SKIN OF MEMORY
PROJECT DESCRIPTION
BY Holly Gore
Skin of Memory (1999–2017) is a social practice artwork by artist Suzanne Lacy and anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá that grew out of a community-led process in Medellín, Colombia. Lacy was invited by Riaño-Alcalá and a team of historians, political scientists, activists, and educators working to strengthen community in neighborhoods divided by violence. During the 1990s, Colombia was one of the most violent countries in the world. Drug cartels, leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups, the Colombian army, and US interventions forged a multilayered conflict, subjecting Colombians to homicides, kidnappings, massacres, and forced displacements. In Medellín’s Barrio Antioquia, rival youth gangs staked their territories and allegiances; to cross these lines was dangerous. Skin of Memory (1999) and Skin of Memory Revisited (2011) investigated spaces in which citizens could share histories and unite in mourning to rebuild their communities.

For Skin of Memory (1999) women and youth acted as collectors; they went door-to-door throughout Barrio Antioquia, gathering objects with powerful connections to the residents’ lives and experiences and recording the stories that made them significant. Because the neighborhood was deeply territorialized, they created a movable museum, which displayed these keepsakes in a bus retrofitted with aluminum shelves. Over the course of ten days this museum of Barrio Antioquia was visited by 4,000 people, who were invited to write a letter to an unknown resident of the barrio, expressing a wish for a peaceful future. Skin of Memory Revisited (2011) created for the Medellín Biennale, reconvened participants to reflect on personal, social, and political changes in Colombia over the intervening decade between the first and second parts of the project. Lacy, Riaño-Alcalá, and their original collaborators organized an installation and public conversation at the Museo de Antioquia, an established city museum. In a dimly lit gallery, new and former objects of memory were exhibited on a long aluminum shelf lit with small white lights, reminiscent of the interior of the bus. Two video projections illuminated opposing walls, one of which documented the 1999 project, while the other showed former participants now reflecting on the past and future of civil society in Colombia.

For the exhibition and representation of the project in this book, Skin of Memory (2017) continues a dialogue with ongoing political processes and aligns with a significant moment in Colombia: the signing of a Peace Agreement with the former guerrillas of the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC). The related exhibition and book pose a significant challenge for Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá: to consider how this new presentation in the United States will impact viewers’ understanding of the work. US stereotypes of Colombians are enhanced by a Trump-era narrative that disparages Latin Americans—one that ignores the impact of US policies on the daily lives of youth in Medellín, California, or wherever drug-related policies or military aide are enacted. The US-led “war on drugs” and the “war on terror” have directly affected Barrio Antioquia, which, in past decades, was the main producer of “drug mules.” Over time the conflicts in Colombia have been particularly deadly for youth, such as those who began this project, and now for their children. With Skin of Memory (2017) Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá hope to encourage a deeper curiosity for, as well as conversation about, the relationship between Colombia and the United States and its impact on the lives and deaths of youth in each country.