

PRESENT PASTS

Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA
2003



Doris Salcedo's Memory Sculpture:

Unland: The Orphan's Tunic

A strange lostness was
palpably present, almost
you would
have lived.

—Paul Celan

In recent years, there's been the surprising emergence in post-minimalist art of what I would tentatively call memory sculpture: a kind of sculpture that is not centered on spatial configuration alone, but that powerfully inscribes a dimension of localizable, even corporeal memory into the work. This is an artistic practice that remains clearly distinct from the monument or the memorial. Its place is in the museum or the gallery rather than in public space. Its addressee is the individual beholder rather than the nation or the community. In its handling of materials and concepts, it relates to a specific tradition of installation art, and in its emphatic reliance on an experiential dimension it is much less confined by generic conventions than either the monument or the memorial would be. Monuments articulate official memory, and their fate inevitably is to be toppled or to become invisible. Lived memory, on the other hand, is always located in individual bodies, their experience and their pain, even when it involves collective, political, or generational memory. Anticipating Freud, Nietzsche acknowledged that simple fact when he said: "Only that which does not cease to hurt remains in memory." Sculpture expanded toward installation and incorporating memory traces relies on the traditions of the

sculpted human body. In the works in question, however, the human body is never forgotten, though it is just as absent and elusive as it would be in any memory of the past.

Sculptures by artists such as Mirosław Balka from Poland, Ilja Kabakow from Russia, Rachel Whiteread from England, Vivan Sundaram from India, or Doris Salcedo from Colombia thus perform a kind of memory work that activates body, space, and temporality, matter and imagination, presence and absence in a complex relationship with their beholder. Their sheer presence counteracts our culture's triumphalism about media images and electronic immaterialization in virtual space, and they speak compellingly to the concerns with memory and absence that have emerged as dominant in the past decade or two. In these works, the material object is never just installation or sculpture in the traditional sense, but it is worked in such a way that it articulates memory as a displacing of past into present, offering a trace of a past that can be experienced and read by the viewer. It thus opens up an extended time-space challenging the viewer to move beyond the material presence of the sculpture in the museum and to enter into dialogue with the temporal and historical dimension implicit in the work. At the same time, these sculptures do not fall for the delusion of authenticity or pure presence. In the use of (often old or discarded) materials and their arrangement, they display an awareness that all memory is recollection, re-presentation. As opposed to much avant-garde artistic practice in this century then, this kind of work is not energized by the notion of forgetting. Its temporal sensibility is decidedly post-avant-garde. It fears not only the erasure of a specific (personal or political) past that may, of course, vary from artist to artist; it rather works against the erasure of pastness itself, which, in its projects, remains indissolubly linked to the materiality of things and bodies in time and space. I would like to suggest that the various forms of temporal and spatial displacements in the sculptures of artists such as Salcedo, Sundaram, Balka, and Whiteread mark a specific place in the broader culture of the 1990s, a culture that it would be frivolous and meaningless to call post-postmodern, but that is nevertheless significantly different from the postmodernism of the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to say that such memory sculptures are somehow "expressive" of some unified, totalizing *Zeitgeist*; despite a shared postminimalist language, these works are too different in terms of the politics, histories, and locales that gave rise to them. It is to suggest, however, that they are part of a larger problematic,

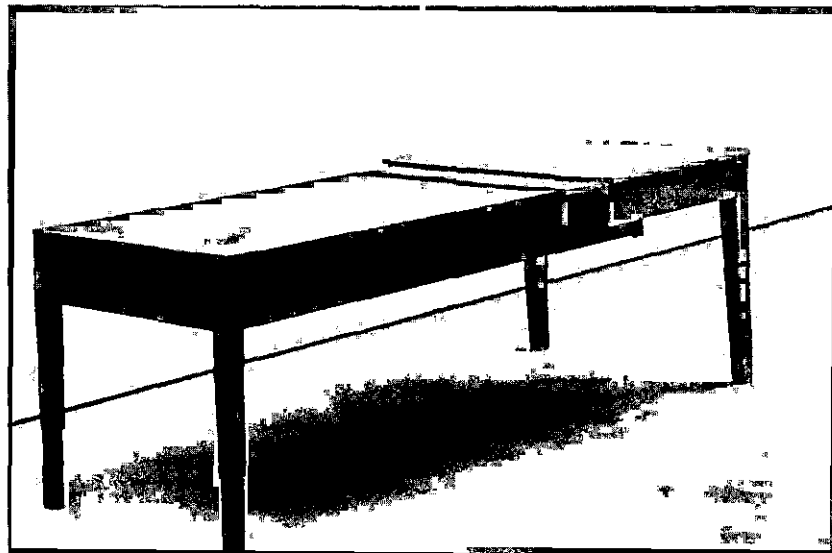


FIGURE 7.1 Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (1997). Courtesy: Doris Salcedo.

which is the restructuring of the sense of space and time in our age of mass media, cyberspace, and globalization. Respecting the specificity of each individual artist's work, this essay focuses only on one outstanding example of what I call memory sculpture, a work by Doris Salcedo.

The work is one of three in a series of sculptures entitled *Unland* (1997), and first exhibited far from their place of origin, in the New Museum in New York City in 1998. If the land is the site of life and culture, of community and nation, then "unland" would be its radical negation. As a poetic neologism it implicitly retracts the promises contained in its linguistic kin "utopia," the no-place of an imagined alternative future. Thus far from embodying the imagination of another and better world, unland is the obverse of utopia, a land where even "normal" life with all its contradictions, pains and promises, happiness and miseries has become unlivable. As an artist working in a country that is being torn apart by a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and lawlessness, Salcedo leaves no doubt as to the identity of this unland that serves as her melancholy inspiration. It is her homeland, Colombia.

If such a reading of the work's title suggests an explicit and straightforward political art practice, nothing could be further from the truth. Salcedo's sculpture captures the viewer's imagination in its unexpected, haunting visual and material presence in a way that does not easily relate to its mysterious title and subtitle, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*. The haunting effect is not there at first sight as the viewer approaches what from a distance looks like a simple, unremarkable table with some uneven surfaces. It comes belatedly, *nachträglich*, as Freud would say. It deepens as the viewer engages with the work. The muted but expressive power of this sculpture grows slowly; it depends on duration, on sustained contemplation, on visual, linguistic, and political associations woven together into a dense texture of understanding. And it raises the question of sculpture as material object in novel ways that sidestep the much debated issues of abstraction vs. figuration, objecthood vs. theatricalization, plastic action, or installation.

If classical sculpture captures the salient moment or crystallizes an idea or ideal form from the flow of time, then Salcedo's memory sculpture unlocks itself only within the flow of time because temporality itself is inscribed into the work. It dramatizes its materials, yet holds on to an emphatic notion of work, object, sculpture rather than dissolving work into performance. It embodies an expanded temporality, and as object it performs the process of memory. *The Orphan's Tunic* is objet trouvé, kitchen table, used and abused, material residue and witness. The object that appears simple and unassuming at first sight begins to come alive upon closer inspection. Its complexity has as much to do with what is there before the spectator's eyes as with what is absent. That which is *heimlich* and familiar, the everyday piece of furniture, becomes *unheimlich*, uncanny, but the homely is both preserved and denied in the *unheimlich*, just as land is in the Celan-inspired title of *Unland*. For one realizes that what looked like one table with different level surfaces is actually made up of two tables of different length, width, and height, violently jammed into each other, the smaller, somewhat wider and higher table shining in a whitish, luminous gray, the longer table dark brown with blackened marks of heavy use.

Both tables are mutilated. Where they clash and are mounted into each other, the inner two sets of legs are broken off.

As the spectator's gaze scans the surface, the whitish shine reveals itself to be a silk covering, the tunic, very thin natural silk that covers the surface and runs down the side boards and covers the two remaining legs.

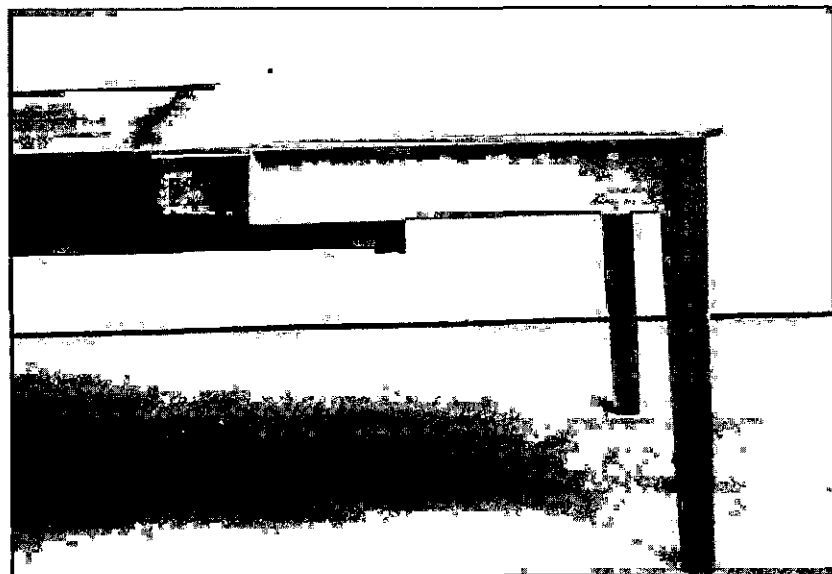


FIGURE 7.2 Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (detail 1).
Courtesy Doris Salcedo.

The silk is so thin that the eye is drawn to the cracks visible underneath, gaps between the five wooden boards that make up the table's rather rough surface, and other smaller cracks and gouges attributable to the table's former use. The silk frays over the gap between the middle boards, suggesting perhaps that the table is still expanding, and it folds into some of the smaller cracks as if it were growing into them, attaching itself like a protective skin to the unevenness of the wood. Examining the surface of this table is like looking at the palm of a hand with its lines, folds, and wrinkles. The effect is closeness, intimacy, and at the same time a sense of fragility and vulnerability that contrasts with the sturdiness of the wooden table. Suddenly the table appears to be no more than a trace, a mute trace. But a trace that has now been so heavily worked over by the artist that it has acquired a powerful language. It speaks a language that is aesthetically complex without being aestheticizing, and subtly political without resorting to a direct message.

Salcedo's work on the homeliness of the kitchen table that has be-

come the uncanny is not tied to individual psychology, nor are we merely dealing with a negative aesthetic in an Adornean or avant-gardist sense of distortion or defamiliarization. At stake is rather the conscious artistic translation of a national pathology of violence into a sculpture that articulates pain and defiance by bearing witness. The work is not simply there as object *in* the present, even though it is very much *of* the present. It leads the viewer back to some other time and space that is absent, yet subtly inscribed into the work: Celan's "strange lostness" that is "palpably present." Doris Salcedo's art is the art of the witness, the artist as secondary witness to be precise, the witness to lives and life stories of people forever scarred by the experience of violence that keeps destroying family, community, nation, and ultimately the human spirit itself.

For some years now, Salcedo has traveled the land, searching out and listening to the stories of people who have witnessed and survived gratu-

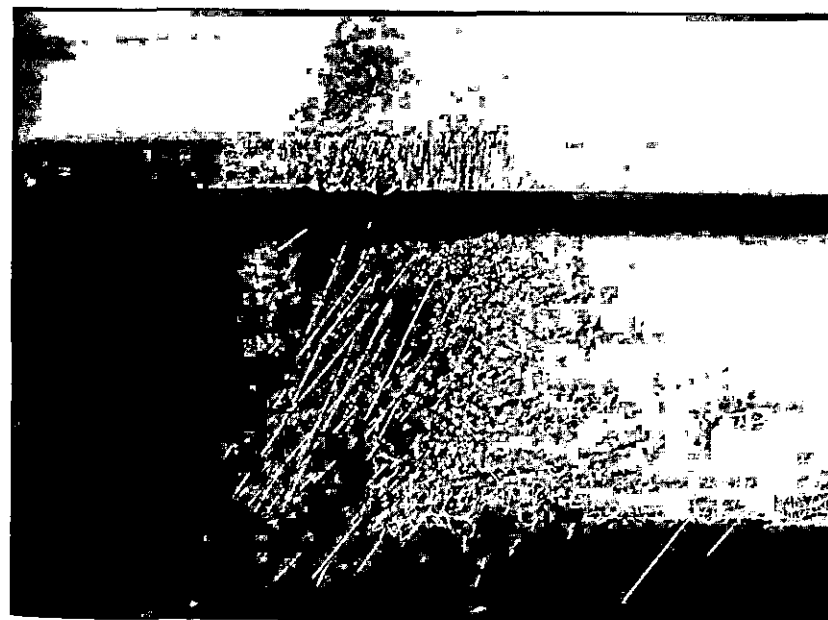


FIGURE 7.3 Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (detail 2).
Courtesy Doris Salcedo.

itous violence directly, who have lost parents and siblings, spouses, friends, and neighbors to guerrillas, drug gangs, and military death squads. In the case of *The Orphan's Tunic*, as Salcedo tells it, it was the story of a girl from an orphanage, a six-year-old, who had witnessed the killing of her mother. Ever since that traumatic experience, she had been wearing the same dress day after day, a dress her mother had made for her shortly before being killed: the dress as a marker of memory and sign of trauma. The story forces us to take *The Orphan's Tunic* literally as index of a death, a life, a trauma, something that did happen in the real world. At the same time, *dress* is translated into *tunic* and becomes a metaphor for a child's loss and pain—a permanent marker of identity.

This metaphoric dimension is then put through another loop that adds to its texture. The choice of the word *tunic*, by way of an implicit *Engführung*, points to another Celan poem, a poem from *Lichtzwang*, a poem without title, orphaned, as it were.

Night rode him, he had come to his senses,

the orphan's tunic was his flag,

no more going astray,
it rode him straight—

It is, it is as though oranges hung in the privet,
as though the so-ridden had nothing on

but his
first
birth-marked, se-
cret-speckled
skin.

The poem, fraying into Salcedo's work by way of the sculpture's subtitle, provides the linkage between tunic and skin, or between dress and body, a linkage that proves to be central for the aesthetic and material transposition of event, idea, and concept into the finished work. Documentary investigation, poetry, and materials blend into the sculpture, which lives off its temporal dimension as much as it relies on its spatial presence.

This double temporal and spatial effect is heightened when, looking even closer, one notices the thousands of minuscule holes, many of them $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch apart, with human hair threaded through them, going down into the wood, resurfacing, and going in again. If the silk is marked from

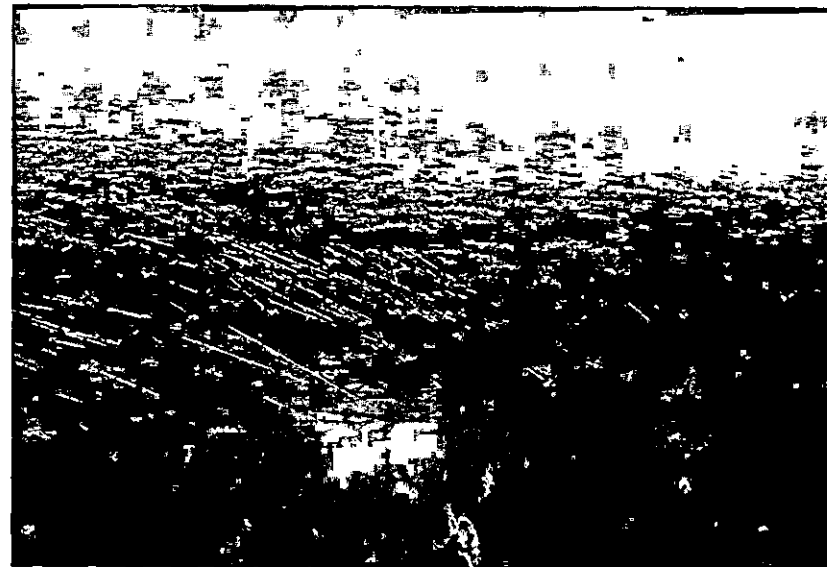


FIGURE 7.4 Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* (detail 3).
Courtesy Doris Salcedo.

below by the unevenness and natural splits in the wood surface, it is marked from above by hundreds of hairs that look like small pencil marks but actually hold the silk tunic close to the table. Now it is like looking at the back of a hand and noticing the short, fine hair growing out of the skin.

If the tunic is like a skin—the “first/birth-marked, se-/cret-speckled /skin”—then the table gains a metaphoric presence as body, not now of an individual orphan but of an orphaned community deprived of a normal life. Exhibited as memory sculpture far from its homeland in an international art world, this work appears itself orphaned and homeless in the spaces it now occupies.

How are we to understand this combination of human hair and wood? Both are material residues from formerly living organisms, now arrested in their growth. Clearly, the work plays on the contrast: the hair as fragile, thin, and vulnerable, with reminiscences of the famous piles of hair that we know from Holocaust photography, hair thus suggesting not life but death. The wood of the table, on the other hand, is a solid, sturdy guarantor of stability. But just as the hair has been cut, the tables have

been mutilated. Not the least of the various mutilations are the thousands of holes drilled through the surface with a $1/64$ drill bit before the hair could be stitched through. The very idea of the painstaking labor involved gives one pause. What an utterly absurd activity, stitching hair, and lots of it, through a wooden surface. But is it only absurd? Or is it perhaps also an act of mending? If the table stands for community, family, life in its temporal extension, then the stitching of hair, the inorganic trace of a human body, of the victim of violence, through the table's surface is like the threading of pain and its memories through the surface of history.

But perhaps the most stunning part of the sculpture is the thick band of hair that looks as if woven across the table just at the threshold between the silk tunic and the bare surface of the brown table. Here the tunic appears stitched down and held down by the hair, secured in place—hair, skin, texture, body, all come densely together in this part of the sculpture. It is close to where the two tables are jammed into each other, close to where the four middle legs have been broken off, the threshold that makes the table structure look vulnerable. Here it might cave in if pressure were applied from above. And precisely this tenuous threshold seems fortified by the band of hair, densely woven from one side of the table across to the other side and down on the side. It marks the end of the tunic on one side, the end of the barren brown surface on the other; it becomes thick texture. Hair appears here as providing strength, while the table seems vulnerable: an imaginative reversal of the basic nature of the materials. However absurd this project of stitching hair through wood is, it also has an air of defiance: it defies the implacability of the wood, but it also defies the absurdity and gratuitousness of violence in Colombia.

Like all of Salcedo's work, *The Orphan's Tunic* is about memory at the edge of an abyss. It is about memory in the literal sense, both the content of specific memories of violent acts and memory as process and as structure as the work enters into dialogue with the viewer. And it is about memory in a spatial sense, approximating it, never quite getting to it, compelling the viewer to innervate something that remains elusive, absent—the violent death of the mother that left the child orphaned, the orphan present only in that residual tunic, which now seems more like a shroud covering part of the table. Forever absent are the communal or family events that took place around this table, the chairs, the people, the food and drink served here. If the people, especially the indigenous people, be-

long to the land, as Salcedo has suggested in one of her rare interviews, then *Unland* marks the absence of the people from the communal site. But it is a forced absence achieved through death and displacement.

If *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* is adequately seen as a memory sculpture, inevitably the question will arise: what of hope, what of redemption? And what kind of a politics of memory, if any, does Salcedo's artistic practice imply? Clearly, the work defies a politics of redemption, and it suggests defiance in an even broader sense: defiance first of any direct representation of a self-perpetuating violence it would be too legitimizing to call political; defiance also of an increasingly spectacularized culture of memory and its obsession with public sites of commemoration, monuments, and memorials. Salcedo knows how public monuments and memorials are bound to serve as ciphers of forgetting through aestheticization or direct political comment. Her work does not trust mechanisms of public memory, while at the same time it desperately desires to nurture such memory. This is the minimal hope the work does suggest. Sculptural form, rather than monument or memorial, the work addresses the individual spectator, inscribes its complex message, and leaves the spectator moved by the memory of a powerful image. But the reality of *la violencia*, we know, continues unabated. There is no end in sight for the cycle of violence that feeds on itself in Colombia, like Chronos devouring his own children in Greek myth.

Finally, there is Salcedo's defiance—or should one say overcoming—of the always present danger of aestheticization, due primarily to her use of simple, everyday objects and materials. And yet, even if our gaze is not arrested in aesthetic pleasure, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* haunts us in its compelling beauty. As in other successful artistic work articulating historical trauma in unique media and materials, Salcedo's sculpture moves the spectator to the edge of an abyss only thinly veiled by the beauty of the piece itself. The veil, however, is indispensable for us to come face to face with the trauma and to become witnesses of a history we must not ignore.

Memory sculptures such as the ones by Doris Salcedo are currently being produced in many different places in the world—in India and South Africa, in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and in Latin America. The works may be influenced and coded to varying degrees by the Western art system, which is itself becoming global, but the inscribed traditions and memories will be invariably local and space-bound, challenging the beholder to engage with them. The demise of the Euro-American model priv-

ileging the latest avant-garde actually facilitates a hybrid merging of different times and different spaces in artistic practices and their reception. The geographic and temporal splintering of contemporary art will of course generate problems of legibility when such works are then exhibited in other places that have other histories. But then art has always interacted beneficially with ways of reading, commentary, and interpretation that could become generative of the spectator's dialogue with the work. Reading in a globalizing culture requires new skills and new knowledge, and works such as Salcedo's foster a dialogue beyond the frontiers of "Western" art.

But apart from the invariably specific histories, localities, and corporeal memories that the works ask the beholder to trace, as a medium by itself memory sculpture asserts the need for a slowdown, and it demands recognition of the basic matter of everyday life. As sculpture it insists on the insuperable materiality of the world, of objects as well as of bodies. Its inscriptions of time and displacements of space need to be read patiently. They are usually not to be found on the surface, in the way of documentary or politically explicit art. This complicates reception. The viewer may have to rely as much on association, analogy, innervation of the work as on explanations that may or may not be offered with captions, catalogues, and reviews. Primarily, of course, the artists will want to get to the imagination of the viewer through the language of their materials, the suggestiveness of markings, the uses of space and configuration. If the work is successful in engaging the attentiveness of the beholder, if it suggests meaning yet refuses easy consumption, if it yields pleasure in its aesthetic configuration without denying cognitive gain, then it does its job. It works against the structures of forgetfulness in our contemporary world, whether such forgetfulness is enforced by a military state and its system of "disappearing" people (Salcedo), triggered by the transformation of a formerly communist society in which public and private remembrance and forgetting are thrown into turmoil (Balka or Kabakow), or simply brought about by the planned obsolescence of objects (and people?) in the consumerism of our own Western societies. Such art also contests the draining of space and time in hyperspace. It nurtures the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality and in recognizable space, however they may be organized. And it enriches the beholder by drawing us into its slow work on the indissoluble relationship among space, memory, and bodily experience. Luis Buñuel once said: "You have to begin to lose your memory, if

only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives." The art of Doris Salcedo and others working on memory and space in sculpture and installations helps us not to forget that and, perhaps, to look with fresh eyes at the way we ourselves negotiate space and memory in our own everyday lives.