have as a testimony of their existence for the female's families and the society. These photographs do not merely show 'what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously'.¹⁵ And the role memory plays in these images goes beyond the fact that 'remembering is an ethical fact' that let us have a greater understanding of life and death.¹⁶ The absences portrayed in these photographs let us also recognise how the invisible can be visible by inferring from the objects depicted the importance the presence of someone has for the other, and the suffering anyone can feel if someone close to her disappears.

These artworks are disturbing as long as they let the audience take the victim's and her family's point of view. However, because they are disturbing, they arouse moral disgust, an emotion that, according to Martha Nussbaum, is directed to ourselves in virtue of our revulsion to different objects that may contaminate us and remind us of our mortality and animality.¹⁷ However, contra Nussbaum who considers that it is an 'anti-social' emotion directed toward ourselves that prevents us from deciding whether an issue is morally problematic, the moral disgust prompted by these artworks goes the other way around, as an emotion aroused by a morally problematic situation we recognise that both reminds us of our own mortality and contaminates our social context. In this way, disturbing feminist art focused on femicides, on violence against females, elicits moral disgust not just because the artistic vehicle in some cases can be disgusting, but because they show that what has been done with the female's bodies is morally disgusting and the situation is contaminating many spheres of the social life.

For the same reason disturbing artworks can also arouse sympathy. In contrast to photographs that depict in the media the harm and suffering of the other, the sympathy we are able to feel about the situations represented in disturbing art is not morally problematic, as Susan Sontag argued. For Sontag, photographs depicting suffering, specially photojournalism, can elicit either 'emotional anaesthesia' (due to the repetitive exposure to these kinds of images) or sympathy. And sympathy for her is an 'impertinent' emotion, because it is a response due to the fact that we can feel safe from the harm done to the other and we are not responsible for the situations depicted, although it is possible to think about the other's situation as if there is a causal relation between my well-being and the other's suffering.¹⁸ However, the sympathy we can feel for the victims and her families in the disturbing

art examples given is not prompted by a recognition of either our own safety or the relation our wealth may have with the other's misery or suffering. Since these artworks do not merely report an event, by showing the testimony of the experience of the other they unveil the social, political, subjective and bodily dimensions of the situations depicted, because they show how femicides are gender crimes that contaminate and affect directly the people living in those social contexts, and also how they may affect anyone as long as any female can disappear in the three senses given. Then, feeling for the other sympathy by disturbatory artistic means makes possible a recognition of the other's vulnerability as well as our own.

Finally, disturbatory artworks that address femicides are able to elicit indignation on the audience, as a moral emotion that 'concerns harm or damage' infringed upon females.¹⁹ As moral disgust, indignation can have a moral (and political) effect: 'to upset and unsettle comfortable attitudes and conceptual frameworks'.²⁰

Hanna Arendt pointed out that 'the most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences, namely, the experience of great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all.'²¹ These artists are able to transform 'the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance' into something that actually can be shown, can appear, through the artwork, since it is capable of 'making visible the invisible' and shape materially our most shocking individual and collective experiences.²² The use of artistic means in order to show publicly female's disappearances is a chance to expose indirectly the voices of those females who were killed and silenced by social and institutional contexts in which neither their deaths, pains, and even lives were ever recognised, let alone the risks and fear all women in those contexts endure.

gemma.arguellom@gmail.com

NOTES

1. Danto 1990, 299.
2. Danto 2006, see URLs.
3. Danto 1990, 300.
4. Ibid.
5. Idem, 301.
6. Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilineal character. It takes on the form of the exclusion of substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up. Abjection persists as

exclusion or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more 'secondary' forms such as transgression (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness—but always nameable, always totalisable. The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of reli-

- gion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity' Kristeva 1982, 17).
7. Danto, 2006, see URLs.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Ibid.
 10. Danto 1990, 299.
 11. Fontcuberta 2005, 68.
 12. According to Diana Russell, a femicide is 'the killing of females by males because they are females' (Russell 2011, see URLs). In addition, Marcela Lagarde considers femicides as the result of 'the silence, omission, negligence, as well as the partial or total collusion of authorities responsible for the prevention and elimination of these crimes' (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2008, 216).
 13. 'A partir de reportes policíacos, utilicé mi cuerpo como un mapa simbólico para documentar y narrar la violencia en cincuenta de los casos registrados. En un ambiente de morgue, la pieza consistía en reproducir en mi propio cuerpo, con un plumón quirúrgico, cada uno de los golpes, cortadas y balazos que dichas mujeres sufrieron. De esta forma, mi cuerpo se transformaba en un vehículo de representación de la violencia hacia las mujeres en Ciudad Juárez, hoy aparentemente institucionalizada.' Wolffer, see URLs.
 14. 'Mi primer intención era validar la desaparición de mujeres, no de cifras; quería ver las recámaras casi como un movimiento intuitivo, como una necesidad pasada'. See URLs.
 15. Sontag 2003, 89.
 16. Sontag 2003, 90.
 17. Nussbaum 2004.
 18. 'The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.' Sontag 2003, 80).
 19. Nussbaum 2004, 102.
 20. Korsmeyer 2011, 97.
 21. Arendt 1998, 50-51.
 22. Arendt 1998, 51.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, Hanna. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Danto, Arthur. 1990. Chapter Bad Aesthetic Times of *Encounters & Reflections*. *Art in the Historical Present*. California: University of California Press. 297–312.
- Fontcuberta, Joan. 2005. "Archive Noise." *Photoworks*, vol. 4.
- Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2011. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela. 2008. "Antropología, feminismo y política: Violencia feminicida y derechos humanos de las mujeres." In *Retos teóricos y nuevas prácticas*, edited by Margaret Louise Bullen and Maria Carmen Díez Mintegui, 210–239. Spain: Ankulegi.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2004. *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.

URLS

- Danto, Arthur. "The Body in Pain." *The Nation*, Nov. 9, 2006: <http://www.thenation.com/article/body-pain/>
- Mayra Martell <http://www.mayramartell.com/ensayo.php> (Accessed May 20, 2015.)
- Russell, Diana. 2011. "The Origin and Importance of the Term Femicide." http://www.dianarussell.com/origin_of_femicide.html (Accessed January 15, 2015.)
- Wolffer: http://www.lorenawolffer.net/01obra/11md/md_frames.html (Accessed May 20, 2015.)