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THE big ideas: why does art matter?

Naming the Disappeared, Raising the Dead

Art can give witness to those who governments have tried to erase from history.

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By Doris Salcedo

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*This essay is part of [The Big Ideas](#), a special section of *The Times's* philosophy series, [The Stone](#), in which more than a dozen artists, writers and thinkers answer the question, “Why does art matter?” The entire series can be found [here](#).*

I am a political artist who works in the midst of crisis. I have produced most of my work in Colombia, a country trying to end a 50-year war. In 2016, the government and the FARC guerrillas signed a peace accord. But we have yet to put an end to the brutal armed conflict, which has claimed more than nine million victims through death, disappearances, sexual violence and forceful displacement. Colombia continues to be one of many epicenters of catastrophe today — one of many places where tragedy seems to be a single continuous event.

I believe it is precisely in times of crisis that art achieves its most profound meaning.

Zealously and stubbornly, I have remained in Bogotá for more than 30 years, driven by the obsessive need to render visible the experience of the most vulnerable and anonymous victims of political violence, not only in Colombia but around the world. Victims who, through senseless acts, have been expelled from the story of humanity.

This is the single issue I have chosen to address in my work. It is not simply because I am Colombian — although that, in a way, gives me a deeper understanding of the effects of political violence. It is also because I strongly believe that violence defines the ethos of our society.

Since the final days of the 19th century, updates to the tools people use to kill and the appearance of concentration camps in various forms have made death more efficient, while also reducing it to an insignificance trivialized and inscribed into our everyday life. Death has become what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called the “manufacture of corpses.”

That is why the testimonies of victims are not only at the center of my work, but are actually a requirement for the very existence of each and every one of my pieces.

Doris Salcedo's memorial installation "Fragmentos," created in 2018, is made from the recycled metal of 37 tons of rifles turned in by FARC rebels as part of their 2016 peace agreement with Colombia's government. Credit...Nadège Mazars for The New York Times

The silencing of victims of political violence — the reduction of those who have suffered to lamentation and weeping — demonstrates its worst consequence: its paralyzing power. Political violence can destroy our capacity to represent and narrate what has happened to us. Art matters because it articulates and materializes painful experiences into images that are capable of breaking that hold.

In my sculptures I address the experiences of those who dwell on the borders, on the periphery of life and in the depths of catastrophe. I have devoted my work to those who, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote, have nothing but the vulnerability of their own skin. Or, as the poet Paul Celan said, those who are "unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the heavens."

Naming is art's immemorial task. In naming, art addresses aspects of reality that the establishment has chosen to ignore. It names in order to bring to light what those in power believe should remain invisible, unnamed and faceless.

Art matters because its ability to name exceeds the type of administrative thinking that is so often applied to marginalized communities, who are perceived as worthless unless they produce economic gain. In the face of this, art reinvents itself anew and expands society's viciously narrow definition of who qualifies as human. Celan believed that in every work of art, "even in the least ambitious one, there is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim" demanding that we reconsider who belongs to mankind. Art, he says, tries to wake us up by bringing into our own lives the existence of the stranger.

In doing so, art requires a radical break with indifference. It demands that we immerse ourselves in specific traumatic events that have a distinct political immediacy.

In Colombia we are currently witnessing the daily, unstoppable killings of hundreds of social and community leaders and human rights advocates. Each murder imposes on our society a devastating feeling of impotence and sadness.

My response to those crimes was "Quebrantos," a monumental, ephemeral act of mourning realized last year in collaboration with Colombia's Truth Commission. It was meant to be both a forceful gesture and a tool that could be used by the community to communicate the painful experiences it has been forced to endure.

I invited 103 community leaders who have received death threats and, in some cases, have survived attacks, to come to Bogotá to write in broken glass the names of 165 of their slain fellow activists.

Helped by hundreds of volunteers, those who came slowly but continuously shattered 21 tons of glass. We worked for 12 hours, sometimes in the rain, until we had completely covered Bogotá's main square.

The act of breaking what should be whole is a painful one, but when it is done in a compulsive manner, it becomes excruciating. The act of breaking glass while naming victims reminds us that glass, like life, is fragile, and once it is broken, it can never be mended.

Doris Salcedo's "Shibboleth," a temporary installation in the form of a crack running through the floor of the Tate Modern museum in central London in 2007. It represented segregation and racial hatred directed at immigrants and migrants. Credit...Edmond Terakopian/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Taken in that context, art allows us to recall our recent history not as a means to preserve intact the memory of violent events, but rather to re-enact the past through images capable of renewing what otherwise would lay forgotten.

The making of political art is like a solitary liturgy in which the unbearable, the unknowable and the painful are accepted and forged into images that bear witness to life. In the images art offers us there is not only the memory of oppressed existence, but also the light of an immemorial ethos. That is why art matters.

Doris Salcedo is a Colombian visual artist and sculptor who addresses the concept of memory and the forgotten in her installations. Her work has been exhibited at the Tate Modern, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum.