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A key methodological aspect of understanding the relationship between politics and art – including how political phenomena impact the type of art that is produced and vice versa – entails engaging in an analysis of, and particularly a *description* of, artworks or artistic practices and the milieu in which they are created and circulated. Given that artworks themselves often describe the world – that is they represent, draw, report, portray, and account for it – theorizing the relationship between politics and art entails thinking about description both as an **object of analysis** and as a **research method**. The former entails analyzing how artists and other members of the artistic field, through their work, describe the world (i.e. the kind of describing that artworks do and to what effect). The latter, in turn, focuses on how description works both as a method of research and analysis in the social sciences.

Even as describing often involves practices which, like copying and translating, tend – erroneously in my view – to be associated with lack of originality and novelty, description is neither neutral nor passive, nor does it simply entail transcribing or re-enacting the given. Instead, description is constitutive of reality because, as poet Mark Doty maintains, "our knowledge of the sensory world is nothing fixed, but a continuing reappraisal, a set of processes that figure and refigure the world."[1] In the words of the editors of the 2016 special issue of *Representations* dedicated to "Descriptions across the Disciplines," "the practice of description provides the material that gives future scholars, the opportunity to engage differently with their objects."[2] Both takes on description – as an object of analysis and as method – are evidently tied, which is why **taking description as a research method seriously, entails taking art as an object of analysis seriously**. In other words, if we agree that describing is a worthy form of research because it is much more than a mere mimetic act, then we need to acknowledge the importance of studying the work of artists (and of other members of the artworld) as work that not simply reflects reality but also helps create it and which, therefore, has important implications for politics.

In what follows, I provide a brief glimpse of my research, which includes a descriptive vignette, followed by the theoretical argument that **making visible through description different aspects of artistic objects and practices can help account for what these do politically**. I am still working on this argument and trying to clarify it. I wonder if in making this argument I am inevitably claiming that describing art can help us answer why and how questions (rather than simply what questions) and make causal arguments. I welcome discussion on these points and any input you guys may have. Thanks in advance!

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A large maroon flag hung on an outer wall of the Palazzo Rota-Ivancich, the sixteenth-century Venetian palace which housed the Mexican Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale. The flag fluttered over gondoliers and picture-snapping tourists who were, most likely, oblivious to the fact that the flag was made of fabric soaked in blood collected from execution sites in Mexico. *Bandera* ("Flag") was a piece by Teresa Margolles, the artist invited to represent Mexico at this, the most prestigious art event in the world. Margolles is known for exposing and exploring the effects of violence by using body parts, fluids, fat, and blood, as well as materials amassed from sites where violent incidents have occurred. Other works in the show included *Ajuste de Cuentas* ("Account Settling," jewelry encrusted with fragments of windshield glass collected after a shooting), *Sonidos de la Muerte* ("Sounds of the Dead," a series of recordings of the voices of witnesses gathered from a site where cadavers had been found), and *Limpieza* ("Cleansing," a performance which consisted of a Mexican janitor, who had lost family members to the violence, mopping the floors and windows of the Palazzo using water mixed with the blood of other victims).

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[1] Quoted in Sharon Marcus, et al. "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 10.

[2] Ibid p.4.

While earlier in her career Margolles – who is certified as a forensic scientist – collected the material for her literally visceral pieces from morgues, by the time the Biennale opened in May 2009, the artist claimed she could just as easily gather all that she needed on Mexico's ever-more-violent streets. This was perhaps a provocation, but it was not an exaggeration. The bloodshed unleashed by the so-called "War on Drugs" launched by president Felipe Calderón in December 2006 was ubiquitous, including murders, disappearances, human trafficking, forced displacement, and torture, and spanned the country and its public conversations. In the three years between its inception and the Biennale it had claimed the lives of over eight thousand people marking Mexico as one of the most violent countries in the world. But despite the dramatic increase in violence, Mexico was praised widely for being a newly democratic regime. A decade before the Biennale took place, the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico for over seventy years, had finally lost the presidential elections to the conservative National Action Party (PAN). This was one more step in a sequence of political changes which radically modified the way the whole state apparatus works. The shift to formal electoral democracy constrained the president's power and introduced plurality to Congress, which became constituted by members of multiple parties who freely and fairly competed for votes and pushed different agendas. New institutions meant to facilitate public access to electoral oversight and more transparency in general were also created, including the much-lauded National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information and Personal Data Protection (INAI).

Far from alluding to the country's democratic turn, however, the title of the Mexican Pavilion in Venice, *What else could we talk about?*, was, instead, a comment on the country's sanguinary status quo. The curator of the show, renowned art historian Cuauhtémoc Medina, explained that the exhibit "encloses a visceral reaction to the expectation of the Mexican elites that for the sake of the national image or to safeguard the illusions of tourism, we should maintain a contrite silence about the indiscretion of a society bent on slaughter in such a noisy, immoderate, and public fashion. They wish."[3] But while the exhibit certainly visibilized the violence plaguing Mexico and hinted at the complicity of the state and national elites, and despite Medina's rejection of the use of art to promote an illusory image of the country, the Mexican Pavilion also helped boost the country's reputation as a mecca for daring contemporary art, and a place where the global art world, art market, and art elite were more than welcome. Despite its loosely anti-state message, the Mexican Pavilion was partly funded by state institutions. Given the content of the works, however, some state institutions ended up withdrawing their support shortly before the event took place.[4] In turn, a number of private institutions stepped in to fund the show, including those owned by millionaires whose wealth in recent years had grown in importance and magnitude. This pointed to the rising inequality that scholars have, in large part, attributed to the market reforms first implemented in the late 1980s that mark the country's neoliberal turn, which predates its transition to electoral democracy.

Margolles' work itself could not have been more different from the art that was associated with the Mexican nation throughout the twentieth century prior to the country's twin democratic and neoliberal transformation. Unlike the iconic, realist murals of artists like Diego Rivera that graced the walls of public buildings and the pages of school textbooks, which relayed the country's history in linear and optimistic ways and portrayed national heroes to a lay public, Margolles'

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3 Medina, Cuauhtémoc. 2009. *Teresa Margolles: What else could we talk about?* Barcelona and Mexico City: RM: 29.

4 Pastor Mellado, Justo. 2010. "Teresa Margolles and the boundaries of the artistic intuition." *ArtNexus* 77: 55.

installations present no clear narratives or hopeful accounts of the Mexican nation or its people. Rather than calling people together into a common national project and refusing to engage in top-down nation-building or exalting national symbols, Margolles instead critiques and mocks the state and the nation and uses her work to convey feelings of anger, anxiety, disgust, and disenchantment, including with electoral democracy. But her work refrains from conveying any kind of authoritative message and is reluctant to impose the artist's specific vision of community that people should feel a part of, or the politics to which they should subscribe. Stylistically and aesthetically, therefore, as cultural critic Néstor García Canclini has maintained, the power of pieces like *Bandera* (seemingly just a flag), "lay partly in the fact that it reproduced not the original scene – a shootout, murdered bodies – but rather its *imminence*, in the smells, the washcloths soaking up red stains, the loudspeakers broadcasting the voices of witnesses."[5] Margolles' work, therefore, is critical but ambiguous: a product of Mexico's particular context chosen to represent the nation, but neither patriotic nor nationalist, nor even quintessentially "Mexican." It represents Mexico and its politics, and is representative of the aesthetics and content of Mexican contemporary art, but the politics of how it came to do so also represent an entirely new relationship between artists, the state, and the private sector in the wake of the country's shift away from autocracy and state-centered economy.

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My work analyzes art and the professional artistic field (i.e. the set of relatively well-funded and well-known institutions and the people who work in these spaces) in the wake of Mexico's transition to electoral democracy and market-oriented reforms. Far from being epiphenomenal, I show how art is a privileged site from which to study pressing political phenomena, including topics such as freedom of expression, collective action and critique, political representation, education, and mobilization, and the creation of national narratives. Despite the hefty existing literature on the antecedents and aftermath of Mexico's formal electoral transition and adoption of market-oriented reforms, we know very little about how these transformations shaped national imaginaries, political narratives, and forms of collective identity. In my work I shed light on these transformations by analyzing cultural and artistic policies, institutions, and production.

By describing works of art and artistic practices more broadly, together with their conditions of production, circulation, and reception, I show how an electoral democratic transition need not "democratize art" and can, under certain conditions, make it more elitist. Throughout the 20th century, in Mexico, the arts were central to state and nation formation processes. The state's near-monopoly on artistic production made the Mexican state amazingly strong at creating national identity through the promulgation of nationalist images and narratives. The art produced under the PRI was meant to be easily legible to masses of people and was meant to represent them, thereby hailing Mexicans into identifying as part of a community that had not previously existed. In the absence of opinion polls and free-and-fair elections, artists often claimed to channel the voices of different segments of the population into a national, though highly restricted, public sphere. The creative elites never followed a democratic procedure, nor were they all inclusive in who and how they chose to represent. Nonetheless, theirs was an attempt to imagine a national public *and* a national community and to constitute it *by* representing it.

Theory about democratic transitions and civil society in democratic states might suggest that after its transition to electrical democracy, Mexico's art world would become more inclusive and representative of the democratic polity. My work shows, however, that democratic representation at the electoral level does not necessarily or directly translate into more democratic forms of representation in other contexts, including in the kinds of collective narratives and imaginaries that

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5 García Canclini, Néstor. 2014. *Art beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without a Story Line*. Translated by David Frye. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 164.

get produced. It also does not necessarily lead to an inclusive, widespread increase of freedom of expression. While private funds are now available and have helped to produce and circulate art (including Margolles'), I also show how these private funds fail to make up for the decrease in state funding and are unequally distributed. Some of the art that presents scathing critiques of the present moment (like that made by Margolles) often only reaches smaller, specialized, or elite publics rather than the masses. I also show how not every kind of art benefits equally from the participation of the private sector. For instance, despite the art world explicitly addressing all kinds of critically political issues, it continues to exclude feminist activist-artists who tackle gender-based violence, as well as work that directly comments on the country's prevalent but under-discussed racism. My work takes such exclusions and silences very seriously because they can help us understand how different kinds of political narratives, allegiances, and attachments, including those related to gender, race, and class, are formed and experienced in the wake of a democratic and neoliberal transformation.

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Analyzing artistic objects and practices as if these were just any other kind of object or practice, available for scholarly analysis – and in my case particularly in the context of ethnographic research - is problematic and perhaps a bit lazy. But it is difficult to know how one should interpret an artwork and what to take into consideration when doing so, especially when the goal is to make a claim about our political world. Should the researcher base her analysis on her own interpretation of the artwork, or should she try to understand the artist's intention or alleged message? Should she analyze the public's opinion of the work? But what if, much like "the people" in any democratic setting, the public cannot be easily determined, and its opinion cannot be generalizable or even known? Artworks have many layers and can be read differently and thereby have different effects on different people. Moreover, as scholars have shown time and again, "we humans are never fully reliable even to ourselves."[6] It is possible, as literary scholar and psychoanalyst Gabriele Schwab argues, that for some members of artistic public, an artwork's mood or message, say on grief, might resonate with a hidden personal grief that has never become conscious. "This experience of resonance," Schwab maintains, "may be transformational in the sense that an unconscious mood has found a symbolic expression and thereby entered a communicative space" even when there is no way of demonstrating it.[7]

If claiming that an artwork can transform the life on an individual is hard, and perhaps impossible to do, maintaining that a work of art has a large-scale and direct political impact – including, for instance, starting a war, swinging mass public opinion on a topic like abortion, or serving as a weapon of liberation for a group of people – is even harder. Doing so entails oversimplifying the complex ways in which works of art and artistic practices more generally can be said to "work in the world." It entails, in other words, oversimplifying the causal processes required to account for a major social or political change. As Michael Hanne has argued about Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and other works of fiction, "When we talk loosely of the political impact of a novel, that metaphor implies that effects have followed from its publication by the simplest causal connection, like ripples moving outwards when a pebble is tossed into a still pool. It must be immediately obvious not only that Rushdie's novel possesses a quite un-pebble-like complexity as cultural object but that the political pool into which it was tossed was already extremely turbulent. (…) Any serious assessment of the political 'impact' of any artwork must focus on the effects it has had on an already existing power relation."[8] Hanne is pointing to the impossibility of measuring and

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6 Wedeen, Lisa. 2019. *Authoritarian Apprehensions*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago): .

7 Gabriele Schwab. 2012. *Imaginary Ethnographies* (New York: Columbia University Press): 4-5.

8 Michael Hanne. 1994. *Power of the Story* (New York: Berghahn Books). 3-4.

isolating the political impact of any work of art. And the same is true when trying to isolate what political variables enable a certain work of art to be made or what their statistically weight might be.

While reality is always messy and part of what political scientists attempt to do with their explanations is to read through this mess, when it comes to art and its political impact, messiness might be a much welcome trait. Understanding the political relevance of artworks, therefore, cannot depend on determining the causal impact of a specific political factor – say the implementation of free and fair elections – on artistic production, nor to isolate the likely causal impact of a work of art on the political world. Rather than using experimental or statistical techniques to engage in causal analysis, **the messiness of description might work better to explain causality, including the political effects of art and the effects of art on the political terrain**.

Given that the political effects of artworks are difficult, and in many cases, impossible to gauge, **I argue that making visible through description different aspects of artistic objects and practices can help account for what these do politically**. Describing an artwork – including not only its form and content but also its conditions of production, circulation and reception – is one of the only ways of garnering the influence that particular artworks have in the world. It is through descriptions of art, which help us think with and through it, that artistic objects and practices can begin to be used as evidence to demonstrate the effects of political events (and also, the effects of political events on works of art). Description as method involves determining *what* to include in the description and *how* to go about doing the description. In the case of my work on art, deciding *what* to describe can entail deciding whether to include the formal structures of the artwork (e.g. its compositional elements, material, and alleged messages), its conditions of production, funding structures, and other aspects of political economy, the ways it is displayed, circulated, and received by the public and specialized critics, or the more general historical context in which its production, circulation, and reception take place. Describing these different aspects of an artwork can, as I show in my work, not only shed light on different aspects of political life but also make causal explanations about it.

In making this claim, I echo John Gerring's famous claim that description is a type of argument that should be valued in its own right.[9] I agree with him that description should not become a mere adjunct to causal hypotheses or causal frameworks. Gerring, however, maintains that description *only* allows researchers to answer *what* questions (e.g., when, whom, out of what, in what manner) about a phenomenon and differentiates these types of arguments from causal ones, claiming that understanding *what* questions need not entail explaining, nor determining causal implications. But I wonder if descriptions can contribute to our understanding of causal mechanisms and help shed light on causal explanations. For instance, by "merely" describing Margolles' work and that of other artists whose work circulates widely in Mexico, we can say something about the kinds of narratives that are being produced and deployed in Mexico at a certain point in time and infer something about how these are explained by the political and economic terrain. Is this enough to answer "why" questions, including for instance, "Why have national narratives changed in the wake of Mexico's twin transition to electoral democracy and a market-oriented economy?" Given the impossibility of presenting strong causal claims when works of art are involved, what is the closest we can get? My sense is that close readings and descriptions of artworks and the artistic field can do more than deploying artworks merely as illustrations of historical or social events and can reveal profound insights about our political world. I wonder if the claims that can be made in this regard are causal per se or if they are merely correlational, and if we should stick to calling them "elective affinities." I look forward to our discussion!

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[9] John Gerring. "Mere Description," *British Journal of Political Science*, 42:4 (October 2012):721-747.