

My work considers how different forms of cultural production in contemporary Colombia engage with the question of historical memory and violence. My research aims to explore how narrative voids in historical memory produce openings whereby artists, writers, and filmmakers contribute to a radical shift in discourse, inviting the possibility of seeing memory beyond testimony and the archive. My research: What is at stake in transposing violence into representation? What role do absence and silence have in representing acts of violence? What can be gained by thinking of memory beyond the singular subject of violence? Finally, are there alternatives to memory beyond the tropes of archive and testimony? Ultimately, my work hopes to consider how production in Colombia has begun to transform itself in the wake of the exhaustion of work that fetishizes the broken body of violence.

So, in the discussion with Richard Rauboldt some weeks ago, for the opening of the gallery, we discussed his work with trauma, space, and the city - and how that had taken different forms in his work in private practice for the last 35 years. In his paper, he writes, "Buildings are not immune to the ravages of time, neglect, vandalism, societal shifts, forces of God or whims of the economy. Living rooms, family rooms and dining rooms that, by their very names, evoke memory spots that can disappear. Waiting rooms, conference rooms and lunchrooms, the industrial/commercial gathering places, are swept away as well. And what is left? Ruins, the scattered bones of buildings and vapors of memory, are what remain." Today, I'm interested in opening up a discussion of this notion of the remnant: I'll start by briefly grounding my own research, then I'll give

some examples of some of the iterations I'm examining, and then I'd like to open up to a broader discussion of how my work, that examines contemporary Colombia, continues to resonate with the question of the city, particularly hoping it can be germane in some way to a gaze at Detroit.

So first - I'm examining a particular moment in Colombian history. The advent of the election of Alvaro Uribe changes things dramatically. Uribe's tenure as president created social upheaval and unquestionably altered popular discourse surrounding Colombia's civil conflict more than any president before him. Utilizing the global fear produced by 9/11, Uribe specifically invoked the terrorist label to demonize the FARC's leftist guerrilla struggle. He may not have been the first Colombian president to utilize the label "terrorist" to describe the FARC's movement, but he strategically re-took up this label for the leftist insurgency, with a keen awareness of its transnational resonance in the wake of September 11. By categorizing the FARC as part of the global network of terror, Uribe was thereby able to justify a host of human rights violations by re-branding them as necessary excesses in the new war on terror. Previous to Uribe's presidency, Colombia finds itself knee deep in a narcoviolence in the 1990s that drastically transforms cities, as city buses are bombed and middle-upper class Colombia can be robbed or kidnapped at your everyday traffic light. It is this fear that allows Uribe's brand of social reordering to thrive.

So, how to make sense of this history? Since 2005, Colombia begins to find itself trapped in the task in the task of institutionalizing memory, mimicking the work that is done in the Southern Cone of South America in the aftermath of the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. I suppose my work is problematizing the very notion of this institutionalization. How can we speak of an archive when histories are always wrapped up in this divisive inside and outside binary? How can we speak of testimony when the stakes are so high to "speak up," when truth as a concept is already being questioned in many different disciplines, and when the notion of a singular subject of violence is already a far gone conclusion? To hark back to the questions of memory, city, and ruins here in Detroit - how can one speak of a singular victim of white flight? Or a singular subject of the urban reordering of the city? It's literally impossible.

So for my own work, I'm taking up the term "un-subjectable," or maybe even the possibility of the anti-subject, and I'm looking at different interventions from a set of writers, filmmakers and artists. With the literature, I see that these writers are conceiving of the city in a different. Rather than a narrative that focuses solely on a single protagonist producing memory or witnessing, the narrative demonstrates not only the impossibility of doing so without always already being mediated by capitalism and the media, but it also demonstrates how the narrator (him or herself) are fractured, telling a story that in a sense is a palimpsest that doesn't really belong to them but somehow is theirs. With the different artists I examine, the works in questions resist forms of historical memory and commemorative projects, which have traditionally placed the

subject as the focus of inquiry and as the primary encounter with the spectator. Rather, these artists are using space and the material encounter to problematize the effects of violence beyond the human subject and the force of law. Faced with the relentless hyper visibility of violence and dogged impunity in contemporary Colombia, they propose an alternative figuration of violence that evacuates the human presence and therefore resists a passive and comfortable spectatorship. In this way, they attempt to represent impunity, silence and absence without risking sentimentalism and emotional voyeurism. Finally, in this films I will analyze, violence shows up as a spectre, a sort of inheritance, in rural and urban spaces alike, that interrupt an enemy/friend binary of violence. Instead, the films show how violence in Colombia has now become an assemblage and an ubiquitous affect, both whose origin and end is lost in some slippage. What's different about the ways in which this violence materializes on the screen in these films versus previous work done in the 90s the absence of overly commodified and exposed bodies and instead a haunted quality of opacity on the screen.

So, today, I'll discuss one specific example of an artist, then re-open the discussion back to the questions of memory. In Doris Salcedo's *Plegaria muda*, the artist articulates a sort of profaning of materials that is particularly fascinating



when considering the work is about violence and loss. Presented at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (January 2011), the work's catalog includes Salcedo's background to the piece. She speaks of how this particular installation responded to just one example of Colombia's torrid history of violent impunity: Alvaro Uribe's falsos positivos. Between 2003-2009, 1500 young people, from rural and impoverished areas around Colombia, were murdered for political reward. Salcedo writes "It was clear, that the Colombian government had implemented a system of incentives and rewards for the army if they could prove that a greater number of guerrillas had been killed in combat. Faced with this system of rewards and incentives, the army began to hire young people from remote and deprived areas, offering them work and transporting them to other places where they were murdered and then presented as "unidentified guerrillas: discharged in combat." (Catalog). Indeed, *Plegaria muda*, like all of the artist's oeuvre, denaturalizes the quotidian nature of objects, and in a parallel way, it's as if she's gesturing towards a resistance to the desensitizing that many Colombians feel towards their country's history of violence.

What's more, she uses organic materials, to remind the spectator of the precarity of decay, and in this particular work, the grass that springs up between the cracks of the wood is



reminiscent of the fragile line between life and death. Moreover, Salcedo's work, while repeatedly engaged in the political, resists a commodified spectatorship, and instead,

evokes in the viewer some combination of alienation, displacement, and solitude of stillness. Plegaria muda's material engagement with the impunity of the unburied dead invites a reading of Salcedo's wood tables as a sort of chilling sepulcher. It should come as no surprise to the viewer then that the overturned tables are in identical proportion to the real coffins, giving the exhibition a haunted quality. According to Salcedo,

"Plegaria muda is an attempt to live out this grief [here, I invite to think of a doubled grief: that of the innumerable loss of life throughout Colombia's civil conflict but particularly this all-too-contemporary example of state immunity], a space demarcated



by the radical limit imposed by death. A space that is outside life, a place apart, that reminds of our dead." (Catalog).

What is exceptional about this articulation of death is how she presences death through absence. As I

previously argued, Colombian cultural production has often exhausted the gaze at death, presenting mutilation, blood, and human loss ad nauseum. While Salcedo's exhibition is devoid of any explicit referent to death, Plegaria muda still reveals an unavoidable and illuminative meeting at death's wake. Ultimately, Salcedo's exhibition does not try to articulate ritual or rite through the act of commemoration, but rather it challenges the spectator to think of subjectivity beyond the human and memory beyond testimony and the archive.

To conclude, I hope that my work on Colombia might be interesting to think of questions around the potentiality of ruin. When thinking of Detroit and the disenfranchised reorganization of the city, I wonder whether we might not be able to think about practices, conversations and work that try to resist the trap of institutionality, thinking about ruin as possibility instead of perpetual wreckage.