

In her early installations, contemporary Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo re-signifies damaged domestic objects in ways that trigger processes of memory and mourning. They thus acquire the potential to perform profanatory acts, which Giorgio Agamben understands as a way of returning things to human use and potentiality in our time.

## “Troubled Materiality”: The Installations of Doris Salcedo

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*We must always wrest from the apparatuses [. . .] the possibility of use they have captured. The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation. —Giorgio Agamben, Profanations*

In *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben asks whether today there are still effective ways of profaning, of returning things to human use and potentiality, in an era of late capitalism that “has its emblematic place in the museum” (85), a space where use has been withdrawn from things: “If to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed from the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable” (82), in the sense that it reduces everything to the value of consumption, which Agamben regards as “nothing but the impossibility or the negation of use” (82). In light of this question, I explore in what follows the extent to which the installations of contemporary Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo redefine the use of the altered domestic objects that make up her installations; challenge the space of the

museum, understood as a sanctuary for no longer useful objects; and initiate, without claiming to complete, a process of mourning and healing needed to move beyond the paralysis resulting from ongoing violence.<sup>1</sup> Salcedo's work enacts a persistent struggle to re-signify everyday objects and resist the violent hindering of potential use that they display.

Salcedo's installations are politically informed, intimately engaged with the loss of human life and the erosion of both private and public spheres that have resulted from decades of violence in Colombia. Her work explores the relationship between objects and bodies; between objects, place, and duration; between representation and violence; between words and materiality; and between memory and forgetting, along with the gap between the witness offering testimony and the one who receives it. In particular, it addresses the aftermath of violence and raises the question of how one goes about living after an experience that irrevocably transforms the meaning of the ordinary, after which everything or anything—a simple chair, a kitchen table, a shoe—has been affected and becomes reminiscent of unbearable violence and loss.

Since her early work, Salcedo has used domestic objects that “bespeak the presence of human beings” (Basualdo, “In Conversation” 21), objects that bear traces of the human but that have been removed from the sphere of daily use and thus appear estranged, as a kind of coded language that calls attention to the fracturing or loss of human lives. Her work repeatedly stages the link between deactivation and reactivation of use that Agamben regards as characteristic of profanatory acts: “the creation of new use,” associated with the profane, “is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative” (86).

Material remainders of real subjects are often inscribed within the objects in Salcedo's installations, particularly the ones from the 1980s and '90s—in the form of human hair, as in *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*, or the bits of bone and cloth sticking out from the cemented surfaces of old furniture in *Untitled*. In more recent work such personal artifacts as “the ruffle, shoe or sleeve” found in *Atrabiliarios*, *La casa viuda*, and the *Unland* series, as Edlie L. Wong points out, “are no longer in evidence” (183), a significant absence that marks a move away from the domestic spaces of the earlier installations, “a progressive shift [. . .] from inside to outside spaces, private to public objects” (184). When they do appear, however, they tend to generate a haunting, visceral effect since they evoke violence done to bodies. To the viewer lacking any other information or explanatory text about the relationship of the objects to their context, the early installations' story of no-longer-functional objects is only semi-legible. This semi-legibility or incomplete narrativization, which paradoxically opens the objects up to a new use, is crucial to understanding the ambivalence of rupture and suture in the work under study.

Arranged in particular configurations, Salcedo's "widowed," "orphaned," or otherwise abandoned objects (terms used in the titles of works such as *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* and *The Widowed House*) neither explain nor describe; they do not memorialize either, given the temporal nature of installations. These objects trigger the work of remembering victims lost to violence but without functioning as monuments or commemorations; rather, they emphasize the difficulty of memory under specific historical circumstances. "I am not building temples that resist time," says Salcedo (Basualdo, "In Conversation" 32). Charles Merewether also notes that Salcedo's work on memory is "conceived over against the practice of remembering and enshrined in the painting and photography favored by museums" ("Zones" 117). Her work brings into view that which resists visibility in tangible ways. It confronts the spectator with forms of undoing that invite one to ask what led to the dysfunctionality of the objects before us, to their loss of use and meaning; what made the space they once occupied uninhabitable. Andreas Huyssen suggests that the negativity of the prefix "un" in the title of one of Salcedo's series of pieces, *Unland*, already indicates a difficulty of dwelling (112), something Salcedo herself recognizes when she detects echoes of Matta Clark's work, which "makes us aware of space [. . .] that we can no longer inhabit" (Basualdo, "In Conversation" 12), in her own.

Through the inanimate, Salcedo speaks of human experiences of displacement, suffering, and loss. Her work is often informed by interviews (Salcedo's early work was based on conversations with women whose husbands had been murdered in Columbia, and other survivors of violence), along with readings of poets and philosophers such as Paul Celan, Georges Bataille, and Emmanuel Levinas. However, her work does not have subjects, only anonymous objects that act as landscapes through which the violent transformation of the everyday and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of inhabiting ordinary spaces is evoked. Huyssen and Basualdo have discussed her work in relationship to Celan's poetry (from which she borrowed the title for *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*). In his interview with the artist, Basualdo observes that through the tension in her work between the violent alteration and re-signification of objects, she carries out something similar to Celan, who "translates the experience of absence through the disintegration of language and its structure" ("In Conversation" 25). Salcedo acknowledges that she approaches sculpture like Celan approaches poetry: "piecing together from ruptures and dissociations, rather than association and union" (26). She disrupts objects as a way of opening them up to new mnemonic uses and at the same time exacerbates their static, heavy quality as a means of highlighting the uselessness and immobility, the "quarantine" state to which they have been forced (Princenthal 43).

The installations, as Jill Bennett remarks, do not explicitly refer to violence, its victims, or its possible causes (3). They record injury without making any visual reference to victimized bodies, for which there is no equivalent, calling attention, through the violated objects, precisely to the desubjectification of now-absent individuals. “I believe that the major possibilities of art,” says Salcedo, “are not in showing the spectacle of violence but instead in hiding it. [. . .] It is the proximity, the latency of the violence that interests me” (qtd. in Princenthal 40). Deactivating the significance attributed to ordinary objects becomes the main means of addressing the unnatural interruption of daily life in Colombia, the brutal tearing of individual and social fabrics. By stressing their forced muteness, she makes objects speak.

What those objects speak about is the subject of this inquiry. Like other twentieth-century artists engaged in the effort to address forms of social and political violence, and faced with the difficulty of finding a means of representing what defies conventional means of representation, Salcedo has sought ways of figuring what trauma studies scholars often regard as unfigurable, ways of developing a language for what resists access to conscious recall and control. In *The Future of the Image* Jacques Rancière expresses a (what I regard as salutary) “certain intolerance for the inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable and [. . .] allied notions: the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable” (109) common in discussions of the relationship between art and trauma. He proposes instead to consider different regimes or systems of representation. Although traumatic events certainly demand “a type of language appropriate to [their] exceptionality” (137), he insists that they do not necessarily escape all possibility of representation. Salcedo’s work takes a similar position: although violence defies established modes of representation, there are still ways of rendering it tangible. At least, this is what the artist interested in thinking about the relationship between art and politics after catastrophic situations strives for. Salcedo’s installations can be seen as a persistent attempt to create a space where the telling of a story that resists full legibility or narrative coherence could begin to take place, a site on which “to place the experience of marginalized people in space” (Basualdo, “In Conversation” 17). The sculptor creates spatial environments that activate a renewed perception and scrutiny of de-familiarized everyday objects, and thereby tacitly open up the possibility of mourning while also calling attention to the incompleteness of the process.

Hal Foster’s remarks on installations as a preferred form for archival artists, by which he means artists who “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” (143), are relevant to a discussion of Salcedo’s work. To achieve such an end, Foster suggests, these artists “elaborate on the found image, object, and text and favor the installation format as they do so” (143). “The archives

at issue” in archival art, he adds, “are not databases [. . .]; they are recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible, and as such they call out for human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing” (144). Salcedo’s work shares many of these aspects. Rancière’s observations on installations can also contribute to an understanding of Salcedo’s focus on altering the means of viewing the ordinary. The “unity principle” behind strategies specific to installations, Rancière notes, seems to be “to bring about, on a material that is not specific to art and often indistinguishable from a collection of utilitarian objects [like the garments or furniture used by Salcedo, for instance] [. . .] a double metamorphosis corresponding to the dual nature of the aesthetic image: the image as cipher of history and the image as interruption.” Installation art “involves reviving utilitarian objects” and “brings into play the metaphorical, unstable nature of images” (25); they “set out to displace the representations of imagery, by changing their medium, by locating them in a different mechanism of vision, by punctuating or recounting them differently” (26). This dual, unstable nature of metaphorical images that Rancière finds at work in installations is applicable to Salcedo’s assemblages, which also aim to redirect our vision and “interrupt” the functions normally attributed to utilitarian objects.

**T**his essay explores Salcedo’s work with objects, the possible purposes of her “sculptural assemblages,” as Jill Bennett describes her work (60), her attempts to materially convey what resists a certain type of figuration, associated with trauma, and the task of mourning they both initiate and suspend. For if Salcedo’s art contributes to an opening up of the difficult process of mourning losses brought about by an undoing or damaging of the social fabric in Colombia, it simultaneously questions the possibility of a complete mourning or a fully successful “stitching” of individual and collective wounds. This latter aspect is highlighted in works like *Atrabiliarios* or *Orphan’s Tunic*, where stitches or acts of mending are an important element of the pieces and are rendered prominent. (Mieke Bal has called attention to the gendered aspect behind some of Salcedo’s “repair” work, which involves rethinking the relationship between private and public domains and often includes activities conventionally considered feminine, such as sewing, braiding, and weaving [229].) The emphasis on the limitations of the repairing gestures parallels the foregrounding of the limitations of witnessing or intervening in response to testimonies of violence.

The testimonial component of Salcedo’s work places the artist as well as the viewer in the role of “an empathetic witness,” something Eric Santner considers crucial to the recuperation of affect at stake for individuals afflicted by trauma (qtd. in Bennet 25). By incorporating organic material into inanimate objects, Salcedo turns

them into bearers of absence, mnemonic devices or mute testimonies to which we then become witness. Since the artist already acts as a secondary witness—"I try to be a witness of the witness" (Salcedo 140)—the viewer in turn is placed in the role of tertiary witness.

A key tension in Salcedo's early work lies in the simultaneous foundational role of words and the acknowledgement of their inadequacy to speak of violence and loss; when dealing with violence, words, she claims, "are no longer possible" (Basualdo, "In Conversation" 22). Thus, though often informed by testimonies, Salcedo's work does not use words or tells stories in a conventional way. "While personal testimony endows these sculptures with their peculiar form, Salcedo openly resists narrativization in her working method" (Wong 174). And yet, I would add, while it is important to acknowledge that "thinking with things is very different from thinking with words, for the relationship between sign and signified is never arbitrary nor self-evident" (Daston 20), one cannot forget that words often precede Salcedo's work with objects. The ambivalent relationship or discrepancy between words and material images or between the sayable (or unsayable) and the visible (or invisible) profoundly informs her work. Her early installations, after all, foreground the effort to find a mode of materially presenting what the sculptor received from witnesses in the shape of words or objects, to render an account received verbally in tactile form. "I do not illustrate testimonies," Salcedo points out; "I simply reveal—expose—an image" (qtd. in Princenthal 82); nevertheless, words remain an important component. One could say that she stages the missing link between what is visible and what is intelligible or sayable.

Salcedo's artistic language relies on the arrangement of objects bearing the marks not only of violence and displacement, but also of words. It explores "how matter constrains meanings and vice versa" (Daston 17), "the way words and world mesh together and thereby unsettle views about the nature of both talk and things" (15). The multiple, at times incommensurable materialities from which the installations are constructed function as surfaces on which acts of rupture and suture are enacted. Potentiality emerges from the "mixture of materials that come from opposite realities" (Basualdo, "In Conversation" 22).

Since her early work in the late 1980s, Salcedo has made use of objects from everyday life: inanimate domestic objects such as shirts, chairs, shoes, and wardrobes, which she then subjects to subtle yet profound alterations. Neat piles of pressed white shirts in the 1989 *Untitled Works* appear mercilessly pierced through the left corner by metal rods; shoes in *Atrabiliarios* lie quietly in separate niches, simultaneously displayed and protected, warded off by an opaque animal fibre that makes them at once recognizable and distant. The wardrobes in her 1995 *Untitled* have been cemented

with disturbing reminders of human lives (bits of bone and garment) incrusting in the cement. Along with ordinary objects, Salcedo uses a combination of organic and inorganic materials such as wax, human hair, wood, cement, iron, surgical thread, silk, cloth, and animal fibre. Seemingly insignificant or hardly noticeable at first glance, the alterations to which she subjects the objects, making them interact with different materials, reveal something disquieting upon closer scrutiny that does not allow the viewer to stand back from what is observed. The viewer experiences discomfort upon gradually realizing the transformations to which objects have been subject, since the modified objects (the jammed tables, the pierced shirts, the cemented wardrobes) suggest the incisive workings of violence as a cruel sort of artist that moulds and chisels bodies, minds, objects, individuals, and communities, transforming them for good. Just as the objects in the installations do not immediately call attention to themselves in an abrupt or spectacular way, but require patient viewing and physical proximity, our realization of what the alterations imply also seeps in slowly and requires a longer duration to unfold, an aspect of the works that Bal and Huyssen have discussed.

Like some avant-garde practitioners—Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp are two figures that she has mentioned as important references—Salcedo works with “readymades,” but she transforms these found, discarded objects profoundly marked by history in such a way that they speak of something else beyond the ordinary meanings, functions, and uses normally attributed to them. If nothing else, the altered objects speak of a forced muteness and an uncanny stillness. They dramatize a human condition in a specific place and time and force the viewer into a different way of perceiving and interacting with them. Salcedo’s work with and through objects is a way of claiming the viewer’s attention and having him or her look again. Hence Bal’s emphasis on “the visualization of duration” as “the crucial weapon of her art” (*Reader* 234); Salcedo creates “sticky images” that “enforce a slowing down as well as an intensification of the experience of time” (“Sticky” 94).

Insofar as the objects often bear human traces or remnants, they trigger an almost visceral awareness in the viewer of what the experience of loss might be, but without allowing empathy or easy assimilation. The estranged ordinary objects elicit an affective response while resisting identification. This tension is suggested, for example, through the animal fibre Salcedo uses in *Atrabiliarios* to cover the shoes that have been placed in niches on the wall. Functioning as a veil, the fibre renders the object behind it opaque, semi-visible, thus recalling the lack of clear vision, the ultimate inaccessibility of the object (a shoe belonging to a victim of violence) and what it evokes. The opacity created by the fibre suggests that Salcedo’s “troubled materiality,” to borrow Basualdo’s term (“Model” 32), follows the kind of investigation that

Rancière speaks of, one that “cannot be assimilated to the representative logic of verisimilitude” and that entails focusing on “something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have been erased; find[ing] witnesses and mak[ing] them speak of the materiality of the event without cancelling its enigma” (129).

The veil also suggests that what is presented is not “the wordless, senseless materiality of the visible” (Rancière 9), but a materiality impregnated with words (from interviews, testimonies, or readings) that precede the finding of a form and a material to evoke absence. The coarse black stitches with which the animal skin is attached to the wall further work as both a gesture of symbolic suturing, or burial of what remained unburied, and a reminder of the rough, incomplete work of mourning prompted by the burying gesture.

The deactivated objects in Salcedo’s installations are not limited to displaying marks of violence. They tend to bring at least two aspects into visibility. They bear the marks of violence—jamming, piercing, drilling, cementing—but the violence is accompanied by healing or suturing gestures. The shoes in *Atrabiliarios*, which have received particular attention by critics and which I later discuss, are protected by an opaque veil, just as a fine mesh of hair in *Orphan’s Tunic* is woven exactly at the intersection of the two jammed tables, where a wound has occurred. The hair acts as a very frail thread that could be seen as a precarious attempt to mend the broken surface, as some kind of imaginary restitution of what has been damaged. Notwithstanding such gestures of reparation, Salcedo’s installations, nevertheless, stress the incomplete character of the symbolic burial or the possibility of successful (collective) mourning. The healing can never be complete because of (among other reasons) the inevitable dissociation of the objects from the contexts in which they might have once been used, the gap between object and place, viewer and object. Just as the tables in *Orphan’s Tunic* appear displaced from their setting and function, the human hair covering the wounded zone has been displaced from the body. In *Atrabiliarios* the stretched cow bladder through which the protective gesture is carried out transmits a physical sense of the violence present in the protective gesture itself. In other pieces, such as *La casa viuda* (*The Widowed House*) or *Untitled* (1995), the healing gesture is not foregrounded; the object lies uncannily still, evoking a disquieting feeling of suffocation and paralysis.

A jarring tension between rupture and suture frequently occurs at zones of juncture. In *Orphan’s Tunic*, for example, what appears to be a long wooden kitchen table is the result of two tables of different height, length, and hue jammed together. Where the table is disjointed, a fine mesh of hair and silk joins them together, but the fragility and precariousness of the weaving action is evident. Despite the gestures of repair and the attempt to join the fragments—the combination of hair and silk meticulously



woven around the point of fusion between the two tables—they remain irreparably disjointed and fragmented. The legs of the tables are amputated. The fracture remains unconcealed. In fact, the gauze-like hair and its application over the wound, which darkens the color of the table in that precise zone, highlight the dislocation. Whether through animal fibre or a fine mesh of human hair, the very gesture of mending or restoring simultaneously enhances the fracture and the opacity of the object.

Based on a painstaking labour with a “troubled,” “tortured” materiality, Salcedo’s installations display above all work and materiality—work on, with, and through objects that have been arrested from their normal functions. A clear example of such a removal from everyday use can be found in the cemented furniture already mentioned. The effect of concrete poured on the wardrobes is one of brutal stifling and silencing; what strikes the viewer is the absence of movement, the impossibility of further gesture. The drawers and doors cannot be opened any more, just as the human damage evoked by the incrustated bits of wood, bone, and fabric in the modified furniture cannot be undone. Most of the objects in Salcedo’s installations share the same condition: they have all been taken out of circulation, not just by the sculptor, but by specific historical circumstances. Furthermore, they give the impression of having been violently torn from their context; they have been rendered dysfunctional and appear disturbingly blocked, marked by an abrupt discontinuity from the everyday life of which they were possibly once a part. Bill Brown’s notion that “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us [...] when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” is applicable here (4). In the very process of exacerbating their condition of forced displacement, abandonment, and anonymity, however, Salcedo transmits what challenges transmission precisely by displaying or staging their dysfunctionality, by destroying the ordinary meanings and uses of a table, a chair, a shoe. The useless objects gain the ability to call attention to the condition of uselessness and impotence to which they have been forced. They gain the weight of heavy ghosts in a room and exude an intensity that Salcedo liberates.

In short, Salcedo consistently disturbs the legibility of familiar, utilitarian objects. Impregnated with human traces such as hair and bones, they become other than they would be in a “normal” setting and function as something beyond themselves—at once close and distant, familiar and radically unfamiliar. The shirts, the tables, the wardrobes, appear deprived of recognizable meanings or attributes. By displaying them in conditions outside their ordinary use, Salcedo paradoxically makes inanimate objects “speak” of loss and disruption in everyday life; at the end of their circulation as useful things or possessions, they acquire a new function. The artist

encodes them with a signification beyond their normal associations as a way of having the viewer acknowledge acts of de-subjectification. Disfigured and released from the bond of usefulness, doubly displaced in spatial terms (from the private into the public realm, from Colombia to the different places where they are assembled and displayed), they not only act as reminders of a semi-legible but undeniable violence, but are tacitly put at the service of a task of mourning that is hinted at, although, as I have already suggested, is never completed and is left to the viewer to initiate.

The bodily traces present in the furniture evoke the anonymous individuals who might have used them; they work metonymically as figures for missing bodies or as referents for radically disrupted daily life. While the subject/object distinction is blurred, the two are not fully conflated, since this would emphasize the objectification of the subjects that the installations otherwise decry. Salcedo points to human pain by displacing it on to inanimate objects that have been damaged, weaving language, story, and narrative into them. Through the estrangement of the familiar she calls attention to the radical defamiliarization of daily life in a place “constantly interrupted by acts of violence” (Basualdo, “In Conversation” 14).

*Atrabiliarios*, an installation from the 1990s, uses shoes that were given to the artist by friends or relatives of victims of violence. Occasionally in pairs, more often without their companion, they appear—as has already been described—encased in tomb-like niches on the wall, covered by a fibre made of stretched cow bladder, which blurs the legibility of the object. Empty boxes on the floor made of the same fibre are also part of the installation and convey an eerie feeling, for one is left to wonder whether these empty containers await new shoes/bodies and thus call attention to a violence that has not yet ended, linking past and future.

The opaque effect produced by the organic fibre conveys a double message: it suggests the inaccessibility of the objects concealed behind the fibre, but it also acts as a protective veil, which in a way restores an aura, a certain untouchability that carefully evokes the anonymous owner who once walked in those shoes. One gets the impression that the installation is symbolically enacting a quiet burial for objects whose owners never saw proper burial. However, the raw stitches with black surgical thread that Salcedo uses to hold the fibre over the holes containing the shoes (similar to the fine strands of interwoven silk and human hair in *Orphan's Tunic*) remind us of the inevitably failed attempt to bury or mourn the anonymous dead, the tentative quality of the gesture and the mnemonic intent, the impossibility of a complete suture. At the same time that she brings the shoes into view, Salcedo protects them from too violent an exhibition, too direct a gaze, and reminds us of the distance between the space these objects occupy, both in the present and in the past, and the space we inhabit as we observe them.

Salcedo's work primarily addresses and has emerged from a very specific geographic, political, and historical situation. And yet, the installations do not depict any particular individual and remain anonymous, like the disappeared themselves; there is nothing Columbian *per se* about the objects either. In this sense their unsettling impact is not immediately pinned down to a specific referent or place. The installations demonstrate a reluctance to represent directly, and instead display a performance of simultaneous violence and restoration that demands contemplation in time. This has the effect of calling attention to acts of violence in general and to the silence and coldness that follow. Though much of her work through the '90s is informed by interviews with witnesses of violence in Colombia, it also speaks beyond the violence specific to a national space in which violence has been commonplace. Indirectly, her work evokes possible connections between different modernities and territories—connections she has developed in more recent projects (see Wong). Having said this, however, one does notice that the objects used are not exactly modern in terms of design or the materials of which they are made. The chairs, tables, and wardrobes are mostly made of wood and are simple in design. In this sense they speak of “a marginalized form of modernity” (Basualdo, “In Conversation” 22) in an era of late capitalism.

Late capitalism, Agamben contends, has created conditions where to profane—that is, to put things to a use that would not be limited to consumption—has become impossible. If the religious sphere “removes things, places, animals and people from common use and transposes them to a sacred sphere” (72), capitalism causes a similar removal by negating the use value of objects in favour of their exchange value. The separation he regards as intrinsic to religion applies to capitalism as well, since the former turns things into commodities and negates a use other than consumption, which “necessarily destroys the thing” and “is nothing but the impossibility or the negation of use” (82). “In its extreme phase,” Agamben insists, “capitalism is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviors” (87). How to profane in such conditions thus becomes an urgent political task. I wonder whether one could speak of Salcedo's work, which returns a certain symbolic use to the damaged object—that which was meant for use but was deprived of such—as carrying out such a task, as both an act of profaning and, simultaneously, an act of restoring a sacred quality to the profaned object. In this case, the sacred would refer to the human, and not to a religious sphere, within a context where it is death and the human that have been “desacralized” (Merewether, “Zones” 114).

To discuss Salcedo's work through the lens of Agamben's notion of the profane and its counterpart, the sacred, requires explanation of the terms. By *sacred* Agamben means that which is “removed from the free use and commerce by men,” that which

is “reserved” for non-human use and is endowed with a “special unavailability” (71). The *profane*, in contrast, refers to what is returned to human use after having been removed from the sphere of the sacred. If *to consecrate* once meant “to remove things from the sphere of human law,” *to profane* “meant inversely to set them to free use by men” (71), to make them again available for use. Insofar as to profane is “to return to use what the sacred had separated and petrified,” it involves “open[ing] the possibility of a specific form of negligence and what ignores separation or rather, puts it to practical use” (75). “Once profaned,” an operation that he regards as political, “that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use” (77).

Earlier I suggested that Salcedo in a way restores a sense of aura to the victims evoked by the shoes in *Atrabiliarios* through the protective gesture of covering them with animal fibre. This might seem to contradict Agamben’s reference to the loss of aura, which for him accompanies the return to use. However, Agamben also points out that both profanatory and consecratory operations have “double, contradictory meanings.” Just as “a residue of profanity” is present “in every consecrated thing,” there is “a remnant of sacredness in every profaned object” (78). The passage from one to the other necessitates a sacrifice, by which he means “the apparatus that effects and regulates separation, that sanctions the passage of something from the profane to the sacred, the human sphere to the divine” (72), and, furthermore, necessitates the passage between use and lack of use. Salcedo’s work, one could say, enacts a similar sacrificial passage insofar as she does violence to the object; she “sacrifices” it as a means of confronting the effects of violence and redefining use.

The various nuances of the term *aura* can help clarify this seeming contradiction. In a recent article on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, Beatrice Hansen explores the cluster of meanings and conflicting roles at stake in the term that do not pertain solely to the special status of the art object prior to the age of mechanical reproduction—the meaning most frequently associated with his use of the term. Hansen calls attention to “the heterogeneity of sources and intertexts that resonate in Benjamin’s aura” (375). Aura alludes, first, to “the unique appearance of a distance [. . .] however near it may be [. . .] however close the thing that calls it forth” (340), second, to “a form of perception that ‘invests’ or endows a phenomenon with the ability to look back at us” (339), and, third, to “an elusive phenomenological substance, ether or halo that surrounds a person or object of perception, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity” (340). A combination of these different meanings can be said to be operating in Salcedo’s work: it enhances “the paradoxical entwining between nearness and distance” (Hansen 375) in an object that is at once three dimensional and unapproachable; it endows objects with the ability to look back and “wound” the

viewer; and it conveys a trace of subjectivity through objects that suggest a long-term material relationship with the wearer/owner.

My first impression when I saw *Atrabilarios* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 2003 was that the shoes inside their niches resembled old photographs because of the washed-out, sepia tones generated by the fibre over them. Nancy Princenthal observes something similar: “By being sealed off behind yellowed, finely wrinkled, glossy sheets of stretched and dried animal fiber, through which they are dimly visible [. . .] these intimate items become images rather than objects. They become pictorial—or, perhaps more precisely, photographic—rather than sculptural” (50). This quality acquired by the objects would seem to endow them with “the logic of the trace,” the “indexical dimension or existential bond in photographic signification” that Hansen notes as an aspect of aura (340).

The term *aura* seems particularly appropriate, especially to Salcedo’s early work, insofar as it establishes a link between materiality and tactility, between the inanimate and the human at work in one of several meanings of aura: “The experience of the aura [. . .] arises from the transposition of a response characteristic of human society to the relationship of the inanimate or nature *with* human beings” (Benjamin qtd. in Hansen 343). The concept is also pertinent to Salcedo’s work in that “the indexical dimension of aura’s relation to the past” that Hansen points out “is never a matter of continuity or tradition; more often than not, it is a past whose ghostly apparition projects into the present and ‘wounds’ the beholder” (341). In Salcedo’s work, the violation carried on the objects marks a discontinuity that in turn “wounds” the viewer, who is thereby prompted to reconsider the nature of objects and their place within the realm of the social, as well as the possibility of resignifying the uses of everyday objects through relations of “resemblance and dissemblance” (Rancière 127) in order to comment on the ripped fabric of family and society.

Objects in Salcedo’s work, then, can be said to occupy an ambivalent position in between Agamben’s understanding of the sacred and the profane. There is certainly nothing sacred about the objects in her installations in a religious sense, yet they are not exactly profane either, insofar as they have ceased to be for “free use by men.” Objects meant for human use in Salcedo’s work have been emptied of use, deprived of all possibility of exchange, and yet they acquire the function/use of exposing the workings of violence. The difference is that the unavailability of the objects in the installations does not imply they have been reserved for the gods, as occurs with religiously sacred objects. Here the sacred comes to refer to something profoundly human. If to profane is to return the sacred to use within the realm of the human, Salcedo carries out the inverse process, since, once deprived of utility, objects are used

to signify their violent loss of use, raising the question for the viewer of who or what made them lose their use. Of course, it is the sculptor who has altered the objects (the drilling of tiny holes on the wooden surface of the table through which she weaves the human hair in *Orphan's Tunic* or the piercing of shirts in the 1994 *Untitled*, for example), but she has done so to expose and comment on the violence that has disrupted lives around such objects.

The “troubled” or “tortured” materiality in Salcedo’s work paradoxically endows objects with what Basualdo calls “a monstrous exceptionality.” A sense of possibility and singularity is thus oddly restored to the damaged thing. In other words, by displaying the wounding and petrification of domestic objects, by rendering immobility and dysfunctionality tangible, Salcedo opens up the possibility of moving beyond these conditions. In the process of distorting the ordinary, what emerges is the trauma around which a particular social reality has been structured.

Further in his discussion of the profane, Agamben argues that the present is characterized by a tendency toward “museification,” *museum* being a term that designates not so much “a given physical space or place” but the “exhibition of the impossibility of using, dwelling, experiencing,” of the “docile withdrawal of potentialities” (85). Salcedo’s recent work has appeared in open, public spaces: her installation for the Eighth International Istanbul Biennale (in 2003) consisted of 1550 chairs piled between two buildings on a street in Istanbul, evoking a mass grave; *Noviembre 6 and 7* (in 2003) consisted of chairs hung on the outside walls of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá to commemorate a massacre in 1985. Her earlier installations, however, appeared within the space of the gallery or the museum, a symbolic centre of modern culture that she transforms not only “into a space of mourning,” as Merewether suggests (“To Bear” 20), but also into a space that comments on the very process of museification that Agamben sees as characteristic of our late capitalist present. For Agamben, “profanation does not simply restore something like a natural use that existed before being separated into the religious, economic or juridical sphere.” The operation is more complex; its end result is “not to regain an uncontaminated use that either lies beyond or before it” (85). Salcedo does not restore to objects a use they might have had before appearing in the museum either. She exposes instead how they have been rendered useless, thereby inviting the questioning of why they have been emptied of sense or “museified” even before they were displayed within a space designated for exhibition. She both deactivates and reactivates the signification of objects. By exacerbating their condition of uselessness and rarification, Salcedo displays their museification both within and outside the museum and thus resists a process of museification while inhabiting the space of the museum.

In other words, the museum housing Salcedo's installations takes on a new function; it ceases to be merely a place to store and/or exhibit aesthetic or no-longer-useful objects, but becomes a stage for the performance that necessitates reflection upon the outcome of what violence leaves in its wake. It becomes what Charles Merewether calls a "place for that which does not survive or which, by virtue of the archive, is forgotten." By archive, he means "the repository of ordered systems and documents, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written" (*Archive* 10). Salcedo's work would fall into what he calls a "counter-archival approach that challenges the very logic of an archival practice," which reduces "events and experiences to statistical knowledge," and at the same time "opens up possibilities for new ways of writing histories" (17). One could say that if the installations stage an ongoing struggle against oblivion, they also stage a resistance to conventional archival or monumental forms of memory. As a result, the museum/archive ceases to be "a storehouse to catalogue traces," to use Agamben's words, but acts rather as a space for "the enunciation of an alternative relationship between the said and the unsaid."

The museum becomes a space that can harbour a different temporality, a time of contemplation of what remains inevitably fragmented and semi-legible. It becomes a space in which to acknowledge the remains of the faceless dead, at once close, through the objects bearing their traces, and inaccessible. In the process of making the violation of the private (home and body) public, or of destabilizing the boundaries between the two, Salcedo alters the understanding of the museum as a neutral or depoliticized public space. Art in turn is understood as an engaged, transformative practice, as an intervention that conveys the artist's attempt to bridge the gap between the victim of violence, the witness, and the receiver of the testimony, while acknowledging the impossibility of closing the distance between these different subjects. Since what is exhibited is the "desacralization" of the domestic, the home that has ceased to be a sanctuary from violence and terror, the museum that now houses such everyday objects also ceases to function as a protective space. One could say that it has been profaned, opened to a different use that "does not coincide with utilitarian consumption" (Agamben 76). This use, Agamben suggests, consists in having "freed a behavior from its previous genetic inscription within a given sphere. The freed behavior still reproduces and mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relation to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use. [. . .] The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative" (86).

*Orphan's Tunic*, a sculpture based on Salcedo's encounter with a six-year-old girl who, upon witnessing the slaying of her parents, wore the dress made by her mother

every day, can serve again as an example. The deliberately disjointed and then re-assembled table indicates that it has clearly lost its purpose as a surface around which people gather, eat, talk, work, or interact. But in its now-amputated condition it exposes the forced nature of its uselessness without being reduced to an exchange value. The table also becomes the sign of an intervention in the name of those involved in violence and testimony; it responds to one who is no longer alive (the murdered mother) and to the orphan daughter who witnessed the killing of the mother and lacks the means to articulate the loss. Through the woven silk in the wooden surface, a fabric that evokes the dress made by the mother for the girl, the installation keeps the memory of the mother alive as well as that memory's significance to the daughter, whose only means of confronting her death is the daily wearing of the dress. The silence of Salcedo's objects speaks then of a forced silencing that recalls the double charge of silent speech noted by Rancière: "Silent speech [. . .] is the eloquence of the very thing that is silent, the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth. But in a second sense the silent speech of things is, on the contrary, their obstinate silence [. . .] the incapacity for an adequate transfer of singularity" (13–14). This doubleness of speech is present in the tension between testimony and resistance to narrativization in Salcedo's work, which consistently renders the familiar strange.

The incorporation of the fabric onto the table also seals the inseparable relationship between the artist and the material, the artist and the witness. Salcedo's reference to her work in terms of a gift is significant here: "Sculpture for me," she says, "is the giving of a material gift to the being who makes his presence felt in my work" (Salcedo 141). The early pieces have been made with victims in mind, with a desire to approach the other, to establish some form of "communion" between the artist and the witness: "I consider this work to be not only my own," says Salcedo, "but also as belonging to them" (141)—"them" meaning, in the case of *Orphan's Tunic*, those children who have witnessed traumatic events and have suffered from the violence in Columbia. This idea of sculpture as a gift or a return to someone of a materialized form of the working through of loss implies an acknowledgement of the gap between the witness and the one who receives the testimony, or between speaking about and speaking for, as well as between acts of rupture and acts of suture. While it acknowledges the limitations of responding to testimony, Salcedo's sculpture, conceived of "as a way of representing a crossroads, a meeting point" (Salcedo 137) between victim, witness, artist, and viewer, nonetheless seeks to communicate what might be difficult for the direct witness to articulate on his or her own. It thus offers a means of articulating trauma and resignifying everyday life through specific materials, forms, and relationships.



## NOTES

1/ The notion of “troubled materiality” to which I refer in this essay is one I have borrowed from Carlos Basualdo (“Model” 32).

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