

## Embodied Memory, Spaces of Action

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For our disappeared, not a minute of silence, a life of struggle  
/ Por nuestros desaparecidos ni un minuto de silencio  
toda una vida de lucha.  
– Gloria Luz Gómez Cortés (2021)

I am not an activist and I do not believe in aesthetic redemption. Art cannot save a single life; however, it gives us back dignity and humanity every time a life is lost due to violence.  
– Doris Salcedo (Orozco, 2016)



Figure 1. *¿QUIÉN DIO LA ORDEN?* Digital rendering of the mural in the public space, part of the “*campaña por la verdad*” (campaign for the truth) organized by MOVICE. October 19, 2019. Courtesy: MOVICE

In late 2019, this image, titled “¿Quién dio la orden?” (Who gave the order?), went viral in Colombia (Figure 1). The image portrayed five men, all military high officials responsible for thousands of extrajudicial executions, in what was the most gruesome of the human rights violations committed by the state in the long Colombian conflict. The mural was part of a campaign against impunity by the Movimiento Nacional de las Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado (MOVICE, or National Movement of the Victims of State Crimes) led by activist Gloria Luz Gómez Cortés. The image was placed on a wall nearby military battalion #13 in Bogotá and referred directly to their involvement in the so-called “falsos positivos” (extrajudicial killings). The killings were committed by factions of the military, mostly during the tenure of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010). According to investigations in 2021 by the Justicia Special de Paz (JEP, or Special Justice for Peace) regarding crimes by agents of the State (known as Case 003), the number rose from MOVICE’s original count of 5,763 to 6,402 civilian victims of this practice.<sup>1</sup>

What is remarkable here is not the number of killings but the macabre and almost systematic way they were committed. In response to El Acto Patriota (Patriot Act), part of the Seguridad Democrática (democratic security) policy developed during Uribe’s tenure, military units across the country systematically identified disenfranchised youth in poor neighborhoods in cities and the countryside. Military scouts offered them work in military battalions, then kidnapped and killed them in cold blood. They dressed the victims in military attire (so that they resembled guerrilla fighters), arranged false evidence, and finally reported them as killed in action. The policy rewarded platoons based on numbers of “bajas en acción” (enemies killed in action). In most cases, bodies without identification were deposited in common pits, adding to the number of disappeared in Colombia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> José Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch at the time, reported the violations in Colombia. Two reports to mark the ten years of the Soacha cases were published summarizing the “Falsos Positivos” scandal. See “How the Perverse Incentives behind ‘False Positives’ Worked” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/12/how-perverse-incentives-behind-false-positives-worked#>. On the JEP’s Case 003, see <https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/La-JEP-hace-p%C3%BAblica-la-estrategia-de-priorizaci%C3%B3n-dentro-del-Caso-03,-conocido-como-el-de-falsos-positivos.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the National Registry of Victims and the National Registry of Disappeared, 167,325 people disappeared in Colombia between 1930 and 2021. Among those registered as “forced” disappeared, 30,276 are listed for reasons of political affiliation. <https://desaparicionforzada.com/la-desaparicion-forzada-en-colombia-datos-2021/>.

After almost two decades, mothers and sisters are still asking for answers, for justice, for their loved ones.<sup>3</sup> In the 2013 documentary *Retratos de familia* (*Family Portraits*), director Alexandra Cardona presents a number of stories about the mothers of young men from Soacha, a poor district in the southern end of Bogotá. Their sons were taken away in early 2008 and later found in a common pit hundreds of miles away in the town of Ocaña in Norte de Santander. This case became pivotal in uncovering this practice. By sharing images and stories of the men in domestic settings, the film helps to bring their physical presence to the forefront: helping them exist beyond statistics, beyond the shadow of a police state able to cover up massacres committed by its forces that can only be uncovered by women sharing their collective grief. As these images were shared in the public sphere, they entered not only into the judicial processes and the archive, but also into the social imaginaries in which women (mothers) became the first line in the struggle for human rights in Colombia. Building on the legacy of “las Madres/Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo” they have become subjects of history. By narrating their stories out of pain and silence, a voice emerges, and a collective body arises, resonating deeply in the shared consciousness of the victims of Colombia’s horror. They are real “memory entrepreneurs” (Jelin 2003), confronting the male power that cast a shadow of doubt over their claims and allowing a process of emancipation and reconciliation to start.<sup>4</sup>

This is just an example of how practices of embodied memory through visual means in Colombia have triggered members of civil society to act as permanent and embodied witnesses. They act through event/actions, judicial processes, and healing.

The use of images, processions, murals, installations, and social performances are part of a toolkit of resistance in Colombia. These practices signal an encounter between the cultural world and the social realities of the nation. It also dislocates the

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<sup>3</sup> Some cases ended at the Supreme Court, which finally decided to declare them of “lesa humanidad” (crimes against humanity) in 2017. Due to its systematic nature over the span of a decade, and the fact that many cases were not even included in the “Ley de Justicia y Paz” (Justice and Peace Law) of 2005, the JEP created Case 003 to overwrite and revise judicial proceedings previously done by the courts (even military ones) and prosecutors.

<sup>4</sup> At the time, President Uribe Vélez argued that a shadow of suspicion hung over these young victims: “No fueron a coger café, iban con propósitos delincuenciales y no murieron un día después de su desaparición, sino un mes más tarde.” There are many sources that showed how overt this practice was; see “Uribe dice que desaparecidos de Soacha murieron en combates” (*El Espectador*, 7 October 2008, accessed 28 April 2022, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/articulo-uribe-dice-desaparecidos-de-soacha-murieron-combates>); and “La historia inédita de los falsos positivos” (*Semana*, 6 July 2013, accessed 28 April 2022, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-historia-inedita-falsos-positivos/349851-3>). Years later, in 2015, Uribe Vélez had to ask for the mothers’ forgiveness after continually casting them as bandits. (All translations in this article are mine.)

“culture,” which is usually found in galleries, museums, theaters, and auditoriums, instead bringing it to the streets, plazas, and physical and virtual public space and creating a zone where artists and social movements meet, collaborate, and produce spaces of mourning, reflection, and action. As the group bearing much of the suffering during the internal conflict, women have been leading and organizing collectives, becoming visible and vocal.<sup>5</sup>

This text shares the story of two women who have been working individually and collectively to find forms of embodied action to process their grief and mourning, to bring the truth to light, and to find spaces of reconciliation. On one hand, there is the work of activist Gloria Luz Gómez Cortés, long-time director of the Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (ASFADDES, the Association of Detained and Disappeared) in Colombia and co-founder of MOVICE. Gloria lost two of her brothers—Leonardo and Luis, in 1983 and 1987—at the hands of the military. Their cases were never resolved: one body was found with a bullet in the head, the other was lost. Gloria then decided to work for victims, women like her, fighting to find their loved ones. The two organizations use storytelling, photography, protest, performance, public installations, and political action to claim justice. Today, MOVICE includes more than two hundred organizations of victims of political disappearance, extrajudicial executions, targeted killings, and forced displacement, supporting hundreds of human rights defenders. On the other hand, there is the well-known work of visual artist Doris Salcedo, who for almost forty years has been producing embodied art pieces, acts, and events related to loss and grief in the Colombian conflict (Rojas-Sotelo 2022). They present forms of embodied memory and announce a constellation of people (women in particular) that functions as memory entrepreneurs, as defined by Elizabeth Jelin (2003). These memory entrepreneurs/activists/artists find ways of interrupting the flows of time and space

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the *Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz* (Alianza IMP) is an alliance of twenty-two women’s organizations, including indigenous women, academics, feminists, afro-Colombians, and others. Alianza IMP bases its foundation in UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, and acts as a collective voice for women at the official peace negotiations with the FARC-EP and the Santos Government. Alianza IMP was established in November 2001 at a conference in Sweden that brought together various women’s organizations from Colombia to build and share strategies for peace. They continue working actively on multiple fronts. For more information about Alianza IMP, see <http://www.muieresporlapaz.org/>.

and the relationship of the object to the subject by establishing a collective immersive experience of history via memory.<sup>6</sup>

The many collective activities developed by Gloria Luz Gómez Cortés (1958) respond to individual memories and the bodies and archives produced by those participating in them. MOVICE is a collective construction, created in 2005 as an aggregate of organizations. In 2008, they published their “Comprehensive Policy of Human Rights: A proposition from victims of State Crimes,” based on discussions that took place in previous national meetings of victims to “lay the foundation for finding an effective solution regarding human rights violations in the country and to counter the politics of war embodied in security policies of the State” (MOVICE 2020). Gómez and her group organized a national demonstration on March 6, 2008, for “victims of state violence.” This event/action enabled unprecedented visibility of such crimes in Colombia. It followed a demonstration in February 2008 called “No Más FARC” that had obtained the support of Colombian society in combating the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) after the Justice and Peace Law that demobilized paramilitaries in 2005 (Knoll Soloff 2016).<sup>7</sup> Due in part to the efforts of these organizations, the scandal of extrajudicial executions (False Positives) broke in 2009. For years MOVICE had collected official

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Jelin’s notion of “memory entrepreneur” defines individuals who are responsible for the creation of memory, and for the reinterpretation of memory. The past decades have seen an emergence of artists in Colombia working on issues of violence, grieving, war, kidnapping, narcoterrorism, etc. Apart from Salcedo, there are dozens of artists who have produced work on these topics, including, but not limited to, Alejandro Obregón, Ethel Gilmour, Beatriz González, Miguel Ángel Rojas, Juan Manuel Echavarría, Óscar Muñoz, Clemecia Echeverri, José Alejandro Restrepo, Juan Fernando Herrán, Rosemberg Sandoval, Wilson Díaz, Fernando Arias, Edith Arbeláez, Ana Claudia Múnera, Carlos Uribe, Erika Diettes, Claudia Salamanca, and Fernando Pertuz. There are also some seminal texts that present these issues in historical context from 1948 on, such as Álvaro Medina’s *Arte y violencia en Colombia desde 1948* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, 1999) and María Malagón’s *Arte como presencia indécica: la obra de tres artistas colombianos en tiempos de violencia Beatriz González, Oscar Muñoz y Doris Salcedo* (Bogotá: Uniandes Press, 2010). Other important contributions are: Jaime Borja y Alejandro Restrepo’s *Habeas Corpus: que tengas un cuerpo para exponer* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2010); Juana Suárez’s *Sitios de contienda: producción cultural colombiana y el discurso de la violencia* (Madrid: Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2010); Luisa F. Ordóñez Ortegón’s “El cuerpo de la violencia en la historia del arte colombiano” (*Nómadas*, No. 38. January-June 2013). See the reference section for more sources.

<sup>7</sup> The FARC was formed in rural Colombia in 1964, when a group of farmers rose up in arms to challenge the landowning class and create an autonomous territory. They later turned to armed struggle to take political power. Since its formation, the FARC-EP has been at war with the Colombian army and the various U.S.-backed paramilitary groups that have united to combat them. After the 2016 peace process some guerrilla fronts did not demobilize, establishing what are called “Dissidences,” which are still active in various regions of the country.

documents, testimonials, produced reports, and organized campaigns; the Nunca Más Project (Never Again) emerged from this archive.

Doris Salcedo (1958) lives and works in Bogotá. She trained as a professional artist in the early 1980s in Colombia and later in the U.S., and she returned to Colombia in 1985. There, she witnessed the escalation of violence.<sup>8</sup> This fact—along with her interests in the work of Joseph Beuys, minimalism, stage design, social theater, and her own political awareness—would eventually lead her to make social narratives the core of her aesthetic enterprise (Rojas-Sotelo 2004, 2022). In this article, I will discuss Salcedo’s pieces *Adding Up Absences* (2016), and *Fragmentos* (2018)—both installations, aesthetic events-actions, and counter-monuments.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. *Despaired / Disappeared*

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Doris Salcedo’s artistic production included sculptures and installations, establishing visual and sensible representations of socio-political facts erased by official historical narratives in Colombia. Her approach led her to feature a direct connection with victims of violence by including real/personal objects (clothes, furniture, even bones, and hair) of victims in her work. *Untitled* (1990) is a direct response to a massacre involving banana workers and right-wing forces in the Urabá region, northwest of Colombia; *Casa Vinda* Series (1992-1994) represents violent acts committed in rural areas with individual sculptures/installations. *Atravilarios* (1992) is an archive/columbarium of vestiges of murder victims in the city of Medellín. Today, Salcedo is one of the most important

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<sup>8</sup> Salcedo was impacted by the events of November 6 and 7, 1985, when the Justice Palace, located in downtown Bogotá, was occupied by guerrilla forces. A command of M-19 took over the building. The violence that ensued ended in a horrific tragedy not completely understood even today. Doris Salcedo was an eyewitness to this tragedy. Seventeen years later, she created a piece in the same location using chairs titled *November 6 and 7*. Several chairs, hanging from the walls of the building, recalled the justices that were lost during that event, and many others due to the internal conflict.

<sup>9</sup> I will be using the concept of “event/action” and the idea of “social sculpture,” coined by Michel de Certeau and Joseph Beuys, in examining Salcedo’s work and her role as a permanent and active witness of social realities. Cultural practices are carried out in the form of tactics, which at the same time are the actions of the weak, acting against strategies that are attempt to control and subjugate. They are located in the geometrical space of power. Social sculpture refers to a conception of art, framed in the 1970s by Beuys, as an interdisciplinary and participatory process in which thought, speech, materiality, and discussion are core ingredients. I have used this notion when discussing the work of other artists in my text “Chimeras of Today and Corporeal Minds” (2007. Accessed on April 28, 2020. [https://www.academia.edu/921461/Chimeras\\_of\\_Today\\_and\\_Corporeal\\_Minds](https://www.academia.edu/921461/Chimeras_of_Today_and_Corporeal_Minds)).

visual artists alive.<sup>10</sup> Her work is included in public and private collections,<sup>11</sup> and is recorded in major publications.<sup>12</sup> Her *oeuvre* intervenes in debates about art and politics and in the poetics of mourning (Rojas-Sotelo 2004, 2022; Rubiano 2017; Huysen 2003; Bal 2000, 2010; Merewether 1993,1999).<sup>13</sup>

The practice of Gómez as activist has been to reveal what is hidden, the uncomfortable truth of political disappearance in Colombia. The house where ASFADDES operates (located in a popular neighborhood in Bogotá) is a living archive, a place in which the memory of those who are not present find comfort in the form of photos, documents, memorabilia, etc. Each time mothers and sisters bring them out of the archive, into the streets and plazas, in front of governmental offices, to demand the disappeared return home in public events, they come alive again. “In the house of the association, there are several rooms with at least 500 boxes of documentary files of the absentees. There, a reconstruction of an individual and collective memory is found, which hopes to intersect with the historical one, to finally find the truth” (Morelo 2018).

For Salcedo, as well as for Gómez, freezing space by entombing images, narratives, and even vestiges is key to revealing the reality. Salcedo shows how time is constantly interrupted by acts of violence. Gómez and the relatives re-embodiment each

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<sup>10</sup> In 2010, Salcedo received the Velásquez Award in Spain; in 2014, the Hiroshima Art Prize; in 2016, the inaugural Nasher Prize; in 2017, the Rolf Schock Prize for Visual Art; and in 2019, Salcedo was awarded the world’s most significant art prize, the Nomura Award (one million dollars). In 2015-2016, Salcedo had a major retrospective organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Perez Art Museum. Retrospective volumes were produced for her exhibits in 2015 and *Plegaria Muda* for the Nasher award. Her work has been also featured in the ART21 series. For a complete curriculum vitae of Doris Salcedo, visit: <https://www.whitecube.com/artists/doris-salcedo>.

<sup>11</sup> At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Los Angeles Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art San Francisco, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, the Tate Modern in London, La Caixa in Barcelona, The Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the National Gallery of Canada, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango in Bogotá, among other collections. Her work is represented by Alexander and Bonin in New York City and White Cube in London.

<sup>12</sup> See Arnason 2004; Bal 2010; Benezra & Viso 1996; Harrison & Wood 2010; Rodrigues-Widholm & Grynsztein 2015; Schneider Enriquez, et al. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> In the past decade, an increasing interest in the relation of art and violence and art and politics took writing about art in Colombia by storm. After many debates—many centered on theoretical approaches to the issues, derived from poststructuralism (French), cultural studies (Frankfurt School and the British), and the recent decolonial turn (Latino, North and South America)—some authors are establishing new epistemological frameworks to talk about this issue. It is refreshing and important to see an active sector working on the participation of the cultural sector on the histories of disenfranchised peoples, and a growing body of work that is responsible for representing this reality.

violent act as a catharsis of their pain as a political act. Salcedo and Gómez are aware of both the cultural space and, more importantly, the social and geopolitical one.

## 2. *Women's Struggle: monumentalizing memory*

When ASFADES was founded, Gloria Gómez remembers, “Most of them were men. We lived in a totally macho space. Who were the leaders? Who were the activists? Men” (Morelo 2018). Gómez recalls how in Colombia women had a traditional role: to run the home. However, violence disrupted such roles. During the first years of their struggle, “they called us the crazy women... When we went out to the marches in the streets to look for the disappeared, the men stayed behind us” (2018). Ever since women became the first line of the movement, they became visible (while men had to be in the shadows for fear of being taken). Women had to play a double role, running broken homes and looking for the absent ones. “Society itself called us the body searchers and in the midst of it we asserted our dignity” (2018).<sup>14</sup>

During the Justice and Peace process (2005-2010), demobilized paramilitary groups narrated some of the crimes for which they received amnesty, many of which were committed against women.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, sexual violence has been present in Salcedo's work. As with her *Casa Viuda* series, whereby locating tortured sculptures in halls and passing areas interrupted the flows of time and space, interpolating the

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that women, in Colombia's long internal conflict, have been victimized the most. The National Institute of Forensic Medicine reported that 2.5 women per day were murdered between 2014 and 2016 (Medicina Legal 2017). Women fifteen to fifty-four years old are the target of selective violence, with an increasing number of women twenty to twenty-four years of age. According to the statistics, perpetrators are mostly unknown men (23%), while a smaller percentage declared that perpetrators are their partners or ex-partners (11%). The most dangerous states for women in Colombia are Valle del Cauca (capital Cali) and Antioquia (capital Medellín). Both territories were under the control of organized crime until recently, and still face security challenges both in their rural and urban environments. The United Nations has stated that, between 1995 and 2011, more than 2,700,000 women were forcibly displaced (about 6% of the total population of the country and 51% of the total number of displaced persons). In the same period, 15.8% of displaced women report having been victims of sexual violence. In 2016, close to 90,000 women were victims of domestic violence (United Nations 2017). “Women belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by the violence due from the conflict; of the total homicides of indigenous and Afro-Colombian people, 65.5% were women” (ONU 2017).

<sup>15</sup> The “Ley de Justicia y Paz 975, of 2005” was the legal framework promoted by the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez and approved by Congress at the time in order to facilitate the demobilization of paramilitary forces, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, or United Self-Defense of Colombia). By telling the truth, thousands of demobilized men were able to obtain full pardons for crimes against humanity, such as those related to sexual abuse, torture, and mass murder.



viewer: “art speaks to the other; it addresses an altogether other, even if it does not reach the person it is addressing” (Salcedo 2003, 28).<sup>16</sup>

Later, in 2018, Salcedo participated in the establishment of a place that would function as a memory center. At the end of the 2012-2016 peace process with the FARC-EP guerrillas, Salcedo was assigned one-third of the weapons surrendered by them (37 tons, or around 8,900 units) to build a “monument,” and two other monuments were also commissioned.<sup>17</sup> These weapons were previously used by combatants in their everyday life—a remnant of a time that hopefully has passed. For this project, Salcedo used a direct approach to the transformation of that material: fire. Fire is a direct reference to what the weapons did; this primal force, at times used as part of rituals of cleansing, was applied to the objects, which slowly melted and transformed into thousands (1,300 total) of flat tiles of about thirty by thirty by one inch. Each one shows scars and scratches on the surface and, assembled together, they look like a large swath of skin (Torrado 2018). The scars on the tiles were inflicted by female victims of sexual violence during the conflict. They hammered each one as a form of catharsis, which constitutes the second approach in the transformation of the material: rage.<sup>18</sup> The new floor was installed in a space that was formerly a colonial house, also in ruins, near the center of power in Colombia—two blocks from Bolívar Square and a street away from the presidential palace.<sup>19</sup> The product became a counter-monument, *Fragmentos (Fragments)* (Figure 2).

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<sup>16</sup> Art theorists Mieke Bal (2000, 2010) and Charles Merewether (1993, 1999) have addressed Salcedo’s use of time, space and materiality, while others, such as Elizabeth Adan (2010), focus on issues of interruption and specificity. According to Bal, Salcedo’s work slows down time, making it “sticky” to us (2000, 180). Adan suggests that “[w]hile Salcedo’s turn to site-specificity marks something of a shift in her work, these large-scale projects continue her previous, indeed ongoing, commitment to a rigorously politicized aesthetic practice” (2010, 586).

<sup>17</sup> The three “monuments” would be displayed in public spaces: Salcedo’s in Bogotá; another in the grounds of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City; and the third in Havana, Cuba, the host city of the peace negotiations between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government between 2012 and 2016.

<sup>18</sup> “We hammered for days, with the force of hatred that sexual violence and the rage of war left us. But in this way, we were able to free ourselves from these feelings. Now, we are standing above the weapons, and not the weapons over the country,” said Ángela Escobar, one of the victims participating in the production of *Fragmentos* (Chica-García 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Here I also use Anthony Giddens’s concept of “historicity” (1990) to analyze the work of Salcedo. For Giddens, historicity is “the use of knowledge about the past as a means of breaking with it... Historicity orients us towards the future” (50). Recently, the issue of monument and counter monument has become central in understanding Salcedo’s work. I did work on that topic in my master’s thesis in 2004 and returned to it in my text of 2022. I loosely base my argument on a text by Jaime Cerón titled “Memoria y Dolor, el contramonumento en Doris Salcedo” (2002). Cerón also references Salcedo’s interest in art as a document.



Figure 2. Doris Salcedo. *Fragmentos*, 2018.  
A Space for Art and Memory. Author photos.

Doris Salcedo's artistic methods are those of an artist and of a social scientist, human rights defender, and woman interacting with facts and matter. The result is a declaration of real subjects in real environments. The *experience* that emerges from her interaction with witnesses and victims of violence makes her a witness and a victim as well. Salcedo states how "the exhaustive investigation that I carry out on the deaths of the victims of violence, on the actual deed of the murder, leads me to accompany them, step by step, to that death, and in that sense, I feel as though they are inscribed in me" (Merewether 1999, 143). Even taking into account the difficulty of representing the pain of others, her work makes it possible via memory (reenactment)

to come to terms with history—the first stage of reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> The pursuit of justice drives both Gloria Gómez and Doris Salcedo to explore local histories and locations, such as those of the disappeared, the abused (women), and the murdered (civilians, not agents in the conflict) in the framework of events and actions taking place in public spaces, such as Bolívar Square in Bogotá.<sup>21</sup>

The creation of monuments and memorials is usually the task of the state as part of official narratives of nation-building. Monuments embody the highest achievements of society and in some cases, they are the only evidence of an individual's or a society's existence (Rubiano 2017; Reynolds 2003, 113; Greenberg 1995, 180). Salcedo's work moves in the opposite direction, remaining firmly in the sphere of the individual. *Fragmentos* (2018) was designed to be a counter-monument, a space for events/actions, where the spectator is not in front of a spectacle of history, but immersed in it, on equal footing with anyone sharing the experience. On the one hand, proximity (the immersive experience) is a trigger for transient memories; monuments, on the other, are detached and monolithic statements in the public space establishing narratives of History (with a capital H). Salcedo's pieces are unstable, and they can vanish, as memory does. Although they initially resemble solid structures (as monuments do), they are in fact organic objects that start to decay as soon as they are out of her domain (making the collecting of her art challenging). *Fragmentos* becomes the first of Salcedo's works to move from mobile, fragile, and transient to a stable, material, and semi-permanent work (at least for fifty years) (Figure 3).<sup>22</sup>

Most public monuments are masculine, vertical (phallic) presences that deploy ideological perspectives, becoming public enactments and historical landmarks mostly related to masculine power (Panofsky 1955).<sup>23</sup> Salcedo's work, instead,

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<sup>20</sup> Salcedo does not use photographs; however, her investigative work used them as documentation. Susan Sontag's latest book on photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) presents an intersection between news and art so connected with the use and abuse of images in the context of war and disaster that the book itself does not contain a single image. The "weight and seriousness" of images, says Sontag, is more aptly honored privately in silence, in a book.

<sup>21</sup> With the assassination of political satirist and activist Jaime Garzón in 1999, Doris Salcedo moved part of her practice as an artist into the streets and plazas, marking a new collaborative approach in her work. Salcedo completed three public interventions in the streets of Bogotá following the murder and has kept up with such actions ever since.

<sup>22</sup> *Fragmentos* would exist only for the time that the conflict lasted (around fifty years). It also functions as a container where other event/actions take place, and where other artists (two a year) can act and show their work related to human rights, memory, and reconciliation (Torrado 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Many things have been said about the relationship between monuments and masculine power. Their architectural design is the object of many discussions about the validity

provides a human dimension. Edward Bacal has stated how in the work of Salcedo there is an “immateriality full of flesh, [where] the underlying materiality of bodies hence remains one of the principal constitutive factors of not only social production but the political, ethical and aesthetic conditions” (2015, 270).



Figure 3. The *Red de Mujeres Víctimas* (network of women victims) and *Fragments* (Doris Salcedo) welcomed Denis Mukwege, the 2018 Nobel Peace Award winner, to a joint event and a call for action on August 16, 2019. Author photos.

Salcedo’s commitment found inspiration in the struggle of people such as Gómez. Expanding her practice to a radical aesthetic via site-specific art gave her exposure outside of the art world (Adan 2010). In this way, she has been responding more directly to the changing conditions of the Colombian internal conflict. As social

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of monuments as historical documents in the context of feminist theories of male domination. For a definition of monument as document, I take Panofsky’s allusion that they are objects that—unlike the humbler documents that scholars use to establish the historical framework for monument’s purposes and meanings—demand that we engage them on something approaching their own terms, as ends rather than means, and as a works rather than interpretive fields or instruments.

sculptures and events, these works interrupt space and time establishing tensions between presence and absence. By operating in certain locales, they become discursive vectors, raising the aesthetic from its confines via into collective action (Adan 2010, 588). At the same time, they become immersive experiences for participants and eyewitnesses (Rojas-Sotelo 2004).<sup>24</sup>

### 3. *Embodying Praxis*

Colombians take to the streets to grieve their dead and call for action. In Bogotá, people go to Bolívar Square, which acts as an open living archive.<sup>25</sup> The Square contains the politico-administrative apparatus of the nation: on the south side lies the Presidential Palace, *Casa de Nariño*, and Congress; on the east side, the Catholic Cathedral; on the west side, City Hall, the administrative headquarters of Bogotá's Mayor; on the north side, the Justice Palace (the judiciary branch); and at the center of the plaza, the statue of Simón Bolívar, the founding father of the nation. The plaza is a large open space that can host more than fifty thousand people at once.

In 2007, Salcedo achieved international success for her exhibition *Shibboleth* at the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London.<sup>26</sup> However, it has been her work

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning here Salcedo's piece *Tenebrae Noviembre 7, 1985* (1999/2000), presented in Documenta 11 in Germany, 2002. This piece was the precursor of a piece developed at Bolívar Square in 2002. It was based on the November 6, 1985, events when a commando of M-19 raided the Justice Palace (supreme court) in Bogotá, and the disastrous reaction by state forces in taking it over. About the work, see José Roca (2002) "Documenta 11" (*Columna de Arena* 45. Accessed on April 28, 2020. <http://universes-in-universe.de/columna/col45/col45.htm>).

<sup>25</sup> The Square was demarcated by Bogotá's founder, Spanish Conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada in 1539, on the sacred land of the Chibchas (Bacatá). Independence leaders such as José Antonio Galán (1782), Camilo Torres (1816), and Rafael Uribe Uribe (1914) were all executed there. It received the victorious Simón Bolívar in 1819 and was destroyed after the assassination of Jorge E. Gaitán in April 1948.

<sup>26</sup> I won't refer to this piece in this essay due to the extensive coverage and critical writing about it, in part due to its location (the Tate Modern, and its most significant public-space, the Turbine Hall) and the spectacle it created. According to the Tate Modern site: "Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* is the first work to intervene directly in the fabric of the Turbine Hall. Rather than fill this iconic space with a conventional sculpture or installation, Salcedo created a subterranean chasm that stretches the length of the Turbine Hall... In particular, Salcedo addressed a long legacy of racism and colonialism that underlies the modern world." A 'shibboleth' is a custom, phrase or use of language that acts as a test of belonging to a particular social group or class. Rephrasing what Walter Mignolo has remarked, Salcedo writes, "The history of racism runs parallel to the history of modernity and is its untold dark side." See Tate Modern Unilever Series at <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/unilever-series/unilever-series-doris-salcedo-shibboleth#:~:text=Doris%20Salcedo's%20Shibboleth%20is,length%20of%20the%20Turbine%20Hall>.

in public spaces in Colombia that established a socially engaged, locally informed, and contextual practice.



Figure 4. Doris Salcedo. *Acción de duelo*, July 3, 2007. Candles in public space. Approx. 267 × 350 ft. (81.4 × 106.7 m). Site-specific work, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá, 2007. Nearly 24,000 candles were lit in the Plaza, in response to the death of Colombia’s Valle del Cauca Deputies who had been taken hostage in 2002 by the FARC-EP. Photo: Sergio Clavijo.

Salcedo’s *Acción de duelo* (Figure 4) came during a (fake) process of demobilization by the paramilitary groups (AUC Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) that took place in 2005 under the Justice and Peace Law (Álvaro Uribe Vélez’s peace process). During his tenure as president (2002-2010), a military offensive supported by “Plan Colombia” against the FARC-EP heightened the violence nationwide. During those years, the Square was occupied multiple times and for different purposes not only by Salcedo but by the people.

In 2008, two marches took place (February 4 and March 6): one against the actions of the FARC-EP and another against state terror (one supported by the government and the other by the opposition forces). The first march, on February 4, mobilized millions nationwide, not only at Bolívar Square, expressing the social discontent over the use of kidnapping for ransom (and kidnap-express) as a weapon of war by the FARC-EP. The second march, on March 6, was organized by MOVICE and led by Gloria Gómez, denouncing paramilitary actions and state terror in the fight against oppositional forces during Álvaro Uribe Vélez’s tenure. The use of social media (Facebook) and the media were factors in the organization and success of these

marches, establishing newly empowered communities in a divided nation.<sup>27</sup> There have been academic reviews on those events; one of the most interesting noted that the February march used the slogan “Colombia soy yo,” while the second march used “Colombia somos todos.” This distinction created a contrast over who participated and how participation was constructed. While the first march was supported by the government (of Uribe Vélez at the time, and sponsored by, among others, Coca-Cola), the second one was condemned by the government and boycotted by many as non-representative of the interests of the nation (Jaramillo, Molina 2010).

#### 4. *Memory Entrepreneurs*

Salcedo understands well the processes of reification in which memory is a form of spectacle and a commodity. Undoubtedly, there are some qualities that make Salcedo’s work close yet distant from this phenomenon. Referring to its use in the Americas (particularly in the Southern Cone after military regimes) and the memory industry, Salcedo comments, “over the past few years the question of memory has been abused and exhausted as a theme... My work deals with the fact that the beloved—the object of violence—always leaves a trace imprinted on us... I would say that the only way in which I confront memory in my work is, to begin with, the failure of memory” (Merewether 1999, 140). Her work is not celebratory (or denunciatory) and does not support any particular agenda (only that of the victims), and it addresses violence by all agents (right-wing, left-wing, organized crime, or the state) as a result of the convoluted history of Colombia.

The sixty-year-plus armed conflict has taken a devastating toll on Colombian society. More than nine million victims, seven million people internally displaced; 267,000 murdered; and more than 46,000 disappeared since 1999, when the United States pledged billions of dollars in foreign aid for a counter-insurgency war.<sup>28</sup> Plan Colombia helped the army decimate FARC-EP’s ranks, but it also forced Colombian civil society to grapple with the atrocities of death squads (right-wing paramilitary forces), forced displacement, disappearances, massacres, and extrajudicial killings.

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<sup>27</sup> For more about these mobilizations, see *La marcha de la Rabia*. (<http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-marcha-rabia/90798-3>); Editorial, “A seguir marchando” and Ivan Cepeda’s “6 de Marzo” in *El Espectador*. March 5, 2008. <https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/columnistas/ivan-cepeda-castro/la-trascendencia-del-6-de-marzo-column-5215/>

<sup>28</sup> From the National Victim Registry data: <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/>

During all those years, Bolívar Square became the location of public demonstrations. On one hand, Salcedo's symbolic control of space, focused on interruption, re-inscription, emptiness, and absence, while on the other hand, social mobilization focused on physicality, noise, and presence. Both are different in nature: one symbolic and the other political, and both present in the public sphere.<sup>29</sup> At the time, these social demonstrations, in addition to the military offensive, were a call from the civil society and the intellectual community that the time had come. Perhaps they served as a preamble for the peace process that took place between the FARC-EP and the Colombian Government, promoted by President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018).

##### *5. Ashes, Bones, and Flesh*

After four years of negotiations that took place in Havana, Cuba (starting on August 26, 2012), a peace agreement was signed in Colombia on September 26, 2016. Victims of the conflict, such as Gloria Gómez Cortés and Francia Márquez Mina (the current vice president in Colombia) represented women during the process (Humanas 2017). However, a plebiscite was called to approve the accords with a simple YES or NO vote. On October 2, 2016, the NO vote won by a slim margin (0.4%). On October 5, after the defeat of the referendum, over 100,000 students and members of the general public took to the streets of Bogotá, arriving at Bolívar Square in support of the peace accords. MOVICE became pivotal in the social mobilization, as a small group of protesters decided to occupy the Square until the accords were accepted and the process implemented. Days later, on October 7, the Nobel Committee awarded President Juan Manuel Santos the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize, demonstrating the support of the international community for the process.

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<sup>29</sup> In fact, many other art related installations, events, and actions have taken place in the Square during those years. Global artist Spencer Tunick even organized a “nude” photo event at Bolívar Square on June 5, 2016.



On October 10, the Square once again became the medium for Salcedo's action. 2,350 pieces of white cloth (almost seven kilometers of textile), similar in size to death shrouds/flags, were inscribed in ash with the name of (a fraction of) the victims of the internal Colombian conflict. Under Salcedo's direction, victims stitched them together eventually covering or shrouding the entire area of the plaza. This event/action artwork was titled *Sumando Ausencias* (*Adding Up Absences*) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Doris Salcedo. *Sumando Ausencias*. Bolívar Square, Bogotá. October 10, 2016.  
Courtesy: Presidencia de la República de Colombia.

These two event/actions (the March 2008 “Colombia somos todos” march and the October 2016 event/action) evoked the mythic “Marcha del Silencio” (silent march) called on February 7, 1948, by Jorge Eliecer Gaitán (the then-presidential candidate killed a month later, triggering what is known as the “La violencia”) (Figure 6). The silent crowd carried white flags and candles and marched to mourn those massacred in the countryside by the dark forces of the *pájaros* (paramilitary units of the conservative party) during a political transition. The silent presence evoked those absent in one of the most chilling demonstrations of political and symbolic power in the history of the Square. As the implementation of the peace agreement went sour during the Iván Duque administration (2018-2022), the reorganization of criminal organizations grew, the time for justice is still to come.



Figure 6. Marcha del Silencio, February 7, 1948. Bolívar Square, Bogotá. Creative Commons.

It took forty years for ASFADDES to reach a ruling by the courts on one of their foundational cases: “On June 6, 2022, the Prosecutor’s Office 52 specialized in Human Rights declared as a crime against humanity the forced disappearance of 13 young people in 1982, at the hands of F2 agents, a Police intelligence structure in the nineteen-eighties” (Redacción Colombia 2022). The next steps were for the State to strengthen coordination between the Search Unit, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Truth Commission, the Prosecutor’s Office, and social organizations, which have carefully monitored the cases. Gloria Gómez warned: “Victims do not give up our right to justice, and that is why we ask the JEP to strengthen attention to victims and not limit itself to just a few who have decided to speak out. Both sides must be heard” (Redacción Colombia 2022).

On October 18, 2019, just hours after completion, the Mural “¿Quién dio la orden?” was vandalized, apparently by members of the nearby military battalion (Figure 7). Soon, the military filed a court order (Tutela) against MOVICE. The ruling came fast, on February 20, 2020, from civil court number 13 of the circuit of Bogotá and was sanctioned in favor of the military. It stated that MOVICE had to erase all traces of the mural and the image from any medium. MOVICE’s response in a press release dated February 25, 2020, stated that the the mural had already been erased by the military back in October, and that such acts of censorship had produced the

opposite reaction, a multiplication of the image in many forms: more murals, press notes, TV reports, and the sharing of it on multiple platforms via social media. MOVICE argued that the image went viral as a result of the censoring of the image, and with its diffusion came the possibility of finding the truth, moving towards reconciliation, and the negation of such acts under the transitional law.<sup>30</sup>

This action became the first intervention of the Colombia Nunca Más (never again) project. According to MOVICE, Colombia Nunca Más is an initiative with the purpose of contributing to the struggle against impunity for Crimes Against Humanity committed in Colombia by State forces. The organization has created an online system that gives access to the whole archive of victims and serves as an ongoing space to denounce cases of forced disappearance. From the perspective of recovering the historical memory of such acts, the documentation of the events, and the inventory of the damages caused, the project's criteria include recovering and preserving the voice and truth of the victims who have suffered various forms of aggression and identifying those responsible.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 7. Twitter post of the vandalization of the mural. Courtesy: Johana Fuentes (Twitter) and MOVICE.

<sup>30</sup> To access the full text of MOVICE's press release please visit <https://movimientodevictimas.org/en/mural-quien-dio-la-orden-ya-es-patrimonio-de-la-sociedad-movice/> (Accessed on March, 31 2020).

<sup>31</sup> The portal can be found at: <https://nuncamas.movimientodevictimas.org/>.

*To Come...*

Gloria Gómez and Doris Salcedo (among many) are memory entrepreneurs, women whose work has shed light on the multiple cases of human rights abuse in Colombia. Their work has given voice to victims. They have used their voices, bodies, and have collected images, and vestiges of the past. A cascade of public events and actions has taken place since those made in the mid- and late-1980s. That visibility brings attention to their struggle, and their work has won the support and recognition of international organizations and global critics. Their commitment resonates not only with the victims, event participants, and observers of the actions, but also in the debates about crimes against humanity, memory, grief, loss, public art, socially engaged art, and peace resolution in Colombia. Like interruptions in the timeline of history their work announces, perhaps, the potential of collective action via an aesthetic embodied action. In Colombia, those actions involved a process that begins with the promise of an end of the conflict (at least on paper).

Today, multiple groups of victims of human rights abuses in Colombia are using similar tactics to those of Gómez and Salcedo (Figure 8). For example, the relatives of the victims of the Unión Patriótica political party (the plaintiffs report about eight thousand killings) have filled Bolívar Square with images and chairs every year since 2017. They mark a symbolic and judicial debt owed to them. After decades of persecution and slaughter, even with the recognition that at least sixty-seven cases are considered crimes against humanity, the conventional justice system has made little progress (Figure 9). However, on March 25, 2020, the Special Justice for Peace (JEP) recognized their case as one of political genocide.

At root are those touched directly by the political conflict in Colombia, more than nine million, mostly women who are actively looking for their dead (disappeared bodies or even fragments). The victims—families, relatives, friends, colleagues and the society at large—understand that much work is still to be done. These women, Gómez and Salcedo (as so many), continue to demand a world that is yet to come.



Figure 8. Collective action led by Doris Salcedo. *Broken*. June 10, 2019. Dozens of activists, who themselves received death threats, wrote the names of the victims using shards of glass. (AP Photo/Ivan Valencia)



Figure 9. Every year in October, the Unión Patriótica victims take over Bolívar Square. Left: October 19, 2017. Photo credit: Mauricio Alvarado. Right: October 29, 2018. Bolívar Square filled with the empty chairs of the 6,243 victims of the genocide. Courtesy: Corporación Reiniciar.

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