The significance of recent work of two Colombian artists, Maria Teresa Hincapié and Doris Salcedo, is their capacity to "perform" domestic labour and create a metonymic object for the experience of violence and loss respectively. Through the use, on the one hand, of the genre of autobiography/biography and on the other, of the testimonial/witnessing, each artist produces an interpretative account that shifts a traditional narrative form of storytelling into an insurgent form of modernism. Occupying a temporal and spatial moment of duration, each work opens up a transforming "in-between" moment, translating private experience into social knowledge. It therefore participates in a politics of transfiguration and participates in an expression of utopian aspirations not yet fully articulated.

V. THE POLITICS OF RE/MEMBRANCE

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric... But Enzenberger's retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict... It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it... It is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred from politics.

In countries where there has been military violence, it is precisely this idea of community or collectivity which is threatened and always at stake. The history of dictatorships in Latin America demonstrate a vested interest in removing from consciousness the death of people in order to displace memory as an active element of hope and impulse of collectivity. Terror is anonymous in nature, while mutilation and disappearance avoids identification and so

---

256

---

257
as a method of social control. Death is placed under surveillance and the dead repressed by the State or military place as a means of social repression. In human identity and death are desacralized. The practice of these regimes is to reduce individual loss through death to the anonymity of mass graves and the disappeared to a matter of statistics. These practices generate a fear and work this context, there can be no martyrs, no historical memory, no family shrines, nothing but anonymity.

The relation between violence and the law of the State has driven collective memory from the public sphere into the private sphere of the individual self or of the family. Yet, for this reason, the relation to the dead, our dead, is critical to popular culture because it becomes the contested site of identity that threatens military and state power.

In this context, forms of visual representation assume an important ideological function. They occupy a phantasmagoric space of the real. Two forms of photographic practice are worth noting in the context of this subject. First photojournalism with its emphasis given to images of conflict, violence and death, and secondly the importance of photo-portraiture by the mothers and families of the dissapeared. The difference between the two is not simply a matter of genre and style, but the way photography transgresses and redefines the subject of taboo, that is notions of the sacred, of intimacy and the private sphere. The significance of bringing into the streets the photographs of the disappeared or those killed is that they represent the dead rather than death. Their power originates from the form of resurrection achieved in the act of showing publicly these intimate portraits, through this union with the living and with the refusal to accept the anonymity of the public sphere. This action contests a mode of photojournalism that by default create un uneasy correspondence, not to the practices of families of the disappeared, but to the practices of paramilitary death squads.

Photographs of mutilated bodies and cadavers are made for public circulation, not for the domestic or private sphere. It breaks taboos, as Benjamin points out, taking the viewer to places where the human cannot see or cannot bear to look.

It opens up the body for display like a surgeon, revealing the secret or scene of the crime. Concealing the codes and apparatus of technology, photography fetishes the visual as evidence and testimony of the real. The photograph of the dead body becomes a fetish object which both derives its power from its referent yet also banishes it. The image assumes the place of the real,

producing a form of cathartic identification through the spectacle of death. There is something dreadfully adequate in the work of this kind. As Pierre Nora has suggested “The less memory is experienced from the inside... the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs.” This form of photography produces a redemptive form of amnesia, a relation of remembrance and forgetting. Yet, it is in this space of memory, of interiority and the private sphere, that contemporary painting has assumed disturbing significance.

Over the past ten years, the movements of ‘new figuration’ and neo-expressionist painting gained tremendous success in Europe and North America, and in Latin America. Not only disseminated through the circulation of North American and European art magazines, State museums of modern art welcomed as a sign of their active participation in contemporary culture, exhibitions of contemporary Italian and German painting. Artists like Kelier, Baselitz and Penck or Palladino, Chia and Clemente had a great impact on the local art scene. The appeal of European neo-expressionism and new figuration was its emphasis on a ‘rhetorical and aesthetic vehemence’, an unmediated ‘expression’ of an internalized introspection and a universality of subject-matter that focused on the mythological and allegorical.

Both the museum and gallery provided an immediate form of legitimation and support, sanctifying certain forms of representation as both locally relevant yet also discrete, autonomous objects that could be appreciated internationally. In this manner, the question of violence is transformed into an apocalyptic, universal and timeless subject, conforming to a modernist privileging of sight and of contemplation. It provides a “liberating potential... (through) a catharsis of the imagination”. Such a mode of abstraction participates in producing the distinction between the public and private sphere, in which the museum corresponds to the domestic interior, aligning autonomy with privacy. Not only is the interior, as Walter Benjamin points out, the retreat of art, but art becomes a retreat into interiority. In the context of cultures living under repressive regimes or everyday violence as in Colombia, this kind of art, working within the realm of memory and fantasy, fed directly into the sphere in which fear works. Fear is generated by the State and not through communal ritualization but through privatized psychic internalization. In this way, death finds its home in repression in the same way as life is a survival determined by

54 Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Figures of Regression", October No.16 (Spring 1981) 41.
55 Barbara Rose, Quoted in Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting', October, ibid., 74.
the power of death. Overwhelmed by the sensation of powerlessness, melancholy and despair before the return of the repressed, the art conformed to the redemptive power of history and its aspirations to form a coherent representational universe through mythic emblems of the historical past.

The kind of critical practice and debate around the concept of public culture and the politics of the image that occurs across the institutions and art practices in places like North America are virtually absent from countries such as Colombia. Rather the role of the few public cultural institutions that do exist, such as the museums of modern art do not represent public spaces insofar as their role has always been as a kind of silent agent in nation-building. Claiming aesthetic neutrality and disinterested perception, they sanctify certain art and foster a respect for international culture as a way of constructing an aesthetic tradition and language of anonymity sealed off from the local, participating rather in the homogeneous empty time of modernity’.

The issue becomes developing a practice of strategic intervention in the existing circuitries and agencies of representation and their circulation through the public sphere. Such a practice intervenes not so much the subject of address, but its siting and way in which seen. The challenge to contemporary art and forms of visual representation is not to reproduce violence, but to address the subject of these images and problems of everyday life through which people live. The culture of disappearance valorizes the separation between people. In this context, the work of Salcedo contributes to an art of memory and consciousness as against the practice of remembrance and forgetting of contemporary painting and photography, enshrined by museums.

VI. AN ABSENT BODY

From her early work of the mid-Eighties onwards, the sculpture of Doris Salcedo can be considered as an ongoing exploration of how to address and articulate the subject of violence, displacement and loss. Over the past three years her work has been based on the testimonials by women who, with their children, as subject to the violence of an ongoing civil war in Colombia, have been driven out of their houses, off their land to the peripheries of the urban centres, where they live under the shadow of their private experience and with little interest or recourse to the public sphere and the rights of citizenship.

In a recent series of works, DEFIANT and ATRABILIARIOS, Salcedo has produced since 1992, comprise of a row of wall niches filled by women’s shoes and a number of empty boxes made of transparent animal fiber placed on the floor. Each of the niches, small and discrete, neither deep nor shallow, function as containers for women’s shoes, single or pairs of shoes, carefully placed on display. Moving along the wall, the niches reveal over and again shoes, nothing else, but abandoned shoes.

Covering each of the niches, the artist has then stitched with thick black thread into the wall pieces of rough and opaque material. Using animal skin, taken from the bladder of an animal, the effect is like that of membrane or a provisional gauze over a gaping wound. This masking of the niches not only made it difficult to see the shoes inside, but the coarse, visceral quality of the skin had the effect of altering the character of some of the shoes. At times they seem to virtually disappear, at other times, they appear more like the bare bone of the foot.

The experience of “disappearance” has become over the past twenty years a new tactic of State terror. It creates a death space which diffuses fear through much of society. Far from erasing memory, this creates a new terror and the impossibility of marking death with the ritual of burial.

Salcedo’s construction of niches immediately recalls, their use in cemeteries as the site and support of a body’s remains after cremation. Transposed into the museum space, her installation occupies a point somewhere between a reliquary and fetish. It both belongs to and is separate from the referent: the body. As a relic it stands in for the remains of someone deceased and as fetish, a substitute object of both avowal or identification and disavowal. It is intensely personal yet a discrete material object outside of the individual. By acting as a material signifier of that which is absent it arrests death, yet as a metonymic displacement, it also stands as a sign of radical difference and the separation of death from the world of the living. They appear to be without clear signs of identification, yet for their owners, these are personal reliquaries and objects of remembrance. They draw together erasure and remembrance, and the gathering together into one place is evidence of a common history and memory. This provides a bridge between the individual object and collectivity of a community and symbol of an alliance between the dead and the living. In this sense, Durkheim’s observations on totemism appears remarkably congruent, when he writes:

In a general way, a collective sentiment can become conscious of itself only by being fixed upon some material object; but by this very
of representation and institutions of circulation. By introducing the niche into the museum space, Salcedo disturbs its sanctified role in which the work of art serves to redeem death as irrevocable and the museum functions as its support: a mausoleum of forgetting.

Salcedo’s work undoes the separation of public and private sphere. On the one hand, the work transforms the museum space into the private sphere of the house, while on the other, by speaking of death as a shared experience, it becomes “a political space not only of commemoration but of an ethics based on collective memory and continuity.”

In this way, her art speaks of a community who live in hope and act in defiance against the agencies of repression. Such art creates a site of ritual through which the experience and memory of loss can be redeemed. In this context, the work of Salcedo contributes to an art of memory and consciousness as against the practice of remembrance and forgetting of contemporary painting and photography, enshrined by museums and the mass media.

VII. A HETEROGENEOUS SPACE

The work of artists such as that of Maria-Teresa Hlincapie and Doris Salcedo produce a discourse outside in, heterogeneous to itself both in form and its circulation.

In a manner, reminiscent of certain conceptual artists working in the United States in the 1980’s, such work is based on a developing a strategy of decentralizing the place of the author and subject by remaining within the dialectic of the appropriated objects of discourse and the authorial subject, which negates and constitutes itself simultaneously in the act of quotation.”

58 Jean Franco, op.cit.,14.
Invaded by the spaces of marginality, they in turn invade the museum space, producing new "zones of occult instability". They disturb the function of the museum by challenging it as a haven for art that, as Benjamin point out, like the interior of the bourgeoisie becomes the retreat of art. Not only does the work contest the museum from the point of view of class, but equally a contemporary art that serves as a retreat into interiority and continuing privatization of experience. It marks a space of emergent subject positions within the public sphere. In Benjamin's words, it is "blasting a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" to create a differential history. 60

60 Benjamin, "Theses on Philosophy of History" in Illuminations, op. cit., 263.