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Doris Salcedo

The Vision Of The Vanquished Is An Inward Looking Gaze

I WANT to thank Cuauhtémoc Medina for this invitation to share the stage with my teacher, Beatriz González, who—as you’ll see as this conversation progresses—has been a point of origin and a constant inspiration for my work, and who, with tremendous generosity and clarity of mind, was instrumental in everyone’s formation—in the formation of every Colombian artist of my generation.

A group of young art students taught us the importance of an historical understanding, allowing us to recognize the forces that produced and gave form not only to artistic movements, but also to political ones as well. We learned to use history as a weapon against cultural amnesia.

When Beatriz González says, “I do underdeveloped painting for an underdeveloped country,” she affirms her work is linked to a specific time and place. Just like saying “my painting is a provincial art that has no currency except as a curiosity,” or declaring herself to be a “provincial” painter, Beatriz González makes the margins a choice, or as Holland Cotter writes, she turns the periphery into a badge of pride.

Maybe that’s the most important lesson I learned from her: she taught me to be an artist on the periphery.

I am a political artist who lives and works in the Third World. As such, political conflicts and power structures not only constitute the center of my work, they also define the perspective from which my work is elaborated and for that reason all my work is constructed based on

what Miguel León Portillo has called *the vision of the vanquished*. Today I'll be presenting my work, but I'll only undertake an extensive analysis of three pieces, since these works are almost literally constructions of political space. I understand the political as a space of antagonism, conflict and disagreement. My intention with these works, therefore, is not only to construct sculpture or installations, but also events that define political spaces.

"The vision of the vanquished" is an inward looking gaze. Reyes Mate says victims see ruins that hide progress and modernity. Victims see things differently. They see what the rest of us don't want to see, but that nevertheless forms an essential part of our reality. Victims don't just live in the past: their experience endures and transforms our reality. They form part of a reality that has been silenced.

My work is based on historical data; it's work that takes place in the present; yet I'd like to demonstrate the impossibility of fixing what's happened in the past. Artistic redemption does not exist. I vainly try to recuperate what irreversible.

Walter Benjamin wrote that the key element to memory isn't a neutral reception of the past, but rather its danger. Memory is an appropriation of the past "exactly as it flashes out in a moment of danger." Memory is a threat to the present in that it reveals the present to be inscribed in oblivion of ruins and pain.

More than just inert, silent pieces, I see my work as an action. It's a useless action, to be sure; how could anyone put reality back together? It's a vain effort to reestablish the presence of the victim in our current times.

The works are pure absence. Reyes Mate writes that every murder creates an absence in our society as well as a responsibility in us with regard to the absent. It's what Benjamin called "weak messianic power," the responsibility that becomes political mourning. Every one of my works is an act of mourning.

My work is based on the most extreme events of our day. It centers on political violence, human fragility and how those who hold power manipulate lives and experiences. The work emerges based on the experience of those who've been robbed of their humanity.

I live in Colombia, a country at war and currently one of sundry epicenters for catastrophe. One place among many where catastrophe appears to be

an ongoing fact of life. My work takes up the fact that we are obliged to live under the permanent shadow of war—war’s shadows fall over everyone’s actions, because war establishes an order from which we cannot escape; war becomes a totalizing experience. Nothing lies outside war.

Emmanuel Levinas says that war is the most demoralizing form of reality: “in war, reality destroys the words and images that disguise it, hides its nakedness and harshness.” ‘Hard realities’ smacks of pleonasm. Levinas isn’t interested in limited notions of violence like killing or wounding an individual, but rather in war as a radical intrusion into people’s lives. War compels people to take on roles in which they can no longer recognize themselves. War makes people betray their very identities.

Jacques Rancière writes “the new historical subject is none other than the people and groups who die silently, ignored and unheard, but whose voices continue to command history’s attention by means of their repressed presence.”

My work is dedicated to those victims who, in the eyes of power structures, are seen as excess, invisible and residual population. It’s based on the experiences of those whom Jacques Rancière calls “the part that plays no part in community; the ones who have no space in political space, nor any participation in the economic sphere.” My work is relegated to a space on the geographic, political and economic periphery.

The first step I take when I begin a new piece is to address the person to whom I’ll dedicate that work: a victim of political violence. Every work begins as a testimony of a particular experience. Every work moves toward a victim, but during the process of the work’s elaboration, I’m obliged to leave that person’s experience intact. I shouldn’t touch it. As an artist, I shouldn’t actually get to it—I can just orient myself toward it.

Emmanuel Levinas writes that the victim “isn’t just a collaborator and neighbor to our works of cultural expression, nor just a customer for our artistic production, but is also our interlocutor. The victim is the individual that expression *expresses*, that celebration *celebrates*, and is as much the iteration of that orientation as he/she is its meaning.” Levinas goes on to say that cultural expression is a relationship with the person whom I express in expression, and whose presence is required if my gesture of cultural production can really be produced. The person to whom I express what I express is, fundamentally, feeling and intelligibility, because he/she

lends his/her experience to my expression. More precisely, my work refers to the experiences of the *Other*. In his etymological analysis of the word, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe writes that *experience* comes from the Latin *experiri*, meaning “to confirm or test,” as well as from the Latin *periri*, meaning “danger” and “risk,” and finally from the Indo-European *per*, meaning “to cross.” This experience means to traverse danger. Experience, by definition, is related to an event that has already occurred.

Nevertheless, this traversal of danger, this experience, isn’t mine. It’s the experience of those on life’s edges, along its borders or on its periphery, in the epicenter of catastrophe. I think that in order not to condemn these experiences to the silence and isolation of a traumatized victim, this singular experience ought to be inscribed in a memory—in a work of art.

Still, the experiences I try to focus on in my work are not anecdotes; they are direct life experiences. They are the memory of an ever-vanishing experience, of the void created by oblivion. The work of art concerns precisely that which is not an event; it points towards an event. As poet Paul Celan said, it’s the road to a fountain but the fountain will always be inaccessible.

My work doesn’t tell stories or narrate events, it doesn’t recount history nor is it a nostalgic narration of past events. It represents the absence of lived experience. It veers from lived experience to become what Celan calls a lyric memento of what is far off and in another place, of what is foreign to us; a reminder of the presence of the strange in our midst, as a vain attempt to mitigate intolerance.

6 and 7 November 1985

On 6 and 7 November 1985, a guerilla commando team forcibly took control of Colombia’s Supreme Court Building in less than an hour. The army responded in an equally violent manner and as a result, a two-day total war broke out in downtown Bogotá. Approximately 126 people died, including the court’s justices. The building caught fire. Few human remains were found. Just ashes. Seventeen years later, on 6 and 7 November 2002, I presented this ephemeral work on the new Supreme Court’s façade. This act of memory began on 6 November at 11:35 am, the time when the first victim, a security guard, was killed. At that moment, an empty chair was slowly lowered along the Supreme Court building’s southeastern façade. This action was repeated several times during two full days, the same amount of time the battle had

raged. During this act, I almost completely covered the two stone-walls that make up the façade, to outline a specific time and space of commemoration.

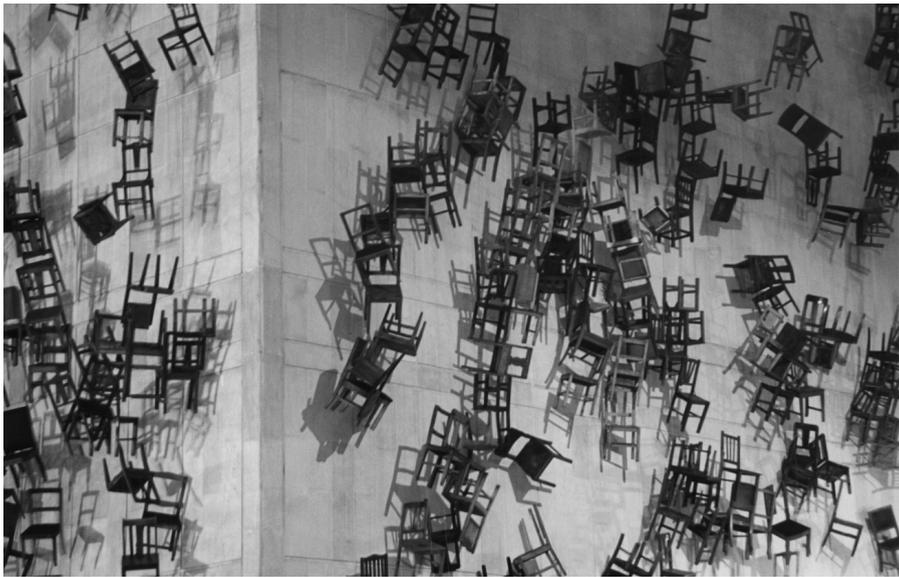
The work is a topography of war and is profoundly inscribed in daily life, in spite of the fact it represents an extreme experience: the point at which life's normal conditions end and war begins can no longer be clearly discerned. An image, wherein the private and the political clash, produces a total sensation of bewilderment.

The idea is to present an image that approximates the existential realities of death, loss and void—the legacies of war. An image that respects the tension between remembering and forgetting, where survivors and the bereaved can debate, year after year. The image I propose is situated at the intersection between a desire to remember and the impulse to forget.

Abyss

A work I did in the Castello de Rivoli, is inscribed in a space that has an absolute, totalitarian character. The Castello is, explicitly, an architecture of power. Space becomes a fundamental category for any kind of power; it represents its strength, social order and objectives.

Abyss permits exploration that leads to a discovery of the genesis of space. It's a tool for decoding the space's history and nature, which was, of course, a place for political actions and in itself constituted a center of power.



Doris Salcedo, 6 and 7 November, Bogota Colombia, 2002

Abyss draws attention to the excessive burden the powerful impose on subject people, and emerges from extensive research on slavery-like contemporary labor in Europe, on top of, reflected in, or present in social conditions that allow it and promote its existence. In a first instance, I analyzed how immigration, in the developed world, is solely perceived as a problem. Opinion surveys assert that there is a consensus among most citizens of the so-called “first world”: they see immigrants as the perpetrators of inexplicable evils—as the sources of all the problems these societies suffer.

The immigrant is not only hemmed in by his appearance; he has been stripped of all humanity. A rejection of the immigrant’s status as human being, the fact his political refugee status, or even his status as a worker, has been erased makes manifest that he is an object of hate. The immigrant, exposed to brutal economic rationalities, and to the abject nature of post-industrial urban life, does not inhabit the first world. Levinas has changed “I think, therefore I am” to “I inhabit, therefore I am”. To inhabit is to exist. Levinas even goes further: to inhabit is to be in a place where one is welcome.



The proliferation of slavery-like servitude and the reappearance of domestic workers, sex workers and indeed, servile, vulnerable and poorly paid work, etc. makes clear just how possible it is to treat human beings like garbage.

The general tendency toward segregation, disintegration and racism is identified by the space *Abismo* seeks to outline, a space that doesn't just contain but also controls the body it covers.

The work is suspended in dead time. This is not a present time, constructed on continual instances, but is rather an immobilized extension of time. Within the work, the compiling of memories is suspended. The silence is radical. And I hope it involves us in what's happening.

Shibboleth

With this work I sought to orient Turbine Hall's modernist space at Tate Modern toward the unbridgeable gap that separates the human from the sub-human.

Shibboleth is a negative space alluding to the negation of non-Europeans in modern history. There is a parallel history running alongside the history of modernity, its opposite and untold dark side: the history of racism.

Seen as an exclusively European phenomenon, modernity is the cultivation of the human mind, through an exercise of reason and a study of the classics whose principal proposal was the creation of a homogeneous, rational and beautiful society. This has been the official version of the history of modernity, a version where colonial and imperial history is unknown, marginalized or simply eliminated.

Forgetting imperial adventures has taken on an active role in forming the image Europe has of itself. Paul Gilroy says this image mitigates the ethical debt Europe owes the rest of the planet and as well, allows for an extension of the privileges that racial hierarchies have institutionalized.

Non-Europeans or, as they're now known, "post-colonial peoples," are perceived, generally, as a sole vector of decline, capable of putting the historical and cultural legacy that gave form to European identity at risk.

Shibboleth is an attempt to make reference to that part of the world that has been excluded from the history of modernity and kept on the margins of Western culture. At the same time I am aware that there's nothing new in all this; I simply wish to take up this issue from the museum perspective, by analyzing the role that art has played in the formation of moral and human-beauty stereotypes, given that Western art developed such a restrictive ideal of humanity that excluded all non-Europeans from the category of human. The stereotype was fundamental to the development of racism as a school of thought.

We're told racism is the symptom of a contemporary malaise, but philosopher Jacques Rancière states that it is the illness itself "the disease, in effect, of consensus, and the loss of any metric for understanding otherness. It is the transformation of the Other to the frenzied point of pure racist rejection."

The work is absolute indifference. No cultural ornament attenuates the desolation and misery to which it alludes.

It's an unwelcome and—apparently—uncontrolled work. It appears in the Turbine Hall. It's having happened seems to be the product of an irrational event that moves across a rationalist construction. Its presence unnerves Turbine Hall the same way immigrants upset consensus and homogeneity in European society. Within Western tradition, the unwelcome element that interrupts development and progress is the immigrant—he who doesn't share an identical identity and who has nothing in common with the community.

I center myself along that limit because I believe it marks the place from where an artist today can address the experience of the vast majority of human beings. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben explained: "When the subject becomes aware of his own ruin, life goes on—maybe amid the infamy in which it existed—but it goes on." Similarly, art allows for humanity to continue. Therefore in these pieces I see not only the memories of a repressed existence, but also an immemorial ethos. Beyond biographical elements, art confers a testimony of life on us all.

Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, Tate Modern, London, 2007



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