

Making the Invisible Visible, Speaking the Unspeakable: Doris Salcedo's Performative Art

I have had a long-standing interest in the art of Doris Salcedo, from my first chance encounter with it in 1997, to my last totally exciting experience of her recent work. I have been lecturing about her work and wrote a book on it. And now, here, this is a moment of reflecting back on my long engagement with this art. For me, it is a brilliant example of many issues I will touch upon in this lecture, which I am presenting today for the second time. First during the festival "Colores Colombia", I gave this lecture on 11 October 2018; and this occasion of "Here/Now: Current Visions from Columbia" on 24 March 2019.¹

When I attended the dinner for the opening of the then most recent work of Doris Salcedo, the Colombian representative in Madrid proudly said that Salcedo is the greatest Colombian artist of our time. Without having much knowledge of other Colombian artists, unfortunately, I tend to believe him; I had just spent six hours inside her work, unable to leave it. Her greatness as an artist resides in her commitment to undoing the erasure, forgetting, violence-toleration and other forms of generalized cultural complicity. For, Salcedo's cultural diagnosis concerns the systematic erasure – not only of the perpetrators of the violence, of all political colours, but also of the public at large who turn a blind eye. In other words, Salcedo is a *political* artist. The question is, in what sense, what way, and through which artistic strategies?

The paradoxes of Doris Salcedo's work raise the issue of *time* in exemplary fashion. Most of her work is *still*, however. It is still technically, because apart from her latest work, it doesn't move, but it is also still in terms of mood. Yet it is moving, not only emotionally but also perceptually; doubly still, it is also doubly moving. The work challenges the opposition between "still" and "moving" images. It also overcomes the gap between an object and its affective charge, in other words, between the object

¹ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010; translated by Marcelo Cohen with Miguel Á. Hernández Navarro as *De lo que no se puede hablar: el arte política de Doris Salcedo*. Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, sede Medellín / Panamericana, 2014. For more references to studies of Salcedo's work, see bibliography there.

perceived at a distance and the viewer whose act of viewing affects her. Among the consequences of this paradoxical state is a complex relationship, not only with representation and figuration – the work with the human form – but also with another aspect of human nature, the one of existing in time. I see different aspects of temporality: heterogeneous time, slowdown, the past cut off from the present, and the need for active acts of looking in actuality.

This raises a question that has been on my mind all through my career as a cultural analyst. How can art be politically relevant, without turning into propaganda and thus, ceasing to be or to be perceived as art? If we need categories, her work would be sculpture; but it is better characterized as art-interventions in space. But what is that, art? Sometimes, you go to see an artwork, and when you enter the space, you look around in bewilderment. Where is the artwork? That was my first encounter with Salcedo's work, her installation *Unland*. I stepped into a relationship with Salcedo's work at the arbitrary moment of a chance encounter. Her three-piece installation *Unland* (1995-1998) was the first work of hers I ever saw. *Palimpsesto* is, for now, the last one, and I think I have seen all or most of the work in-between. So, I will limit this lecture to these two works. There are (at least) two ways of describing *Unland*. Both describe it as radically anti-, although not entirely non-anthropomorphic. From a distance, at first sight one sees non-human, sculptural *forms*. There are three distorted tables, each constructed out of two tables whose legs have been sawn off and whose tops are slightly discrepant, looking a sickly gray in some places.

Alternatively, from close up, the forms become invisible and one sees only a painterly *surface*. Here, one mobilizes one's anthropomorphic imagination - the tendency to see human figures even in abstract art - and sees something resembling the skin of scar tissue. The surface consists of hundreds of tiny follicles, crisscrossing threads, tattered, translucent silk, and on one table a child's cot sunk into the wooden planks of the table's surface and sewn onto it.

The two visions do not connect. It is the impossibility of seeing both visions at the same time that triggers reflections on temporality as a tool of political art. It is that impossibility that makes the sculptures of *Unland* moving in the double sense. But, in order to see the work, one *must* see both visions simultaneously. Like Wittgenstein's famous rabbit/duck drawing, the two are equally necessary. Yet because of the difference in

distance required to practice these ways of seeing, they are physically incompatible. This incompatibility is a bit torturous, painful, even physically nauseating.

After standing near these tables and stalking around them for an exceedingly long time, in a painful experience of perceptual inadequacy, it is as if the furniture itself becomes unsteady. It is this shiftness that is their aesthetics, which is to say, their politics. *Unland*, and in various ways all of Salcedo's work, succeeds in realizing this effect on her viewers. It achieves this perceptual and affective mobility from within the extremely delicate moral and artistic position of addressing violence. The means she deploys – perhaps I can call it her medium – is what I see as a “foreshortening of time.”

In Salcedo's work, *foreshortening* serves the production of temporality in a still medium. In principle, this effect is as illusory as it is real. But Salcedo's deployment of a temporal foreshortening succeeds in breaking the illusion, in favor of a real engagement with the temporality the work “designs.” This is how her work moves us – both in the affective and perceptual senses in which we as viewers are the object of the verb, and in the sense that the verb has both a direct object (us) and an indirect one (it moves us to act).

On the primary level, the act of exposing pieces of used furniture in an art gallery in and of itself compels the viewer to think about their previous owners. It positions the pieces in the past in which they were used – ensconced in the private sphere, unspectacular. Mundane household furniture is displaced, taken out of homes, put into a public space. Salcedo also insists that the furniture is taken, also, out of its *time*. In my view, the cross-over between form and time – between human form and its traces, and between human time in its heterogeneity – is crucial to an understanding of Salcedo's major artistic strategies.

In the three sculptures constituting this installation duration becomes the major tool for turning the direction of the narrative from third-person – out-there, concerning the other – to second-person – here – to touch the viewer in the most concrete, bodily way possible. A first tool of this work with duration is the materiality of the sculptures. Importantly, these sculptures are extremely fragile, nearly impossible to construct, and virtually impossible to see. The material is still furniture – kitchen tables, a toy cot – but

the signifying element is extreme, in its finesse, its fragility, and its durability: human hair, and a bit of silk.

The anthropomorphic is not entirely absent from *Unland*, as if to make the point that in order to make the particularity of human tragedy universally – or rather, transculturally – important, human presence-in-absence is indispensable. *The Orphan's Tunic* combines human-worn silk with human hair, to produce a surface that evokes death in its gray discoloration, yet is enduring in its shiny surface. *Irreversible Witness* has a metal cot sewn onto a table by means of an intricate fabric of silk and hair. The cot is the lone element of an overt anthropomorphism in this chilling space. Driven into the wooden surface, it evokes the child clinging to its mother so that both die or perhaps a later moment in the chronology of violence, the paralyzed fixity of melancholy.

The duration of the work's making becomes a significant element in the effect of the *Unland* sculptures. This is not a matter of the artist's intention but of the visible materiality of her labor. While irresistibly invoking the existential contiguity of indexical meaning production, the sheer number of hairs used bears testimony to the time of the work's making – as a homage to the dead, whose bodies remain remembered through their hair only. However, this material is a *cause*, not a *consequence*, of that duration. In and of itself, the choice of hair as the medium of attachment is multiply significant. It is, of course, in the first place, a trace, poignantly material, particular, and temporal. Hair is one of the most durable bodily tissues, as durable as bone. Durability here is an act of resistance against “disappearing” (a verb used here in the transitive sense), a strategy of warfare. But, in contrast to the durability of bones, the fragility of hair, which accrues symbolic value, also stipulates that this resistance cannot give hope; it cannot endure.

Yet the choice of hair over bone is also an aesthetic one. And, as such, it is an issue of ambiguous temporality. First, the relation of bones to death is too ordinary and predictable, as well as overly universalized. Hair, in contrast, is what was once lovingly combed, what shone and framed the specific face now gone. Whereas bones denote death mercilessly and unambiguously, hair is so close to the living face that its poignancy increases to the extreme. It denotes neither life nor death. Instead, it connotes both, as well as the perverted chronology in which they succeed each other. Second, the hairs are separated, particularized; not only is it hair from a particular individual, but each hair is separated, manipulated, and attached to its new support

with extreme care. This implies a work with, and for, *singularity* that is very relevant to Salcedo's project. Third, the fragility of single hairs imposes respect and distance, as an extreme form of the "don't touch" taboo that applies in venerable art museums.

To actually see what makes these ordinary tables different from those in our own homes, one comes closer and closer, feeling less and less comfortable and more and more voyeuristic, penetrating the home of this bodily presence while, at the same time, trespassing the imaginary line that the public gallery has drawn around the work. Even with forewarning, the actual perception of the details – the tiny holes, the sewing, the braiding, the woven hair – comes as a shock.

This moment of shock is an effect of the temporal discrepancy between the times of the past and the present, when our acts of viewing become, suddenly, acts of a different nature than just that of routine looking in a continuum. Something happens that links the violence, the disappearance itself, to us, now. It is a mobilization of *actuality*. Attention and actuality together begin to approach the kind of temporality that is at stake in Salcedo's ongoing search for an effective, newly conceived political art through temporal foreshortening. Actuality comes out of its dreariness, stretched out like long hairs. As we step backward, then forward again, the shock is equally intense. The *Unland* sculptures work on the basis of the *performance of duration*. They slow the viewing down, to the extreme. Physically, they make you dizzy with their back-and-forthness between microscopic and macroscopic looking. As a consequence, looking itself becomes tortuous, almost torturous. Psychically, these surfaces stick to you long after the intense experience of time has faded back into everyday life.

Temporal aspects (such as discrepancy, belatedness, heterochrony, delayed focusing, vanishing and re-emergence, and performance) are linked to *temporal foreshortening* as a device of primary importance. This is what makes Salcedo's work political in a specific way without it being "about" Colombia. Her temporal foreshortening deploys the specificity of heterogeneous time, to establish a connection between specific violence and the generalized presence of violence, so that each viewer is "touched" by it within her own subjectivity and environment.

Salcedo's work deploys art to activate viewers into becoming witnesses, stopping condoning violence, and rethinking their own political positions. What I would

like to propose, then, is to replace the qualifier “activist” with “activating”, so that we can get closer to a combination of criticality and solidarity.

When the art solicits the viewer's activation, in an attempt to make them think, shed their passivity, and do something, it is fair to say that temporality is the tool for activation. Let me jump twenty years, from my first experience of Unland in 1997-8 to the latest, *Palimpsesto* in 2017-18.

Movement, of the smallest, subtlest kind, trembles through an immense plaza consisting of large slabs, in sand colour, with a grainy surface, engineered to resist the absorption of water. Nearly effaced names are written on them, in sand. Other names overwrite these, in shallow relief engraved in the slabs. Suddenly, a shiny drop of water appears, rolling towards the relief; then more, until the letters of the name are filled, and the water becomes a convex shiny surface, surmounting the flatness of the slabs. After a few minutes, the water letters start to tremble; then they disappear. Appearance and disappearance: the names keep moving, as physical instability, and as emotional effect, producing turmoil. The water names overwrite the sand names, which remain as a palimpsest, a trace of forgotten people.

Salcedo, whose art is devoted to countering the oblivion of violence and the violence of oblivion, has made, over five years and with a team of twenty, the most deeply political art installation I have ever seen. It is also a performative work, a work that *does* something, that keeps moving and changing. And inviting the visitor to walk on it – there is no other space for us – it includes the public in the performance. Every step, one has to decide whether to avoid stepping on the names or, in what seems to me a callous indifference, walk on top of them. The possibility of indifference also hits a nerve, since the names form a recollection of and homage to the innumerable victims of European indifference who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

This is not a “theme”; the work is not “about” this acutely political issue. She never proclaims political opinions either, in the loud voice of so much art that calls itself political. Her work “deconstructs”, in line with Derrida, and then Deleuze, the binary opposition between abstraction and figuration. In *Palimpsesto*, the issue at stake is the most tragic, over-visible due to the media, yet too well-known to avoid becoming invisible, of the world in our time. Too much sand and too little water push people to embark on the precarious boats of human traffickers, only to perish in too much water.

Sand and water: they are part of the basic conditions that preclude survival, so that people cannot stay where they were born and would like to have stayed if only they had the merest chance to survive the negative dialectic of too much (sand), too little (drinkable water), too much (sea water). An artwork can hardly be more *contemporary* – happening in our time, today. And it is devoted to that tragedy of ongoing violence we all, in Europe, continue to condone, here, now. It happens *now*. The names tell us that the drowned are not an anonymous mass but an enormous number of individuals, whose lives matter – each of them as human as we all are or pretend to be.

Palimpsesto shows the cultural necessity yet difficulty to mourn, to grieve for unknown dead; a protest against the violence of indifference and of the acceptance, and even a certain stimulation of the murderous violence by governments – not only the Colombian one, that accepted the loss (with the tiniest majority) of the referendum for peace with the FARC. To this disaster, Salcedo immediately responded with another enormous artwork, *Sumando Ausencias*, Beckoning Absences, covering the entire surface of the central Plaza of Bogotá with the names of those killed in the civil war. But she calls on the world's population to acknowledge the violence committed by all governments. A protest that is at the same time an homage to each of those persons, now named by their names. That double effect, of soliciting indignation and grief, of beauty and pain, is unspeakable. As Ludwig Wittgenstein stated at the end of the *Tractatus* of what one cannot speak, one must keep silent. But later, he retracted, or modified that statement, when he said that of what one cannot speak, one must show. This is why I titled my 2010 book on Salcedo's art after Wittgenstein's dictum. The surface of this work, adapted to the irregular shape of and the many columns in the building, covers the entirety of the Art Nouveau glass building of the Palacio de Cristal, of 1.065 square meters. The appearance and disappearance of the water has a strong impact. It makes the visitor want to stay, to see the vanishing water reappear, and thus witness the act of witnessing that this work constitutes and performs – becoming a co-witness.

One cannot write on water, and sand will not stay in place. But the artist demonstrates that one can write *with* water, and *with* sand. The names written in sand belong to victims of European indifference who died before the year 2000; the names written with water, to those who died after 2000. Only a fraction of the individuals who died could find a place in this enormous work. But that each of them counts is clear. As

clear as the brilliant drops of water. The name is what distinguishes one human being from another; it is the label of their uniqueness. Against the abjection of anonymous death, the brilliance of the water dignifies the persons named. The transparency and the evaporation of the water with which the names are written, constitute a subtle metaphor of the fragility of human existence, and in these cases, of the lives cut off too early.

A complex mechanism underneath the slabs pushes the water up, drop by drop, to the surface. Each drop “walks” towards the sculpted letters, through the tiniest hole in the stone, between the minuscule pebbles. When the drops merge, and take leave from their brilliant appearance where the sun makes them look like precious stones, we realize we must resist that comparison because nothing stays stable and the material is humble. Instead of jewels, we see tears; the earth is crying. This weeping of the stone stands in for the absent tears of all of us, who shake off the everyday spectacle of deaths shown, in half a minute, on television. Instead, in Salcedo’s installation, one is captivated enough to spend a long time *with* the dead. While waiting for the vanished water to return, we can and must take the time to reflect on the political issue so powerfully made tangible, due to the absence of representation. Thus, as in all of Salcedo’s art, grief is brought together with at least a minimal effort to suggest that we can, indeed must break the cycle of silenced violence. The tool: memory and (its) time.

In closing, and before showing you a moving image of Salcedo’s recent work in a short documentary I made, a note on the way this art is political, not activist but activating. Memory is usually understood as a *cultural* phenomenon as well as an *individual* and *social* one. Although the term “cultural memory” has been quite popular for a few decades now, I don’t think that these three “kinds” of memory can be separated. All memories have an individual, a social and a cultural aspect. Moreover, memories have a three-partite temporality. Memory is a connection between the three times of human temporal awareness: the past, in which things happened that the memory engages – or not; the present, in which the act of memorizing takes place and into which the remembered content is retrieved; and the future, which will be influenced by what the subjects in the present, together and embedded in their cultural environment, remember and do with those memories. For art, a public domain, the focus on “cultural

memory" brings forward political aspects, also because in the installation, no visitor is alone. The fact of being together in a (social) space is an important aspect of the experience; while developing the thoughts that the work solicits, one is aware of being *with* those others as well as with the dead.

Salcedo's work addresses cultural memory in its negativity, its failure, and seeks to find hints of solutions. Failure of memory is not so much *forgetting*, but *actively*, albeit not necessarily purposely *repressing* or, in a different view, *disassociating* – in other words, *dis-remembering*, on the one hand; or willfully, in what can even go as far as bad faith, *distorting* potentially helpful memories on the other, as *mis-remembering*. Both are devastating, wasteful, missed opportunities for the present and future. Without moralizing, Salcedo counters these failures.

But why art, in the commonly understood sense? Many people are attracted to art because it offers them temporary shelter from the harrowing extra-mural reality, in a fictional universe that stimulates their sense-based thinking. And those people must be politically activated in their very engagement with art. Art entices its interlocutors to think, first *with* the artwork, then further on their own, drawing their own conclusions, in an activated freedom for which art has the special potential to create the ambiance. Salcedo's work triggered that reflection, with responsibility as its major issue.

In this seventeenth century, Spinoza was a key thinker to deal with the historical predicament that consists of a confusion of guilt and responsibility. In this context, Spinoza's writing on affect becomes relevant. As Australian philosophers Gatens and Lloyd recall,

... the complex interactions of imagination and affect ... yield this common space of intersubjectivity ... and the processes of imitation and identification between minds which make the fabric of social life.

Intersubjectivity here rests on connections between minds which are grounded in the impinging of bodies which are both alike and different, giving rise to affects of joy and sadness, love and hate, and hope. (39)

The awareness of actual bodily modification – the awareness of things as present – is fundamental to the affects; and this is what makes the definition of affect overlap with that of imagination. All this gives special priority to the present. (52)

In this work with and for memory, Salcedo deploys the shadow of the past as the spectre of the dead returning in the present. That showing of continuity makes her art contemporary. The names written in sand in *Palimpsest*, become a spectre that haunts us, when we take time itself into account. And time is the motor of memory, as well as of forgetting, disremembering, misremembering. When we think of time, we cannot ignore history, but I am under the impact of the contemporaneity of this artwork, hence, of the history of the present. There, the plurality of experiences of time lead to what I have called in a co-curated exhibition on video and migration – the moving image and moving people – “heterochrony”.

At this time, Salcedo is making her next work, commissioned by the government to “do something” with the weapons surrendered by the terrorists. What she decided to do is melt the weapons down and constitute a floor with the metal, titled “Fragmentos”, on top of which she will create a new art center.

One of the durational differences in the various experiences of time is the duration of the look. With *Palimpsesto*, as I will now show you, Salcedo has made an exemplary performative work, that keeps moving and changing. In and with *Palimpsesto*, Salcedo de-naturalizes our condoning of what happens, while bringing it so close that indifference can hardly be sustained. When towards the end, a visitor callously steps on the water letter, as a viewer one is shocked. As one is moved by the fingers, a bit later, who repair the damage and guide the water back into the relief. There is some untranslated Spanish in the video, but most of it is in English, and it is primarily the temporality, the movement, and the togetherness that I would like to show you. I have deployed silence and sound in an almost hostile relationship to draw attention to the two extreme modes of experiencing this work. I have to show you this video, to make the point of the moving quality of this work – in all senses of the word.

(for the video, see a bit lower on this page: <http://www.miekebal.org/news-events/>)