Santiago Sierra

Teresa Margolles
Santiago Sierra’s work generates vitriol and enthusiasm in equal amounts. Known for his controversial installations in which hired laborers perform useless tasks in white-cube spaces—masturbate, crouch in cardboard boxes, have their hair dyed blond, sit for tattoos, hold up a heavy block of wood—Sierra aims to unmask the power relations that keep workers invisible under capitalism. He increasingly relies on techniques of obstruction and concealment, creating a variety of artificial barriers that point to real, if often unremarked, accessibility issues: immigrants’ persistent and imprisoning poverty; laborers’ disconnection from the work they do and from the product that is its ultimate result; everyone’s complicity in preserving the structures that keep classes and peoples separate. In 2000 he paid a man to live hidden behind a brick wall for 15 days, discovering in the process the heightened interest piqued by literal invisibility. In 2002 he celebrated the Lisson Gallery’s new space by blocking the entrance with a wall of corrugated metal, thoroughly offending opening-night visitors. His project for this summer’s Venice Biennale, for which he covered the word “España” on the Spanish Pavilion’s facade with black plastic and sealed the building’s entrance with cinderblocks, caused a similar outrage. Visitors who walked around to the back door and showed Spanish passports to the uniformed guards were allowed to enter, but all they found in the pavilion were scattered remnants from the previous year’s installation.

Teresa Margolles shares Sierra’s preoccupation with the working class, but her work focuses on violence in Mexico City and often takes the form of human body parts or bodily materials scavenged from morgues. Often unclaimed victims of crime and poverty, Margolles’s “subjects” are posthumously persuasive about the desperation of their lives and, in pieces that involve walls of smeared fat and foggy rooms of evaporated water used to wash corpses, a bittersweet triumph of spirit.

Sierra and Margolles, arguably the two most controversial artists working in Mexico today, sat down in Madrid this fall to discuss dignity, fear, censorship and national boundaries.

—THE EDITORS
teresa margolles What did you think of the Venice Biennale?
santiago sierra When you participate in something like that, you don't have much time to look around.

tm What about your piece, thought the empty Spanish pavilion blocked off to anyone who couldn't present a Spanish passport?
ss In the context of the biennal we are all playing at national pride, and I wanted to reveal that as the principal system of every pavilion. I had fun covering the word “España” on the facade of the building. In other situations I can play a bit with themes, but the biennal piece was already marked: it had to talk about the concept of the nation, of the representation of Spain, about the significance of those pavilions—because you can't forget that the countries that participate in the Bienale are the most powerful ones in the world. I mean, there's no pavilion for Ethiopia. So the theme was already a given. People have received it very well, although the Spanish press took it as a provocation, when it was simply a reflection.

tm Why was the pavilion empty?
ss A nation is actually nothing; countries don't exist. When astronauts went into space they did not see a line between France and Spain; France is not painted pink and Spain blue. They are political constructions, and what's inside a construction? Whatever you want to put there. And in fact the pavilion wasn't empty: there were leftovers there from previous shows. It was an act of respect to the history of the place. But the work was also the people who were passing by it. The piece was not the empty space but rather the situation.

tm Did the fact that people couldn't enter without a passport cause problems?
ss The only problems were caused by the ambassador, who wanted to enter without documentation, but I had told the guards that their salaries depended on him, so contrary to my will and that of the patrons, he got in. In the art world you always work for the powers that be: banks, governments and so on. Who else can pay for an expositon in a museum? You have to be conscious that we all work for a machine. Even if we're waiters we feed the machine of capital. Besides, what is truly important is not where one can enter but rather the act of leaving determined places, such as countries or jails. The piece was a game because you deprive an international artistic community of the right to access a place. It was taken as a joke.

tm Are your pieces intended to be chronicles of reality or society?
ss I try to do things that are the most natural in the world. At the moment I do the work of an interior decorator or an organizer of exclusive events for the cultural elite. What I do is refuse to deny the principles that underlie the creation of an object of luxury: from the watchman who sits next to a Monet for eight hours a day, to the doorman who controls who comes in, to the source of the funds used to buy the collection. I try to include all this, and therein lies the little commotion about remuneration that my pieces have caused.

tm What is the work like that you've done here in Madrid?
ss Lately I've done some pieces that have surprised me. I hid a hundred unemployed people in one street: in vacant apartments, empty commercial spaces, warehouses. Nobody saw any of this, because neither the people nor the places have any visibility. When you hide something instead of teaching or revealing it, you provoke a response in the imagination of the spectator. For instance, the museum watchman I paid to live for 365 hours behind a wall at PS1 in New York told me that no one had ever been so interested in him and that he had never met so many people. I realized that hiding something is a very effective working technique. The forgotten people want to communicate—something that you also express in your work.

tm Yes. The first piece I did on my own is a good example. I had been thinking about the branding of a bull, the desperation of the bull in the ring once his horns have been destroyed, his body punctured and urinated on. I wanted to put all that desperation on the table. There was no money to do it, which limited me, but then I found a boy in the morgue, a murder victim who was marked in exactly the same way as a defeated bull. I wanted to display his pierced, fucked-up tongue: he had been a punk singer. I had to go talk to the family, but they helped me because we understood each other. I work with emotion, not reason. So the piece is the tongue itself. It has an initial impact of shock, but what's important is that after death the tongue keeps talking, even in different languages. It keeps reminding me: Death is not pretty, and it sucks to be dead. I've stayed with it; I keep working with it, changing around the same piece.
ss What led you to work with death? How do you approach it?

tm I approach death like everyone does, as a loss. I wanted to be an artist, but I didn’t know what to do, so I tried to write a poem, but poems just weren’t coming out of me. That’s how I wound up doing art. In the ’80s a bunch of us sold books outside the university to earn money, and we got to know each other. We were musicians, theater people, artists. We decided to do performances about death and violence and to call ourselves SEMERO, which stands for Servicio Medico Forense [Forensic Medical Service]. The performances were very theatrical, and there was no codification of language. Everyone said what they wanted to say. It was an explosion for the ears, eyes, mind, stomach. But we didn’t really know what we were doing. Then I went to England and happened to see Beuys’s work, and when I saw that I almost fainted. I felt like vomiting and leaving. I said to myself, Would you dare to do something like this? Would you have the balls to do it? The power of art scares me so much. I realized that I didn’t know how to talk about human loss, human pain. I thought my own pain was the most important, but then I discovered that there is a collective pain. I am frightened by death, by what’s happening in the world. I am scared of the twin towers falling, I’m scared of war. It really scares me to work in the morgue because the people there know what pain is. Although I must say that working with live people is much harder than working with dead people, and even more painful. I learned that when I was working with you.

ss Well, I have been called an exploiter. At the Kunstwerke in Berlin they criticized me because I had people sitting for four hours a day, but they didn’t realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a day on his feet. You want to stick your finger in the wound and say that the work is definitely torture, that it is indeed a punishment of biblical proportions. And when you put your name on the work it seems that you’re held responsible for the capitalist system itself. Many of the people who make those criticisms have never worked in their lives; if they think it’s a horror to sit hidden in a cardboard box for four hours, they don’t know what work is. Also, if I compensated these people more, they’d be talking about how “good” I am. But if I find someone who does something that’s hard for 50 euros and it usually costs 200, I use the person who does it for 50. And of course extreme labor relations shed much more light on how the labor system actually works. A yuppie is also a servant of capital and he also has a price, but he’s sweetened by a certain glamour and is thus not useful in terms of what interests me.

If I thought about how to give real visibility to these people, I wouldn’t have chosen the art world as a platform to do it, but rather a determined political activism—but I don’t trust that either. Let’s say that I do things because I think they should be included in the art world, but I don’t have grandiose dreams that I’ll actually achieve anyone’s redemption, because that’s absurd. When you sell a photograph for $11,000 you can’t possibly redeem anyone except yourself.

tm Your work has also been called amoral.

ss It’s possible to have dignity in society, but it costs money. A person without money has no dignity. Whenever you pay for your dignity, you put your body and your time in the hands of a third party. By saying these few things in my work, I think that, as an artist, I’ve achieved enough. In any case, I don’t see a connection between politics and morality or between art and morality. A banker who buys one of my pieces is like a newspaper that accepts letters to the editor. Self-criticism makes you feel morally superior, and I give high society and high culture the mechanisms to unload their morality and their guilt.

tm Do you think the only viable anarchism
is neoliberalism?

ss I think that happiness is not possible and unhappiness is. The rich man is in a state of tremendous slavery to money. His level of suffering is very much reduced, but it's slavery like any other form of it.

tm I remember when I was in Barcelona helping you install your show, and I bought chemically altered Ecstasy from a dealer in the Plaza Mayor that nearly killed me. Afterward, I went to help you at the unemployment place where you were hiring people for your next show, and there was the boy who had sold me the drug. I told him what he had done to me, and he said, "Forgive me," and he thought I was going to demand my money back, but no one does that around here. Later we went back to the plaza where he deals and I sat him down and explained that I am an artist, and I showed him my work. He started to get scared and said, "What are you going to do to me?" I told him I needed someone to shoot the video and take the pictures for my next show, which was in Cerda; I was going to smear body fat from a corpse on the floor of the gallery. Normally I do the documentation myself, but in this piece I'm busy smearing the stuff. When we got there and I started to smear it, it was like a caress. I was mad at the dealer, and I was still feeling bad, but when I started smearing the fat I wasn't angry anymore. Later I figured out the piece: My misery is your misery. That's what it was all about. We don't level ourselves through purifying ourselves but rather through sharing our misery.

ss Negativity is the only coherent reaction one can have in a society where the battle's already lost. I re-create those battles, which is sometimes more dangerous than poetic. I've been focusing on how a worker sells his body, and I also look at what happens when he's not working—where he's going to stop all that negativity. I think that negativity is an expression of how the class struggle takes us in a determined direction and how the art world functions, and the real world as well. I think that is what's behind Pollock's drips and what's behind a person who's inside a trash can.

tm In one of your most lyrical pieces, you walked around Dublin raising the windshield wipers on every car.

ss I had to do that piece during a rugby game, because if they caught me they'd bust my head. And no one caught me, because they were so predictable: Ireland and England were playing, so there was no possibility that anyone would see me on the street. The photos look very good, but you can feel the impact of real life that we see constantly. Photography serves as a kind of transmission system between information and the necessities of the marketplace.

tm Is leisure time a small paradise in our industrial society?

ss I think it's part of industry. Going out on the weekends is part of industry because industry needs the worker to be preparing to go to work on Monday. What interests me is when there are ruptures, when the worker loses it and expresses his negativity, in a plastic way, that is, normally. The hordes of hooligans that pervade Europe do it within determined structures—the structure of rock and roll, the structure of soccer—in which rebellion is centralized but from which all of a sudden things escape that have a link with
The Expressionists, the Dadaists and the Situationists tried to draw that out. That point of destruction is useful for capital, because with this controlled violence the people recharge themselves. It's better to punch the wall than your boss. In the end, it's not a heroic or liberating or creative act—in the same way that war regenerates capital and benefits capital, even though it's another process.

Have you suffered censorship?

I don't talk about censorship, because I think that when you launch a work it functions in many ways, and one of those is that society blocks it. So I don't consider a censored work as failed. I think that artists who work to have their installations or their photos prohibited, and then cause a ruckus in the newspapers claiming censorship, are pathetic. If you do that, you give up your freedom of expression, because the work is determined by the censors. I do not allow concerns about censorship to undermine my creative freedom.

Have you deceived a lot of people?

Quite a few. Many times, you can't give all the information about a piece, and no one asks you to. If you did, you could jeopardize the realization of the work. It's a necessary mechanism, a survival trick. It enters into the realm of seduction as well.

Why do you turn to minimalism as an aesthetic solution?

There are two reasons: it helps me avoid distraction and residual motives, and it's related to the development of the merchandise—merchandise is cheaper and easier to transport if it's cubic.

The Biennale catalogue talks about the importance of "obstruction" in your work. What does that refer to?

It has to do with impeding access, or separating two communities. There are determined forces that, in order to create order, generate...
Santiago Sierra, 133 personas remuneradas para ser teñidas de rubio (133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blond), 2001. Installation view, Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich.

borders, and this has to do with visuality. Society administers images, and it marks the path of what is visible and what is not. Therefore, the obstructions that I create delimit things that can be done and things that cannot be done. The art spectator can access any site. He lives in a privileged world. It's very strange to be denied entrance to an image, and I insert these wedges that put him on the other side.

tm To generate empathy?
ss To get people worked up.

tm Do you think the obstructions of reality develop from a generalized fear?
ss The visual order of politics becomes concrete on the wall.

stm What is the worst evil of society? You talk about racism, drugs, prostitution—
ss The worst evil of society is its broken promises. That’s why I choose these themes. Equality and sexual liberation are a catalog of promises of a liberation that has been taken away from us. What damages society is its structure: everyone works for the production of capital. The problem is not what you shoot into your veins, but what society you do it in.

tm Do we live in a camouflaged medieval society?
ss Completely. Nothing has changed since the Middle Ages. As the philosopher Agustín García Calvo said, "Things change their names in order to keep quiet." It’s a way of taking words away from us in order to impede any kind of analysis. And the new terms are usually very well received, because they’re refreshing and they make us forget old theories.

stm What about on an artistic level?
ss It’s very difficult to create national art. It’s not like before, when art had to do with small organizations of power, like the academy, or the café where people met. Right now none of us is working on a national level. We work with people who live five thousand kilometers away, and seeing art in national terms is just inviting ridicule. It’s something that is still useful as a form of propaganda for governments, but I don’t consider it to be useful myself.

In terms of artistic creation in Spain, I don’t follow it that way. If I see something that interests me, I find out where the artist is from.

stm Do you think that current art tries to make a star out of the creator?
ss Art is conceptual entertainment. Regardless of how radical it is, it has a great penetration on the market.

stm What does Mexico bring to your work?
ss You don’t know why you go—there are many reasons and there are none. Maybe the place you go to is not as important as the place you leave. I was fed up with being where I was, and Mexico is a catalog of situations. It’s a miniature planet Earth. You can pass from Ethiopia to Switzerland in a second by taking the bus—that’s what Mexico brings you. I don’t have to take long trips to see how everything functions. ☺

Translated from Spanish by Kerry Hegarty