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Doris Salcedo's Work of Mourning

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to consider Doris Salcedo's artistic work alongside Jacques Derrida's writing to position her artistic practice as a work *of* mourning with a continuous temporality that exists within and beyond predetermined narratives and contexts. I use Hubert Damisch's and Mieke Bal's analysis of the artwork as a theoretical object to establish the material methods Salcedo deploys to frame viewers as witnesses to and participants in a work that is always in becoming. Critique of individual works, including *A Flor de Piel* (2011-2012) and the *Untitled* series (1989-), is informed by a systematic review of the current literature around her practice. I position Salcedo's work in dialogue with Elaine Scarry's writing to consider the inadequacies of both written and visual language in portraying violence. Consequently, the substitution of the found object for the body in Salcedo's work is established as a means to infer grief at the hands of violence. This is done so with recognition of the necessity of representing and externalising the absence of the other who is lost which, paradoxically, remains also an impossible task. I examine the implications of viewing Salcedo's works as counter-monuments which instigate a prolonged engagement with collective mourning as a method to counteract the cyclical nature of violence, fuelled by indifference to the suffering of the other. By bringing attention to Judith Butler's writing, I discuss a politics of mourning that relies on its inability to be comprehended, thus instigating a continual reckoning with the profoundly human vulnerability of oneself to the other. Salcedo's practice, defined by themes of impossibility and deferral, is presented as a vehicle to engage with the lasting impact of incomprehensible violence in Colombia, which is currently at a crossroads in its history.

Doris Salcedo's Work of Mourning

Introduction

Only there did you wholly enter the name that is yours,

Sure-footed stepped into yourself,

freely the hammers swung in the bell-frame of your silence

– Paul Celan, Count the Almonds (1952)

Jacques Derrida, in the compilation of texts published under the title *The Work of Mourning* (2001), argues that mourning is itself a task that has no beginning or end; an endless commitment to honouring and living with the memory of the dead. The dead's silence, whilst not instigating the work of mourning, makes their absence all the more potent. In Colombia, collective grief at the hands of decades-long conflict is widespread throughout the country; the sheer number of the dead, their often-gruesome killings and the traces of violence in every neighbourhood are consequences of conflict that are ever-present in the consciousness of survivors. Left to mourn those departed and to live with the memories of violence and disappearance, the country remains in a state of apprehension by which citizens hesitantly look to the future whilst remaining perpetually wounded by the past. This Master's by Research thesis aims to use Colombian-born artist Doris Salcedo's practice as a case study for the work of mourning, one that represents a continual engagement with the nation's grief at a pivotal moment in its history.

Memory studies, the remembrance of trauma and practice of it, saw a surge in the late twentieth century, a movement triggered by the influx of literature and art produced in response to the Holocaust. Primarily concerned with acknowledging the lived experience of victims and survivors, these works brought attention to the necessity of practicing and facilitating memory in public discussion. Its applications to social pressures and current conflict encouraged a reassessment of how we engage with and represent traumatic experience. Despite its popularity, however, the movement appears more hesitant to address the complicity of the Western world's engagement with historical trauma in places such as the Global South. This shapes a large part of the focus of this thesis, which is concerned with the ways that traumatic experience within the Global South is represented within cultural media, and how testimonial practices like that of Salcedo can offer alternatives for the benefit of the wider community.

The spotlight on memory theory has dwindled in recent years in favour of decolonial study, and rightly so. Whilst memory art boomed in Western society during a period of relative

peace, many countries, including in the Global South, endured renewed conflict that arose following their independence from colonial rule. This text, however, and many of the theorists and artists it refers to, argues that the memory practices and decolonial study are invariably entwined; present conflict and division are informed and perpetuated by a lack of engagement with contextual pasts. Characterised in the words of Hubert Damisch (1998) by a belatedness which imposes a helpless indifference to historical trauma, the memory of violence is frequently removed from the present as opposed to its being offered in communal service of the navigation of present conflict. The political applications of memory studies are to be found in the continual and open reinsertion of the past into the present, by which society can reevaluate and learn from these experiences. The need for memory debates has not been subdued. In fact, in the Global South it requires more 'urgency' than ever and thus decolonial art and study has not diminished the need for memory art but expanded it (Huyssen, 2022, p. 13). In the case of this thesis, memory studies is not addressed in the wider sense but with a very specific view to mourning, particularly as a result of violence. I do so in order to contribute to pre-existing literature such as that of Andreas Huyssen, who positions Salcedo's work amongst a discourse concerned with the 'politics of memory' (2003; 2022), though I instead propose a narrower focus on a politics of mourning.

Doris Salcedo's political art has been informed by the ongoing conflict in Colombia, which is a product of centuries of unrest in the region. Her work is hugely dependent on and characterised by this context, which can be understood as vital to comprehending the intricacies of her often-ambiguous work. In fact, some works, such as *Fragmentos* (2018), discussed at length in Chapter Four, use the viewer's unknowing comprehension of Colombia's political violence as performative devices that are constitutive of the work's making. For this reason, Chapter One of this thesis focuses on the background that has informed the artist's developing practice. It delves into the country's colonial history, its conquest by and independence from Spain, and the numerous civil wars that have taken place in the aftermath. By outlining the interpretations of researchers in the fields of history and politics, such as Cristina Rojas de Ferro and Mary Roldán, as well as organisations like the Historical Memory Group of Colombia, I argue that the Western World is complicit in instigating and continuing the conflict and the necessity of this awareness when engaging with the artist's work.

The chapter not only analyses the way Salcedo's practice has been shaped by the conflict known as *La Violencia* but also its unavoidable influence on her tutors and peers in Colombia, including Beatriz González. It outlines the pathways that led to Salcedo's material choices, the impact of González' tutorage and some of the defining events of Colombia's recent history. This

includes the 1985 siege on the Palace of Justice which provided a point of departure for both artist's work. This political context is a necessity in understanding Salcedo's artistic intentions, especially with regards to the ethical considerations of her work given its presence on the international stage. In drawing attention to the material choices of both artists and the way that they subvert found furniture for use as vehicles to tackle public indifference, the chapter paves the way for future exploration of the way these materials serve also to displace the work's temporality.

Chapter Two introduces the work of Mieke Bal and hones its focus accordingly on the way that Salcedo's practice occupies the temporal realm. Using Bal's analysis of *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (1997) and positioning it in line with Hubert Damisch's concept of the theoretical object, the chapter begins by framing the way that the physical properties of the work, which often appear contradictory, inform conceptual interpretations of narrative, namely by their lack of visual unity. Bal argues for the role of perspective in the viewing of Salcedo's work, both in terms of plains of viewing and literary 'points of view', positioning the two as coexisting to the benefit of the work's ambiguous temporality. On the one hand, the found objects that form the structure of her works contribute towards narrativity by inferring human presence, and, on the other, the altered surface of the works are used as a means to infer violence by way of their viscerality.

By considering the work as a fulfilment of the role of theoretical object, an encounter that has no chronology of narrative but is instead an ongoing and changeable engagement by which to undergo theory, it paves the way for a positioning of Salcedo's practice in dialogue with Jacques Derrida's writing on and of mourning. It is here that the title of this thesis is based, arguing that Salcedo's practice is a continual enactment and engagement with mourning, as opposed to mere representation, and as such exists outside of any linear notions of a beginning or end to the undertaking. Few theorists have positioned Salcedo's work alongside Derrida's theory to any comprehensive extent; those that have done so have engaged with his writing more anecdotally or, in the case of Toby Juliff and Tricia Tierney, have opted to emphasise the texts *The Gift of Death* (1992) and *Spectres of Marx* (1994) to invoke concepts of the ghost, haunting and spectrality in Salcedo's work (Juliff and Tierney, 2021). I rather present a systematic analysis that primarily emphasises the texts which comprise *The Work of Mourning* as Derrida's own labour of grief in order to apply that same framework to Salcedo's sculptural work.

In considering the theoretical object as an instigator of thought or theory, it becomes a means of reflection upon the work of mourning set out by Derrida, which bestows the absolute

responsibility of the mourner for the other who is lost. In manipulating materials to act in a way that is absurd in function, I argue that Salcedo's work is representative of Bal and Derrida's understanding of an attempt or a struggle to deal with the impossibility of mourning, its representation and the political implications of recognising it as a vital and always ongoing endeavour. Despite Salcedo's commitment to honouring the testimony of actual victims, I acknowledge through Derrida the inevitable repetition that is seen in any singular act of mourning, arguing that, for Salcedo, that plurality is not only unavoidable but is a necessity to position the viewer as witness to a wider genre of violence in and beyond Colombia's borders.

Chapter Three continues with these questions regarding the coexistence of the singular and the plural within the work of mourning, positioning this against a backdrop of silent repression in Colombia in which the subjects of grief and anonymous violence are censored amongst communities by government and paramilitary forces. I deploy a more material focus to critique the way that Salcedo's installations position grief as impacting and taking place within the wider community, as opposed to acts only undertaken in isolation. I propose absence as a motif which contradictorily implies presence, arguing that found objects, profoundly altered by the implications of human engagement, infer loss in Salcedo's work by way of their nonfunction. In doing so I refer to Elaine Scarry's writing on the language of pain and violence to position the home as a miniaturisation of society, considering this in relation to Salcedo's displacement of violence onto an absent referent for the body, which is most often found objects relating to an expanded concept of the home.

The above is placed in dialogue with Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (2004) which, I argue, echoes Derrida's proposition of mourning as an indeterminate process. Butler stresses the need for a continual engagement with mourning both as an isolated event of violence and in relation to mass casualty, using 9/11 as their primary example. They use this to discuss and recognise our inherently human vulnerability to the other, which is never more apparent to one than when grieving the life of another. This, they state, when engaged with fully, may act to avoid further violence, recognising that that vulnerability is universal and thus avoiding the repetition of an endless cycle of violence based on the dialectics of opposing identities. By inferring a miniaturisation of disfigured society in her use of found and subverted objects, Salcedo conveys the urgency of this identification and recognition of the vulnerability of and to the other.

Chapter Four continues with an initial description of the counter-monument movement, as described by James E. Young, as a starting point for discussion regarding the funerary

practices used to mark mass casualties throughout history. It explores the methods of abstraction that have been deployed following the atrocities of the Holocaust, which were set apart from many of the more traditional monuments or memorials erected following previous conflicts. I build upon the material emphasis of the previous chapter to magnify the role of concrete, frequently used in Salcedo's *Untitled* series as well as many public works deemed as counter-monuments. I suggest that concrete serves a two-fold function: to give the works a monumentality indicative of the irreparability of the loss to which they stand in recognition of, and as a further means of substitution for society and its traditionally industrial uses. The chapter argues that communal engagement with grief can be encouraged by alternative methods of memorial to those that glorify the deaths of generals or martyrs. I propose that Salcedo's practice serves not only as artistic methods of memorialisation but as social means of reckoning with Colombia's innumerable dead.

What emerges is an interpretation of Salcedo's work that relies on its framing as a work of mourning that is deeply shaped by the context of violence in Colombia, though applicable to wider global instances of violence and unrest. In her ambiguity and plurality of narrative, she remains faithful to the singular testimony of victims and survivors whilst bringing the memory of wider violence and the lasting impact of grief out of isolation and into continual collective consciousness.

1. La Violencia in Colombia

Doris Salcedo was born in 1958 in Colombia amidst a decades-long conflict that punctuated the country with excessive violence and continuous political unrest. Salcedo's practice is well known internationally, and her work has been widely exhibited across the globe. Notable examples of Institutions include Tate Modern, London, where her monumental work *Shibboleth* was exhibited in the Turbine Hall between 2007 and 2008, and at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where several of her works are held in their permanent collection. Earlier and smaller scale works have continually focused on memory practices and accounts of violence as a consequence of conflict in Colombia. The artist's practice has evolved with the changing developments within a country which has endured a long history of civil unrest.

Colombia is a country rich with natural resources, one of only seventeen in the world classified as megadiverse owing to its varying biomes and vast species diversity (Earlham Institute, 2017). Latin America, including present-day Colombia, was colonised by the Spanish in the 16th century, a conquest that saw the deaths of countless indigenous tribes, either through direct violent warfare or the silent assault of European diseases such as smallpox (Thomson, 1998, p. 117). After several failed attempts by rebel movements, Colombia finally gained its independence from Spain in 1810, becoming the Republic of Colombia (Gran Colombia) under Simon Bolívar in 1823, a territory which also included modern-day Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador. The fight for independence and subsequent conflict within the Republic led to the deaths of one in five Colombian citizens at that time (Bailey, 1967). Conflict continued for much of the 19th century, including several violent civil wars in which Venezuela, Ecuador and eventually Panama seceded from the Republic (Morris, 1985, p. 253).

Conflict remained a regular occurrence in the twentieth century; in the 1940s, civil war broke out once again, a period which has shaped much of the history regarding modern-day Colombia. Dubbed *La Violencia* (trans. The Violence), due to the extent of violence and brutal acts, this conflict and its aftermath has shaped much of Salcedo's practice. The war began as a consequence of tensions between the Colombian Liberal and Conservative parties. Theorists such as Norman A. Bailey and Richard Skretteberg have suggested that the extent of violence was a continuation of a country which for centuries had been plagued by persistent war and civil unrest, that the lack of sustained peace and subsequent socio-economic factors fostered an environment of resentment (Bailey, 1967; Skretteberg, 2015). Partisan politics, which can be

traced back to the consolidation of the Liberal and Conservative parties in the mid-nineteenth century, and disputes over land ownership formed a catalyst for hostility.

In the aftermath of colonialism and the eventual consolidation of Colombia as an independent territory, the country's identity was left in flux. Existing demographics were left in a state of division. As Cristina Rojas de Ferro states, these identities were constructed according to an 'A/not-A' dichotomy (1995, p. 197) and, in an attempt to form a civilisation apart from colonialism, both parties saw the exclusion and direction of violence towards these designated 'not-A' identities. Thus began a process of division in which the Conservative party, which aimed to model this new civilisation upon the Spanish ideals perceived to be religion and morality, was mainly adopted by the white, upper classes of Colombia, and the Liberal party, which hoped to replicate the British model seen to value education and law, consisted of the common people of Colombia, most often those in rural localities. Consequently, strong regional identities were formed in a fractioned country divided into 32 departments, similar to states, and 1,100 municipalities (Steele, 2017, p. 60). Each region was often in dispute over land ownership, both on an individual basis and between the governing of Liberal and Conservatives. What's more, Bogotá, Colombia's capital city, did not represent a single concentration of power, being significantly less populated proportionately to capital cities elsewhere (De Ferro, 1995, p. 200). The lack of national unity, regionally, racially and financially, fuelled by antagonisms between the two parties ultimately became an instigating factor in the many civil wars that followed their establishment.[1]

In 1948, at the inception of *La Violencia*, the Conservative party had only a clear majority of a third of the country's municipalities. They did, however, have control of the police and military, the deployment of which was used as a tactic to instil fear. Despite the particularly gruesome violence of which it was a perpetrator, it is interesting to note that the party retained the support of the Catholic Church, which further fuelled the tensions between parties (Steele, 2017, pp. 64–65). Conservative-aligned bandits and guerilla groups began to use violent methods to attain land, leaving an estimated two million people displaced from their homes during the period of 1951 and 1964 (p. 69). In retaliation, the Liberal party opted to arm itself, and the resulting factions, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC), became key groups in the continuation of violence, many members consisting of those who had lost their own homes to violence. Thus, as De Ferro states, the manifested violence

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[1] In the nineteenth century alone, civil wars occurred in 1851, 1854, 1860, 1976-77 and finally the especially brutal Thousand Days War in 1899-1902 (De Ferro, 1995, p. 217).

directed towards antagonistic groups, 'defined in terms of vengeance and reprisals', perpetuated the cycle which had been in place since the country's colonial conquest (1995, p. 198).

As Mary Roldán states in her introduction to *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia* (2002), 'recent and past periods of violence are inextricably combined' (p. 18). The so-called National Front, the bipartisan coalition between the two parties, was agreed in 1958 and marked the end of *La Violencia*, despite the continued violence endured by citizens. Whilst the government record states that the civil war lasted for ten years,[2] beginning in 1948 following the assassination of Liberal Presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, '*La Violencia* in Colombia' as perceived by citizens was of a vague timeline; the massacres from which its name is credited began in the years prior to Gaitán's assassination and continued long after the official end of the war (Bailey, 1967, p. 566).

It was in 1958, the same year that the coalition was formed, that Doris Salcedo was born. Both the artist's life and practice have been deeply affected by the conflict in Colombia, the country in which she continues to live and work today. Charles Merewether, in his article 'Naming Violence in the Work of Doris Salcedo' (1993), gives an insightful overview of the ways in which the brutal methods employed by the Colombian military and paramilitary forces influenced the lives of Colombian citizens, and the way this is manifested in Salcedo's artistic practice. Salcedo's work, according to Merewether, represents the unspoken, the 'oblivion' imposed upon the experience of violence by the 'culture of fear' fostered by opposing military and guerilla groups (1993, p. 36). Silence and repression have long been used as tools by these forces not only to instil fear but to conceal government responsibility and further fuel distrust amongst citizens. The dead and their dying are not spoken of despite their frequent occurrence; missing and mourned relatives become taboo. In a country where violence, murder and kidnapping have been so prevalent, very little has been done to reconcile this prolonged period of collective grief (Arango, 2015, p. 156). By bringing attention to the events leading to and the experiences of this grief, Salcedo's work acts as a form of political commentary on the civil war,[3] continuously disputing the cultural amnesia that has dominated in the aftermath of the conflict.

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[2] As defined by Álvaro Uribe Vélez's government when commissioning the Historical Memory Group (GMH) under the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation of Colombia. The GMH was a research group tasked with the study of the causes of the civil war, *La Violencia,* between the years of 1946 and 1958 (Alcalá and Uribe, 2016, p. 10).

[3] For the purposes of this text, the term 'civil war' will be used consistent with the experiences of Colombian citizens, both during and between *La Violencia* and what is referred to as 'The Colombian

Limited records exist pertaining to the death toll of the war. Those that do estimate at least 200,000 casualties in only the twenty year period beginning in 1943, a figure which accounts for an estimated 2% of the population at that time (Bailey, 1967, p. 562). This is approximately four times the combined total of deaths during the dictatorships of Argentina, Brazil and Chile (Vanegas, 2021). Additionally, many casualties remain unreported, for their bodies have never been recovered. They are missing persons merely presumed dead. The International Committee of the Red Cross reports that there are currently over 120,000 persons reported missing in Colombia due to continuing conflict (ICRC, 2021). These regular disappearances are a known strategy used by guerrilla forces to foster an environment of mistrust and isolation throughout the country, particularly in rural areas in which Conservative and Liberal control have been in frequent contention. According to Merewether, Salcedo attempts to honour these casualties and so called *desaparecidos*[4] in her practice. By reclaiming their memory in material form, the works act as forms of counter-monument or -memorial, a term which will be explored in further detail in Chapter Four, to those who were denied a proper burial.

Salcedo states that her work is intended as a reactive force which grapples with the cultural oblivion that continues to spread throughout the country (Salcedo, 2023). Even now, as the country undergoes unprecedented economic growth and Colombian citizens hesitantly approach peace following the 2016 agreement between the government and FARC, there is a reluctance to talk of the grief that now plagues an entire nation. As stated by Alvara Ybara Zavala, a photographer who spent over a decade capturing images of FARC in the San Juan River region, this hesitance is at least in part due to the fear that 'a single spark – an attack by paramilitaries or a dissident army faction – could set the country on fire again' (2017). The traces of conflict still mark many communities, where economic and social development remain unevenly distributed. The resurgence of violence persists as a very real possibility to citizens who have already endured decades of conflict. Salcedo's work is an attempt to create an environment in which this residual anxiety and collective grief can be recognised, where both the experience of the community and of the individual can be honoured and shared.

Conflict and violence impose significant ethical dilemmas upon artists seeking to record and acknowledge the experiences of victims. Given Salcedo's international renown, it would be all too easy to slip into the domain of the spectacle, to commodify the suffering endured by

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Conflict' (1964-Present). Several researchers, including Mary Roldán, have referred to the struggle to define the period in which *La Violencia* took place from the conflict that continued thereafter (2002).

[4] A general term used to describe those who have disappeared during the conflict (Beneza and Viso, 1996, p. 86).

Colombian citizens. This susceptibility is evident in the frequency and methods by which Western media and cultural producers have reported on the conflict, keen to profit from the suffering of those individuals whose poverty and misfortune come as a consequence of war. This is especially so in those regions deemed 'Third World' countries. Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, members of the filmmaking group of the Colombian Grupo De Cali, address this in the satirical film *Arraganda Puebelo* (1977) (trans. Vampires of Poverty), in which fictional filmmakers leech upon the hardship of others. The film is in keeping with the criticism of *pornomiseria*, or the cinema of misery, a term coined by the filmmakers in relation to the exploitation and commodification of poverty by predominantly Western media (Friexas, Bonadies and Ospina, 2018).

Ospina and Mayolo filmed on the streets of Cali, a populous city in Southwest Colombia. Recorded partly in black-and-white, partly in colour, the former stands in for the supposed behind the scenes, the latter the content of the mockumentary. Satirical to the extreme, the film is deeply uncomfortable to watch; the people filmed display obvious objection and the directors are shown to fabricate narratives and settings. In one scene they are depicted chasing a woman across a busy road yelling 'Shoot her! Shoot her!' to the cameraman (*Arraganda Pueblo*, 1977, 04:43), a segment reminiscent of Susan Sontag's writing on the language of photography and its violent connotations (1977). The entire premise of the film is to show the hypocrisy of mercantilist approaches to documentary for apparent socio-political reasons, and is encapsulated by one actor in the closing scene of the film with reference to its title:

You bloodsucking vampires! You only come here to make people laugh in faraway places!

(*Arraganda Pueblo*, 1977, 21:57)

Amidst Western generalisations of Colombia as under the control of cartels, such as that of the infamous Pablo Escobar, and inundated with poverty, drug abuse, illiteracy and crime, approaches to contextualising countrywide trauma are uneasy and often voyeuristic. So called 'poverty porn' does little to humanise those depicted as opposed to exploiting their circumstances and partaking in exhibitionism. That is not to say that representation or artistic mediation on the events and suffering depicted is not necessary or appropriate, but to recognise the difficulties and ethical dilemmas imposed by it and acknowledge the responsibility of the artist in navigating these concerns.

As Andreas Huyssen states, Salcedo's international success can in part be credited to the increasing number of biennials which give a platform to artists who traditionally would have been forced to move to the likes of London and New York to remain instead in their native countries (Huyssen, 2022, p. 14). As a result, her work continues to be rich in contextual references to the Colombian conflict because she remains in active engagement with the actual experiences and lives of the other. The work is based on multiple narratives which draw upon the testimony of victims, though these combined accounts are never credited to a specific individual nor made opaque. Instead, Salcedo's work speaks more generally about the collective trauma experienced during civil war. Though she herself is Colombian, and most of the documentation and literature surrounding her work addresses the Colombian crises, few of her works point solely to Colombia as a unique representation. Rather, the works engage more broadly with themes of violence, grief and the traumatic experience which is echoed across borders and communities. In her material choices, Salcedo's practice infers violence rather than embodying it with any specificity. The artist uses metaphor and the material suggestions of absent bodies as narrative devices, as alternatives to direct methods of representation. In this way, she avoids the so-called 'hyper representation', of which she is a known critic, where explicit and voyeuristic portrayals of violence dominate cultural media (Salcedo, 2023).
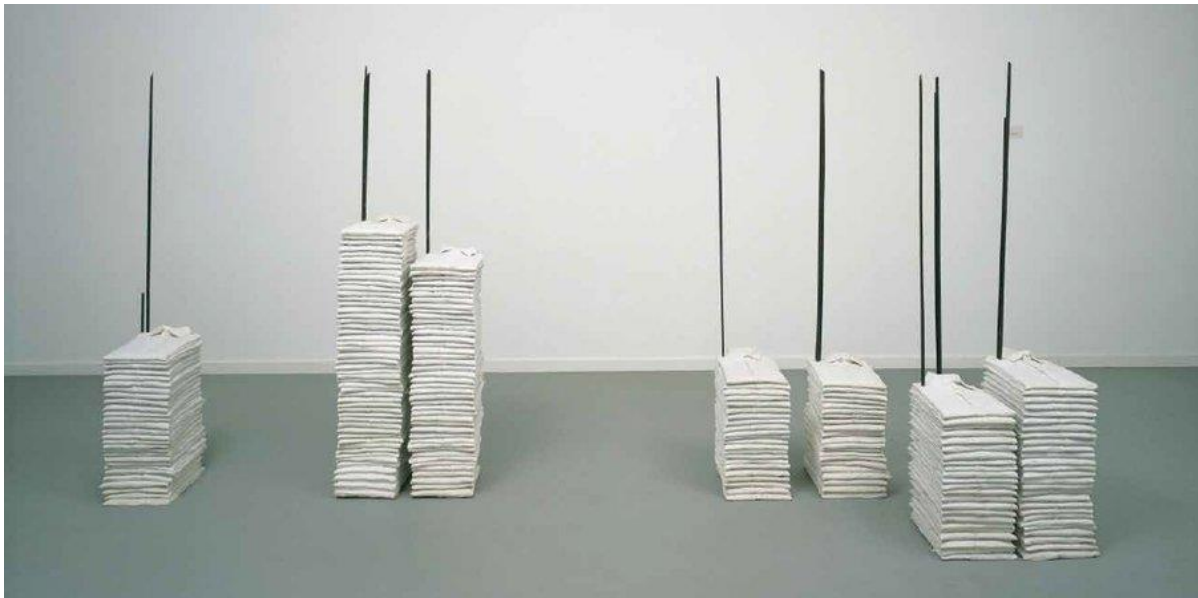

Fig. 1: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* (1989-1990), (Cotton shirts, plaster, metal rods). Available at <https://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/book_report/enwezor-on-salcedo-52952> (Accessed 13 April 2025)

Salcedo's work has focused upon violence from very early in her career; works such as *Untitled* (1989-1990; Fig. 1) protest atrocities and instances of violence within Colombia, in this case the massacre of workers at two banana plantations in 1988 (Brinson, 2015). The work comprises of plain cotton shirts, similar to those that would have been worn by the plantation workers, which are delicately folded before being impaled by metal stakes. The white shirts are neatly stacked and encased in plaster as if to solidify the absence alluded to by the clothing. By puncturing these shirts with iron rods, Salcedo is able to infer violence and the circumstances of their death in a visual language that is not voyeuristic or overtly specific. For Salcedo and other artists working within Colombia, violence 'is the reality I know and cannot avoid' (Salcedo, 2004, p. 148). Events such as these puncture the day-to-day lives of all those living in Colombia. Resistance to their role in the work of cultural producers, according to Salcedo, would therefore be absurd (Salcedo, 2004, p. 148). Furthermore, by ignoring the events, alienating them from the cultural and social domain, we make room for their repetition. Silence would only further the lack of accountability for the government's complicity and would continue to repress the experiences of the individuals affected, denying the provision of justice (Evans, 2022). According to Salcedo, artists in Colombia, including her peers, Beatriz González, Juan Manuel Echavarría and Oscar Muñoz to name a few, have a responsibility to the victims of violence and so their artistic practice cannot be removed from the contexts in which they are made.

Salcedo studied at Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Bogotá, Colombia, under artist and tutor Beatriz González (b.1932) (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, p. 31). González is best known for works depicting scenes of everyday life in Colombia during and after the civil war, a focus that developed following the siege by M19 Guerillas on the Palace of Justice. The artist, who described watching the scenes broadcast on television of a military tank entering the Palace of Justice in 1985 as having unfolded 'like a movie', was motivated by what appeared both a 'farce' and a deep 'wound' to Colombian society (González, 2018). She determined that her work could never be neutral, she could not ignore the events unfolding in Colombia and from there on has maintained a commitment to producing works which consistently relate to these atrocities and political failings (González, 2018).

This farcical attitude, rooted in contempt for the scale of violence in Colombia, is also extended to the artist's perception of contemporary art itself. González's works have come to be associated with the Pop Art movement, a relationship that, though contested by the artist (González, 2015), is rooted in her frequent references to popular culture, with religious and political iconography often taking centre stage in her work. Her bright and blocky style of enamel

painting, coupled with the commercial references included in many of her works, labelled González a 'controversial artist', dividing the opinion of many critics (González, 2018). By presenting items associated with 'folk or plebian taste', González not only sought to subvert the elitist culture of Colombian art institutions, but to draw attention to the everyday existence of the lower-class citizens excluded from it (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, pp. 34–35).

Works such as *Los Papagayos* (trans. The Parrots) (1997; Fig. 2) are examples in which colour and style are used as devices to further the political narrative of the work. Military leaders are depicted in the colours of parrots native to Colombia to criticise the overuse of force by the government, actions Gonzalez' deemed senseless and irresponsible. The work plays with the colloquial verb 'parroting', suggesting a lack of accountability or individual thought in political dialogue. This satirical and derisive political humour is carried through many of her works to convey the hypocrisy of Colombian politics and religion.

Fig. 2: Beatriz González, *Los papagayos* (1986-1987), (Oil on paper). Available at: <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/beatriz-gonzalez-populaire-politique/> (Accessed: 02 September 2024)

In contrast to Gonzalez' material choices, Salcedo's practice is sculptural, though she did first receive formal training in painting (Salcedo, 2000, p. 8), a fact which is evident in the often painterly surfaces of her works. Regardless of material and aesthetic differences, González's influence on her former student is clear, with the central focus of both artistic practices being upon the 'ordinary' people whose experiences of daily life in Colombia, often considered out of the ordinary by general audiences, are not commonly told. Both have strong theoretical underpinnings; in an interview in 2000, Salcedo, who herself draws upon theorists and writers such as Hannah Arendt and Paul Celan, refers to González as 'half art historian, half painter' (Salcedo, 2000, p. 9), a reference to the series of works González began in the 1970s, in which

she frequently addresses figures and works from art history. It was at this time that the artist also began to incorporate locally sourced furniture into her practice to produce a series now widely considered her most famous work (González, 2018).

Notable examples of this coupling of domesticity and iconography include *The Last Table* (1970; Fig.3), in which she applies a reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495-1498; Fig. 4) to a metal table. The furniture is a product of industrial manufacture and was consequently deemed undesirable and in 'bad taste' by middle-class critics and gallery attendees (González, 2015). González intentionally selects items of mass production and couples them with an academic and historical grounding to offer viewers a physical amalgamation of elements associated with both lower and upper-class Colombian culture. In doing so, she establishes both the entwinement of, and tension between, both demographics (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, p. 34). This is particularly important with regards to the political climate in Colombia, in which the targets of *La Violencia* have been largely indistinct. Unlike many civil wars fought elsewhere across the globe similarly navigating the aftermath of colonialism, such as that of Sri Lanka (1983-2009) which began as a result of tensions between Sinhalese and Tamil citizens (Anandakugan, 2020), violence in Colombia has been largely indiscriminate and not directed towards citizens of a particular race or economic status (Bailey, 1967, p. 563). Both Liberal- and Conservative-aligned individuals have suffered unimaginable losses, and so González' works seek to recognise this commonality. It must be said, however, that despite this there are clear disparities in the way that those belonging to upper classes are able to shelter from the events, which makes this relational vulnerability ever more important in the gallery.

These class disparities fail to render the violence occurring on the streets of Colombia invisible, but the elites' desire in more developed cities like Bogotá and Medellín to live 'cosmopolitan lifestyles', permitted by a reliance on bulletproof glass and private security, promote what Santiago Villaveces-Izquierdo describes as a 'pungent indifference towards the fate of the other' (1997, p. 236). Both Salcedo and González intertwine the history of objects and their iconography with the social history of their users as a means of intervention. The displacement of the objects, their presence in the gallery and their material manipulations, along with their subverted uses trigger the work of domestic memory so as to comment upon the 'ripped fabric of family and society' (Moreno, 2010, p. 107). Social solidarity is threatened by these class divisions, the perpetuation of an A/Not-A dichotomy as outlined by Rojas de Ferro above, and according to Salcedo, cultural amnesia comes not as a consequence of *forgetting* but efforts to 'actively *disremember*' (*Doris Salcedo at Glenstone* [YouTube], 2022, 03:56, my

emphasis), the familiarity of the objects and the connotations of class are used as attempts to disarm viewers of their indifference.

Statistical references, like those listed above, remain the primary means of acknowledging the Colombian tragedy. This archival reliance on empirical fact does nothing to combat this indifference. What is more, as authors of the Historical Memory Group (GMH) state, this numerical data and the discourse based upon it is subject to the scrutiny of 'state and institutional dynamics' that 'instrumentalise' and make superficial the experience encompassed within them (Alcalá and Uribe, 2016, p. 6). Contemporary artistic practice like that of Salcedo seek to offer an alternative, a discourse underpinned by subjective and individual testimony. This kind of alternative archival practice, or 'anarchival' as Hal Foster proposes, often utilises 'readymades of mass culture' (2004, p. 4). In evoking familiarity, the works are defined by 'mutations of connection and disconnection' (p.6). Drawing the viewer past the boundary of indifference by way of their domesticity, comfortable narrative and distancing is subverted only after the viewer has been caught by its initial legibility.

Fig. 3: Beatriz González, *La última mesa (The last table)* (1970), (Enamel on a metal sheet, assembled in metal furniture). Available at: < https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gonzalez-the-last-table-t14223 > (Accessed 09 May 2025)
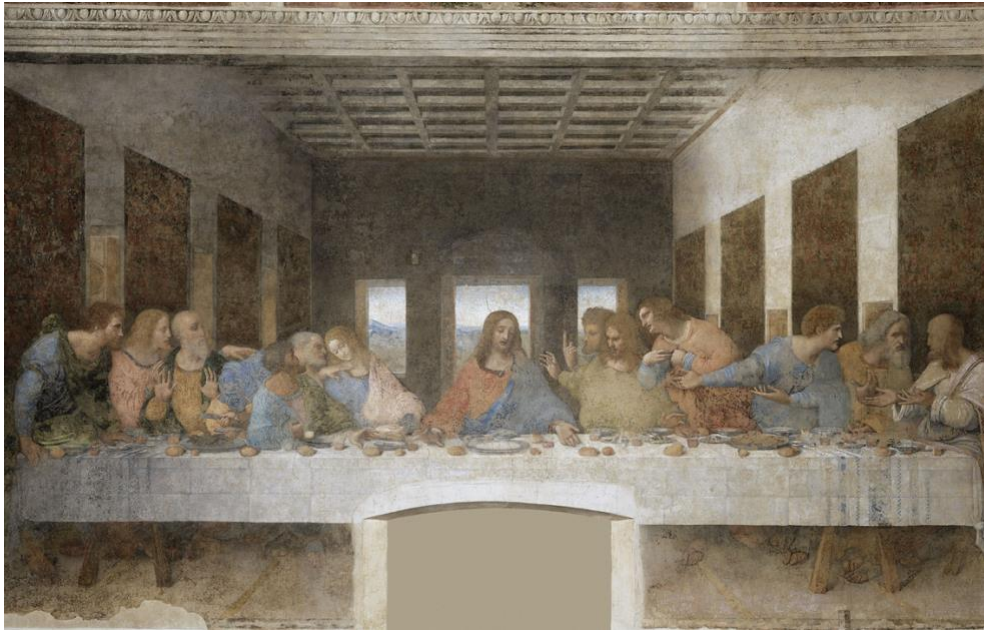
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Fig. 4: Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (1495-1498), (Dry wall painting). Available at: <https://cenacolovinciano.org/en/museum/the-works/the-last-supper-leonardo-da-vinci-1452-1519/> (Accessed 09 May 2025)

This kind of domestic intervention is not only beneficial to the dissolution of indifference within Colombia, as targeted in the works of González, but also affords respect and attention that is not often granted by representations or interpretations of violence in the Global South, particularly by Western producers. Salcedo's practice conveys the need for a national engagement with grief as well as an awareness of the Western world's entwinement with the perpetuation of violence. In this sense, the work becomes not only a place of recognition for the effects of the Colombian conflict but a 'transnational' site of the memory of violence elsewhere across the globe (Huyssen, 2022, p. 14). Salcedo takes the view that 'the Colombian situation is a capsule of condensed experience that is valuable to the rest of the world' (Salcedo, 2000, p. 35). In isolating her work from statistical references that reinforce the anonymity of violent death, she is able to infer markers of identification that challenge the viewers' ability to distance themselves from the violence occurring across the globe, both near and far from them.

This chapter has outlined the contextual references that underpin Salcedo's artistic practice and have influenced all means of cultural production in Colombia. It has traced some of the origins of *La Violencia* to situate it and the artist's practice within a wider discourse concerned with the effects of colonialism and modern-day violence in the Global South, as well as the Western world's detachment from the conflict. Statistical references are made that coexist with criticisms of that same data to acknowledge the extremity and scale of violence in Colombia, which considers the political implications of Salcedo's work as contributing to

cultural memory, recognition and respect for the other. It has also made reference to the materiality of the works, which is to be expanded in further detail in subsequent chapters, and the way that these choices inform the social applications of the works and set them apart from the indifference and anonymity encouraged by an over-reliance on statistics. It paves the way for further exploration of the active process of mourning, which is ever-present in her work, the perceptual devices deployed by the artist to infer the intimate experience of grief in an open and autonomous way which is not confined by historical and political context but always informed by it.

2. The Temporality of Grief

Mieke Bal's *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (2010) is one of the most comprehensive texts written about Salcedo's work. Bal is a cultural analyst whose research is grounded in the study of narrativity in literature and the visual arts. *Of What One Cannot Speak* is one of a trilogy of works written regarding three contemporary artists: Doris Salcedo, Ann Veronica Janssens and Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Bal focuses predominantly on the political applications of engaging with the artists' work and, in the case of Doris Salcedo, she applies the concept of the 'theoretical object' to position the artist's practice in dialogue with narratives concerning memory, trauma and violence.

The theoretical object, a term first introduced by philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch (Damisch, 1964; 1998), is a concept which Bal frequently revisits in her writing (Bal, 1999, 2001, 2011). It positions the work of art as an object that instigates or compels the viewer to do theory, by which to think and to question the context and narrativity of the work. Context as it informs cultural analysis, Bal states, is in part dependent upon historical narratives and their presence in cultural memory (Bal, 2001). According to Damisch, however, one function of the theoretical object is to temporally displace our understanding of history (Damisch, 1998, p. 5). He argues that history today appears to speak only 'retrospectively' and enforces our resignation towards our 'living in a situation defined only by its belatedness' (Damisch, 1998, p. 5). It strips us from our ability to think towards a future informed by that history, for we are resigned to think only in the sense of an absent or fixed past tense. There is no sense of a historical context in *becoming* or even of the developing present, for the retelling of something relies on its being situated concretely in that past tense.

The theoretical object challenges us to question this fixed state which enforces a separation or rigid chronology of past, present and future tenses; instead, it imposes a dynamic engagement with the *fabula*, the sequence of narrative events (Bal, 2001, p. 43). According to Bal, one way it does so is to alter the narrative's historical or contextual framing as something that requires 'a reverse perspective... starting with and in the present' (Bal, 2013, p. 8). In order to engage in the narrative which, in Salcedo's work is one of the memory of trauma, one must begin in the present moment, and so the artwork as theoretical object must open up that space for reflection of and in the present also. In doing so, the work is informed as much by present and developing contexts as it is historical. Engagement with the work is singular and individual depending on the unique circumstances of the viewer, but that singularity must not be confused

with the particular. By that Bal and Damisch would argue that that singular engagement is always in a state of becoming or amendment, and therefore the work does not exist in or start from a static present. It is not an isolated perspective or experience, there is no 'splendid isolation' but an address of 'the cultural moment from which they emerge' (Bal, 2013, p. 8). The work exists in the developing present, alterable according to who, when and what the work is in dialogue with. Consequently, the objects themselves exist outside of linear time, both fluctuating and static according to the viewer's position.

In giving the art object an existence that is not a constant, we 'empower the object' and, in doing so, empower ourselves as viewers to think beyond a static conclusion to the work (Bal, 2013, p. 12). Bal argues that interaction with the work may be more accurately described as 'encounters' or even 'happenings', a performance in which the conclusions drawn are never static or tangible; they hover between 'the thing', the object or artwork, and the 'event', the engagement or theory that comes through it in that present tense (p. 13). That present tense fluctuates according to the viewer's unique contextual offerings and the way that they inform their own subjective perspective.

The use of the term 'perspective' in the work of art is explored at length in Bal's *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (2001) and is once again informed by close reading of Damisch, particularly his *The Origin of Perspective* (1995). Perspective is a complicated term, according to Bal, for there are both physical and psychological points of perception (2001, p. 43). Physical perception relies on the moving of the body or eyeline as would be understood in relation to art historical terms such as foreshortening. However, the term also applies to literary explanations of 'points of view', that is the individual, historical and contextual circumstances which are brought to the work. These definitions and the way that each informs the viewer's conceptual understanding are contradictory; the geometry of perspective lays claim to its being an expression or representation of a predetermined or fixed truth, where literary points of perspective depend entirely on subjective interpretations of narrative (Damisch, 1995, p. xvi).

As informed by Damisch, Bal argues that in Salcedo's work both physical and psychological perspective play a role and that the two interact with each other. There are often two physically distinct perspectives or viewing points, from which one is concealed by and from the other. Bal distinguishes the two as the sculptural *form* at a distance, and the painterly *surface* close up (2011, p. 123). Using *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (1997; Fig. 5 & 6), Bal discusses the form of the work in relation to its sculptural composition, the work as it is made of objects here clearly defined if not perplexing in their arrangement; two independent tables are dissected and

joined together to create something that resembles a balancing act, a precariousness conveyed despite the structure's substantiveness. Unsettling in its perceived instability, the feeling of discomfort and confusion is doubled when one engages with the painterly surface of the work. Intricate and vulnerable, when the joinery comes into view there is a sudden visceral recognition of the hundreds of threads of human hair that, sewn together, hold the structure together.

Fig. 5: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic (detail)* (1997), (Wood, cloth, hair, glue) Available at: <https://artjewelryforum.org/articles/loss-and-memory/> (Accessed 02 September 2024)

The two views arise as a consequence of the failing of geometric perspective, the inability of foreshortening to make indistinct two plains of view, or, as Bal states, to transform 'representation into illusion' (2011, p. 141). Salcedo makes no attempt to condense them; they remain 'incommensurable' in so far as the surface is not visible from the same vantage of the form and vice versa. One cannot appreciate the fragility of the organic matter, the intimate details and insinuations of the works production, whilst in view of the structure as a whole. If we consider this in line with geometric understandings of one point perspective in art, we can draw comparisons between the incommensurability of viewing *Unland* and the vanishing point in

traditional two-dimensional drawing. Where the vanishing point in drawing aims to give the illusion of three dimensionality, the sculptural work of art is defined as a tactile, three-dimensional form. The division of form and surface in Salcedo's work, however, enacts a constant shifting between the two. The surface of the work represents what is or should be beyond the vanishing point of the form; it brings the surface out of the work, threateningly present in its visceral materiality and removed from the work as a whole.

Fig. 6: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic (detail)* (1997), (Wood, cloth, hair, glue) Available at: <https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52484365/>. (Accessed: 02 September 2024)

Conversely, another argument to be taken from Bal's critique suggests that by placing the work beyond the invisible barrier in the gallery space and therefore forbidding a tactile exploration of it, it is transformed once again by its unavailability back into varying frames of a conceptual two-dimensionality. In this sense, by making the vanishing point present the contradictory two-dimensional form is returned once again into the three-dimensional by the material presence of the vanishing point, despite its unavailability from the form. Both arguments are characterised by movement, by the insufficiency of static viewing. This inherent 'perceptual inadequacy', a failing of the classic techniques of foreshortening, is to be found in the recognition of this separation. It strips away the illusion of distance, disallowing the detachment of viewer from the work. The work requires movement from participants, a physical engagement with the space and the work's constant shifting of one perspective to the other. Just as González'

paintings on furniture are said to require a non-traditional approach to looking in the need to peer from above as opposed to straight on, *Unland* sees the viewer 'forced into a kind of physical reaction' by their contribution to viewing in which they are required to occupy and encroach on its space (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, p. 35). Its multiple vantage points simultaneously enforce viewer agency as well as denying it, instigating a shifting conceptual engagement.

That is not to deny the role of perspective or oscillating dimensionality in the expanded field of sculpture, for the above could indeed be argued of any three-dimensional work. In fact, the marble sculptures of Michelangelo are revered for their exceptionally detailed portrayal of the texture of human skin, the exact intricacies visible only when in close proximity to the work (Figs.7 & 8). In considering Salcedo's practice, however, it is the functional shock, the absurdity and incoherence of the two visions that is so effective in the visceral understanding of the work. The material choices in works such as *Unland*, the unnerving presence of real human hair and the absurd function it is made to serve, works in conjunction with the mobility required of these visions, each enhancing and dramatizing the effect of the other, imposing a sense of voyeuristic looking (Bal, 2011, p. 139). In this way, the work embodies Bal's proposition of the work as theoretical object, and the effect of perspective consequently becomes more than mere geometry but a conceptual device that remains ambiguous in order to fuel viewer engagement.

Fig. 7 (left): Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David* (1502-1504), (Marble) Available at: <https://www.visituffizi.org/florence-museums/accademia-gallery/michelangelos-david/> [Accessed 01 June 2025)

Fig. 8 (right): Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David (detail)* (1502-1504), (Marble) <https://vocal.media/art/michelangelo-s-david-making-blood-flow-in-marble-jrvem0u13> [Accessed 01 June 2025)

As Salcedo states of her work:

I have tried to avoid perspective, the comfortable distancing of the world.

(2004, p. 151)

That distancing relies on temporality, where one would place the object outside of the viewer's own present, alienating it from their own living experience. As if referring to Damisch's conception of historical latency, Salcedo displaces a temporal past which would be limited by the viewer's supposed belatedness, bringing it instead to the present experience of viewing (Damisch, 1998, p. 5). Bal argues that, in addition to the subversion of one point perspective, 'Unland' fails also in 'temporal foreshortening' (2011, p. 149). Its inadequacy goes beyond physical perception and encroaches also on the semantic, leaving the viewer to fill in and navigate the voids in narrativity left by the theoretical object. These gaps characterise the work with a delayed comprehension; it becomes a site in which to record 'a rupture in time' (Beneza and Viso, 1996, p. 94). It is an encounter that is neither past nor present, neither about death nor exclusively about life. The passage of time becomes vague, Salcedo's works referring to both a 'discreet moment', a singular event, that is the act of violence, and 'an extended, unending state' in which time stretches out before the viewer who is made to engage with the lasting experience of grief. As Mary Schneider Enriquez states, the works may well appear to exist out of time (2016, p. 90); the positioning of the event within a linear passage of time becomes indistinguishable, reflecting the permanent alterability of the narrative flow or comprehension of viewing.

This diverges from much of the discourse regarding Colombia, where emphasis is placed upon concepts or accounts of violence itself, on the instigating event, characterised by a beginning and end which is placed concretely in the past tense. Salcedo's work, however, calls upon the viewer to engage not only with that finite moment, but the way in which it infinitely alters the victim's present. The 'rupture in time' sees the work take on responsibility for an event which exists within a singular instant and, paradoxically, the way that this event becomes continually present and active. The work therefore represents successive, as opposed to singular, moments which are temporally both fast and slow; the chronology of violent events and their consequences is disrupted. This is consistent with the traumatic experience that psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub describes, in which it exists beyond 'the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time' (Laub, 1992, p. 69). In this sense, the passage of time as it exists within a grounded reality becomes irrelevant. Past is indistinguishable

from present and there is no temporal reality in which the traumatic event does not exist. In Salcedo's work, this is demonstrated by a constant but fragile suspension of time. Each of her works represent a stillness or rigidity, highlighted by themes of deferral and suspension which contribute towards an atmosphere of disquiet, the feeling that the viewer is awaiting an outcome or resolution to this state of apprehension which never arrives yet remains always on the horizon.

On a conceptual level, Salcedo recognises the impossibility of the work's subject matter; both trauma and mourning remain unrepresentable, uncharacterizable, and so depicting them in their entirety is impossible. And yet, Salcedo argues that if her work was to be somehow *successful* then it would consequently *fail* at its intention. Whilst an impossible task, it is, however, not futile. Tackling this impossibility is essential in stressing the need to engage with mourning and its inability to be mastered or fully comprehended. It is a paradoxical state that must be left open ended, and if somehow it were to be finalised, wrapped up simply, it would betray the 'brutality and massiveness of the act' (Salcedo, 2000, p. 21). In this way she argues that the traumatic experience of the other must always be something beyond full comprehension, infinitely removed from ourselves.

The need to represent trauma is itself a contradictory predicament. As Bal states in 'Refugees and Representation: An Impossible Necessity' (2022), these are subjects that exist beyond our own consciousness which make our attempts to represent them impossible. Yet they must be spoken of, must be put into public domain as subjects for discourse. By way of this impossibility, however, their presence in theoretical discussion remains always inadequate in their unique absurdity. Bal's essay, in which she addresses the complexities of 'refugeedom' (p. 4), is an effort to represent the unrepresentable; the attempt itself standing as an acknowledgement of her inability to do so. She seeks to convey the urgency of a subject through a text which is not and cannot summarise, condense or resolve that which is discussed for it exists outside of the author's own experiences, and, in many instances, her reader's. Even those that identify as refugees themselves will have differing perceptions of the word and their experiences, for no instant or identification is universal. Rather than a finished product, she says, her essay must always remain an attempt, never a fully realised text; it must be an exploration never completed, though vital nonetheless (Bal, 2022, p. 3).

Salcedo's practice is always mindful of this inconceivability and, returning to the ethics of representation discussed in the previous chapter, acknowledges in its abstraction its own failure to convey the urgency of narrative in any adequate visual language. Elaine Scarry states that the pain of the other must always be marked by a careful balance between 'tact' and 'immediacy', actions which would usually appear to oppose each other (1987, p. 9). Those who

seek to represent the pain or traumatic experience of the other must somehow infer upon the reader or viewer the necessity of action, often through identification, whilst recognising our inability to comprehend experiences that are not our own, and thus the absolute inconceivability of that identification. To overlook this inherent failure would be to ignore the immorality of doing so. The subjects of Salcedo's works are an attempt to operate with that same urgency that Scarry insists upon, but, in their speaking in a 'language of obstacle and delay', remain faithful to their sensitivity (Princenthal, 2000, p. 40). Never abrupt, never forceful, the works do not instigate immediate comprehension but rather engage viewers in a 'thickening of experience', a reckoning that can only become more potent with time and committed engagement (p. 40). It is important to note that whilst this experience may indeed thicken with time, it is never resolved or realized in its entirety. Instead, it remains always a spectre of understanding requiring continual engagement with the theoretical object. Lacking any sense of a concrete narrative, the visual statements made by Salcedo's works are open-ended and exist not to provide answers but as a space in which they can be uniquely interpretated and reinterpreted.

This attention to incompleteness echoes the work of Jacques Derrida, whose writings on and of mourning — the *of* a key element which is to be discussed shortly — echo these sentiments of impossibility. To grasp this, however, it is useful to begin briefly with the work of Sigmund Freud, whose writing is representative of the discourse which precedes Derrida's account of the 'work' of mourning and provides a binaristic account which Derrida frequently engages in dialogue.

Freud describes mourning and melancholia as similar dispositions (Freud, 1953, p. 243). Mourning is a reaction to loss, whether that be the loss of a person, object or an abstraction or ideal. It is a process, a normal or expected response to loss and thus, while grief may temporarily suspend the sufferer's ability to manage the expectations of daily life, with it comes an eventual release, the dissolution of mourning. In psychoanalytic terms, the 'end' of mourning is defined as the point at which 'reality testing' is completed (p. 244); the mourner recognises their loss as something separate and external from themselves. The exact process of this, or the work of mourning according to Freud, involves the replaying, or perhaps reliving, of all memories attached to the lost object. Upon completion, the unattainable object or person is acknowledged as just that, and thus the work of mourning is resolved.

The first point at which Freud's melancholia diverges from mourning is in its classification as a pathological state (Freud, 1953, p. 250). It develops as a product of unsuccessful mourning, where the work is not accomplished or resolved, the ego never recuperated or separated from the lost object or other. What follows is a descent into melancholia and thus a pathology that is

distinct from mourning itself. Lacking the ability to externalise itself, melancholia is consequently experienced both 'privately and constantly' (Hochman, 2008, p. 389), an isolating experience, relentless and without end. Where mourning will at last return the person to their reality as it was before the lost object, melancholia holds the sufferer in a suspended state which cuts them off from external reality.

In Freud's view, we might argue that Salcedo's work, in its refusal to adhere to the normal passage of time, clings hopelessly to mourning, denying its eventual end. Consequently, her practice would be a representation of the pathological state of melancholia. To do so, however, would be to diminish the complexities of the work and deem Salcedo's insistence on a sustained engagement with mourning as a form of surrender to suffering, with no worthwhile application to the realm of the social. More appropriately, her work can be studied in view of its attempt to convey the importance and use of a sustained encounter with mourning to further understand the conditions of grief on a collective basis and the responsibility the community has to the memory of trauma. In this sense she commits herself to the coexistence of mourning and melancholia, discrediting Freud's proposed binarism.

Salcedo's practice can instead be considered as aligned with Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (2001). Mourning, according to Derrida's text, is a process that is indefinite, existing beyond the constraints of linear narrative. Rather than seeking a resolution to grief as Freud would suggest, the process of mourning is instead an ongoing dialogue with the absence of what has been lost. This persistence is representative of the impossibility of achieving any sort of reconciliation or closure of grief and its resistance to definition. Michael Naas, editor and translator of *The Work of Mourning* (2001a) alongside Pascale-Anne Brault, writes that mourning is 'doomed to fail' (Naas, 2014, p. 119). This is not an error on the part of the mourner, or to suggest that mourning is in itself some irrelevant practice, but rather because this failure is 'constitutive', a 'structural' element that is inherent (p.119). Without it, mourning would cease to exist for its being depends upon its irreparable perpetuity. According to Derrida, an understanding of mourning cannot be brought about by defining its inception or its resolution, for its very existence depends not only on its presence in the in-between any 'beginning' or 'end', but on its perceived ever-present threat on the horizon. The process of mourning begins well before the event of death, and it remains afterwards an unending state, an experience which is indeterminate.

Derrida believed friendship to be defined by mourning, by the potential of the death of the other (Derrida, 1997). Mourning therefore is not instigated by death, for it exists long before the

death event, but rather the 'force' of mourning, as Derrida discusses in his dedication to Louis Marin, evolves upon the death of the other (Derrida, 2001, p. 145). Mourning is only weakened by the being of the other as something separate from oneself and so the presence or 'force' of that other is ultimately and paradoxically strengthened by their absence. The present and future reality of the one left to mourn is altered irreparably, shaped by the lack of the other's material presence. No longer able to externalise the other, they become 'dead *in us* though other still' (Derrida, 2001, pp. 51–52). According to Maurice Blanchot, despite what might be expected or assumed, in mourning there is no 'deepening of the separation but its erasure' (1997, p. 292). The void between friends, for Derrida writes that friendship must always be defined by the knowledge that one will eventually mourn the other, is dissipated. Their absence means that the other is permanently internalised and thus present and, in contrast to Freud's writing, can now never be externalised again. Even where the other's external presence remains in a superficial form, as in a photograph, Derrida says in speaking of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980), that the referent can no longer be suspended 'having already receded into the past' (Derrida, 2001, p. 39). Images of the lost other become a mere reduction, 'they are no longer anything but *images*' as 'the other of whom they are images appears only as the one who has passed away... [he/she] leaves "in us" only images' (Derrida, 2001, p. 159). In acknowledging this fact, recognising that the image can never be a true externalisation of the individual, Salcedo avoids superficiality by relinquishing specificity, for that specificity would always be inadequate no matter how faithful.

Where Salcedo applies evocations of the singular, she does so only as a means to evoke the plurality and universality of grief, and thus the works are never particular to one instance of death. This is apparent in *Atrabilious* (1992-93; Fig. 9) where she encases possessions, in most cases shoes, belonging to singular victims in tiny crevices covered by translucent animal skin. Each recess presents an image or capsule of condensed experience belonging to an individual, though presented amongst an array of multitudes which reinforces the ultimate lack of specificity by way of the image's repetition.

Fig. 9: Doris Salcedo, *Atrabilious* (1992-93), (Plywood, shoes, cow bladder and surgical sutures) Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/134303> (Accessed: 27 June 2025)

Derrida proposes that the work of mourning relies on its inability to be concluded, resolved or removed. Its indeterminate character is necessary to do our duty to the other as mourner in acknowledging their permanent, insurmountable loss. And yet, this responsibility, though vital, is not defined in his texts, indeed cannot be. It is, as Naas states, 'the completely identified and the unidentifiable... [the] interiorization of what can never be interiorized' (Naas, 2003, p. 79). Mourning is thus characterised by a directionless struggle and a never-ending commitment to its work. This work or task is to be found in the struggle between recognition and trying to pay respect to the singularity of each death and the individual that is lost, whilst acknowledging the undeniable plurality or repetition in each singular death (Naas, 2003, p. 78). The very fact that these texts are compiled into one singular publication is testament to this.

'The work of mourning' acts as an intersection between Derrida's theoretical work and his own personal experiences of loss. In this sense, as alluded to previously, these texts are not only writings *on* mourning, but also *of* mourning; it is a textual working of living experience. The *work* of mourning of which Derrida partakes is to be defined by a struggle in which one must balance the fundamental contradictions of its work. Through it, as in the words of Naas above, we must by some means interiorize what cannot be interiorized, identify what is unidentifiable, do justice to the other by not appropriating their words or experiences, and recognise the inevitability of this fact. It hinges on an impossible task, and yet, it *must* be done; those left to grieve have no choice but to engage in this work. Derrida, in his dedication to Paul de Man, echoes the paradox proposed by Mieke Bal and the impossibility of engagement, stating that whilst 'speaking is impossible, so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness' (Derrida, 2001, p. 71). Expressing one's grief is a necessity, and yet there is no adequate way to do so; to summarise the life and loss of the other would be a narcissistic venture, not only incomplete but dishonourable. Above all, Derrida's texts always return us to this responsibility to the other, particularly in death. For Salcedo, specificity would be further impossible for the work of mourning conveyed by her practice is not only her own, nor does it belong to any single individual. The work does not name a victim or perpetrator or even the one who is left behind. Consequently, the only specificity that is brought to the work is that belonging to the viewer who she designates as witness, assigning them responsibility for the unavailable other.

Derrida recognises that, in the funeral oration or eulogy, 'iteration is unavoidable... our language for speaking about these deaths repeatable and, thus, open to citation' (Brault and Naas, 2001, p. 21). By speaking of and for the inaccessible other, we partake in the work of mourning and yet Derrida insists upon the inherent narcissism of the phrases that appear so often in these speeches, those that consist of 'bemoaning and taking pity on oneself', an act

which carries an 'intolerable violence', an egotistical and self-absorbed undertaking (Derrida, 2001, p. 115). And yet, he also acknowledges that he himself simultaneously criticises and participates in this. This is 'the unbearable paradox of fidelity' (p. 159); in order to 'keep myself' Derrida must lament his own loss, in this quotation that loss being of Louis Althusser, 'by keeping him in me' (p. 115).

Derrida's work of mourning and Salcedo's artistic practice both enact the conflict of mourning. Both are manifestations, written and sculptural, of internal struggles to comprehend and undertake the work of mourning. Though they act with the awareness that the works will also be engaged with by the public, in Derrida's case they are considered together only retrospectively for the texts were not compiled together until 2001, there is a recognition inherent within their works that, whilst created for their own practice of grief, for their others engagement will always be alterable. Their mediums differ, both carrying their own limitations, both operating with the acute awareness of the inadequacies of both written and visual vocabulary. Yet, the ineffectiveness of the works to fully convey the experience of their mourning, the singularity of their own grief and the loss of the individual, are precisely why the work is able to succeed and be undertaken in the first place. In Derrida's work of mourning, he attempts to treat each text and thus each individual as such, in an attempt at 'eulogizing the singularity of the friend' (Naas, 2003, p. 88) . He frequently summarises each text by returning us to the words of the one who is lost with significant quotations used in order to counteract his own unavoidable return to the narcissism of iteration. When we consider that the compilation of these texts, whilst alone they tackle the singularity of his own personal lived experience of mourning an individual, when presented to a viewer together they conversely underline his theoretical thinking and understanding of mourning, and so the relational qualities of each text embody this inevitable repetition in mourning. This is reminiscent of the division in *Atrabilious*, in which view of one recess in isolation evokes a unique circumstance but when the work is viewed as a whole it becomes more of a compendium of grief. It is, once more, a reminder that while each work of mourning is singular it cannot be considered particular.

Salcedo's other works seek also to begin with the experience of the individual; a number of her works are built upon the seemingly more singular testimony of surviving widows, *La Casa Viuda* (trans. The Widowed House), or children, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*. Though descriptive, these accounts remain generalised and many of her other works are even further removed from any hints towards the testifiers. In all cases, however, there remains a departure from the individual into the collective experience of grief, whether that be a wider interpretation of mourning in the most general sense, or the impact of the violent death upon community and

politics. This 'politics of mourning' which Derrida discusses cannot be fully isolated from the individual or private experience of grief. Despite the maker's best efforts to honour the singularity of an individual, there is, in any medium, that inevitable plurality. This is aptly put in the title of the French edition of *The Work of Mourning*: *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Each Time Unique, The End of the World) (Eva Antal, 2017, p. 25). Each individual effort places the relational nature of loss in dialogue with its singular and insurmountable alteration of the world, to which there is no return.

Perhaps it is unavoidable to speak of Derrida's texts without viewing them as connected eulogies of a generation, for so many of the individuals whose deaths are included are considered amongst the most influential theorists, artists and writers at a unique point in time. Brault and Naas consider how this could be interpreted as a further betrayal of the singularities of each death, a way in which the 'unique death' becomes 'absorbed, evaluated, compared or reckoned' to a *genre* of death (Brault and Naas, 2001, p. 18). This need not be only a criticism, however, for the mourning of a genre or epoch may always build upon and add to both our and the mourner's undergoing of grief in addition to its negation.

Salcedo's work addresses another genre of death, that is, the genre of violent death, and this genre can be further expanded to violent deaths that occur both within and outside of Colombia. It is a meditation upon death, even trauma in a broader sense for this can impose the mourning of a loss of self, at the hands of war, conflict and displacement. It is simultaneously faithful to the singular whilst absorbing itself into an expanded field that comments upon our inherent vulnerability, the precariousness of war and our susceptibility to the wounds it imposes. It is an attempt, as is the case for Bal's essay, to encapsulate, to struggle to honour, the uniqueness of death and experience, whilst recognising that any effort to represent it must always also become an individual's own iteration of and with all mourning. Her works therefore are a deliberate effort to undergo the recognition of what Bal refers to as the 'singularity-in-multitude of mass murder' (Bal, 2011, p. 254). Where the deaths of Colombians seem automatically conflated in consciousness to the category of violent death, Salcedo utilises their reckoning both to invoke the parallels of mourning within the social and as a way to remind the viewer of the singularity encompassed within the genre's scale. By citing the individual testimony of individuals and presenting this in the gallery via abstracted forms, she attempts to honour the responsibility she has to the individual whilst recognising the narratives plurality in a genre of violent death.

A Flor de Piel (2011-12; Fig. 10) is indicative of the above and Salcedo's own commitment to honour the singularity of individual experience whilst recognising and even utilising its inevitable repetition to speak of wider conflict. The work is based upon the experience of a Colombian nurse who was kidnapped, tortured and ultimately killed (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, p. 121). She was denied a dignified death, her body never recovered and thus stripped of her funerary rites. The work, comprised of a shroud made from hundreds of individually sewn rose petals, is Salcedo's offering to the woman, an attempt to honour a singular loss. The shroud itself is a kind of burial sheet that affords respect to the body of the dead, but its formlessness also leaves the body unknown and unspecified, indicative of its existence amongst the thousands of victims whose bodies have been forcefully disappeared in Colombia. On the one hand, the work infers dignity, on the other it alludes to the neglect of the deceased's passing, of the cultural and political oblivion surrounding the anonymity of these losses. It reminds the viewer of the plurality and scale of violent death, and the shared relations of this narrative.

Whilst a 'failure' in its singularity, this failure is accepted and deliberately employed as a tool in which to emphasise the unavoidable relational qualities of grief. The individual petals, meticulously sewn together are an act of unification, a collaboration unachievable by one singular person. The work in its inception is laboured upon by a team of assistants in Colombia, each not only engaging with the offering to the individual but bringing to the work their own experiences of grief and violence. It is a work of great care in which, as stated by one of the assistants employed to sew the piece, 'the idea is not to embroider but to join' (*White Cube* [YouTube], 2023). The aim is to recognise that the work, whilst on the one hand can be viewed as a whole, as the singular burial sheet, is also the union of the individual petals, of the many individual threads. Evocative of a surgical suture in its delicate precision, the work is representative of a healing action, though it is the healing of a wound that cannot be healed. Perhaps there is a sense of catharsis to be felt from within this paradox; the petals emblematic of mourning 'something absolutely unique and yet nonetheless shared' (Brault and Naas, 2001, p. 22).

Fig. 10: Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel* (2011-12), (Rose petals and thread) Available at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/articles/checklist/a-flor-de-piel-the-fragile-force-of-doris-salcedos-artwork>. (Accessed: 20 November 2024)

The fluidity of form, the shapeless grave flowing toward the viewer, denying the distancing of viewing and invading the viewer's plane, speaks of endlessness whilst remaining a representation of the rigidity of place and time. The rose petals themselves are suspended precariously in a state which, through careful and experimental chemical processes, intends to delay their decay. The longevity of the work is uncertain, for the artist cannot know how long these new processes will keep the petals from disintegrating. As is the case for so many of Salcedo's works, their materiality is characterised by apprehension, the works always requiring the most delicate care. This is never more so than in *A Flor de Piel,* for the smallest changes in humidity could contribute towards the works decay; it is so vulnerable that even breathing too close to the piece feels as though it might, and quite literally could, damage it in some way.

The roses imply the country's instability in more ways than just their ephemerality. Their effectiveness in speaking specifically of collective experiences of grief in Colombia is only furthered when coupled with the knowledge that Colombia is one of the world's primary exporters of roses; as much as 25% of the global supply of roses originate in Colombia (Luvusi, 2023). This hesitance and anticipation of a change of state parallels the developing economic relations between Colombia and the rest of the world, whereby the country's economic development has triggered a transitionary period in which traditional craft and agriculture are dwindling in favour of industrial manufacture.

The petals as material, just as the hair used in *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*, are an absurd choice for the function they are made to serve. It is for this absurdity, however, that they are selected, as the persistent threat to the work only strengthens its effectiveness at portraying both the fragility and futility of mourning. The organic matter cannot be used without being indicative of its being a once living material. No longer living in the biological sense, Salcedo's treatment of the material halts its passage from this state, returning it to a living, and thus changeable, condition. As Toby Juliff and Tricia Tierney state regarding the installation of A Flor de Piel:

> The smell and the colour of the piece changed, deepened, and darkened, and the unattached edges of the petals began to curl back slightly so that the work seemed like a living, and therefore a dying, being.

<div align="right">(2021, p. 202)</div>

Its delicate presentation and evolving state appear anthropomorphic in their ability to infer the susceptibility to harm of organic life and thus human life. Whilst the works engage with a death or loss that was instigated in the past, Salcedo also argues for the inescapable and continued vulnerability of the living, their precarious state and the anticipation of loss, of another or of oneself, on the horizon. Their presence in her works seems always a way to hint toward the threat of the wound or, more finally, mortality. By inferring life and death at once, the organic elements of Salcedo's works reinforce our inability to place the works within linear time or narrative. The hair in *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*, the petals of *A Flor de Piel* and the persistence of the grass in *Plegaria Muda* (2008-10; Figs. 11 & 12), which continue to grow despite the odds, are all ways in which the works refer to the precariousness of life and the tenacity of its absence. Furthermore, in the placement of the work as a *living* thing, Salcedo implies that the work is still capable of *doing* something, returning us once more to the theoretical object. The work's

lingering living existence deems it capable of instigation, remaining an active participant in the conceptual exchange. Salcedo is conscious of this and states: 'I like the term that Paul Celan used to a refer to work of art. He says a work is a being' (Salcedo, 2004, p. 154).

The success of Salcedo's work hinges on its resistance to being a static thing; it remains living or, as Bal would describe, a theoretical object that, whilst capable of activating something in the present, requires also the active contribution of the viewer. Constantly fluctuating in and out of seemingly polar states, as emphasised by the mobility of physical and psychological perspectives, the work promotes a performative viewing. By facilitating this kind of active engagement, it combats feelings and attitudes towards its being an event that exists only in the past tense, holding us instead in a dialogue with the prevailing 'latency of violence' and necessity to act (Villaveces-Izquierdo, 1997). In considering her practice alongside Derrida, we see the work as encompassing the existence of grief itself outside of a linear timeline, and thus the temporality of the work is further displaced. Defined by its impossibility, it's lack of adherence to any objective narrative or truth, the work thrusts the viewer into both personal and wider political dialogue with the persistence of violence and the responsibilities of the work of mourning.

Fig. 11: Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda (detail)* (2008-10), (Wooden tables, soil, grass) Available at: < https://postscriptmagazine.org/content/2019/05/06/doris-salcedos-plegaria-muda>. (Accessed: 01 June 2025)

Fig. 12: Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda* (2008-10), (Wooden tables, soil, grass) Available at: < https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-91/9-1-review-essays/e91-performance-review-plegaria-muda-by-doris-salcedo.html>. (Accessed: 01 June 2025)

3. Absence as Presence

Salcedo's work is dependent upon the need to convey an impossible experience: temporally, physically and emotionally. When dealing with mourning, the body of the one that is lost is often present in the mind, the immediate signifier of their death, or a living image that becomes evocative only of an unattainable past. Salcedo's work lacks the body's specificity, and so the question remains as to how the body and its material loss can be represented in its individuality whilst existing within a work that endeavours to speak also of wider political violence. This dilemma echoes the manifestation of mourning within Colombia, where so many casualties remain missing persons, their bodies never returned to their families. Funerary practices in most cultures rely on the presence of the body, an attempt to externalise the unattainable dead. This makes the marking of a person's passing in Colombia particularly difficult to manage, leaving their loved ones with only an abstract finality to their loss. What is more, with no body to pay collective respect to, their death is publicly reduced to acknowledgement as only a number in a statistic. Salcedo does not wish for her work to be a mere repetition of the data that is already far removed from the personal experience of loss, or of the inaccessibility of shared recognition of grief (Salcedo, 2004, p. 142). Instead, she uses the material properties of the works to position the viewer as a witness to this absence as opposed to passive onlooker able to detach numerical statistics from the lived reality of the individuals they encompass.

Salcedo states:

> ...My greatest fear is to be incapable of giving a human dimension to my works. Terrible things happen in the world and yet our capacity to represent them is minimal.

> (2004, p. 142)

Salcedo does not deny the inadequacies of language and visual substitution and their inability to portray with any accuracy the full extent of the pain of victims or that of the mourners, but her work remains an attempt to root itself in an implied sense of profoundly human experience. Where other artists working in Colombia have used more explicit substitutions, for instance the mannequins used by Juan Manuel Echavarría in his *Portraits* series (Fig. 13), where the figures bear the physical traces of violent acts, Salcedo relies on more subtle evocations of the body. She uses signifiers of familiarity, found household objects, to materialise the absence of the body from within the home, giving a ghostly presence to the vacant spaces once inhabited

by the other. The use of these items, most often clothing and furniture, has been present since Salcedo's earliest works and her manipulation of their forms and function are a hallmark of her practice.

Fig. 13: Juan Manuel Echavarría, *10* from the series *Retratos* (*Portraits)* (1996), (Broken mannequin doll)
Available at: < https://www.artnexus.com/en/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5d6323e390cc21cf7c09f178/56/juan-manuel-echavarria> (Accessed 19 June 2025)

Salcedo's tutor Beatriz González also incorporates familiar items and imagery to manipulate the viewer into an engagement with the traces of bodily presence. Both artists benefit from the signification of body and home, the comforting presence of familiarity, and its subsequent violation. In *Lullaby* (1970; Fig. 14), González uses a discarded crib once used in a local hospital and mounts an enamel variation of the famous Madonna and Child. A predominantly Catholic society resulting from Spanish colonisation, this type of religious symbolism is familiar to Colombian citizens and reproductions of classical paintings such as this

are hung in many homes (González, 2018). The familiar iconography and its depiction of the infant, inferring fragility, together with the deliberate choice of object, the crib, allows the artist to explore the maternal relationship and consequently themes of care and protection. The cold metal of the crib and the jarring colour palette, however, juxtapose themes of comfort and security. The harshness of the material reflects not just the substitution of violence in the place of safety but serves as a reminder of the increasing industrialisation of the country, which continues to take steps away from its traditional roots. This is another evocation of the division amongst Colombian citizens, and on wealth distribution and the geography of industrial progress. The presence of the child threatens the idea of refuge and poses unanswered questions concerning the next generation, growing up amongst intense conflict, and the uncertain future of the country. The effect of the objects relies on their material manipulation which subsequently allows for the signification of contradictory states, violence and protection.

Fig. 14: Beatriz González, *Lullaby* (1970), (Enamel on metal sheet, assembled in metal furniture) Available at: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2015/11/01/arts/design/01COTTER4.html> (Accessed 02 September 2024)

Mary Schneider Enriquez argues in *The Materiality of Mourning* (2016) that it is, at least in part, González's influence that led Salcedo to incorporate found and everyday objects in her own

sculptural practice. Found objects are central elements of Salcedo's work[5] and it is the weight of history that these found objects carry, the ways in which they can speak of and in themselves by means of their inherent signification, that makes them so vital. As Salcedo states:

> [These are] materials that are already charged with significance, with a meaning they have acquired in the practice of everyday life. Used materials are profoundly human; they all bespeak the presence of a human being.
>
> (2000, p. 17)

In using these domestic objects, Salcedo detracts focus from the events chronicled by the headlines of news articles, or the statements made by military powers. Instead, attention is drawn to the experience of Colombian people, as it is in their streets, their homes, and neighbourhoods that the events of war unfold. The use of found objects allows her to reclaim the humanity of memory by way of their daily function; their monotony lulls the viewer into a familiar intimacy from which Salcedo can impose violence in the form of disruption.

The experiences which Salcedo's work attempts to narrate are both traumatic and painful, and so it is natural that much of the discourse surrounding her practice centres around the study of trauma. In conversation with Nick Serota at the Fondation Beyeler, Salcedo states that much of the European literature produced in the aftermath of the Holocaust provides a point of departure for her theoretical thinking (*Fondation Beyeler* [YouTube], 2023, 23:28). The Holocaust remains always present in her thinking during the production of a work, particularly the manners by which the violence of the tragedy has been manifested in art. Salcedo refers frequently in interviews and abstracts to the writings of Paul Celan (1920-1970), a Romanian born poet of Jewish descent who suffered the loss of both his mother and father following their deportation to concentration camps in 1942 (Hamburger in Celan, 1996, p. 21). Celan's poetry, which explores themes of grief, violence and the negation of memory, is an 'essential source of reading' for Salcedo (*Fondation Beyeler* [YouTube], 2023, 24:02). Celan's ability not to name violence directly but to give voice to its all-encompassing nature, the absolute vulnerability it imposes, is particularly impactful for Salcedo who searches for equivalent forms of expression

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[5] While in Salcedo's early work she relied upon found objects as sculptural material, items specifically belonging to the victims of violence, she has more recently begun to manufacture her own furniture to more effectively support the weight of the structures (*Art21* [YouTube], 2024). The technical means of doing so is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

for violence in Colombia, focusing on the experience of violence as opposed to the violent act itself.

Essayist Elaine Scarry has written several texts relating to violence and the social implications of pain, its victims and its perpetrators, notably in her 1987 book entitled *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry implements a divide between the consideration of pain that is physical from that which is psychological, though the text also relates the psychological pain that arises as a consequence of the inability to express that physical pain (1987, p. 4). Salcedo's work does not represent physical pain or violence explicitly, nor does it exclusively seek to represent those who have had physical pain subjected to them. Often, it is those that grieve in the knowledge that their loved ones were subject to such injury who are the central focus of her work, those endlessly unable to comprehend the act of violence. The presence of the manipulated found objects can consequently be read in two ways: to give body to a physical pain that is unrepresentable, and which would for that matter be unethical to do so, and to speak of the alienation that is subjected to individuals who have suffered loss, left to comprehend the violence subjected to their loved ones, and the home that is reconfigured irreparably in the silence of their absence.

Fig. 15: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled Works* (1989-2008), (Wood, concrete and metal) Available at: <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/verbal-description-of-doris-salcedo-untitled-works-1989-2008> (Accessed: 11 March 2024)

Scarry uses the term 'analogical verification' to refer to the way in which the 'felt attributes of pain' can be made visible in their attachment to 'a referent other than the human body' (1987, pp. 13-14). The reality of the pain can be removed from its host and reattributed to something else, most commonly an object that is non-sentient. In language, this is most often done so via vocabulary relating to tools and weaponry. In these terms, the visceral qualities of the objects and their intended use invoke an understanding of pain that is not reliant on the wound itself but on the object and its function, whether as an instrument of pain or some other independent or innocuous purpose. The gestures of these functions, to 'cut', 'hammer' or 'drill' to name just a few examples, trigger an emotional response in the reader to the act that inflicts pain, where the experience of the pain itself cannot be actualised. In *Untitled* (1989-1990; Fig. 1), discussed in Chapter One, the bodies of workers at two banana plantations are evoked by the neatly folded cotton shirts, only to be *punctured* by a metal rod, a visceral image of pain that is reminiscent of papers stacked together, like orders in a restaurant. In this way, the gesture of *puncturing*, innocent when removed from this circumstance, is the means by which we attempt to comprehend or witness the violent act.

In addition, the surfaces of found furniture, perhaps the most frequently occurring materials in Salcedo's practice, are marked by traces of the actions listed above, evoking the language of violence with even more subtlety. This is demonstrated in the *Untitled* series (1989-; Fig. 15), where the individual pieces of furniture are dissected and disfigured before being reassembled together into unsettling new compositions. Its presence can also be seen in more minute gestures; buttons are *hammered* into the joins between panels of wood, the surfaces of tables are *chiselled* away at, and their varnish is *scraped* away. The furniture becomes the substitute for the body, their 'skin' is 'rubbed raw', their painterly wooden surfaces bearing the traces of the violent act and the language that is used to describe it (Princenthal, 2000, p. 60).

By manipulating these objects, Salcedo disfigures not just the individual objects but a distorted recreation of the/a household room. 'The room', states Scarry, 'is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body' (1987, p. 38). Its function is to protect the life that it houses, acting as shelter, one of the most fundamental human needs. While this is further evidence for the substitution of the room or the furniture within it for the individual who pain is inflicted upon, Scarry proposes that it can also be considered 'a miniaturization of the whole of civilization' (p.38), for each room is a repetition of that human requirement amongst the whole of a society. It is both shelter from and constitutive of that civilization. Scarry speaks of this in relation to the torture or prison room, and how the room can be subverted into a weapon itself, but, in the

context of Salcedo's practice, this is also applicable to the state of grief or, for the survivor, to the traumatic experience *after* the event.

This simultaneous magnification and miniaturization is clearly evoked in Salcedo's *La Casa Viuda* series (trans. The Widowed House) (1992-1995). The works in this series are centred upon a doorway suspended within the exhibition space, either as free-standing objects or precariously resting against the gallery walls. *La Casa Viuda VI* (1995; Fig. 16 & 17) is comprised of a child's tarnished metal seat supported by a pair of human rib bones against the frame of a wooden door, *severed* in two parts. The work forces an immediate and visceral reaction from the viewer to the bones themselves, though in this work the bones appear to be more relevant for their physical properties rather than as an opaque signification of death. The brittle quality of the bone and its role in suspending the doorway, speaks of the fragility of this boundary into private space. It is as if the ribs are somehow supporting the whole weight of the structure and, were they to *snap* in two, the entire work would fall apart in a domino-like effect. The materials, suspended in a perilous state, are evocative of the feeling that citizens are 'holding their breath', anticipating the return of violence, and thus the work gives form to their anxiety.
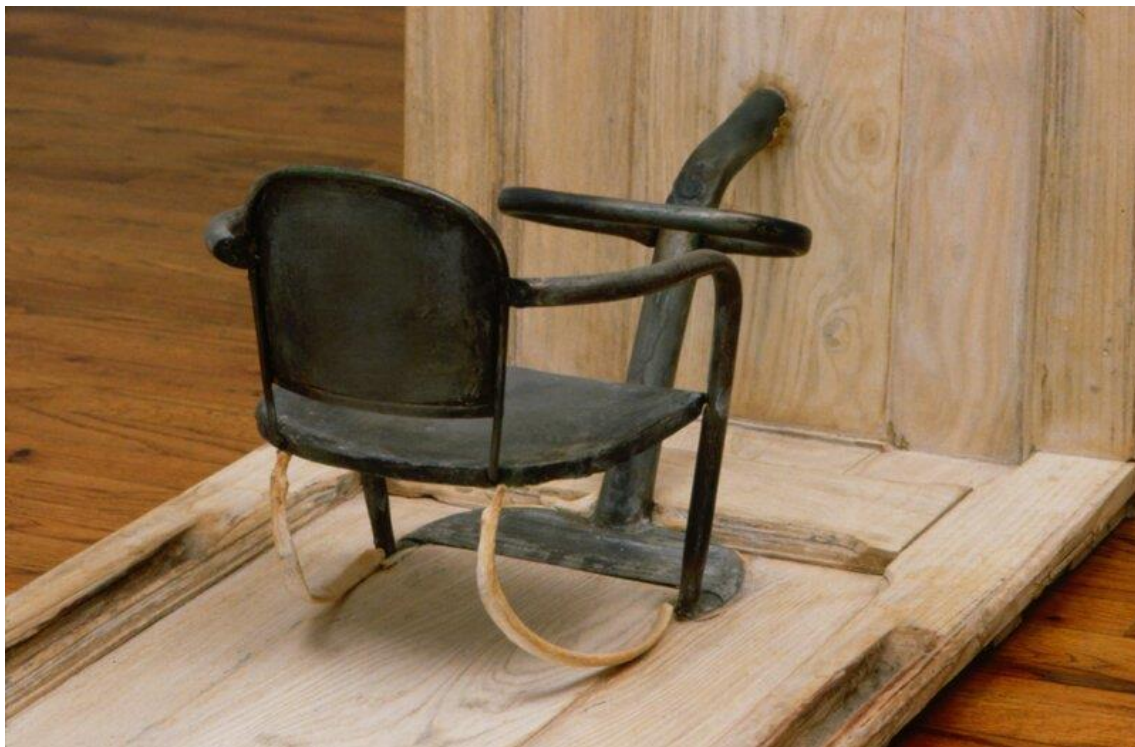

Fig. 16: Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda VI (detail)* (1995), (Wooden doors, steel chair and bone) Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/doris-salcedo-la-casa-viuda-vi-detail> (Accessed 02 September 2024)

Fig. 17: Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda VI* (1995), (Wooden doors, steel chair and bone) Available at: <https://www,whitecuber.com/artworks/la-casa-viuda-vi> (Accessed 29 February 2024)

The doorways featured in the series act as a fragile division between the individual and the society outside. In *La Casa Viuda I* (1992-1994) for example, the work is based upon the individual experience and testimony of a young boy who inadvertently allowed paramilitary troops to enter his home and assassinate his father, simply by answering the front door to a stranger. As Claudette Lauzon states in 'A Home for Loss: Doris Salcedo's Melancholic Archives' (2015), the piece not only calls on the specific instance which led to the death of the boy's father, but the door, devoid of its purpose in its suspended state compels the viewer to debate the instability of safety within the home beyond individual circumstance (2015, pp. 203–204). It acts as a marker for a universal vulnerability, overshadowing the perceived barrier into private space. For victims of conflict the home is not always a place of comfort and security and, while violence can make its way into the home, as in the case of this boy's testimony, events that occur outside can also reconfigure the home in drastic and permanent ways.

Nancy Princenthal suggests that Salcedo's installations become a site of non-place, 'a passage where it is impossible to live' (2000, p. 49). Tainted by insecurity, it is a representation of the unease of which inhabitants are forced to relate to the everyday. It is an anxious waiting place in which the occupants anticipate the return of their loved ones during an extended period, in

which 'mortal fear' presents itself in the face of 'ordinary delays' (Roldán, 2002, p. 20). The potential of loss, whether brief or prolonged, instigates an identification with those whose loved ones do not return, who remain missing persons, in many cases perpetually. The work initiates association, knowing that it cannot be fulfilled.

In bringing domestic objects into the gallery space, Salcedo distorts 'the familiar', often universal indicators of the home, into 'a viciously and perversely reconfigured' version of private space (Schneider Enriquez, 2016, p. 60). The precarious reconfiguration of domestic objects in Salcedo's work removes them of their function, suspending them in a state of nonfunction to which no tangible replacement will arise. The viewer, when confronted with this hybrid arrangement of objects, cannot help but search for the autonomous elements. Some of the objects are easily identifiable, large armoires being the basis for many works, however, in their *dissection* they become something entirely different, an arrangement in which the viewer, rather than discovering what is there hidden in the work, becomes increasingly aware of what is not. In their nonfunction they become mere signifiers of irreparable absence, a 'functional death' bestowed upon the objects and the home (Princenthal, 2000, p. 43).

The title of this series, *The Widowed House,* unusual in that many of the artist's works remain untitled, is anthropomorphic in nature and places emphasis on an individual who remains to mourn their departed. To describe the house itself as being widowed also gives autonomy to the home and its evolution as a site of mourning. This is typical of her work, in which she dedicates herself to honouring and remembering not just the direct victims of violence, but also that which continue to grieve in their absence and the spaces they inhabit. As such, the viewer is compelled to engage with the lasting experience of grief, rather than on the instance and instigators of death. The echoes of individual existence which are brought into the gallery in the form of furniture, clothing and sometimes human hair or bone 'refer as much to those who remain as those departed' (Merewether, 1993, p. 35). Those left to grieve find that theirs is a home that no longer acts as refuge, but a space in which the absence of the other is inescapable. Salcedo states:

> We all use chairs, we all use tables, we all use cabinets. But when a person is killed then all the objects that belong to that person start screaming the absence of that person.
>
> (*Doris Salcedo at Glenstone* [YouTube], 2022)

Chairs when presented alone indicate the negative trace of the body, configured together they become markers of lost dialogue (Mengham, 2004). The empty chairs signify the presence of a body once there, now startingly absent. In this way, this person's absence gives a presence to grief that is unimaginably loud, it *unmakes* the home and all the qualities that make it such. As Anne Kjœrsguard states of gravestones in her study of mourning practices in Denmark, in providing a material substitution of the body Salcedo can evoke not just the absence of a person but 'a feeling of the dead not only present, but too close' (Kjœrsguard, 2019, p. 116). Their existence as signs becomes claustrophobic, indicative of their actual inaccessibility. The spaces which the other once occupied becomes a void, a vacant space that still manages to 'scream' out their absence. Salcedo's work attempts to make visible what Derrida describes as an impossible predicament of internalisation – the other 'at once too absent and too close' (2001, p. 114)

In relying on objects that are specific in their domesticity, Salcedo conveys the intimate experience of loss which 'leaves only its trace within the community' (Merewether, 1993, p. 37) and yet enforces its presence upon the individual. Wardrobes, beds and dressers appear frequently and are not just indicative of the home, but of the most intimate spaces within it. As Princenthal states, these are 'objects in which protection, care and confinement play equal parts' in much the same way as González' crib (2000, p. 43). Grief is inherently isolating, and this is especially so in Colombia, where guerilla and paramilitary groups not only control *how* victims of violence can be mourned but whose death can be publicly acknowledged and where. The individual, confined to the home or the site of mourning, cannot speak openly of their loss and are instead doomed to mourn in isolation. This, in turn, refers to the state of society in which individual experience is minimised, suspended in a state of traumatic ambivalence. Neighbours, despite participating in the same practice of grief for their own loved ones, are alienated from each other by the divisive measures implemented by the perpetrators of violence.

Just as the events of the siege on the Palace of Justice instigated a shift in the practice of González, Salcedo similarly found motivation. *Noviembre 6 y 7* (2002; Fig. 18), a work Salcedo deemed both vital and seemingly impossible, commemorated the 17th anniversary of the siege. Where González faced the reluctance of critics to engage with her politically charged work, Salcedo encountered difficulties with regards to censorship which interfered with her ability to obtain objects and access to the space necessary to realise the work (*Fondation Beyeler* [YouTube], 2023, 42:31). Many prisoners were taken following the retaking of the building, in many cases they were wrongly accused of being guerilla sympathisers and subject to torture and interrogation. Families were not made aware of their arrests; many were lied to and falsely

informed that their loved ones had simply been caught in the crossfire. Ultimately, the majority of those accused were killed and/or forcibly disappeared, the full circumstances of their deaths and the government's complicity was never known (The Center for Justice and Accountability, n.d).

This is testament to the struggle to produce works that engage with violence in Colombia where the government has continuously attempted to cover up the mistakes and consequences of the actions made by the state. The installation, both time- and site-specific, consists of the careful lowering of chairs against the façade of the rebuilt Palace of Justice. Unusually, the work is specific in its temporality, each action is timed in accordance with the time of death reported for each casualty and so, the chairs, indicative of each singular absence, encourage the public witnessing the event to engage in the remembrance of the loss of life that day. Long repressed in the government's attempt to conceal the events, the work now represents a shift in public perception and open recollection of the casualties of the siege and, more generally, the loss of life resulting from the wider conflict. A previously 'latent memory' as Salcedo states, was seen to 'rise up and live' (2004, p. 158); the loss or absence of life makes it all the more present.
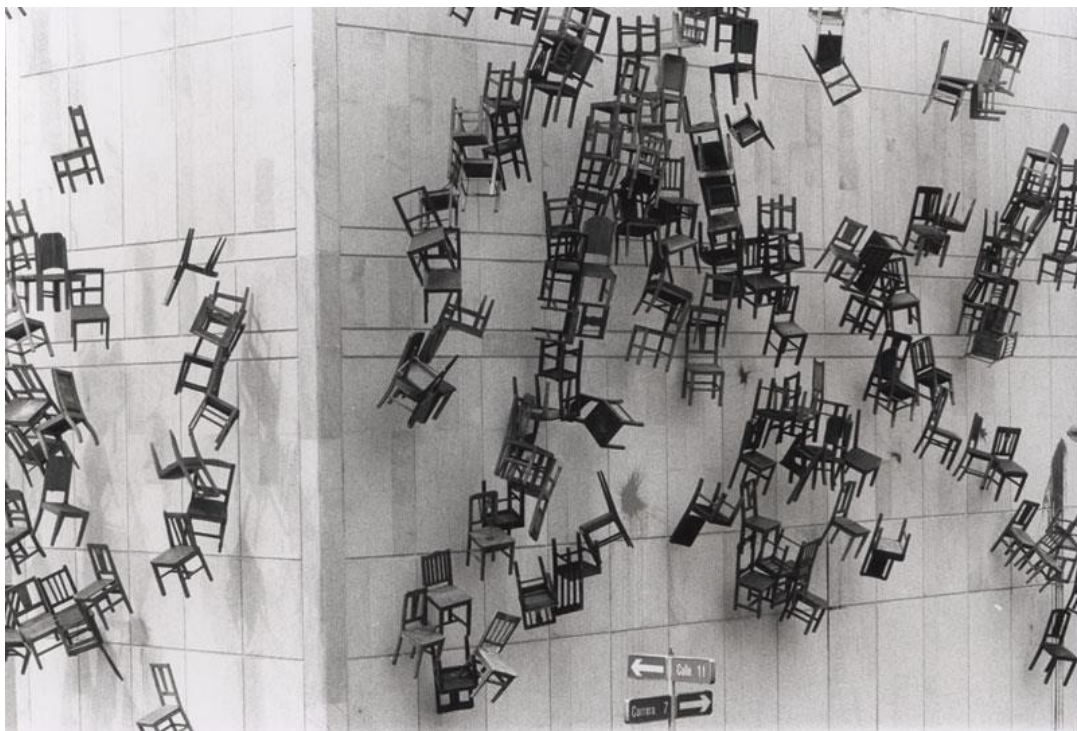

Fig. 18: Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7* (2002), (Wooden chairs) Available at: <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/its-the-job-of-both-artists-and-museums-to-reevaluate-the-past/> (Accessed 19 May 2025)

As if to intentionally subvert the common emphasis upon impersonal statistics, Salcedo uses exact number and scale in this work to narrate the event's gravitas. She does so, however, with signifiers of the lived experience of victims, their daily presence before the siege and their absence that remains in its aftermath. In doing so, she combats the tactics used by the perpetrators of violence who aim not just to anonymise victims but to repress their lived experience, to threaten community by way of minimising the singularity of each life. By imposing a state of indifference concerning the individual, the state further removes their loss from the social domain and thus the realm in which 'the political plays out' (Bal, 2011, p. 153). This has implications beyond borders too; whilst not specifically addressing Colombia, Scarry comments upon the ways that organisations such as Amnesty International are supposed to convey the relatability of the experiences of people under the conditions of violence so that those elsewhere may be encouraged to offer aid. That identification is difficult to convey, however, when little about their 'ordinary life' is known except that 'that ordinary life has ceased to exist' (Scarry, 1987, p. 9). Salcedo's work in its domesticity and intimacy simultaneously evokes and distorts this reality, arguing that it is within the recognition of everyday circumstance that the viewer can comprehend an existence not dissimilar from their own. In doing so, the viewer is reminded of the unavailability of that prior life; it is not solely the wound that inflicts violence upon the victim but the obstruction to daily life. It imposes endless limitations on every aspect of human life, both privately and collectively.

By reinforcing the similarities of individuals, as opposed to the differences, by way of the domesticity of the everyday, Salcedo's work instigates a dissolution of the alienation of grief by means of identification. According to Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (2004), the collective recognition of mourning is vital to the political understandings of loss at the hands of violence. Whilst we may consider grief to be a 'privatising' event, one which ushers us into a 'solitary situation' (Butler, 2004, p. 22), by creating conditions under which we are made to recognise our ties through identification, our vulnerability to each other, a 'tenuous "we" [is] made of us all' (p. 20). Published just three years after the events of 9/11, *Precarious Life* discusses the way in which the act of mourning itself can be considered inherently political.

Beyond prompting feelings of sympathy, Butler emphasises the way in which mourning serves as a reminder of the very real vulnerability of each of us to the other, that at any time our 'socially constituted bodies' are, by their very nature, 'attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure' (p. 20). In keeping with Derrida's writing, this identification becomes indicative of the fact that the viewer's own work of mourning has already begun, for the threat of its realisation is and always has been

present. Mourning therefore 'furnishes a sense of political community' in which we are made to recognise our 'fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' to each other (p. 22). As witness to the mourner's testimony, the viewer recognises 'the enigmatic traces of others' (p. 46) that constitute their own sense of self which, in Salcedo's work, is manifested by the marking of the other's absence. These traces encompass not only the relationships we are conscious of, but also that inherent vulnerability to the other, whether that other is known to us or not. By understanding the role in which the traces of the other constitute our own identity, we recognise our place within a wider community in which we acknowledge our 'collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another' (p. 30). Salcedo's emphasis on ordinary existence returns the viewer to these ties and their own associations with and susceptibility to grief.

Butler argues that this collective responsibility to the other in a state of grief can give claim to 'non-military political solutions', where its denial 'can fuel the instruments of war' (p. 29). They continue by quoting the speech given by President Bush following a period of national mourning for the lives lost during the terrorist attacks of 9/11, where he announced that 'we have finished grieving ... now is the time for resolute action to take the place of grief' (Butler, 2004, p. 29). Soon after, the United States declared a war on terrorism, sending military troops to Afghanistan and eventually Iraq. Butler asks us to consider whether rather than conceding to fear, if the nation had allowed itself to mourn, a collective 'tarrying with grief' of the individuals, 'not endeavouring to seek [a] resolution' could have been more effective in avoiding further violence and conflict (Butler, 2004, p. 30).

Mourning in the public sphere often relies upon the imposition of a strategy of self-defence in which the other is defined in accordance with the A/not-A dichotomy referenced in Chapter One and as proposed by de Ferro (1995). Considerations of 'what makes a life grievable?' (Butler, 2004, p. 20) are pushed aside in favour of designating a defined antagonist to which our grief can be redirected, with little regard for its contribution to the cyclical nature of violence. In Bush's 'resolute action', the war on terror, we are denied the possibility of mourning as a means of solidifying social relations. Instead, violence is perpetuated by combatants on either side, the names of casualties in other countries and cultures morphed into more digestible statistics in the conscience of Western society. In Colombia, grief becomes motive for retaliatory violence between guerilla groups, despite the many civilian victims. Violence is justified by this same imposition of action, where a meditation on mourning would be more effective in the prevention of the events' repetition.

In this sense, the politics of mourning plays out in Salcedo's work, not via statements of fact or the designation of blame, but in its creation of conditions of identification under which the viewer can reckon with their dependency on the other and the necessity of engaging in collective and sustained grief. Despite not directly referencing Derrida, both Butler and Salcedo in effect recognise his definition of the unceasing quality of mourning and the necessity of it being so, for its continued existence is of great importance to the politics that instigate violence.

To say that presence can stand in for absence is inherently contradictory, but it is in the coexistence of these conflicting states, the way that Salcedo is able to make a vacant space or void claustrophobic, that the artist's work is able to convey its depth of meaning. The work encourages its viewer to engage with a temporal reality that existed long before the violent act alongside the suspended present which is reconfigured physically and perpetually by the absence it leaves in its wake. Her practice considers the ethics and necessity of identification whilst acknowledging its reductive nature, inferring the ultimate and paradoxical responsibility we as witnesses have to each other. In using and subverting found objects, she manipulates signifiers of refuge into those of brutality, conveying a generic reality viewers can identify with that is subsequently disrupted by the shock and repulsion of violence. Her politics of mourning is rooted in the objects' material existence, which are laden with the scars of violence, evoking the body in a way that removes the victims from the confines of a shapeless statistical form. The artist makes the unobtainable body once more accessible and so, in their static evocation, realises their absence in a material and thus present form.

4. The Artwork as Counter-Monument

Salcedo's practice is characterised by its commitment to honouring and promoting the memory of loss resulting from violence in Colombia and, more broadly, conflict which takes place outside of the country the artist calls home. Many, if not all, of her works allude to funerary rituals or practices, marking the passing of an individual or group at the hands of violence. Her works might be described as monuments to the casualties of the Colombian civil war, especially those pieces that exist within public space, for their effect is to bring their memory into wider consciousness. The rhetoric of classical monuments, however, is far removed from the methods of Salcedo's practice. In contemporary contexts, these sculptures, often cast in bronze and depicting the figures and faces of kings and war generals, are no longer understood to be befitting of the times nor as serving the public to which they are intended. Salcedo's work is more closely aligned, as Patrizia Violi argues, with the counter-monument movement which arose in the second half of the twentieth century alongside a heightened interest in memory studies (2019, p. 62).

Counter-monumentalism, a term first used by James E. Young in relation to public art in Germany following World War II, refers to public monuments or memorials which avoid the classical forms and rhetorics (Young, 1992). Instead, these works operate outside of any fixed stylistic or thematic format and, rather than acting as a celebration of any patriotic righteousness or victory, the counter monument is more often than not constructed as a way to remember barbarity and loss. The focus of the monuments is centred on 'vernacular memory', encouraging a sense of embodied viewing, and many adopt minimalist forms as their primary modes of expression (Thor, 2023, p. 55). Many works rely on a 'sensorial poignancy' evocative of oppression and solemnity as a means to enforce identification with the victims of violence (Richards, 2019, p. 2). As opposed to absent or apathetical engagement, the counter-monument invites the viewer to occupy a space that is physically evocative of the traumatic experience it depicts to encourage an emotional engagement. Some employ physical sensations such as that of claustrophobia, others position the viewer as witness to a performative action, activating the viewer's own senses, distorting their own physical reality into one evocative of the oppressive lived experience of the event.

Fragmentos (2018; Figs. 19 & 20), is an ambitious yet ambiguous work by Salcedo which has a permanent home in the city of Bogotá. Completed in 2018, the work is site specific, occupying a once derelict building in the city. When selecting the site, Salcedo opted not to

demolish the existing structure, instead rebuilding it alongside architect Carlos Granada to incorporate elements of the colonial building. The sleek minimalist reconstruction contrasts the rubble and ruins, creating a blend of old and new which reflects the precarious redevelopment of the city at present. Without prior knowledge of the work it is not immediately obvious to the viewer, who walks along tiled empty corridors, stopping at one of the temporary exhibits and continuing on until they are met with a lengthy video by the artist which explains that it is the floor itself that comprises the work. Each grey tile is made up of the corrugated metal sourced by the melting of thousands of surrendered FARC weapons, hammered into form by seventeen women, all survivors of sexual violence during the conflict. The work, according to Salcedo herself, is a counter monument, not to peace, though it was commissioned following the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC, but to the victims of violence (Violi, 2019, pp. 64–5).

The significance of the work's conception and those that laboured upon it, is vital to its being a counter monument. By insisting that the work of hammering and shaping the piece into completion was done by women survivors gives the work a performative aspect in addition to the significance of the material itself. The work is, consequently, made active; it is constituted by the process or performance of its making. Violi argues:

...in that floor the suffering and the anger of the women is objectivized and made concrete... feelings become matter... the floor is the material, visible result of a performative action which is at the same time a very complex narrative.

(2019, p. 68)

In this sense, the works stands again, like so many of Salcedo's pieces, outside of a static present. Even upon the viewer's realisation of the existence and material matter of the work, it still exists in the past tense, in the moments of its making, operating in tandem with its developing present. The work therefore *activates* memory as opposed to containing it, as was one of the potential fears proposed by Young above. *Fragmentos* instigates a reckoning with 'the previous phases of the narrative', from its hammering into form to the melting of the surrendered weapons, from the instances of sexual violence to the wounds inflicted by those weapons (Violi, 2019, p. 69). The work only occupies the viewer's present in the sense of their being an enactment of the victim's isolation and public repression. The viewer's initial lack of comprehension has them stand upon the work without acknowledgment; in their ignorance they perform the act of repression which the victims have been subjected to, only to be reminded of their belatedness

by the video description. In this belated present the viewer is called to engage with their own memory bias and questions as to what is and is not memorialised. Melting the FARC weapons, as opposed to their mere confiscation or reuse, invokes a sense of finality that gives way to present and future, but in giving them a new use as a method to speak of the very present trauma of past events the work is able to reflect on the unease of the community who may not share these sentiments or faith in the finality of the act. The role of the counter-monument consequently is not solely to convey or engage with past but to make it and its present contexts sometimes painfully present.

Fig. 19: Doris Salcedo, *Fragmentos (detail)* (2018), (Melted Rifle Floor) Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/opinion/colombia-violence-art.html> (Accessed: 19 March 2024)

Fig. 20: Doris Salcedo, *Fragmentos* (2018), (Melted Rifle Floor) Available at: < https://www.archdaily.com/919792/fragments-nil-counter-monument-granada-garces-arquitectos/5d0c56bf284dd1469e000006-fragments-nil-counter-monument-granada-garces-arquitectos-photo> (Accessed: 19 March 2024)

Many monuments are used as attempts at reparation and closure for a collective or demographic tragedy, or at the very least, the recognition of it to be displaced from the present moment (Thor, 2023, p. 55). Rebecca Katz Thor, in her essay 'Concepts for Contemporary Monuments'*,* intended to be a dialogue with Young's formative essay, argues for the way that contemporary monuments 'encompass a temporal continuation' despite their efforts at closure; they 'enhance a rupture, an end, and a new beginning all at once' (Thor, 2023, p. 56). This is reminiscent of previous discussion of Derrida's conception of mourning, which this thesis has proposed to be an undercurrent to Salcedo's mourning practices, in that the work or monument alludes to past, present and future tenses all at once. In the case of *Fragmentos*, the work offers an attempted 'closure' or recognition to both the sexual assault these seventeen women have experienced, and to the tyranny imposed by FARC forces, whilst also evoking an element of reparation or catharsis for those same women in the act of making, and the material, melted

surrendered FARC weapons, invokes a the hesitant hope for the future following the peace agreement.

The influx of monuments in the late 20th century dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust also required the rethinking of material choices. Particularly in Germany, Young describes the 'Sisyphean replay' or preoccupation with the erection of these monuments and the new and often conceptual forms they take (Young, 1992, p. 269). As opposed to traditional bronze sculptures, many works became based on ephemeral materials or process, or conversely, materials similarly meant to stand the test of time though still less evocative of the classical history of monuments. In particular, the monolithic nature of concrete gives it an aesthetic that has been considered becoming of many modern memorials, with notable examples including the Mémorial des Martys de la Déportation (trans. Memorial to the Martyrs of Deportation) (Fig. 21), hereon referred to as MMD, in Paris, France.

Following the monuments inception, Ionel Schein wrote to architect Georges-Henri Pingusson:

You have brought life into death. And that, moreover, with concrete

(in Richards, 2019, p. 2).

The MMD appears conspicuous from the outside. Its presence on the Seine is dwarfed by the neighbouring Notre Dame Cathedral. Though the interior of the memorial includes the inscription of names and is lined with 200,000 glass crystals, intended to signify the lives lost and those that were 'disappeared' following deportation to Nazi concentration camps, the defining material remains the concrete used to form the monolithic exterior and passageways. The material, though monumental, has a modesty that affords the memorial an 'earnest quality' which is simultaneously evocative, as Elizabeth Benjamin states, of 'claustrophobia, imprisonment and oppression' (Benjamin, 2021, p. 8). Concrete is immediately readable as the encasing of something, and thus the memorial is indicative of a burial. Critics of this architectural style of monument may, as Young states, claim that it contributes to the stifling of history, the 'evasion of memory' (1992, p. 270). Alternatively, we might argue that its gives form to a memory in 'perpetual irresolution', it seals and entombs memory as an act of preservation as opposed to closure, keeping it present in consciousness where it may instead have been repressed by shame and remorse (p. 270).

Fig. 21: Georges-Henri Pingusson. *Pris aus Mémorial des Martys de la Déportation* (2015) Available at: <https://flic.kr/p/v3fN6u> (Accessed: 02 September 2024)

When used in architectural practices and manufacture, concrete is an especially divisive material. As Adrian Forty states, even the history of the use of concrete is disputed. Now more commonly associated with modernism due to an increase in popularity during the nineteenth century, its use dates as far back as the Roman Empire. This 'primitiveness' as Forty states, appears at odds with its apparently progressive or radical nature (Forty, 2012, p. 28). Its low cost and durability have contributed to its use in immense structures, industrial feats truly monumental in size. Interestingly, however, the laying of concrete remains a manual craft, 'dependent on human muscle' and not substantial machinery (Forty, 2012, p. 34). Carlos Basualdo, who interviewed Doris Salcedo in 2000, questions whether this element of craft, of manual labour, is intended to infer 'that which industrial processes represses or marginalizes' (in Salcedo, 2000, p. 6). It speaks to Colombia as a developing country in flux, where Western industrialisation increasingly imposes itself upon traditional craft, contributing to pre-existing fractions between urban and rural regions. Salcedo continuously returns to the use of concrete,

especially in her *Untitled* series (Figs. 22 & 23), as if to embody this stifling of tradition, the dwindling emphasis on rural labour, as well as a way of encasing loss.

Fig. 22: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* (2008), (Wood, concrete and metal)
Available at: <https://www.whitecube.com/artworks/untitled-29>
(Accessed: 11 March 2024)

Fig. 23: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled* (1989), (Wooden furniture, concrete) Available at: <https://mcachicago.org/exhibitions/2015/doris-salcedo> (Accessed: 11 March 2024)

The qualities of the material itself can appear contradictory; it depends on the changing of states from solid to liquid and once more liquid to solid, a strange kind of alchemy that is overlooked in the understanding of general audiences. Defining the material itself is debated, some refer to it as a type of stone, others plaster and others brick (Dungy, 2022). A malleable material at first, it ultimately becomes hardened and impenetrable. Once set, its surface can be either rough and abrasive, or soft and chalky. As viewers of Salcedo's work, we can never be certain which, or perhaps it is both. The touch taboo of the gallery, discussed in Chapter Two in relation to criticism by Mieke Bal, forbids the tactile qualities of the material from being fully explored and thus its surface remains an unknown. Its lack of definition has an evocative effect and, as is often the case in viewing Salcedo's work, the material is unsettlingly indeterminate; in much the same way that Salcedo's narrative is left unending and always to some degree incomprehensible, the material properties of the work remain hovering just outside of our reach.

Edward Bacal, in his essay 'Concrete and the Abstract: on Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra's Tenuous Bodies' (2015), argues the case for concrete's use in abstract works, especially the way in which it can be used to relate to the absent body. This relational understanding of the material seems at odds with the more commonplace, non-material understanding of the term which, in the Oxford Learning Dictionary, defines the adjective concrete as 'based on facts, not on ideas or guesses.' What's more, it points us to compare the term with 'abstract', implying that one is the antithesis of the other (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2024). This would suggest perhaps that this material would be inappropriate for metaphorical use and yet, this seemingly polar relationship between the two terms forms the basis of Bacal's text and evidence for the way in which conflicting understandings of material forms and qualities are used in Salcedo's practice to enhance an ambiguity of narrative.

Salcedo's use of concrete, Bacal states, gives the work both physical and metaphorical weight (2015, p. 263). Physical in the sense that the work is monumental; anyone can stand before the works comprising Salcedo's *Untitled* series and recognise their sheer mass. The logistics of moving the work even just a few inches seem inconceivable. The technical skill required in the production of the work relies on an entire team of assistants, with unseen metal structures built to support the colossal weight of the concrete. As Ramón Villamarin, one of Salcedo's assistants, states 'Doris always tries to make something kind of impossible' both materially and conceptually (*Art21* [YouTube], 2024, 01:47*)*. That impossible monumentality is vital to the work to give it the imposing quality of static weight and immovability, contributing to

the feeling of suspension and stillness which is so prevalent and captivating in Salcedo's practice.

Beyond the consideration of weight in the concrete (adjective) sense, the material is inconsistent in that it is also abstract: it invests in the work an emotional weight. It gives the experience of loss and the absent body a symbolic permanence and importance. This investment has two purposes: both as a proxy for the permanence of the violent act, the irretrievable death, and as a vehicle of mourning that gives those left behind a substitute for the lost body towards which they can direct their grief. Anne Kjœsguard surveys the various ways in which mourners interact with the stones that mark loved one's graves, using the gravestones of Denmark as a case study. She explores the 'metonymic connection between person and stone' (Kjœrsguard, 2019, p. 108), the way in which the gravestone acts as a stand in for the lost body in much the same way that Salcedo continuously substitutes the body for static material. These stones 'provide the dead with a continual material presence in the world', which is only strengthened by its physical qualities (Kjœrsguard, 2019, p. 112). Properties, such as its weight, durability and lack of vulnerability to decay, are shared with that of the concrete structures Salcedo places in the gallery, providing permanence to the place of mourning as well as to the absent body.

In opposition to the relative comfort some find from the exchange of the once living body with stone, Kjœsguard relays the experience of a Danish woman who mourns her father's untimely death at age 63. She speaks of her father's gravestone with a reluctance to identify with it and 'emphasises that the stone is grey and cold to touch', as if to 'contrast the colour and the temperature of the stone with those of golden warm skin' (Kjœrsguard, 2019, p. 116). The harshness of the stone juxtaposes the vitality of the once living body in a very material way. Where some see the stone as a means of permanence and presence, for others that same presence is a reminder of the absence of a person and the fixed state of the dead. In this regard, this substitution bestows both 'sorrow as well as solace' upon the mourner (p.103). Salcedo's words on concrete as material echo this sentiment: 'when you put concrete on something there's no rescue in it, that's the absolute end' (*Doris Salcedo at Glenstone* [YouTube], 2022, 5:19). There is a foreboding permanence implied by its encasement, just like in the MMD. Rather than offering closure by means of this finality, it instead gives the memory and loss a substance which is irrefutable, whether there is comfort to be found in that memory or sorrow. Unlike Kjœsguard's understanding of the relationship between the body and stone, Salcedo's static objects do not stand above or mark the grave of a loved one, for their loss is often one of disappearance, in which the bodies of loved ones remain unrecovered. She gives a solid form to both the loss and the body which is otherwise not afforded the respect it deserves.

Salcedo's work operates not only as a memorial to the dead, but as a commentary on the wider violence to which they were lost. The solidity of her works serves as more than a means of substitution for the singular solitude of mourning or the intimate experience with absence; the permanence of the structures is also a reminder of the way in which the community has been permanently reconfigured. The deaths to which her works allude are ones of violence, the product of a conflict that is fuelled by murder, torture and disappearance which serves to further the division of citizens by means of isolation and fear. In this sense, the mammoth sculptures consisting of robust materials are imprinted with fragile memory traces that question the division and circumstances of loss in Colombia by way of their material contradiction. By parcelling the grief of an individual in one static object, encasing it in concrete, she invites the viewer to witness this mourning in isolation and to question its position as a singular experience when the conditions of loss are shared by so many. In this apparent coexistence of sorrow and solace, singularity and plurality, the contradictions and experience provide further evidence for the ambiguity of Salcedo's narrative, or lack thereof, for it is the viewer's own position that defines what it is the work can give.

The substitution of concrete for the body stands as more than just an object of which to direct grief; it also provides a vessel to record violence itself. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), a seminal text regarding the ethics of representation which pays particular attention to violence and war, Susan Sontag states that 'a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies on the street' (Sontag, 2003, p. 7). Sontag's work is preoccupied by dilemmas of representation, the nature of war and our obligations to memory and the means by which we can bring forth consciousness of it. According to Sontag, cultural producers have a duty to the individuals affected by conflict to look to alternative methods of representation to avoid graphic or voyeuristic gazes, often those of metaphor, difference and deferral. As if in response, Salcedo uses objects and the treatment of materials to infer the violence done to the bodies for which the inanimate forms of concrete or wood substitutes. As inanimate, architectural material, concrete provides a record of the damage to the infrastructure of society and thus the destruction imposed upon those living within it; it takes the place of the bodies of those that have suffered and been displaced at the hands of war. Just as citizens of a war-torn city bear the scars of conflict, so too do its buildings and streets. Salcedo's works allude to the body subjected to brutality and serve as a metonymic and therefore ethical means of portraying violence.

The anthology of texts titled *Wastiary: A Bestiary of Waste* (2023) considers the role of an alphabet of materials in contemporary culture, several of which are reoccurring in Salcedo's

practice. Adam Przywara addresses rubble in his segment in which he compares the experience of women in postwar Poland to the remains of the buildings damaged or destroyed during the war. He argues:

> Many of those labouring on the rubble had been torn out by the war – from their familiar social and economic structures. In large majority, this social group was formed by women, called 'abandoned' since their relatives had been killed or remained lost to war.
>
> (2023, p. 74).

Rubble shares the experience of those who have endured and been displaced by the war: their walls collapsed; their bricks scattered across the city. The physical form of the home, school, hospital or government is destroyed just as much as the concept is shattered. The inclusion of concrete in Salcedo's practice is therefore a method to speak of both types of losses: the emotional loss of a person, the concept of the home, and of the physical damage to society and infrastructure. Concrete forms, forced into the cavities of objects, entombing wardrobes, chairs and tables as well as the personal belongings of those departed encroach on these themes. By encasing the concrete (the building exterior) inside of the furniture (interior), the artist further subverts the divide between the individual and communal in placing the outside *inside* of the home. Just as the marks of violence on the wooden surfaces of armoires and chairs evidence Scarry's argument of the home or room as a signifier of simultaneous miniaturisation and magnification of society, so too do the concrete structures in reverse.

Jonathan Hill addresses ruination in an additional chapter of *Wastiary*. He writes: 'Design, construction, maintenance and ruination may occur simultaneously, fluctuating according to specific spaces and components. Ruination does not only occur once a building is without function' (Hill, 2023, p. 10). As in *Fragmentos,* where the artist preserves the remains of the original building, Salcedo's work shows ruination as a process in flux, where it can exist without a totality or permanence that might at first be assumed. The 'fragments' of the past, as the title alludes to, remain in order to operate in tandem with that which is of the present moment. In the *Untitled* series, despite the material having been meticulously levelled, often metal rods, used in architecture to provide structural support and typically out of sight, are jarringly exposed, contrasting the material's careful setting. The attention to detail in the setting of concrete and its conceptual designation as an architectural material is suggestive of a

rebuilding of the old, burying the past with something new, yet the metal rods that give the work structure fight their way to the surface in order to remain present and seen.

Those that have suffered loss at the hands of violence in Colombia are often subjected to a painfully slow progression of time, the traumatic unfolding of time's passing as defined in Chapter Two. The tactics of guerilla forces leave the bodies of casualties often unfound or unidentified, leaving the families of *desaparecidos* or 'disappeared' relatives to live in a state of permanent delay. Salcedo's work asks the viewer to witness this in engaging with a work that bears no figurative resemblance to that which is lost and does not intend to give clues as to the identity of the one who mourns or is lost. The works carry traces of the absent body, though these traces are rarely specific, only alluding to a lost human presence. The work therefore acts as a kind of monument or space of reflection upon an anonymous death, an unmarked grave or burial.

In Puerto Bérrio, a town in North-West Columbia which is situated along the Magdalena River, it is not uncommon for the bodies of nameless victims to be washed up along the harbour banks accessible to local residents. In fact, in a three-year period the District Attorney's records show the remains of 350 individuals were washed ashore, typically discovered by local fisherman and residents (López, 2014, p. 82). Masses of graves (Fig. 24) marked only NN (an abbreviation of the Latin *Nomen Nescio* which, in English, translates as anonymous or no name) mark the burial places of the unidentified dead (Vanegas, 2021). In this small town, itself devastated by the effects of civil war and its subsequent violence, a curious practice has developed, in which the families of other unidentified or missing persons 'adopt' these bodies and take on the task of mourning them as if they were their own family member or friend. Flowers and hand-painted messages cover the graves of Puerto Bérrio's cemetery, where at its gates a list of missing and murdered citizens are displayed on scrolls for all to see and be remembered. 'It is said that some adopt these bodies... hoping that someone else will also mourn their missing relatives, wherever they may be' (López, 2014, p. 83). It is this idea of reciprocity, of a shared mourning, which Salcedo's work examines.

Fig. 24: Joaquin Sarmiento, *View of Tombstones with Signs Reading 'Exhumation Prohibited' at a Dolorosa Cemetery in Puerto Berrio, Antioquia Department, Colombia on October 28, 2021* (2021), (Photograph) Available at: <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/latin-america/the-colombian-town-that-adopted-a-conflicts-anonymous-dead.phtml>. (Accessed: 02 September 2024)

Unidentified bodies and missing persons are evidently not a new or unique phenomenon during conflict. For centuries now traditions of honouring the 'unknown soldier' have taken place, in which ceremonies centre upon the concept of or the body of an unknown casualty, used as a substitute for all of the losses endured during a specific conflict. To have so many deaths unidentified and unrecognised is an impossible situation and the ceremony is proposed as a solution to the dilemma of how we might honour these deaths in their singularity whilst acknowledging that the specificity of the body, an important factor in most funerary rituals, is unavailable, and that the circumstances of their death and/or disappearance has occurred in unimaginable plurality. Salcedo's work similarly mourns, or creates conditions under which we can mourn, a plurality of loss as it relates to an unspecified individual; in their substitutive representation of the body, they evoke an individual presence without clarifying who. In a sense, Salcedo's works operate under the same conditions of the unknown soldier, expanding and building upon it to reflect not just those who have died during active contribution to combat, but also civilians, bystanders and their loved ones.

Michael Naas brings our attention to the tradition of the unknown soldier relaying the speech given by President Ronald Reagan at the 1984 Vietnam Memorial Day ceremony. He

expresses the way in which he felt both 'moved and deeply disturbed' by the speech, and the 'terrifying thought that with this one ceremony, all the horror and uncertainty, the lies and deceptions of Vietnam had been recuperated, lifted up, transformed into a glorious death' (Naas, 2003, p. 87). Naas' *History's Remains: Of Memory, Mourning and The Event* (2003) was written following the tragic events of 9/11 and, as to be expected of the editor of *The Work of Mourning,* Naas relates the events with Derrida's writings on and of mourning. In particular, Naas pays attention to Derrida's essay written following the death of Jean-François Lyotard, 'Lyotard and Us' (Derrida, 2001). He does so in order to draw attention to the Athenian concept of the beautiful death and that same glorious death that the casualties of Vietnam are now made to serve (Naas, 2003, p. 88).

This beautiful death consists of 'the exchange of the finite for the infinite', where a person is given purpose in their death, be it glory, martyrdom or otherwise, and thus, they 'die so as not to die' (Derrida, 2001, p. 236). Nicole Loraux refers to the Athenian 'warrior's death' as the 'supreme exploit' of the individual (2024, p. 64). The funerals of 'normal men' are given purpose only in death. Whilst in tone they are treated with the honorary respect of that of a general or commander, this is done so only through communal ceremony. They are afforded the same glory in death as their superiors but this accolade must be shared rather than granted in isolation to any 'common' individual (p. 63). Not only to remove purpose from their lived lives, transferring it the honour only in death, Loraux argues that the celebration of the death of combatants has always been done so in such a way that a greater ideology could be implanted and justified (p. 64). It was a way of giving cause for their death as a necessity for greater means, a sacrifice for the goals of 'democratic' society. In this sense the ceremonial speech act conducted by orators or poets, Loraux states, transformed 'the beautiful dead man to the beautiful death' (p. 67).

Society and mass casualty situations have been used throughout history as a means to further an ideology. Naas draws comparisons to the ceremonial-like 'images of falling towers' shown with 'endless repetition' at the 2002 Super Bowl following 9/11. When faced with the prospect of mourning on such a large, national scale, it would appear the Western procedure is to memorialise the events in such a way that we are desensitised to the casualties, forgotten in their individuality, and instead considered within wider claims to a vengeful attack by a political or ideological agenda. The work of mourning the individual is put to a premature end in favour of 'transformation', an attempt at sublating mourning into the beautiful death at whatever cost (Naas, 2003, p. 88).

Sublation, quoted by Naas, is an interesting contribution, the attempted translation of the Hegelian concept, *Aufhebung*. No adequate English translation from the German exists, though Derrida has attempted to translate the term into French, reléve (Bass in Derrida, 1984). It relates to notions of both preservation and negation, coexisting in an unstable paradox, reminiscent of the impossibilities in Salcedo's work and of theoretical understandings of the work of mourning in the wider sense.

Naas points to the existence of traditions such as that of the unknown soldier as leaving 'a gaping wound at the heart of the glorious death' (Naas, 2003, p. 88). Commemorating remains that remain unidentified leaves us with an 'unidentifiable spectre that haunts our collective mourning', prolonging it, resisting narrative or resolution and thus deeming it interminable in a way that embodies Derrida's identification of mourning as an unending state in the most literal sense (pp. 88–89). The state's organisation of mourning, its attempt at sublation, has thus failed. Ultimately, the dead's separation from their history, their own names even, makes the loss of them more undeniable, their 'absence more present and pressing' in the community (p. 89).

Charles Merewether similarly examines the ceremonial qualities of tombs to unknown soldiers, drawing parallels between this and the sheer number of missing persons in Colombia, presumed dead at the hands of military and guerrilla violence. He states that whilst ceremonies such as these are intended to foster a sense of community following conflict, in countries like Colombia where so many have encountered military violence, it is 'the idea of community or collectivity which is threatened' (Merewether, 1993, p. 35). The anonymity of mass graves, ever increasing statistics and reports of missing persons reduces the loss to something impersonal. Emphasis comes to be placed upon death itself, rather than the dead in their individuality and mourning therefore is experienced only in the private sphere.

Rather than an attempt to supress the memory of individuals and events in what Naas and Benedict Anderson (1983, p.14) believe to be the tactics of the unknown soldier, Salcedo finds a way in which to manipulate the concept and acknowledge both the singularity and plurality of loss for those who remain missing, presumed dead. Her works remain a kind of anonymous vigil by which to honour the deaths of an uncertain number, without conflating them as one.

Where the statements made by Reagan above and Bush, quoted in the previous chapter, hope to conclude, to wrap up neatly, the grief of a collective, Salcedo asks the viewer to continually stand as witness to grief, offering a contribution to 'social memory' as opposed to the cultural oblivion imposed by ceremonial practices that evoke a sense of martyrdom (Arango,

2015, p. 156). Her work engages with the premise of the unknown solider without deeming it a resolution; it aims to recognise the wounded society, and to do so continually, without seeking to heal it. Salcedo offers the practice of memory up as a form of justice, acknowledging that whilst what is lost or has been endured cannot be repaired, we can offer respect, dignity and responsibility for the dead in our continual engagement with cultural memory (Arango, 2015, p. 157). In doing so, the artist avoids the repetition or valorisation of the violent acts themselves, as to do so would be to surrender to the 'anonymity of violent death' (Merewether, 1993, p. 42). Instead, Salcedo's work serves to remind the community of their collective conscious, to position them as witnesses, in order to give a statement of defiance against the 'tactics of disappearance' employed by the military (p. 43).

To describe Salcedo's work as constituting a monument, to consider *Fragmentos* or the *Untitled* series to be singular memorials to defined events, would be reductive. Where traditional monuments remain insufficient, Salcedo's work hovers around the notion of the counter-monument, a site to instigate memory rather than narrate it. The anonymity of death in Colombia is an often-unavoidable fact and so the artist's work recognises the futility of giving shape to the casualties of the conflict whilst also affording them a monumentality by means of the works material properties and physical weight. Her practice brings grief out into the social and political domain, encouraging a collective engagement with that which has been repressed, though the work speaks not from a specific perspective nor to reinforce division but to favour evocation of universal vulnerability over the suggestion of ideology. In doing so, the works are given the freedom to encompass narratives outside of the standard rhetoric, the experiences of survivors and mourners is made present, affording them honour and dignity that is not diminished by that of the dead.

Conclusion

To write a thesis based upon the work of mourning, defining that work as having no beginning or end, and then to offer an introduction and conclusion seems contradictory; it suggests a beginning and an end to what we might consider to be my own work on or of mourning. However, to adhere to academic principles, I must introduce and summarise whilst also acknowledging this fact. Furthermore, in considering Derrida's notion of mourning as bestowing the ultimate responsibility onto the mourner for the other, I must accept that part of my responsibility is to acknowledge that this work from its inception was and always would be a failure, in much the same way as Derrida's and Salcedo's work is unsuccessful too.

I will offer instead this thesis as existing within the limits Bal proposes in her *Refugees and Representation: An Impossible Necessity* (2022) which has been referenced intermittently throughout this text. She writes:

> ...when I say "essay", I mean this quite literally. This is not a simple, traditional scholarly article, developing research and drawing conclusions about something.... but it is an essay in the literal sense of an attempt: a noun, attempt, and a verb, attempting...

(Bal, 2022, p. 2)

Throughout this text, I have emphasised Salcedo's use of the artwork as a vehicle for mourning. In doing so, I have discussed Bal and Damisch's proposition of the theoretical object, positioning the artwork as an object that implores the viewer to think for themselves and undergo their own theory. Salcedo does not offer a prescribed narrative but an ambiguous one that leaves room for continual reinterpretation. This also serves to remove the work from a static temporality, opening space for reflection on Derrida's writings of mourning which, as above, designates it as a process which is indeterminant, having no defined beginning or end. It is rather a labour that is undertaken in perpetuity, continually in process and alterable accordingly.

I have discussed the way that Salcedo's material choices reinforce this ambiguity, the way their uncertain form make the work of the theoretical object possible. The text has relayed Salcedo's interventions with found objects, the contexts and influences that inform these choices, which combats viewer indifference by way of their familiarity and subsequent violation.

By manipulating perspective in her division of form and surface, the artist presents and encourages a visceral and at times confusing engagement with the work in which silence, rigidity and discomfort are balanced against both moving and melancholic elements. In using and disfiguring found furniture, Salcedo positions them as referents for the wounded or lost body, which I have placed in dialogue with Elaine Scarry's writing on the body in pain and the inadequacy of written and visual language to communicate this. This echoes the notions of impossibility proposed by both Bal and Derrida. I argue that this metonymic substitution is representative of both the failure and success of Salcedo's work in conveying the felt experience of violence. The artist suspends the work between both oppositional outcomes, using a visual language she already knows to be ineffective. This connection serves as an ethical means of portraying violence and brutality, avoiding both exhibitionism and the suggestion of an overarching narrative or ideology. Salcedo's work can, in fact, be seen to speak to victims and perpetrators from both sides of the Colombian conflict, as well as those beyond its borders. Furthermore, in positioning the home as a miniaturisation of society, as suggested by Scarry, the objects become not only markers of the fractured society but attempts to combat the indifference or repression between citizens.

The damage that these found objects are subjected to, the violence of their being brought out of the home, serves again as a means of repositioning or repurposing. This does, however, appear to be less of a *re*purposing of objects and the spaces they inhabit and more a means of suspending them in in a state of non-function. In doing so, Salcedo infers upon the viewer the irreparability of grief and the feeling it imposes on the mourner of having been removed from a normal chronology or passage of time. Temporality is further invoked by Salcedo's choice of materials; in some works, such as *A Flor de Piel,* temporality is insinuated by way of the material's ephemerality, in this instance the chemically treated rose petals. Others, however, evoke monumentality in the permanence and solidity of their material forms.

One obvious example of this monumentality is Salcedo's use of concrete in the *Untitled* series. In Chapter Four I argue for the similarities of the material with the durability of stone used to mark graves. It renders the work capable of giving a permanence to their absence by way of a static presence. Its solidity can instigate both solace, in the permanent form it gives to their loss, and sorrow, in the finality of its cold and hardened form which seems so absurd as a stand-in for the living body of a loved one. This is similar to the use of furniture in her work, often filled with concrete as in the *Untitled* series, which evokes the absence of the human body and bear the scars of violence it was once subject to.

A reoccurring material in Salcedo's practice, concrete has also seen an increase in use in modern memorials, particularly those erected during what James E. Young describes as the counter-monument movement. Salcedo's work shares similarities with the intentions of the movement, avoiding the classical rhetorics and forms of monuments that pre-dated it. Her work simultaneously infers individual experience in its familiarity and in the artist's dedication to testimony yet remains also representative of a plurality of narrative. It avoids making martyrs of those named or unnamed, or imposing any form of ideology or purpose in their death. She positions us instead to witness a genre of violent death, rather than defined events or individuals, whilst not diminishing the singularity of its effects.

In addition to the counter-monument movement, in Chapter Four I also discuss Salcedo's work in relation to ceremonies of the Unknown Soldier, which Michael Naas discusses in conjunction with Derrida's text. This is relevant in two ways: because of the thousands of disappeared people in Colombia, the dead who remain lacking either a body or a name, and because these ceremonies provide a starting point from which to consider mass memorials following innumerable casualties. With regards to the latter, Naas writes about the way that as communities we appear to repress tragic events such as that of 9/11 by means of over exposure or desensitisation. By commemorating mass casualties in these ceremonial ways, the memory of them appears to be 'wrapped up' in order to be forgotten, an active disremembering by means of an attempt at concluding the event and its effect.

I argue, however, that, rather than attempt to foreclose the memory of tragedy, a prolonged engagement with mourning and the recognition of human vulnerability to the other ought to be considered a priority in our *attempted* reconciliation. Informed by Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (2004), that reconciliation is an ongoing process which, like the work of mourning, relies also on it having no beginning or end. If Salcedo's aim is to look for a solution to rectify the effects of collective grief, she does so under the awareness of its impossibility. Her work of mourning operates only to acknowledge and reckon with its futility and its lack of definition. She promotes rather an engagement with mourning as a means of tackling indifference, the dissolution of the distancing of the other from oneself. By encouraging the work's viewer to act as witness to the traumatic experience in the form of a perpetually and intentionally unfinished work, she aims to remind us of our own vulnerability to the other and to rethink the cyclical nature of violence based on retribution.

There is no final paragraph I can offer that would not go against the incompleteness of the work of mourning or does not pretend to give a conclusive theoretical explanation of Salcedo's

work. Instead, this thesis offers only a contribution of my own continual work of mourning and ongoing engagement with the works as theoretical objects, dependent on their ability to be reinterpreted in perpetuity. Salcedo positions I, and you, as witness to the work of mourning and to the violence in and beyond Colombia, combatting indifference directed towards the other and making us active participants in the work of mourning.

Paul Celan ends the poem in this thesis' epigraph with the final line, 'Count me among the almonds' (Celan, 1996). His words are a call for survivors not to be discounted, to be considered amongst the casualties who are irreparably altered by the absence of the other and the silence that speaks so loudly of the event. Salcedo's work invites the viewer to witness their absence and so we too become absorbed into categories of the mourned, the mourner, the perpetrator and the witness. Ultimately, in our encounter with the artwork, we are made to both engage with and recognise our own continuous contribution to the work of mourning, and to assume the position of witness to the violence subjected to the other and their consequent grief.

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