

Doris Salcedo - Fissures : Exploring the public art(s) of memorialization

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Introduction

The question of how, and especially the problem of whether it is possible at all, to create public memorials for political violence has been subject to debate for the more than half a century which has passed since the end of the Second World War. It is not difficult to find examples of public art and memorials which commemorate political violence that seem inadequate, hollow or contradictory. Referring to Holocaust art Inge Clendinnen describes 'the inversion effect' : "We expect the magic of art to intensify, transfigure and elevate actuality. Touch the Holocaust and the flow is reversed. The matter is so potent of itself that when art seeks to command it, it is art which is rendered vacuous and drained of authority." (Clendinnen, 1998, p. 185)

Fig. 1 Looking over the Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe towards the Tiergarten in Berlin, Germany. Panorama. Photographer : Chaosdna (Licensed under Creative Commons)

This impotence is nowhere more evident, I would argue, than at the site of what was one of the most eagerly anticipated monuments in history: the Holocaust memorial in the capital of the Third Reich, which the German Parliament decided in 1995 would be built. German artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock came eleventh in the subsequent international competition with their "anti-proposal" *Bus Stop*. Rather than a static monolith the artists proposed that the site should be occupied by a bus stop and information

centre and that red busses with the sign *denkmal* (memorial) would depart from here and travel all over Berlin taking visitors to various sites around the city that relate to the holocaust. As Schnock said, "A giant monument has no effect and ultimately becomes invisible. Giving people a way to visit the authentic crime scenes would be far more effective. ([HYPERLINK](#)

"<http://wso.williams.edu/~mdeean/berlin/busstop.html>"

<http://wso.williams.edu/~mdeean/berlin/busstop.html> accessed 7.9.09) The competition was won by Christine Jakob-Marks who proposed a 100 square meter concrete block 7 meters thick covering the entire site, inscribed with the names of the victims, but it was discovered that there would not be enough space to accommodate the full names, so it was decided that only the given names of the victims would be included. However while the government was prepared to fund the inscription of 500,000 names, public subscriptions would be required to fund the other 4 million names. The German chancellor Helmut Kohl, eventually vetoed the plan and another competition was launched, which was won by renowned architect Peter Eisenman.

Eisenman's 25 million euro *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was finally unveiled nearly ten years later and consisted of more than 2,711 concrete slabs, or stelae, of various heights on uneven ground. According to the official City of Berlin website "The monument acts as the central site of remembrance and commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust." and its design "represents a radical confrontation with the traditional concept of a monument, among other things because it does without any symbolism." (<http://www.berlin.de/stadt/en/denkmal.html> accessed 12.9.09) Indeed Eisenman himself referred to the site as a place of no meaning in the hope of dispelling fears that he was trying to symbolize the deaths that took place during the Holocaust, but there were complaints that Eisenman's trademark abstractness made it a monument that evoked no memories, into a confrontation with the past. However one can read the uneven ground and the imposing nature of the concrete pillars, apparently the same but actually

each is unique in its dimensions, as a kind of hyperreal system of order gone wrong, and Eisenman alluded to this in his project proposal.

In 2003 a Swiss newspaper reported that Degussa, the German company which had won the contract to cover the concrete pillars in a graffiti-proof coating, was once a part of Degesch, the company that delivered Zyklon B to the extermination camps. However in 2000 city officials in Vienna decided not to put any anti-graffiti solution on Rachel Whiteread's *Nameless Library* a memorial to the 65,000 Austrian Jews who died in the Holocaust in Vienna, "If someone sprays a swastika on it we can try to scrub it off, but a few daubed swastikas would really make people think about what's happening in their society." " Whiteread said. (The Guardian 26 October 2000) However as with the Berlin memorial there was a reluctance to name names. Where Eisenman fought to have no names on the memorial because he felt it would turn it into a graveyard, indeed there is no indication anywhere of what is being commemorated; in Vienna it was the names of the sites of extermination which were omitted. According to the original proposal they were to be inscribed on a glass base on which the memorial was to be mounted.

Fig. 2 Rachel Whiteread *Nameless Library*. Photographer : Unknown
(Licensed under Creative Commons)

It is hardly surprising that artists and architects as are reluctant to tackle the Holocaust since Adorno's radical pronouncement in 1947 that after Auschwitz poetry is barbaric which is often interpreted as encompassing all creative practices. But Adorno later returned to this statement to redefine its emphasis, explaining that it was more a case of asking the question how poetry and art could still be possible, and iterating the problem of aestheticisation in the wake of the Holocaust. [1]

Doris Salcedo, a Columbian artist living and working in Bogota, has a history

of engaging with audiences through the installation of memorials in public spaces commemorating specific events of politically motivated violence in her native country. The materials used by Salcedo however are markedly different from the slabs of concrete used in monuments such as those designed by Eisenman and Whiteread in Berlin and Vienna and the granite monoliths often encountered in conventional memorials the world over. Salcedo's works are often fragile and always temporal and ephemeral.

For example in 2007 when eleven members of the State Parliament of Valle in Columbia were assassinated by FARC guerillas Salcedo organized an *Act of Mourning* in the central square in Bogotá filling the entire square with 24,000 candles in a perfect grid, and in 2002 she created a work *Noviembre 6 y 7* which commemorates the events of that date in 1985 when a terrorist group staged a siege in the Palace of Justice which resulted in the death of over 100 people, including 11 Supreme Court Judges. Salcedo created a temporal work which took place in the same timeframe as the events it commemorated, gradually lowering empty wooden chairs, one for each person killed or missing, down the walls of the new Palace of Justice built to replace the original building which was destroyed during the siege.

In her more recent work Salcedo has looked increasingly beyond her own national boundaries whilst addressing one aspect of the problem faced by artists working with the theme of the Holocaust which Soshana Felman has identified as the need for art to 'de-aestheticize' itself. (Felman & Laub, 1991, p. 33) Salcedo transcends a number of the binaries which face practitioners in the design and construction of memorials to unspeakable acts of violence, which I have called the art of indirect witnessing. [2] According to Ivonne Pini, Salcedo's work develops an 'ethical conscience' which addresses both the past and the present, memory and experience, aesthetics and politics, survivors and perpetrators: "(Her) art is a condensed experience, one with profound historical meaning, in which the story of each protagonist of an act of violence, mixes with those of other members of the

community". (Pini 2008)

Salcedo quotes the German writer W.G. Sebald, who "poses a question about how to form a language in which terrible experiences, experiences capable of paralysing the power of articulation, could be expressed in art." (Salcedo 2007) It is no coincidence that Salcedo refers to Sebald, whose indirect approach to memorializing the Holocaust in his novel *Austerlitz* is analogous to the way many of us have learnt about it : through layers of narratives, through witnessing either directly or indirectly, the testimonies of survivors. *Austerlitz* is one of the most interesting literary works about the Holocaust that I have come across, and it is not a historical novel, it doesn't use the word Holocaust or mention the 'horror' of the concentration camp. Sebald believed that the crimes of the Nazis should not be uttered directly. [3]

In making *Neither* in 2004 Doris Salcedo too had tried to find a way to address concentration camps - both historical ones and their contemporary versions. "*Neither* is an indeterminate space, located beyond my powers to articulate, to understand and measure the political structure in which we live. *Neither* is a piece about uncertainty and ambiguity." (Borchardt-Hume, 2007, p. 109) Crucially, Salcedo says she wants to "disassociate her work from the way art has represented torture. Mostly it has been represented as a spectacle, as something we can watch. The implication is that it cannot be stopped and the inactivity of the onlookers underscores this impotence." (ibid)

Fig. 3 Doris Salcedo *Shibboleth* 2007 Photograph: Tate Modern
Copyright : Tate Modern 2007

Doris Salcedo was the eighth artist to be invited to make a work for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Such an immense challenge would be every artist's dream and every artist's nightmare. How do you address this cavernous space that is both beyond the gallery and outside of it? Whilst not exactly a

public space, it must be traversed by all those who enter and exit the museum, and its scale is such that the work must be made especially for it - each being commissioned by a large multinational, Unilever.

Doris Salcedo intervened in this space, choosing to subtract from it rather than bringing something into it. She brought about a fissure in the very floor of the museum itself, exposing its fundament and creating a new space into which, in a wondrous sleight of hand, she inserted a link fence, a motif she first appropriated in 2004 in *Neither*, a work dealing with the issue of historical and contemporary concentration camps.

Shibboleth refers to the title of a book by Jacques Derrida about Paul Celan, Auschwitz survivor and poet. According to the O.E.D. Shibboleth refers to a word or sound which a person is unable to pronounce correctly; a word used as a test for detecting foreigners, or persons from another district, by their pronunciation. In the Old Testament the Ephramites' inability to pronounce the word Shibboleth led to 42,000 deaths.

This radical act of intervention in the architecture of an art institution was a work about difference, a work about an unbridgeable gap. This was a work about an abyss into which you were in danger of falling, by which you could be swallowed up. For Doris Salcedo : "Shibboleth is a negative space: it addresses the w(hole) in history that marks the bottomless difference that separates whites from non-whites. The w(hole) in history that I am referring to is the history of racism, which runs parallel to the history of modernity, and its untold dark side." (Salcedo, 2007, p. 65)

Fig 4. *In the Turbine Hall Tate Modern December 2008* Photographer : Johannes Klabbers. Copyright: The Author.

It would be a grave error to suggest that what remained in the Turbine Hill in when the exhibition had ended and the concrete had been poured in, was

Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* because one of its essential elements, the links of the fence, had been rendered invisible. However what remained, what remains, is a trace, a definite unmistakable and undeniable shadow which shows where *Shibboleth* was, and reminds us of its referent. As Ivonne Pini had predicted in her review of *Shibboleth* in *ArtNexus*: "The transgression of cracking the floor open will leave a trace: however the floor is filled, there will be a scar, which will function as a memorial." (Pini 2008)

No doubt at some future time the institution will cause this broken ground to appear like a single smooth field again, but for now we can trace Doris Salcedo's intent with our hands and our eyes and wander along its path, all the while wondering whether in fact the museum also left intact the reminder of the concentration camps which Salcedo placed inside the fissure and just filled the gap with concrete, or whether the links of the fence had been painstakingly picked out one by one.

In any case there are not many contemporary art works which have managed to impress themselves so deeply into the very structure of the building which houses the museum that a visitor from far away who arrives long after its exhibition ended and another has been installed, is still able to perceive the effect of the work on it, and is thus provoked to contemplate the issues it raises. In this way Salcedo's work manages to be unique in the history of art, and as such it exists in a different kind of space, which public art works do not usually occupy. In view of the issue/s she is addressing in her work, in which she seeks to intervene, it is a space that is entirely appropriate. It is a critical space - but one which demands reverence and trust, because it allows us to listen to voices which had been silenced and words which had not uttered. [4]

Perhaps one of the reasons why Salcedo's works succeed where others fail so spectacularly is that they do not seek to 'command' or to understand, the issues and events they memorialize. *Shibboleth* does not refer to any specific

instances of catastrophe, and connects with the issues it references only indirectly. Yet this lack of a directness is not experienced like an absence, like the lack of names on the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. Neither is *Shibboleth* monumental in the way that a conventional monument such as the Berlin Holocaust Memorial asserts its presence, rather it references monumentality in the extent of its intervention in the architecture of the building that houses it. Salcedo's work is necessarily complex, intellectually and emotionally, and demands a great deal from audiences, but it is an art of indirect witnessing which achieves its affect not by leaving us in awe of the scale of the object and/or the genius of its creator, but by means of her approach to memorializing the trauma suffered by others, which is characterized by assuming responsibility towards the bereaved. (Borchardt-Hume, 2007, p. 1)

We cannot bring back the millions who lost their lives. We can remember them, there can be a refusal of forgetting, but we can not contain their lives, or the enormity of the crimes that ended them, in a text, or embody them in a monument or house them in an institution. But for Adorno art has the advantage of being able to work with irrationality, to preserve rather than efface the contradictions of history and politics (Statler & Buckner, 2005, p. 8) and in 1962 Adorno wrote "it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find a voice, consolation, without being immediately betrayed by it. (...) it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics." (Arato, 1982, p. 313) Such was Adorno's disillusion with politics as long ago as 1962 and I can't help but wonder what he would have made of it almost half a century later.

The ultimate inextinguishable question then which haunts those of us who are engaged in works of intervention and remembering, 'postmemory' as Marianne Hirsch calls it, is how to make and design public art works that can recapture the memorialisation function of monumentality, as Salcedo is able to do by virtue of the impermanent qualities of the materials utilized her.

(Bal, p. 55) As Simon Wiesenthal told the crowd gathered at the unveiling of Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial: "This monument shouldn't be beautiful. It must hurt." (The Guardian, 26 October 2000)

As I hope I have demonstrated, there are examples of public art works such as those by Doris Salcedo that sustain what Adorno called "the project of establishing humankind's autonomy in the world, even after that project has proven inherently contradictory." (Statler & Buckner, 2005, p. 8) and as such perhaps public art can contribute to a radically different view of thinking about history, to use Adorno's words, as "an unconscious form of historiography, the memory of what has been vanquished or repressed, perhaps an anticipation of what is possible." (Adorno 1970/1998)

Notes

[1] "The aesthetic principle of stylization makes an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning." (Adorno 1962)

[2] Here I acknowledge my debt to Andreas Huyssen, who in writing about an earlier work by Salcedo, speaks in terms of "the art of the witness; the art of the secondary witness to be precise, the witness to lives and life stories forever scarred by the experience of violence." (Basualdo, Princenthal, & Huyssen, 2000, p. 96)

[3] Sebald : "The only way in which one can approach these things, in my view is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation." (Schwartz, 2007, p. 80)

[4] In the words of the Tate Modern Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Achim Borchardt-Hume: "(But) this critical space is one that allows voices and thoughts to be heard that hitherto were silenced or remained unspoken. It is a space that demands trust and commitment, and that allows for going beyond the intention of the original speaker." (Borchardt-Hume, 2007, p. 17)

Images

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



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