Mobilizing Pedagogy
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RELATIONSHIPS, MATERIALITY, AND POLITICS IN THE SKIN OF MEMORY
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SUZANNE LACY AND ANTHROPOLOGIST PILAR RIAÑO-ALCALÁ
One of the best things about this multiyear project has been our conversations. In 1999, one of our colleagues, William Álvarez, came up with the name “Skin of Memory” (La Piel del Memoria).

Skin of Memory dealt with loss and its relationship to memory. With this title we connected the way memory relates to sensation, as does skin; we explored the reciprocal relationship between body and memory.

Memory, in this metaphor, has sensation—it is mutable. It is not only individual but also resides in physical spaces. If memory were like a texture, a surface, then wherever you touch that surface would be felt sensorially within the whole. We hoped that if we touched the skin of people’s memories there would be some impact on their sensory world. The project’s central image, a transformed school bus, became a collective body that stored a myriad of individual and family memories, as represented by the objects that they lent us. But you mentioned this idea of the skin as container?

Skin is the container of a living organism with its sinews, vessels, organs, chemistries, and fluids. When you peel back that skin, the body is exposed, vulnerable, revealed. Once this barrier between ourselves and our environment is removed, pain results. It was as if Barrio Antioquia was a living organism, with the skin as all that stood between the neighborhood and the tremendous loss experienced there. We explored that territory between the individual and the body of the whole of the barrio, with its calcified memories.

A key to memory is that it is not only isolated within an individual. Much of what you remember is part of a relationship. When you work with people who have experienced violence for a long time, you see how memories of loss may become an obsession. Memories haunt them.

In Oakland, where I worked for a decade in the '90s, so many young people carry deep and largely unprocessed personal losses—the disappearance of fathers into prisons, the breakup of families, the deaths of friends by gun violence. Many have a huge reservoir of depression, fear, and anger that can lead to nihilism, recklessness, and despair about the future.

Living with unprocessed loss and its consequent paralysis and violence is not restricted to poor youth. In Colombia, the president himself is trapped by memories of the kidnapping and murder of his father, and he swears to fight the guerrillas to the end. Obsessive memory can take one to the point of revenge, and this might be expressed in many ways.

Through teaching women incest survivors I learned that making art is one way that people reconstruct memories of loss in order to gain some control over their experiences.

I’m not talking about the act of remembering per se, but how, in the process of remembering, you remember as part of a group—the relational capacity of memory as a bridge between past, present, and future, between the individual and the collective, memory as a never-ending source of collective positioning.

You talked about the importance of reconciliation and neutrality in peace processes in Colombia. In Barrio Antioquia, did people who wouldn’t normally transgress local factionalisms visit the bus in neighborhood areas that would not have been safe for them?
They went when it was in their own residential sector, except when it was in the central district, which everyone can access. Though they didn’t necessarily physically cross territorial lines, as far as we know, we do know they began to make the kinds of connections that we were hoping they would make, a slight crack in the rigid boundaries caused by grief.

How do you know?

Because of what they said when they left the bus, comments that are well documented. What we felt was important about art—that it lives as a visual and embodied memory—proved to be the case. The bus remains embedded in people’s minds as a place of memory and a record of suffering, a lived sensory and collective memory.

In this third iteration of the project, now in 2017, we began with the question of whether this installation is a documentation of two previous manifestations or a new work? Are we reflecting on projects from 1999 and 2011? I am interested in how the work and our conversation continue.

We are reflecting on the current implications of those past projects: what are the movements this project inspired in both social and political practices? Now we are working with three women in Medellín to collect objects for this show. We cannot actually keep them because their owners treasure them, but what makes those objects meaningful is that they are part of a very dense network of relationships between people and their pasts, and between you and me. They continue to speak to us in the present, and what we want to consider is the question: what do these relationships continue to tell us?

One of the most difficult things to portray in social practice art is experience including that in relation to others. In museum installations, social practice artists deploy a series of tropes. I worry that in a US context objects displayed on a shelf will be collapsed into a simple narrative: here is this object, owned by this family, representing this story of loss. In the bus, we made specific decisions not to reveal the narrative or the ownership of each object. But, in educating a US audience, we should carefully stage enough narrative context to create what amounts to a new position from which viewers can witness this Colombian reality.

In the beginning of our conversations on the meanings and materiality of these objects, we explored how to avoid fetishizing or instrumentalizing them. We worked from the idea that violence and armed conflict objectify people, dehumanizing them as “an other,” the enemy. We thought we could only challenge this dehumanizing impulse if we reconstructed the relationality between the people, the place they lived in, the territory where they walked, and the things and stories they kept to remember their loved ones.

When I first came to Medellín in 1999, at the invitation of you and your colleagues, it was a real privilege to enter the conversations there. That Alonso Salazar, a journalist and author on youth culture and violence in 1999, had become the mayor when we worked there in 2011, indicates the level of engagement that we all had in the civil society discourse. For me, entering a context where practices from anthropology, education, activism, and art weren’t isolated within the academy offered a rare opportunity to be part of a politically effective team. One of the reasons I’ve stayed interested in
the project over time is that it has an ongoing embeddedness in the social and political life of Colombia.

**PRA** When we first began to think about the project, we felt that it might strengthen local peace processes that were being negotiated and broken repeatedly during those years. A peace process is as much about trust building and relationship building as it is about negotiating the content of the agreements. In the context of Colombia today, with the unprecedented signing of a peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), this is more relevant than it was even then.³ It also has international importance, because when I think about police violence and Black or Latino youth in the US today the same type of questions come to the fore.

**SL** Exactly. We began this work together based on my work in Oakland, your work in Medellín, and the cultural dynamics that were just coming into focus about the ways societies violated the racialized bodies of youth, both of us were interested in the connection between young people, the violence inflicted on them, and the politics of our two countries.

**PRA** Someone in Medellín put it this way: this is art that matters, not necessarily by leaving behind a monument, but by fostering relationships and deeply political conversations. *Skin of Memory* was not about an anthropologist doing art or an artist doing anthropological research. It was an interdisciplinary dialogue that included all types of knowledge exchange: the knowledge of our team members Ruben or Angela as social practitioners, of Alonso as a politician, of the youth from Barrio Antioquia who worked on the project—Sebastian, Nancy, Milton, or Elliot—who had everyday experiences of death, loss, and gang violence.

**SL** I remember during my first tour of the barrio I saw a roped-off street scene with a young person lying under a blanket, the victim of gang violence. It was not unlike what was happening in Oakland in the '90s. But while we were dealing with loss, we were also expressing the hope, pride, and optimism of local youth and adults by working together on this project. In the second project, the idea was to bring the work itself, and the people who produced it, into a place of cultural importance. Over a decade later, our installation conveyed the symbolism of the shelf, the objects, and the expressive meanings of a community's experiences.

**PRA** Today, we wonder what will happen when we bring this work to North America. What is the relationality that we are constructing here? Is there a meaningful connection for those who are immigrants, or the children of immigrants, with no legal status in the US, living in fear under the Trump administration? Is there a relationship with Black activists and youth who have experienced firsthand, similarly to youth in Medellín, that their lives don’t matter from the perspective of the police and society at large?

**SL** The installation begins in a state university, so we should have a complex mix of visitors from the student body. But I wonder how many undocumented people or residents of poor communities will make their way to a gallery? An art museum is not necessarily the best way to reach larger audiences. As we work on this, we need to think more deeply about paradigms of social practice art, to move the field forward, to consider how audiences are also witnesses.
With the work in 2011, we wanted to examine ideas of responsibility: What is the responsibility of those who are not part of the community that experiences everyday violence? What is your role when you enter the museum? That’s when we began to explore witnessing as a practice of being accountable to each other, in new forms of relationality, between the witness and the storyteller, the witness and those who provide testimony, or the witness and the object.

While the first project’s focus was Barrio Antioquia’s individual and collective memories and how they spoke to youth violence and the city, in 2011, we focused on the relationships formed during the project in 1999, and the intervening time between 1999 and 2011 for both Barrio Antioquia and Medellín. The newly borrowed objects were, in a sense, the material link between those two moments in time. The reunion conversation—in the middle of an international conference, for over 75 people who participated in 1999—was a performance of self-enactment by that community. I really enjoyed that moment of reconnection.

Why was it special for you?

Well, aesthetically I like the notion of “performing” life, bringing people back together to reflect on the intervening years in Medellín and what the project meant for them personally and politically. In another sense, it’s fairly simple: I loved seeing everybody again and knowing that I was part of a community engagement, a process, and that I remain in people’s memory, as they remain in mine. I am committed to that time and those conversations from 1999 through 2011 and even up to today. It feels almost familial. But there’s something in that kind of love that is both personal and political. It’s love that is civic minded and has a commitment to ethical relationships, a motivation for social justice.

Because there are so many debates about what makes something transformative and what social justice looks like, some of the most basic ideas risk being lost. As the Indigenous Lakota people say in greeting, “All our relations,” to stress we are all related. This is the idea of relationships as the basis of life and how we experience politics day-to-day. The women we work with today, who were teenagers when we first met, have gone through so many things since 1999. So much has happened—pain and sorrow have been very present—but somehow this project captured and located them in a process that became transformative for them.

I agree, but am uncomfortable representing those transformations as a demonstration of the success of the projects. That is a default position for artists: four women’s lives were impacted, and therefore the art was successful. It goes to your idea of emplaced witnessing.

I see what you’re getting at when you talk about artists. But this happened not only because of an art project, but also because it was something broader, with so many people and social movements thinking about how to respond to the crisis of youth dying as a result of armed violence. It was much more than a public art project. It was simultaneously an educational, political, and community-building exercise, a project of personal development and a project of local cultural expression. It was a project to find alternatives to violence and reconstruct civil society. Witnessing is central to this. It speaks
of accountability and responding to the call of those who provide testimony through their stories and the objects they lent us.

**SL**

The peace process is a significant marker of this moment, in which we produce a new iteration of our work. It’s happening as we speak. Why are we doing this project now, and what are the dangers of doing it in the US?

**PRA**

One of the major challenges that Colombia faces today with the peace agreement is that many are not willing to trust the ex-FARC members or to accept them as full members of society. This project taught us about the possibilities of listening to someone you may see as your enemy, to connect with them through another means, through the act of witnessing. So for me, it speaks to the peace process in quite significant ways.

**SL**

Now we’re getting into the heart of the conversation. One of the first lessons that you taught me was, “don’t come to Colombia thinking this is only about drug violence.” When there, I was acutely aware, not so much of my whiteness but of my US-ness. You explained the multiple violences and displacements that created the Medellín context. You see this US stereotype of Colombia and drug cartels now in the Trump-era narrative: that it is Mexican gangs that cause violence in the US, not our drug usage and gun sales.

I think your reminder about the genesis of this project in racialized and politicized youth experience and its relationship to, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement is important, but this connection has not yet materialized in our installation.

**PRA**

We do need to clarify it further. The Colombian peace process for those in the US and for the visual art world may appear as a distant experience, but it is not that remote when you consider governmental policies. The US-led war on drugs has had a direct effect on Colombia and particularly in Barrio Antioquia. In the 1950s through the ‘60s and ’70s, most of the people who became drug mules carrying cocaine and marijuana to the US were from Barrio Antioquia. During the last decade, US funding of Plan Colombia—the largest military aid package to a Latin American country—has failed in ways that directly impact people there.

In terms of international politics, we need to think on how the US relates to Latin America through policies and aid and the impact of this relationship on the daily lives of the youth in Colombia, but also the youth in Oakland or Canada, or the people impacted by these drug-related policies. We are connected in one way or another.

**SL**

We should see this installation in Santa Barbara as the beginning of an inquiry on context. We’re struggling to produce physical forms in the gallery that communicate the complex reality we lived through the projects. How this work might now operate within the context of Colombian peace efforts is also compelling.

**PRA**

Your work has taught me that this type of conversation doesn’t take place as much in the installation as in the moments of encounter and dialogue that the installation fosters. This happened with the first project when people came to the bus and talked about memory and loss, and it happened again in the museum in 2011 during our reunion conversation. I wonder how this installation may trigger conversations here with the university students, or beyond? They need to feel invited to create a relationship with the exhibition.