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Sanctifying Memory: Religion and Performance in Colombia’s First Wave of Memorial Works

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SANCTIFYING MEMORY: RELIGION AND PERFORMANCE IN COLOMBIA’S FIRST WAVE OF MEMORIAL WORKS

by

Valeria Serrano

B.A., University of Georgia, 2015

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Sanctifying Memory: Religion and Performance in Colombia’s First Wave of Memorial Works
written by Valeria Serrano
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Serrano, Valeria (M.A., Art History, University of Colorado Boulder, Department of Art and Art History)
Sanctifying Memory: Religion and Performance in Colombia’s First Wave of Memorial Works
Thesis directed by Associate Professor James M. Córdova

Abstract:

This thesis provides an interdisciplinary, synchronic approach to Colombia’s current “memory boom,” examining the memorials, artworks, and performances that are materializing on its nearly five decade-long period of national violence. Here I ask what Colombian collective memory on civil war looks like, how locals engage with it, and why. My argument is that Colombia’s strong Catholic tenor provides the principle framework upon which the desaparecidos (disappeared) are regarded and commemorated. I examine how Catholic traditions are redirected into the understanding of Colombia’s victims, specifying on its notion of space, animate materials, and enactment of ritualistic performances. This thesis critically engages with interdisciplinary theories of collective memory, religion, trauma, and memorialization, using memorials and artworks on the Holocaust and on other historic moments of violence as points of comparison. I address holes in the scholarship that do not properly address what the implications of religious memory mediation in Colombia are, and the impact it has on its visual memory landscape. My research demonstrates that together religious traditions, contemporary artworks, and memorial spaces in modern-day Colombia establish a means through which victims of violence are commemorated as saintly.
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Introduction

Currently, Colombia is experiencing a “memory boom.” The country is now beginning to acknowledge the effects of its very recent, violent past, and negotiating the overarching narrative about it, while simultaneously being sensitive to the fact that, for many, the nearly five-decade long civil war is still not over. This thesis focuses on the “memory boom” by examining particular memorials, and the space for memory that artworks and performances open up for the victims of violence and their survivors. I ask how collective memory on violence and trauma is currently materializing, how it is being framed, and what its implications are. I argue that Catholic religious traditions and practices provide the principle framework through which Colombians remember and relate to that violence. Specifically, they construct and engage with visual-based objects and images that liken Colombia’s victims of violence to saints.

The civil war in Colombia has left as many as 220,000 dead, 25,000 disappeared, and 5.7 million displaced in the last fifty years.¹ These numbers, which exponentially kept rising and are only now starting to plateau, made for an overwhelming situation that could not have properly been dealt with until recently. In fact, Colombia’s “memory boom” may have not had its initial beginnings until 2005, with the passing of Ley 975 (Law 975), also known as Ley de Justicia y Paz (Law of Justice and Peace), which had as its main objective to “facilitate the processes of peace, and the individual or collective reintegration into civil life of members from armed groups outside of the law, guaranteeing the rights of victims to the truth, justice, and reparation” (emphasis mine).²


This law represents one of the first cases for the formal recognition of victims as such, which was an important first step. The physical construction of memory spaces would not actually begin, however, until after the passing of *Ley 1448* (Law 1448) in 2011, better known as the *Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras* (Law of Victims and Restitution of Land), which explicitly called for the building of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Center of Historic Memory). These events, which then continued with the 2016 peace deal with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) that was meant to end the world’s longest continuous war, have been key contributing factors to Colombia’s current creation of memory sites. The sites, erected mainly, though not exclusively, in the capital city of Bogotá, serve as places for victims of Colombia’s fifty-four year-long period of violence to express their experiences, mourn the losses of loved ones, and establish a historic memory that contributes to the desire for sustained peace.

As cultural historian Tatjana Louis explains, however, a visual vocabulary for the expression of memories over the conflict is still in negotiation, and Colombia has no historic precedent for traditions of how to remember moments of violence in either the public or private realm.3 This, she notes, has resulted in Colombia relying on pre-existing traditions of remembrance.4 In its search for a visual vocabulary that addresses these issues, Colombians have looked to Holocaust memorials and artworks, but also to traditional, local Catholic religious practices, which is the focus of this paper. Studies on collective memory, and the relationship between collective memory and religion specifically provide the principle scholarly thrust of this

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4 Ibid.
thesis. This scholarship establishes that there is such a thing as “societal remembering,” which includes both memories of events that directly did and did not occur to us; that such memories are reliant upon various social frameworks in order to be remembered and made sense of; and that memory and memorialization, oftentimes, is religious in nature. In other words, memory is not unmediated.

Despite the vast amount of scholarship on collective memory, there is still much to be done in terms of relating specific religious traditions and practices with new commemorative artworks and memorial spaces. The public articulation of collective memory, religion, and violence in Colombia, is, as of yet, virtually unexplored. This thesis addresses these holes in the scholarship and engages with the influential work of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Connerton, and James Young, so as to bring the case of Colombia into the broader discourse of collective memory and material trauma. As an art historian, I am particularly interested in exploring how Colombia’s visual memory landscape relates to this body of scholarship, and to other countries’ visual and performative engagements with memory. I also draw on sociological and anthropological studies to achieve a culturally specific understanding of the particularities of memory, and the complexities behind its visual articulation in Colombia.

My perspective as a Colombian-born woman raised in the United States, who has spent considerable amounts of time in Europe colors many aspects of this thesis. In the chosen subject

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matter it is perhaps most apparent, since although the core of this research is centered on Colombia, I look at examples from the United States and Europe as points of comparison. In doing this, I challenge the notion that the human response to trauma is homogenous, and that, instead, it produces multiple visual articulations that are locally specific. This approach also demonstrates how various visual vocabularies established as synonymous with memory and trauma influence one another. Specifically, I examine ways the Holocaust has been memorialized in monuments, memorials, and memory-related artworks. I also look at how these works impacted other similar ones in Colombia and the United States, since Germany is often identified as the place that has most appropriately established a modern visual archetype for memory on loss.6

I write this thesis before the completion of Colombia’s Museo Nacional de la Memoria (National Museum of Memory) in Bogotá, not knowing about what the final product will look like other than what is described on the project’s website, and what its goals are, as stated in Ley 1448.7 My approach is therefore necessarily a synchronic approach to studying modern-day Colombian memorials because the country is going through its first wave of memorial production on a national level. I look specifically at the work of Colombia’s most prominent living artists that engage with memorializing the country’s violent past: Juan Pablo Ortiz, Erika Diettes, Doris Salcedo, and Juan Manuel Echavarría. Finally, I examine the performative actions that occur in these memorial spaces.

Chapter 1 focuses on monuments and memorials in Colombia, using Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Michael Arad and Peter Walker’s Reflecting Absence in the United States.

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as contrasting examples. I explain what constitutes collective memory in each case, how it is sustained, and how it materializes into these monuments and memorials. I also look at counter-monuments and the relationship between collective memory and religion. Here I examine two memorials in Colombia that have represented collective, national memory: The Skin of Memory, a temporary, mobile memorial; and Memorial to Life, a permanent structure that resides in the Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación (Center of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation) in Bogotá. This chapter critically engages with James Young’s scholarship, where he maintains that counter-monument aesthetics are most appropriate in the memorialization of loss because they best reflect the heterogenous nature of memories held on any specific event, and that unified methods of societal remembrance are an illusion.\footnote{James Young, “Introduction: The Memorial’s Vernacular Arc Between Berlin’s ‘Denkmal’ and New York City’s 9/11 Memorial,” in The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 14.} I suggest that although this may be accurate for the culturally multifarious locations he specifies on (the United States and Europe), Colombia exemplifies a challenge to that premise. Colombia’s influence of religion, which mediates its memory on violence and trauma, has produced memory spaces that likewise resemble saintly shrines and cathedrals. This makes a strong case for there being a presence of collective memory here, showing that this phenomenon does exist and it can result from a unifying national consciousness that privileges a religious overtone.

Chapter 2 considers how a religious framework of memorialization in Colombia predetermines precisely what and how things are to be remembered. This religious mediation results in the production and handling of material things reminiscent of relics and brandia. I argue that these “relics” occupy a logical role in the memory process here because of the systematic
disappearances of victims, which leave families and loved ones without bodies to bury properly. They also serve a spiritual purpose and elevate the victims to saintly status. Examining the works of Colombian artist Erika Diettes, as well as Holocaust memory artworks, I detail the difference between an object and a thing, where the latter is animate and agentive. I then argue that the things left behind by victims function as proxies for the lost bodies, and are consequently venerated as sacred.

Chapter 3 examines the rituals and performances that are integral to Colombian memorial works: prayers, processions, and offerings to memorialize the victims of violence. I argue that these performances activate the sacredness of the things used to mediate remembrances of the victims. I specifically examine rituals done in relation to the nameless bodies (NNs) found in the water of a town in Colombia called Puerto Berrío that sits on a bend of the Magdalena River, and those performed in relation to the artworks of Erika Diettes. I compare these otherwise ordinary rituals to those that comprise religious traditions, as in Catholic Mass, and relate the transubstantiation of the Eucharist during Mass to the transformative effect these rituals have on the victims’ things. By examining the presence and power of religious rituals in Colombia’s memory landscape, we see that the bodies of the disappeared are being remembered and commemorated in a saintly fashion. Overall, this thesis calls attention to the varying visual languages used in memorials and memory-related artworks, and demonstrates that religious traditions interact with contemporary artworks and spaces to mediate articulations, understandings, and remembrance of violence in modern-day Colombia.
Chapter I: Monuments, Memorials, and the Aesthetics of Sacred Presence in Colombian Collective Memory of Violence

In 1981, German philosopher Theodor Adorno declared that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” underscoring the irrevocable changes on cultural production that result from an incomprehensibly traumatic event such as the Holocaust. In attempting to find the most appropriate way to memorialize this event without redeeming it with aesthetic beauty as Adorno warned, Germany has predominantly favored the “counter-monument.” The counter-monument, according to James Young, is essentially a response to Adorno’s concerns, resulting in a kind of “anti-monument.” Though Young first used this term in 1992 primarily to speak about vanishing monuments in Germany, he later expanded his definition to also encompass memorials that establish sites of “collected memory,” rather than assuming and imposing “collective memory.” Thus, counter-monuments do not attempt to provide a “final solution” to a traumatic memory, but rather precisely articulate that void and engage the viewer in various ways, in order to represent the reality of memory’s perpetual state of negotiation.

Architects and scholars widely accept counter-monuments as the most appropriate way to express irreparable loss because of the way they take into account the multiplicity of experiences

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3 According to Young, a site of “collected memory” is composed of various individual memories that just share a common space, whereas a site of “collective memory” imposes a monolithic memory to an event, disregarding the individualization and never-ending negotiation of memory on a traumatic event. See: James Young, “Introduction: The Memorial’s Vernacular Arc Between Berlin’s ‘Denkmal’ and New York City’s 9/11 Memorial,” in The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 1-17.
4 Ibid., 6. Young states that post-Holocaust memory artists would likely respond to Adorno’s comment by saying, “Not only is art not the answer, but after the Holocaust, there can be no more final solutions.”
held on any specific event. Yet, in Colombia they have not been adopted as a way to memorialize its now fifty-four year period of violence. This is especially curious because the Holocaust is the event scholars most often draw a parallel to when speaking of Colombia’s national violence.\textsuperscript{5} According to Young and others, the parallel often drawn between the Holocaust and other similarly violent and traumatic events occurs because the Holocaust has become an archetypal event and reference point for catastrophe.\textsuperscript{6} Paul Connerton notes that, “In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we set a particular event or episode or way of behaving in the context of a number of narrative histories.”\textsuperscript{7} Thus, in the understanding of loss and trauma, for instance, we recall other such events, even if we did not experience them personally.

Examining this phenomenon, Marianne Hirsch has coined the term “post-memory” to describe how memories of events that did not occur to us become adopted into our own memory as if they had.\textsuperscript{8} According to Hirsch, photography plays a crucial role in this process that she calls the “transgenerational transmission of trauma.”\textsuperscript{9} If, however, there is an association of the Holocaust with a general memory and understanding of trauma, and the aesthetics of the counter-monument

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are what have been established as appropriate for memorializing this, what do we make of Colombia’s differing memorial aesthetics?

In this chapter, I argue that Catholicism is the unifying, mediating framework at play in Colombia. It predetermines what memory spaces there look like and what they are comprised of. It also accounts for why they differ from counter-monument aesthetics, as employed in Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Reflecting Absence, because these are products of a multifarious framework of memory, and not a predominantly religious one.

This chapter critically engages with Young’s claim that counter-monument aesthetics are most appropriate because they best reflect the heterogenous nature of modern societies and their differing memories on trauma, maintaining that unified methods of societal remembering are an illusion. Although this is true for the culturally and religiously diverse regions he examines (Europe and the United States) that do not privilege any one over the other, Colombia exhibits a challenge to that premise. Collective memory in Colombia takes a much more homogenous overtone than in other nations that are not as culturally and religiously centered on the Catholic Church. The celebrated counter-monument aesthetics of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Reflecting Absence are hence not as relevant to a nation that does have a predominantly unified method of remembrance.

This chapter examines the relation of monuments and memorials to “collective” and “collected” memory. I introduce the relationship between collective memory and religion to argue for the visual and spatial similarities that the Colombian memorials, The Skin of Memory and Memorial to Life, have with religious shrines and cathedrals. Finally, I conclude by justifying the

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10 Young, “The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning,” in Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, 173.
differing aesthetics of memory seen between counter-memorials and Colombian memorials by suggesting that Colombia has a predominant mediator of its memory, in contrast to major U.S. and European metropolitan centers, such as New York and Berlin, in which counter-monument aesthetics have been adopted.

Monuments and Counter-monuments: “Collective” vs. “Collected” Memories and The Aesthetics of Absence

Studies on collective memory began with the work of Emile Durkheim, but his student, Maurice Halbwachs, coined the term “collective memory” in 1925 to describe how societies remember together. In On Collective Memory, Halbwachs maintains that memory is mediated by and reliant upon social frameworks such as the family, religion, and social classes. He argues that memories exist both individually and collectively, but that individual memories must be placed within these collective frameworks in order to be remembered and made sense of. Halbwachs exemplifies this theory when talking about dreams because, according to him, images from dreams are purely individual memories. This is due to the dream’s lack of structure and organization. In waking, everyday life, however, individuals understand memories and events according to a social framework that influences what exactly should be remembered and how.

Expanding on Halbwach’s work, Paul Connerton added in 1989 that collective memory is expressed and continually sustained explicitly through commemorative ceremonies and bodily

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12 Ibid.

practices. He saw these as intimately connected, noting that “commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms.”

He thus believes that memory is socially habitual and that it is sedimented in the body, making us containers of the past. This can be seen with his example of table manners, for instance, which “remind performers of a set of rules for defining ‘proper’ behavior.”

Similarly, monuments and memorials are memory given a tangible, visible form. They promote societal remembering and contribute to what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory.” And monuments and memorials are also products of a social framework for remembering that simultaneously produce that framework, as Halbwachs’ and Connerton’s theories suggest.

These structures thus establish what should be remembered, how it should be remembered, and bridge the past into the present by demonstrating the memorialized event’s perpetual relevance for contemporary society.

James Young’s work exemplifies the relationship between collective memory and how it is ultimately formalized in monuments and memorials. His most recent book, The Stages of Memory...

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15 Ibid., 5.


17 According to Hirsch, “post-memory” is “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (emphasis hers). What Hirsch finds unique, however, is how these experiences are transmitted in such a deep way that they “seem to constitute memories in their own right” (emphasis hers). A term she synonymously uses for “post-memory” is also “inherited memory.” See: “The Generation of Postmemory,” 106-107.

18 Connerton’s theories on the integral role of bodily practices for storing and simultaneously sustaining collective memory, for example, exhibit similar characteristics to what Young believes comprise monuments and memorials. This aspect of Connerton’s theories are expanded upon in Chapters 2 and 3.
(2016), delves deep into the “memory hours” involved in the creation of several twenty-first century memorials in Europe and the United States that have been erected in the aftermath of violent acts. Here, Young succinctly and adequately defines what characterizes a monument versus a memorial, and establishes a difference between collective memory and what he calls “collected memory.” According to Young, the traditional monument is a singular structure that attempts to encapsulate and impose a monolithic interpretation of a past event onto society. It creates an imagined “unified vision of the past” that is presented to the viewer. The memorial, however, invites the viewer into an architectural experience that is somehow united with the memory it represents. Thus, we might think of the difference between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial to illustrate this. Monuments present us with an interpretation or commemoration of a person or historic event (like the Washington Monument), in other words, while the memorial is an experiential way of remembering that relies on procession through a set space in order to take part in that remembering (as with the Lincoln Memorial).

In the traditional sense, both monuments and memorials can establish a curated narrative of history, however, the memorial provides more space for various interpretations and memories than the monument. So as to articulate the difference between traditional monuments or memorials with their contemporary forms, Young created the term “counter-monuments.” According to him, they are “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of

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20 Ibid.
their being.”21 He adds that they critique “the conventional monument’s static fixedness, bombast, self-certainty, and authoritarian didacticism.”22

These distinctions support Young’s differentiation between collective and “collected memory,” where, quite simply, traditional monuments assume the presence of collective memory, while memorials and contemporary counter-monuments create sites of “collected memory.”23 Young maintains that the notion of collective memory is usually a unificatory illusion, and states that through the awareness of a nation’s "collected memory,”

[W]e recognize that we never really shared each other’s actual memory of the past or even recent events, but that in sharing common spaces in which we collect our disparate and competing memories, we find common (perhaps even a national) understanding of widely disparate experiences and our very reasons for recalling them.24

This understanding of the heterogeneous nature of memory explains why counter-monument aesthetics have been widely adopted, starting in the latter decades of the twentieth-century and continuing into today.

Two counter-monuments significant to my study are Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial of 1982 (Fig. 1.1) and the 9/11 memorial in New York City titled Reflecting Absence by Michael Arad and Peter Walker of 2011 (Fig. 1.2). Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial was the first memorial that broke the mold of what had been done up until that point, and it, consequently, had


23 Around this same time and separately from Young, sociologist Jeffrey K. Olick also wrote an article establishing a distinction between collective and collected memory. For this, see: Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” Sociological Theory 17, no. 3 (1999): 333–48.

24 Young, “Introduction” in The Stages of Memory, 15.
tremendous influence on those done after. Reflecting Absence is the most recent major American
counter-monument, which shows great debt to Lin’s blueprint and has generated significant
scholarship on its visual form.

Lin’s memorial utilized what is now called the “negative form” as a response to the
ultimately undefinable nature of memory. It also turned out to be a metaphorical representation of
the process of grief associated with a traumatic event, as Lin states,

I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and
pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain
a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface, much like the surface on a
geode when you cut it and polish the edge… The names… on the memorial would become
the memorial… The people and their names would allow everyone to respond and
remember.

According to Young, Lin’s deliberate creation of a wound in the landscape is what then opened up
a space for memory. It also created an appropriate solution to the memory-representation
problem because it showed that a more neutral and respectful way to memorialize an event could
be achieved by literally designing the visual articulation of the void left behind. The “negative
form” thus proved to be an effective way of responding to questions on memorials that Young

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25 For sources on counter-monuments and on aesthetics of absence or trauma, see: Sabrina DeTurk,
“Memory of Absence: Contemporary Counter-Monuments,” Art & the Public Sphere 6, no. 1–2 (September
2017): 81–94; Mark Godfrey, Abstraction and the Holocaust (New Haven; London: Yale University Press,
2007); Brett Ashley Kaplan, Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation (Urbana:
University of Illinois Press, 2007); Jeremy Melvin et al., “Monument: Antimonument,” The Architectural
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Marita Sturken, “The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding
Ground Zero,” American Ethnologist 31, no. 3 (August 2004): 311–25; and Verónica Tello, Counter-
Memorial Aesthetics: Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art (London; New York:
Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

4:10.

A formal comparison between Lin’s memorial and *Reflecting Absence* reveals visual similarities. Both memorials make use of the “negative form,” display the names of the victims lost to the event, opt for a minimalist design, and selected similarly dark, reflective material for the surfaces in order to literally reflect signifiers of memory back onto the viewer. Both memorials display a careful respect of the void left behind as consequence of the events memorialized and demonstrate a conscious awareness against redeeming these events through aesthetic pleasure. Anthropologist Marita Sturken also writes on this in regards to 9/11, noting that “in moments of trauma, aesthetics are almost always understood as antithetical to processes of grief.” This is exemplified by looking at the three finalists for the 9/11 memorial design competition: *Reflecting Absence*, *Garden of Lights* by Pierre David with Sean Corriel and Jessica Kmetovic (Fig. 1.3), and *Passages of Light: The Memorial Cloud* by Giesla Bauermann, Sawad Brooks, and Jonas Coersmeier (Fig. 1.4). As a jury member for this design competition, Young reveals that a principle reason for why *Reflecting Absence* was chosen over the other two designs was due to “the memorial logic of the voids.” *Garden of Lights* and *Passages of Light: The Memorial Cloud*, on the other hand, were eliminated because they were too focused on the aesthetics of the memorial and too spectacular, to the point that a void was no longer discernible.

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28 Ibid., 2.
Visually comparing the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and *Reflecting Absence* to memorials in Colombia leads to a meaningful contrast (Fig. 1.5-1.6). It seems that the “negative form” associated with the counter-monument would be specifically appropriate to a diverse social framework, but I argue that Colombian memorials are a visual product from one primary, unifying mediator: the Catholic Church.

**Collective Memory and Religion: The Creation of a Visual Language for The Apprehension of Death in Colombia**

Building upon some of the basic concepts of collective memory, scholars have generated compelling ideas on its relationship to religion. According to Halbwachs, for example, religious frameworks provide individuals with a structure to make sense of supernatural, otherworldly events, such as death and resurrection, for instance.\(^{32}\) He details that,

> In a sense, nothing is more abstract than religious thought. Whether we consider God or the supernatural beings to which the cult is addressed and which are defined chiefly by very general attributes, or whether we try to understand the relationships between God and men, original sin, redemption, grace, or the heavenly kingdom, we imagine symbols or articulate words. But we indeed know that these are vague or verbal expressions of a reality that escapes us. If religious thought were nothing else, it would apply only to ideas that do not correspond to any image or sensible reality, that is, to forms empty of content.\(^{33}\)

Expanding on this idea, anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts his belief on religion being understood as a “system of symbols,” the symbols providing a “concrete embodiment of ideas.”\(^{34}\) He notes that understanding and internalizing these symbols leads to the social and psychological

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\(^{32}\) Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 177-179.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 178.

manifestations of religion in divination and rituals, for instance.\(^{35}\) In other words, despite the abstract nature of religious concepts, we have the vocabulary to concretize these ideas.\(^{36}\) Religious frameworks provide this vocabulary of symbols that affix abstract ideas to perceptible forms.

Accordingly, societies redirect their religious concepts or “symbols” to historic events of violence that are as difficult to grasp as some religious topics. Indeed this is seen across a variety of instances, especially with the events of the Holocaust. In her work, Tania Oldenhage explores how German Christians commemorate the Holocaust, and what symbolic language they use for its articulation.\(^{37}\) One of the examples she mentions is a pencil drawing by German artist Günter Fischermann, which places Jesus in a death camp setting and likens the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust to the suffering of Jesus Christ (Fig. 1.7). She notes that,

In this image, Jewish experiences of suffering during the Holocaust are interpreted through the Christian story of Jesus’ walk to Golgotha… Like the Jewish families in the image who walk towards their own death, Jesus is on his way to his execution… [He] is configured,

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 125.


like the Jews, as a victim... [and just] like the woman with the yellow star, [he] is Jewish.\textsuperscript{38}

The image therefore demonstrates a gravitation towards adopting Christian symbols and imagery in an effort to apprehend the atrocities of the Holocaust that led to the murdering of over four million Jews: a historic event that is difficult to come to terms with. This is not an isolated case, however, and in fact we will later see in Chapter 2 that Colombian artists, like Erika Diettes, explore the memories of Colombia’s national violence by establishing similar parallels.

The Aesthetics of Presence in Colombian Memorials

For the most part, memorials in Colombia are small, personal, local, pop-up makeshift structures. This practice has been in place for many years and continues to this day, but \textit{The Skin of Memory} (Fig. 1.5) and \textit{Memorial to Life} (Fig. 1.6) are two of the first formal memorials that represented the collective memories of the nation, rather than speaking at just a local level. And while the project of building the Museo Nacional de Memoria (National Museum of Memory) in Bogotá is

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 91. This refunctioning of Christian imagery is very problematic and controversial, starting with its initial use in the 1960s and continuing into the present. The parallel is considered offensive because it glorifies the Holocaust, and imposes a misleading Christian understanding on it that justifies the massive deaths of Jews. Co-opting religious significance and trauma in this drawing, however, was purposeful, and related to what Oldenhage outlines as a problem Christian theologians in Germany faced around the year 1966, when the German government established an official day of remembrance to the victims of National Socialism (January 27). Oldenhage notes that one response to this was a youth ritual called the Ecumenical Way of the Cross, where young German Catholics and Protestants join for a commemorative walk through their town with a cross on their shoulders. They enact Jesus’ walk to Golgotha, stopping in a number of public landmarks to sing and pray in remembrance of his suffering. These various stopping sites are treated as Stations of the Cross. Oldenhage explains that in 2001, Fischermann’s drawings played a central role in the rituals, because the theme of the Way of the Cross commemoration that year asked German Christians to remember Jesus’ suffering to that of others in their own time. This drawing likens the suffering of Jesus to the suffering of the Jews as a way to understand that suffering. It does not, however, have the effect of elevating Jews to a saintly status, as seen with the Colombian memorial works I describe throughout this thesis. As Oldenhage explains, “the German artist chose to combine images of Jesus with images of the Holocaust not because Jesus’ agony resembles the agony of a Jewish woman held in check by a Nazi soldier but because he followed the impulse of interpreting the events of the Holocaust through a central symbol of his own religious reservoir” (Ibid., 94).
underway and expected to be completed by mid-2019, *Memorial to Life* is currently the only permanent place that contains the memories of Colombians from all over the nation, and is the primary place people can go to remember.

*The Skin of Memory* was created by artist Suzanne Lacy and anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, and was a temporary project that took place from 1998-1999. It was a bus converted into a makeshift gallery space with shelves and lighting, which allowed visitors to memorialize some of Colombia’s many victims of national violence. It moved throughout different sectors in the city of Medellín for ten days, ensuring a safe space for victims by avoiding hostile areas, while simultaneously attending to the fact that there was no singular space in which the residents from these various quarters at the time could go to remember.\(^{39}\)

Pieces of clothing, stuffed animals, images of saints, and other material memories belonging to the deceased were displayed in the bus.\(^{40}\) Teardrop shaped incandescent lightbulbs lit the items, all of which were enclosed by a glass case. The lightbulbs, which stood in the place of candles, were the light source for the interior of the bus, and provided an aura of sacred space.

Here, the void, or “negative form,” promoted by Young and seen in the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and *Reflecting Absence* has consciously been filled in.

Unlike *The Skin of Memory, Memorial to Life* is stationary and it permanently resides at the Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación (Center of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation) in Bogotá. In contrast to the aesthetics of the counter-monument, this structure monumentalizes the void. This is because the site is built on sacred ground, where thousands of bodies had been buried

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 102.
since the revolt of April 9, 1948. This important date is considered to be the beginning of what has become a period of over fifty-four years of national violence, which began with the assassination of the liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This construction contrasts with New York City’s Reflecting Absence, as the recessed pools there emphasize the gaping hole left in the earth from the collapsing of the twin towers, whereas here the structure emerges from that void left by the victims of violence to memorialize life and presence, rather than absence and loss.41

Fifty rectangular windows that give the appearance of tears when seen from below make up the surface of the structure, and serve as light sources for the Centro de Memoria complex (Fig. 1.8-1.9). Visitors reach the interior by descending from one of four entrances that represent a cross and the four cardinal directions. The inner walls of the structure are made up of over two-thousand glass test tubes that contain fist-fulls of dirt form the various regions of Colombia from which the victims hailed (Fig. 1.10). Together they represent the unfortunate number of sectors of the country that were affected by the violence. Along with the symbolic fist-fulls of dirt, victims also often accompanied their contributions with written testimonies that have the effect of charging the organic material with meaning specific to a person and place. Memorial to Life additionally has the registering of over forty thousand names of individuals assassinated or killed.42 Together, the components establish Memorial to Life as more than a simple memorial, but also a proper and sacred burial ground.

41 Speaking on this, architect Juan Pablo Ortiz states that, it is a “monument to life, to the victims, and to the hope for a peaceful future” that is meant to remind viewers of the millions of victims that have died as a result of the violence Colombia has seen throughout the last six decades. For more information on Memorial to Life, see Centro Memoria, “Obra Arquitectónica,” Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación, May 2015, http://centromemoria.gov.co/obra-arquitectonica/.

42 Ibid.
*Skin of Memory* and *Memorial to Life* exemplify the primary aesthetics of remembrance utilized in Colombia, which significantly parallel the aesthetics of remembrance employed in Catholic sacred and religious spaces. Colombia, after all, is one of the most populous Catholic centers of the world. There, death is often set and understood in religious terms, and commemorated in sacred and religious spaces. This is the case with the weekly Mass, for example, which memorializes and commemorates the death of Jesus Christ. I argue that in Colombia, death and religion are so closely related, they are considered to go hand-in-hand. Thinking of religion as a system of symbols like Geertz suggests, results in memory spaces in Colombia that bear remarkable semblances to religious shrines and cathedrals. By extension, the memorial objects inside these spaces are material remains of the deceased that are akin to the religious concepts of *relics* (physical remains of the deceased) and *brandia* (objects that touched or were owned by the deceased).

The shrine of Santa Laura Montoya Upegui in Medellin is useful in understanding this relationship in Colombia. Santa Laura, importantly, is the only Colombian saint. Canonized in May 2013, she has played a vital role in the religious life of Colombians for the numerous miracles that she has procured. The room in which she died was designated as sacred and turned into a shrine, whereas the rest of the house became the Museo Etnográfico y Santuario (Ethnographic Museum

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and Shrine) of the Madre Laura. The room in which Santa Laura died preserves all the same objects that were there when she still lived and in the same fashion, though it is now closed off with a large glass (Fig. 1.11). Inside we see her small twin-sized bed with a large wooden cross near where her head would have been, her wheelchair, and night table; along with her figures of Saint Joseph, the Immaculate Virgin, and Christ Carrying the Cross. Many of her relics and brandia, including pieces of hair, cotton cloths that were used to clean her blood, and some of the clothes she had last worn are enshrined in this room. Santa Laura’s house as a whole immediately became a place of pilgrimage, where thousands of individuals from all over the nation have come to thank her for the miracles they have received, and to leave offerings like messages on plaques, and objects related to received miracles. These include crutches, walkers, and even wheelchairs that have been displayed as demonstrations of Santa Laura’s mediation in procuring miracles.

Comparing the shrine of Santa Laura to The Skin of Memory in Medellin reveals many essential and overlapping characteristics. The objects, or material memories, displayed in the Skin of Memory, as Lacy states in her mini documentary video of the project, were very carefully placed in order to promote a “sanctification of the objects that were from individual people.” These objects are material “remains” of the deceased person, and are akin to traditional relics or brandia, as seen in Santa Laura’s shrine. This shows especially in their collective display, and the respect with which they are treated, asserting the fact that they are not ordinary, inanimate objects. The space ultimately demonstrates the importance of what those charged objects represent and mediate,

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46 Ibid.

rather than the actual physical object itself: a proxy for the physical body of the deceased. The material memories here are also venerated in a similar, shrine-like way, with the individual incandescent lightbulbs in front of each item in *The Skin of Memory* acting as permanent offerings to the deceased. This is comparable in meaning to the candles or material offerings visitors leave at Santa Laura’s space. Furthermore, just as the saint’s shrine became a place of pilgrimage, so too did *Skin of Memory* with regular visitations by the families and community residents.

Early modern relic cabinets provide an additional visual comparison and a historical precedent to Lacy’s work. Philip II’s relic cabinet in the Escorial (Fig. 1.12) displayed his remarkable collection of relics, books, and art. Inside this cabinet are shelves filled with the relics of saints, contained within elaborately decorated reliquaries. As with *The Skin of Memory*, they are arranged in a way that establishes the displayed objects as sacred through their organized display in a glass case, use of light to highlight the gold of the reliquaries or to underscore the presence of each individual object, and by juxtaposing Christian imagery with the relics. Phillip II’s cabinet, for example, is flanked by an image of the Annunciation, whereas *Skin of Memory* displays crucifixes and images of saints together with the “relics” of deceased individuals. Art historian Cynthia Hahn explains that the dedication ceremony of the Escorial was an extraordinary event, with forty hours of continuous prayer, and over 5,000 lit lamps. She notes that, "The lighting was so dramatic, in fact— with lamps placed in even the very high windows like great ‘necklaces’ of gold— that the church was visible from a distance… [offering] spectators a vision of the Heavenly

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49 Ibid., 165.
I argue that Skin of Memory draws from the traditions of sacred shrine and reliquary display spaces to commemorate Colombia’s victims of violence.

Many of these components are also present in cathedrals and larger religious spaces, though this parallel can most clearly be drawn with Memorial to Life. Comparing Memorial to Life to Bogotá’s first and arguably most important cathedral, La Catedral Primada, for instance, provides a strong example (Fig. 1.13-1.14). La Catedral Primada is the focal point of the Plaza Bolivar, the capital’s main square. It is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, but a noteworthy variant is that it houses the remains of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, a Spanish explorer and conquistador, who was also the founder of the city of Bogotá. This sacred, religious space, then, doubles as a church and a structure that houses the remains of a secular individual, rather than a saintly figure. I argue that this juxtaposition of the sacred with the secular in a historic national monument, the Catedral Primada, provides a local model for understanding the combination of secular and sacred spaces in The Skin of Memory and Memorial to Life. This juxtaposition not only plays out in spaces, however, but also in smaller, local monuments. The Cross of Reconciliation in the small town of Villavicencio, for example, is a local public monument erected to commemorate victims of violence (Fig.1.15). It has recently gained popularity because it was one of Pope Francis’ destinations during his visit to Colombia in 2017, and because it was blessed by him. This monument synthesizes a white, outstretched human silhouette with the symbol of the Holy Cross.

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50 Ibid.

51 I have not been able to find who erected this monument, or when it was erected.
on a high pedestal. Here, the victims of national violence are paralleled to Jesus as a comparable victim, similar to the before mentioned Günther Fischermann drawing (Fig. 1.7).

Aside from the symbolic similarities that juxtapose secular and sacred, *Memorial to Life* also holds many visual and experiential similarities with cathedrals and churches. The structure of *Memorial to Life* itself is meant to lead the viewer into an otherworldly space that audibly and visually is separate from the hectic, busy streets above ground. The space increasingly becomes silent as one descends, especially after continuing past the point where one’s ears meet the level of water upon which the vertical structure seems to float. Once confronted with complete silence, the feeling of peace and spirituality is augmented when looking up at the structure’s windows, which compare to clerestory lighting on cathedral domes, like in the Catedral Primada (Fig. 1.16-1.17). From this vantage point it appears as if the roof of the structure were held up by light and were located in a heavenly realm, as seen in the cathedral. This “floats” above the charged gravel-filled test tubes that make up the surrounding walls, and the thousands of messages written by victims. In this regard, it is not unlike the shrine of Santa Laura, and the relics of Quesada housed at the Catedral Primada. An otherwise secular, inanimate object (a dirt-filled glass tube), is converted into a sacred thing as a product of the sacred space that catalyzes this transformation.

*The Skin of Memory* and *Memorial to Life* relate to Young’s argument that *how* something is remembered determines exactly *what* is remembered. Death and violence in Colombia are

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54 Young, “The Texture of Memory,” in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 173.
mediated by the framework of religion by redirecting the preexisting narratives and symbols
Catholicism provides, and with which its participants are already familiar. This way of
remembering accounts for the resulting juxtaposition between the secular and the sacred in
modern-day memorials that commemorate the victims of the national armed conflict.

Conclusion: “Collected” vs. “Collective” Memory

According to Young, actual collective memory seems illusory because societies increasingly
become more “fragmented and heterogeneous.”\textsuperscript{55} Thus, he primarily deems the notion of a
collective memory expressed in monuments or memorials to be unrealistic because they can “only
be possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and unifying culture exist.”\textsuperscript{56} It is true
that places where counter-memorial aesthetics have proved appropriate, like New York or
Germany, are increasingly becoming more multi-cultural. The events commemorated in these
locations additionally involved victims from many religions, nationalities, and cultures.\textsuperscript{57} The use
of the “negative form” that assumes no particular form to individual memories, therefore, is strong
because it creates a space were a multitude of varying memories are welcome and none are
privileged over the other.

In Colombia, however, Young’s notion of the unlikelihood of monuments or memorials
encompassing collective memory is problematic because in Colombia there \textit{is} a strong case of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Young, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Stages of Memory}, 14.

\textsuperscript{57} According to the Pew Research Center, for example, the United States is primarily composed of various
forms of Christianity and various forms of Catholicism, but also Jehova’s Witness, Jewish, Muslim,
Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, May 11, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-
study/.
\end{footnotesize}
unifying consciousness, culture, nationality, and religion. Although I do not suggest that pure, monolithic collective memory is expressed in the Colombian memorials examined here, what I do suggest is that what is expressed is the product of the unifying religious mediator of that memory, which permeates a vast amount of the nation’s daily consciousness and its consequent expressions.

Sacred, religious expressions, in other words, are synonymous with commemorative methods employed for the victims of violence there. In the end, rather than articulating the aesthetics of *absence*, Colombia articulates the aesthetics of sacred *presence* in their memorials, remembering the national armed conflict’s victims as martyrs or saints.
Chapter II: Re-membering for Remembering: The Sacred Role of ‘Things’ in Colombian Artworks on Trauma

In 2007, the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* published the article “Colombia busca a sus muertos” (“Colombia Looks for their Dead”), which spoke about efforts in looking for the remains of between 10,000 to 30,000 victims that disappeared in the recent years of Colombia’s national armed conflict.¹ The newspaper notes that at that moment, 533 bodies had been found, only thirteen of which were properly identified through DNA testing; and 173 of which were identified through clothing, shoes, tattoos, etc.² The article states that seventy percent of the bodies found had been mutilated with machetes or chainsaws and dismembered at the appendages, which was partly the reason why objects and remains clearly associated with the deceased became very important: the bodies themselves were left unidentifiable. The article continues by listing particular, individual objects that have been found and which have aided in identifying some of the bodies, like a Winnie the Pooh wallet, a pair of overalls, a pair of Karelis brand sandals, and a black cotton Wers brand sweater in size M.³

This form of identification underscores the effects of these systematic disappearances, which leave a victim’s family and loved ones frequently without any sense of closure because of the impossibility of having a proper burial. Families are then oftentimes left wondering where their loved ones died, how they died, and if they, in fact, died. In addition to such objects occupying a logical role in the memory process of Colombia’s victims of violence, I argue that they also serve a

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² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
spiritual purpose that is locally specific as a byproduct of Colombia’s unifying Catholic consciousness. Contemporary Colombian artists working on the theme of national violence draw on this particular use of material memories in their work.

Although early artworks dealing with the Holocaust also placed emphasis on material objects left behind by the deceased, it is noteworthy that this phenomenon did not continue for long. Instead, artworks on the Holocaust increasingly adopted abstraction because of the “lack of immediate comprehensibility on the [meaning of the victims’] ‘relics’” (emphasis mine).⁴ In Colombia, however, the emphasis on victims’ “relics” continues to play a meaningful role to this day in the understanding of its national armed conflict.

This chapter demonstrates how religious memory mediation in Colombia plays a large role in establishing exactly what count as the materials used for remembering, how they are related to, and why the practice continues. I argue that these material memories draw on the religious concepts of relics and brandia, which ultimately are the central components of Colombian artworks dealing with issues of its national violence. Although I primarily focus on work by Erika Diettes because of her work’s close alignment to the themes of this thesis, I will also look at works by other prominent Colombian artists working with the same subject, and artworks on the Holocaust as points of comparison. This chapter concludes by suggesting that the remembering of the victims of Colombia’s national armed conflict is done through materials much in a manner similar to how relics and brandia function. These items act as conduits for a lasting, spiritual relationship with the deceased.

The Material Dimension of Memory

Highlighting the fundamental role that objects, or material memories, play in the memory-work that makes up our day-to-day, Laszlo Muntean, Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik write that “memory matters. It matters because memory brings the past into the present and opens it up to the future. But it also matters literally because memory is mediated materially. Materiality is the stuff of memory. Meaningful objects that we love (or hate) function not only as aide-mémoire but are integral to memory.” The influence of Paul Connerton’s thoughts on this statement are evident, as these scholars have expanded upon his ideas about collective memory to encompass physical materials as well. As we have seen, Connerton maintains that collective memory is socially habitual and sedimented in the body, as expressed in commemorative ceremonies. Muntean, Plate, and Smelik establish a parallel between Connerton’s notion of the body and their notion of materials, noting that “memory is performed, mediated, and stored through the material world that surrounds us.” As such, they are claiming that these otherwise inanimate materials possess agency, and play an essential role in our practices of remembering and forgetting.

Related to the idea of agentive materials, anthropologist Daniel Miller states, “Things do things to us, and not just the things we want them to do.” Writing on the agency of art objects, anthropologist Alfred Gell differentiates between “objects” and “things,” where, simply stated,

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8 Ibid.

objects are inanimate and things are animate “social beings” that have an embodied, or “distributed personhood.”

“Things,” according to Gell, are agents precisely because they are seen as the extension of a person. These theories on the nature and power of things are important when juxtaposed with historic events of mass murder, as was seen in the Holocaust and continues in Colombia, because the mourning of physical bodies in the traditional sense is no longer feasible. The “things” left behind by victims, therefore, are treated as proxies for the actual physical bodies, and consequently venerated as such.

**Art, Trauma, and Abstraction in the Holocaust**

It is noteworthy that the expression of trauma through a “negative form” plays out in many Holocaust artworks, similarly to what we saw with memorials in Chapter 1. This was initially not the case, however, as art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels notes,

> In the search for a ‘safe’ image to use in symbolizing the Holocaust, several artists turned to the piles of belongings which the victims were ordered to leave ‘for future collection’ as they headed for the cattle cars or death, objects which were later sorted into the piles of shoes, clothes, rings, hairbrushes, dentures and dolls that were discovered in the camps after the Liberation and are now preserved as relics.

This symbolic use of the “relics” left behind by the victims of the camps is demonstrated in Karel Fleischmann’s *Furniture from Abandoned Apartments* of 1943 (Fig. 2.1), where the material possessions left behind stand as metaphors for the deceased victims themselves. Similar to Holocaust photographs and drawings that show piles of dead bodies (Fig. 2.2), this drawing treats

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the furniture left behind in a comparable, inhumane fashion. A similar parallel is established in Yosl Bergner’s *Destination X* (Fig. 2.3), where the never-ending trail of piled furniture left behind by victims has literally created a physical trail in the barren landscape, additionally providing a metaphorical visualization of the death toll. This semi-anthropomorphic use of things simultaneously likens the walk of victims to their eventual death at the camps, where people have been substituted with furniture as proxies.

Amishai-Maisels, notes that using the “relics” instead of the physical corpses in the imagery of earlier Holocaust artwork had the effect of placing the viewer at a safe distance from the realities of the event because “Instead of reacting immediately and emotionally, he [or she] must make an intellectual effort to comprehend the meaning of the objects.” This lack of immediacy in the image, Amishai-Maisels argues, is why artists gradually rejected the use of “relics” in Holocaust imagery.

Artists then began to add specific symbols to the “relics” in compositions to make the association much clearer, like placing the objects in concentration camp settings, but they ultimately resorted to abstraction instead. This allowed them to establish a safe distance between the artist and the viewer from the event, but without sacrificing deep emotional engagement. Some of these works are currently in the United States Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., like Ellsworth Kelly’s *Memorial* of 1993 and Sol LeWitt’s *Consequence* of the same year (Figs. 2.4-2.5). Kelly’s and LeWitt’s paintings combine abstraction with specific, memory-conjuring

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.,148-149.
14 Amishai-Maisels, “Distance Through Abstraction: The Problem of Abstraction” in *Depiction and Interpretation*, 244.
titles. These works picture the absence and loss that the deceased victims left behind, in a manner that allows the viewer to project on to the blank spaces whichever memory or “post-memory” image they have in mind about the atrocities of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{15} This allows for suggested suffering, rather than literal suffering. And as Amishai-Maisels maintains, “The suffering suggested by the picture may be unbearable, but the painting [or drawing] itself is not.”\textsuperscript{16}

I argue that the notion of Holocaust “relics” in artwork translating into a “lack of immediacy” for the viewer, ultimately leading to the employment of abstraction on the event, is a non issue in Colombia. I suggest this is because things serving as immediate proxies for beings, human or divine, is an already established cultural understanding that comes from Catholicism’s acknowledgment of a “plurality of sacred things.”\textsuperscript{17} This largely accounts for why this use of symbolic “relics” in Colombia continues in art compositions on national violence to this day.

**The Material Dimension of Memory in Religion**

As mentioned above, physical remains of the dead, especially in a religious context, are both “objects” and “things.” This is because they are not only a literal material reminder of the deceased, but also because they have agency as \textit{things} that facilitate direct communication with the

\textsuperscript{15} According to Kelly, he chose a white monochrome in order to avoid subjective associations. This, however, is not the final effect, especially with its title and context. For more, see: Mark Godfrey, \textit{Abstraction and the Holocaust} (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007).

\textsuperscript{16} Amishai-Maisels, “Distance Through Abstraction: The Problem of Abstraction” in \textit{Depiction and Interpretation}, 244. Other scholars have written on the usage of abstraction in Holocaust artworks, and agree that the “negative form” is most appropriate for the representation of this traumatic memory. For example, see Godfrey, \textit{Abstraction and the Holocaust}; and Kaplan, \textit{Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation}. James Young, “Looking into the Mirrors of Evil: Nazi Imagery in Contemporary Art at the Jewish Museum in New York,” in \textit{The Stages of Memory} offers a succinct account about incorporating Nazi imagery in contemporary art.

deceased, divine, or otherworldly. This notion of relics impacted the way people related to the deceased in the Early Christian period, as the presence and power of individuals, with particular emphasis to those considered holy, was thought to reside in the places they lived and died, and in their corporeal remains. As art historian Cynthia Hahn notes, “The earliest Christian relics were often cloth, pebbles, or even dust.” Objects, in other words, that were a spiritual synecdoche of the individual. Hahn, referencing orthodox Euro-Christian doctrine, defines relics, noting that, “All relics… share a quality in that they are indexical— that is… they are representative of a sacred person or place in terms of being a product of (as blood indicates a body), adjacent to (as touching or having touched) or actually being a portion of (a fragment or splinter) the holy thing.” The importance of relics, however, would materialize from the performance of rituals and in the way they would be commemorated (a topic covered in Chapter 3). And although these rituals or commemorations would play a crucial role in the establishment and sustenance of the sacredness of the relic, the relics were also considered inherently holy because it was believed they were acheiropoietic (not made by human hands).

One of the most popular Christian relics, for example, is the Shroud of Turin, namely because it is associated with Jesus himself rather than a saint. The cloth, which has produced numerous miracles, bears the image of who is believed to be Jesus himself, so it is thought to be

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20 Ibid., 19.

his actual burial shroud. The image itself though, was miraculously produced, and thought to have been the result of the cloth’s physical contact with Jesus’ body that left an indexical imprint.

The relic is encased and resides at the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, where it is regularly visited, prayed to, and venerated.

The Sudarium of Oviedo is another acheiropoietic object, comparable to a Christian relic. It is thought to be the cloth that was wrapped around Jesus’ head after he died, and is kept in the Cathedral of San Salvador in Oviedo. The Sudarium does not reveal an image of Christ like the Shroud of Turin, but it is believed to be stained with the blood of Christ. It resides in its reliquary, and, like the Shroud, is an object of pilgrimage and veneration. This pre-existent spiritual relationship with things thus plays an integral role in the way victims relate to the secular “relics” or “brandia” left behind by the deceased from Colombian national violence, which lacked in Holocaust representations with the same kind of materials.

Erika Diettes: *Relicarios, Río Abajo, Sudarios, and the Role of Things in Colombia*

The artwork of Erika Diettes, a contemporary Colombian artist working in Bogotá, demonstrates a similar primary focus on the materiality of memory and on things relating to Colombia’s national armed conflict. Her most recent body of work, titled *Relicarios* (*Reliquaries*), comprises a number

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23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 154- 159.

26 Ibid., 159.
of amber rubber tripolymer cubes (Fig. 2.6). Suspended within these cubes are “garments and objects… that belonged to the disappeared, treasured by their mothers and other family members like relics.” Diettes’ website describes these items within the cubes as “garments that were in contact with the bodies of the missing, garments that are infused with the aura and the smells that carry a sensitive memory.” Some of the things encapsulated in the Relicarios include letters, shoes, shirts, identification cards, rosaries, and photographs.

These “things,” as mentioned in the 2007 El Tiempo newspaper article, are oftentimes the only physical remains that loved ones have left from those that have disappeared. The things become and are related to as “relics,” since the lack of the actual physical body extends these otherwise ordinary objects into things that present the “distributed personhood” of the deceased. They thereby mediate victims’ memories of that person, and become a proxy for the individual. Consequently, these “relics” serve as a spiritual synecdoche for the person, and are prayed to and venerated, similar to how official religious relics are treated (like the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium). Through these secular and religious juxtapositions, which are already prevalent in Colombian culture, audiences in Colombia can look at these things and immediately recognize them for what they mediate and serve as extensions for, rather than simply what they visually represent.

Similar concepts inform the work of other prominent Colombian artists, like Doris Salcedo, who comparably enshrined the worn shoes of women who had disappeared amidst Colombia’s
national violence (Figs. 2.7-2.8).\textsuperscript{30} Just like the things encapsulated in Diettes’ rubber triopolymer reliquaries, Salcedo’s shoes are also witnesses to the unique personhood of the women who wore them, as they are imprinted and shaped by their now lost bodies.\textsuperscript{31} She enshrines these shoes behind a layer of animal skin, in contrast to Diettes’ near-translucent amber material that contains the victims’ things. This use of animal skin inevitably alludes to the violence inflicted onto the human skin of the bodies that once owned the shoes. The animal skin is sewn together with surgical thread, as if attempting to stitch up the wounds of violence that the women endured. These “shrines,” made up of materials that allude to the deceased bodies, become comparable reliquaries to Diettes’.

Juan Manuel Echavarría is another Colombian artist with similar work, though a noteworthy variant is that he does not work with any actually charged materials that were owned by the victims, as Diettes and Salcedo do. Instead, his work establishes one further degree of distance by using materials that \textit{allude} to the physical bodies in a way that parallels earlier Holocaust artwork (Fig. 2.9). Arman’s \textit{Little Hands} of 1960-1961 demonstrates a layer of mutilated mannequin or doll hands that is meant to refer to to the Massacre of the Innocents, paralleled to the loss of innocent lives at the concentration camps.\textsuperscript{32} Although the hands are not actual corporeal remains, the reference to them is made clear in the way they are treated. Equivalently, Echavarría’s \textit{NN (Nomen Nascio/No Name)} series uses mannequins as metaphors for

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Hahn, “The Reliquary Effect: Contemporary Artists and Strategies of the Relic” in \textit{The Reliquary Effect}, 264.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Amishai-Maisels, “Primary Holocaust Symbols: The Relics” in \textit{Depiction and Interpretation}, 150. In the bible, the Massacre of the Innocents refers to the ordered execution of all young male children around the area of Bethlehem by Herod the Great, which was done in order to prevent him losing the throne to a newborn King of the Jews after the Magi announced the child’s birth to him. See: Matthew 2: 16-18.}
\end{footnotes}
the disappeared, and disfigures them in comparable ways to the actual violent practices inflicted onto humans in Colombia (Figs. 2.10-2.11). He then photographs the remnants as if documenting the bodies that make up the mass nameless graves from the massacres that occur there, becoming a kind of “relic” by association in a way that parallels the work of Diettes and Salcedo.33

What is unique about Diettes, Salcedo and Echavarría’s work is their treatment of the victims’ relics or spiritually anthropomorphized materials, and how that preciousness materializes into a tangible experience for the viewer. That is, the artists more consciously establish themselves as a medium through which the things enshrined or depicted can speak. The artwork itself, in other words, is not necessarily the focal point, but the actual materials and the emotions they conjure in the viewer are. The effect is felt in a palpable way, essentially replicating the spiritual experience one would have when visiting a religious relic or the physical body of the deceased.

In her study on relics and reliquaries, Hahn argues that “the reliquary makes the relic,” but that the reliquary “simultaneously erases its own existence, standing only as a setting or context for the staging of the relic.”34 She also notes that “in some sense, the reliquary is better defined as a space containing the ineffable; a never defined but defining container; a shapeless but also shapely frame; a comely deformity, a deformed comeliness.”35 Similarly, these works encapsulate a unique, personified aura of the things suspended or captured within, staging them as “relics.”

*Río Abajo* (Figs. 2.12-2.15) and *Sudarios* (Figs. 2.16-2.19) are two photographic bodies of work by Diettes that share similar qualities in their materiality, despite these being two-


dimensional. *Río Abajo* is a project from 2007 to 2008 that alludes to the rivers in Colombia, which are known to be the country’s largest gravesites. People, in fact, are often deemed disappeared rather than killed, because many mutilated bodies are thrown into the rivers and, most often than not, never found again. In most cases, when bodies are found, it is because of the appearance and discovery of their clothes.36

For this body of work, Diettes toured various regions in Colombia that were known for being scenes of violence, sought out victims from the war, and met with them. During these meetings, the victims would lend her articles of clothing that belonged to their deceased loved one, which could have been found at the site of their discovered bodies, or which came from the victims’ own wardrobe. Diettes would then take these to her studio, where she constructed a small pool with a glass bottom and added a carefully selected blue hue to the water. She placed the garments in the calm water of this constructed small pool, and photographed the articles floating peacefully (Figs. 2.12-2.13).37

Diettes notes that from learning the stories behind each garment, she realized that the items were inherently already precious things, that were consequently treated as such. She mentions that some women would tell me that they would have certain rituals with the clothes, like washing them only on the birth date [of the disappeared person] or for Christmas… people would tell me that when they cooked dinner they would always put an extra plate and serve the dinner as though the person was there… [or] sleep with the garment under their pillow.38


38 Ibid., 153.
Diettes highlighted the preciousness of these garments by printing her photographs of them on glass, and making them almost life-size.\(^{39}\) She states that this tactic was made to intentionally parallel the large photographs of the clothes with an actual portrait of the deceased person.\(^{40}\) The translucence of the glass had the effect of ultimately making the image appear “sacred,” and as if it were “alive” (Figs. 2.14-2.15).\(^{41}\) This effect was heightened by the prayers and candles that families left at the foot of the photographs as offerings.

Diettes’ *Sudarios* series of 2011 consists “of twenty silk-print portraits, frameless and suspended lightly by aluminum wiring, of women from the Colombian province of Antioquia who were forced to witness the torture and murder of their loved ones.”\(^{42}\) Diettes met with these women, who gave testimonies at the sites where the events occurred, and took photographs of them while they spoke. These shots were often taken at the women’s greatest moment of pain, which became fixed in the face, and imprinted on the cloth (Figs. 2.16-2.17).\(^{43}\)

The printing of these images on silk makes reference to the “phantasmal permeation of a body into a fabric,” just as seen earlier with the Shroud of Turin.\(^{44}\) Through the covering of the body with a funerary cloak like this, the fabric “absorbs the impression of the body and the face, thereby becoming a vestige as well as a kind of photograph.”\(^{45}\) In a sense then, the material chosen

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 151-152.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 151.


\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
for the photographs of the women make reference to this famous relic, and implies that the image was not made by human hands, but a spiritual apparition instead.

Additionally, Diettes draws a parallel between the suffering that these women were made to witness, to the suffering of the Virgin Mary witnessing the death of her own son.\(^{46}\) These images thus participate in becoming the universal *Madres* (Mothers), which would only be heightened by the fact that the shrouds themselves are often exhibited in churches and religious spaces in which images of the Virgin would be present, creating a concrete, thematic juxtaposition (Figs. 2.18-2.19).\(^{47}\) The women depicted not only share a relationship with the Virgin Mary because of the similar circumstances they have endured, but then are also simultaneously enshrined within the material (silk) that is an emblem of that very suffering, as with the Shroud of Turin.

Although *NN (Nomen Nascio/No Name), Río Abajo* and *Sudarios* are photographic works that *imply* a tangible “relic” of victims, unlike *Relicarios* and *Atrabiliarios* which use things once owned by the victims, the use of photography itself does not have the effect of creating relational distance. The subjects depicted in the photographs can be related to in a similar way to that established in Diettes and Salcedo’s “reliquaries.” Scholars speaking on photography, in fact, liken the final photograph of a deceased person to their physical corporeal relic, because of the physical proximity that was necessary in order to take that photograph.\(^{48}\) Scholars Elizabeth Hallan and Jennifer Hockney argue, “It is this closeness, contact, or the shared physical space of camera and

\(^{46}\) Diettes et al., “Conversations Between Erika Diettes and Anne Wilkes Tucker, February 2013,” in *Memento Mori*, 158.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

person that affords in the photograph a power to evoke sensations of intimacy with the departed.”

They maintain that “The photograph has the capacity to preserve, or maintain as living, aspects of that which has passed and those who have died: ‘to enshrine identity, creating a memorial which pleads for deathlessness and issues a challenge to time—on behalf of someone.’” In other words, the memorial photograph itself has the capacity to act as a “reliquary” to the individual that is pictured, in that it captures that person’s particularities and aura in a similar fashion. The items become relics, while the photograph becomes the reliquary, which is also in agreement with Hahn’s aforementioned definition of the reliquary in that it erases its own existence. Strong parallels can thus be drawn between the works of Diettes, Salcedo and Echavarría, because they all utilize materials that are spiritually anthropomorphized, becoming sacred portraits of the human suffering amidst a period of violence.

Conclusion: Re-membering for Remembering

Memory artworks of Colombian national violence show a predisposition for remembering through things in a similar fashion to how remembering is made material in Catholic religious practices. This is largely due to a pre-existing religious framework in Colombia that already establishes the notion of things as embodying a unique personhood, showing them to be portals to those individuals, rather than simply visual representations of them.

This idea of things mediating remembrance is deeply ingrained into Colombia’s unifying consciousness, and in a consequent similar fashion, persistently appears to play a strong role in the

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 142.
way victims deal with the loss and suffering brought about from the disappearances of their loved ones. This use of material memories has double meaning, however, as they not only are animate things that serve as proxies for the disappeared bodies that families often never get to say goodbye to, but they also are a literal way to piece back together the very particular and personal items that made that individual. This reconstruction of individual identity through materials is a metaphorical way of countering the violence that these individuals experienced, and which it attempted to erase.

As seen with the shrine of Santa Laura in Chapter 1, performance adds another dimension to the relics that contributes to the establishment of their sacredness. These performances take the form of prayers, processions, offerings, ceremonies, or various other rituals, which not only acknowledge the divine or spiritual essence presented through the relics of the person, but that also facilitate spiritual communication with that deceased person. The following chapter examines these things and their associated performances, which together establish a lasting relationship to the dead in a way that transcends physical corporeality.
Chapter III: Sanctifying Memory: The Sacred Role of Performance on the Bodies of the Desaparecidos in Colombia

In her study of Ground Zero in New York City, anthropologist Marita Sturken notes, “The towers of the World Trade Center were made of steel, concrete, asbestos, wood, plastic, and glass; they were filled with desks, computers, tables, and paper, and, yet, they crumbled into dust.”¹ The dust quickly acquired numerous meanings in relation to 9/11, becoming associated with the physical remains of the bodies that suffered that day.² Sturken adds, “Throughout history, when people have mourned in the absence of remains, they have substituted ritualized objects (empty coffins, flags, photographs, or headstones) as touchstones, material artifacts that can provide some kind of corporeal presence to mediate the absence of a loved one” (as we saw in Chapter 2).³ Accordingly, in October 2001, New York City Mayor Giuliani organized a memorial ceremony where each of the families that had someone pass away that day received an urn of dust from the site, which had been blessed by a chaplain. This blessing, Sturken maintains, “transformed [the dust] into a substance that was understood to be sacramental and ceremonial—moved from the [55-gallon] drums [of dust] (indicating refuse) to urns (indicating individuals, ashes, the remains of life).”⁴

This chapter focuses on the role of performance in the transformation of an inanimate object like dust, to an agentive thing like ashes. By “performance” I mean the enactment of

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 312-313.
⁴ Ibid., 313.
traditional religious commemorations: prayers, making of offerings, marching in processions, and enacting rituals. I argue that the strong religious tenor of Colombia’s collective memory on national violence commemorates the bodies of the desaparecidos (disappeared) as saintly, which establishes a lasting bond between the living and the deceased. As I have shown, this is largely a product of the internalized relationship of secular and sacred that permeates Colombian collective memory on trauma and violence. Rituals and commemorative ceremonies play an integral role in this remembering process, because traditional religious performances are being redirected and enacted for the earthly bodies of the desaparecidos.

Sturken’s article contrasts with my argument for Colombia. She suggests that even though Ground Zero became designated as “sacred ground” with the blessing of priests and the erection of a cross made out of debris, the site itself is not considered sacred in a religious sense. She maintains that “in U.S. culture, the concept of a ‘sacred place’ has been almost exclusively secular and national.” For her, this is because “sacred place” in the United States is premised on national patriotism, rather than evoking the sense of spirituality typically associated with sacred religious spaces, like those in Colombia. Her argument relates to James Young’s scholarship, discussed in Chapter 1: in the face of a multifarious cultural framework, a monolithic absence is most appropriate because it does not privilege one group over another. However, as my study shows, this is not the case in Colombia. The widespread and unifying Catholic consciousness there influences victims to remember the desaparecidos in an overtly religious sense that cannot be

5 Ibid., 314.
6 Ibid.
7 This is a problematic claim, however, because it creates a monolithic understanding of the varying cultures that simultaneously comprise the United States, as I reference in Chapter 2.
mistaken as purely secular. This chapter examines this distinctly religious relationship Colombians hold with the *desaparecidos* in an intimate and also bodily, performative way.

**The Saintly Regard for Victims of Violence in Colombia**

The town of Puerto Berrío sits along the Magdalena River to the east of Medellín, the center of violence in Colombia for over twenty years. Due to its proximity to Medellín, Puerto Berrío has witnessed the consequences of Colombia’s national armed conflict, which has sent thousands of mutilated bodies floating down the Magdalena. For over thirty years, the residents of Puerto Berrío have taken it upon themselves to fish out the bodily remains they encounter in the river.

Because they develop relationships with the remains, they adopt them, give them names, and routinely take care of them. They bury them in individual tombs that they decorate, bring them water, gifts, flowers, and pray *for* them and *to* them. Some of the names people give to the NNs (*Ningún Nombre*, “No Name”) are those of family members or loved ones they themselves lost, endowing them with particular and family-loved individualizations that simultaneously establish the entombed NN as a proxy for the body of the actual lost loved one.

For selecting an NN and taking care of him/her, she/he, in exchange, can provide favors and miracles. As scholar Joe Nickell explains, this relates to the Christian belief that “the bodies of the dead—or, by extension, objects that had touched them—had special qualities or powers

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that made them worthy of veneration.”

Even dismembered remains, like those of the NNs, were thought to contain power as potent as if the body were whole. This is because a person’s essence is believed to continue residing in the body, even after death, and that its power can materialize from the various commemorative actions I define as “performatives.”

In 2013, Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría created a film on the relationship locals have with the NNs. The film includes a number of interviews with the “adopters.” As Echavarría explains, the distinctly spiritual relationship that the townspeople of Puerto Berrío hold with the NNs stems from the local belief that the souls in Purgatory are able to intervene in favor of the living. This establishes the NNs as saint-like advocates who have the power to mediate for the living, demonstrating the blending of secular and sacred that so widely pervades Colombian collective memory dealing with trauma and violence of its national armed conflict. In the film, Martha Correa notes that her NN helped her buy and maintain her home, and that its soul now resides in that home, while María Dilia Mena de Fajardo chose her NN to be the guardian angel of her daughter, and asked for the NN to help her with school and finding a job.

Examining the underlying framework for the occurrence of this phenomenon, sociologist Émile Durkheim notes in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “There is no religion, however unified it may be, that does not acknowledge a plurality of sacred things. Even in Christianity [sic],


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


14 Echavarría, “About,” Requiem NN Film.

15 Ibid.
at least in its Catholic form, accepts the Virgin, the angels, the saints, the souls of the dead, etc.”

Martha Correa’s altar in her home illustrates this “plurality of sacred things,” as photographs of the loved ones she has lost to violence stand side-by-side with a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a figure of the Christ Child, and other images of saints, establishing them at a certain degree of relatedness (Fig. 3.1).

The works of Erika Diettes also exemplify this meaningful juxtaposition of secular souls and sacred souls in a number of ways, most evidently by her exhibitions in churches, cathedrals, monasteries, and other religious centers (Figs. 3.2-3.5). While I focus here on her series Río Abajo and Sudarios, the spaces in which her most recent series, Relicarios, is exhibited also evokes a similar sense of sacredness to that of churches (Fig. 3.6). The religious settings link Diettes’ artworks with the surrounding religious images of the space, and establish them as equally sacred (Figs. 3.2-3.5), similar to what we saw with Martha Correa’s altar. According to Diettes, the choice behind exhibiting in religious spaces was initially not a conscious one, but rather a consequence from the reality that they were the only safe spaces in which these artworks could be exhibited in at the time in Colombia. Significantly, the viewers and families of the photos from Río Abajo, without direction from the artist, treated the artworks as religious icons by touching them, leaving them offerings, and praying to them while they were exhibited in these spaces. This kind of sacred response was culturally informed and also based on the sacred venue.

In another example, Sudarios sets up a visual and thematic parallel with surrounding images of the Virgin (Fig. 3.4-3.5). The pain of these photographed women is akin to the pain of

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17 Erika Diettes, Interview by Valeria Serrano, February 13, 2018.
the Virgin, who also witnessed the death and torture of her own child. In this shared space, Diettes’
women are comparable to images of the Virgin. In other words, the Virgin Mary becomes the
archetype for this specific kind of pain, and Diettes’ photographed women are the faces of the
individuals that similarly define that pain. They are, in essence, the same kind of portrait that
makes sacred a mother’s loss and suffering.

In these cases, I argue that the religious regard held for secular souls is a product of the
centuries-old veneration of Christian saints in Colombia, now redirected to relate to the deceased
victims of violence. It is comparable to the relationship worshippers have with the Colombian
saint, Madre Laura, for example: not only has the room in which she died turned into a shrine and
place of pilgrimage, but her relics and brandia are the recipients of countless prayers and gifts.¹⁸
José Mojica Patiño, a scholar who has worked on Madre Laura, notes that, “There are testimonies
of people that maintain that the furniture [inside of Madre Laura’s room] contains special powers,
capable of curing any illness. There are cases of paralytics that have started walking after laying on
Madre Laura’s bed, and infertile women that become pregnant after sitting in her wheelchair.”¹⁹
Corporeal remains or objects associated with the deceased saint are regarded and treated in similar
ways to those associated with the NNs, such that these “things” mediate the granting of miracles to
its worshippers.

Noting these relational similarities held between secular souls and religious souls, it is also
evident that they compare visually (Figs. 3.7-3.8). Echavarría’s photographs of the NN tombs, for
example, exemplify a striking similarity with the plaques left behind at the shrine of Madre Laura,

¹⁸ José Mojica Patiño, “La Agonía de Una Santa” in Habemus Santa: Vida, Obra, Y Milagros de Laura
¹⁹ Ibid., 181. Translation mine.
which, in both cases, have statements thanking the saints/NNs for the miracles they have helped provide. A close up of one of the NN tombs from Echavarria’s photographs, for example, shows a plaque that states “Thank you for the received favors, soul of the NN and the Divine Child,” and is signed by the “A.A. Family” (Fig. 3.9). Here, the soul of the secular victim (NN) and the soul of the divine (Divine Child), are regarded and act similarly, exemplifying a widespread remembering process for the victims of Colombia’s violence that parallels, and is juxtaposed with, relationships to saintly figures.

The Sacred, Transformative Role of Performance

Performances play an integral role in the relationship between the secular and the sacred because they transform inanimate objects into animated “things.” As noted in Sturken’s article on Ground Zero in New York City, dust was initially an ordinary material that was just seen as part of the aftermath from the collapsing of the twin towers. However, taking it out of this mundane context and placing it in urns, the dust became animated and transformed, not unlike human ashes, and seen as proxy for the never-found bodies of victims. The dust’s blessing also activated this transformation. Without these performative actions, it would have remained simply dust. Likewise, performance’s ability to transform, in a religious sense, allows Colombians to establish

20 In most memory and trauma scholarship, the term “performance” is used differently. It usually signifies an artistic or theatrical sense that is informed by performative theory, and the role it plays in collective memory. This use of the term neglects a meaningful, spiritual relationship that is established through the enactment of performances in a religious sense, which is how I am using the term in this chapter. A more inclusive meaning of this term allows for an understanding of the ability to transform the nature of the receiver of the performance. For more sources on this, see: Jens Kreinath, Joannes Augustinus Maria Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, eds., Theorizing Rituals: Classical Topics, Theoretical Approaches, Analytical Concepts (Leiden; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2006); Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, eds., Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 48 (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, eds., Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma, In between States, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013).
relationships with deceased victims of violence and to help come to terms with this national
tragedy.

In Catholic countries like Colombia, the month of November is known to be El Mes de las
Animas (The Month of the Souls). Every night throughout this month, the cemetery in Puerto
Berrío that houses all their NNs is opened at midnight for the performance of a ritual. Echavarria
states that the practitioners “proceed from mausoleum to mausoleum, murmuring prayers for the
dead, led by El Animero, a man hooded in black, who knocks on the graves, calling the lonely
souls to come and mingle with the living. With bells and candles, the Animero is said to literally
reanimate the souls” (emphasis mine).

Prayers recited during this ritual include the Hail Mary
and special prayers to the souls of Purgatory, which also have the effect of “reanimating the souls”
because it is through the performance of these prayers and actions, worshippers believe, that
miracles from the souls can materialize.

Though these performances held for the NNs are, strictly speaking, “secular,” they
nevertheless underscore the integral role that performance plays in animating the corporeal
remains and possessions of the disappeared that would otherwise be seen as inanimate objects.
The ritual of the Eucharist is a formal religious performance that also transforms. The notion of the
Christian Eucharist originates from the Last Supper, where, as liturgical history scholar Enrico
Mazza states, “Jesus took bread, blessed God, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, telling
them to take it and eat of it, because it was his body. In the same way, after they had eaten, he took


22 Durkheim explains the need of performance in transforming and establishing something as sacred, noting
that these acts need to be frequently repeated in order to “renew their effects.” See Émile Durkheim and

23 In my research, I have not been able to come across what the Church’s stance is on these performances.
the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, telling them all to take it and drink of it, because it was the cup of the covenant in his blood.”24 Mazza adds, “Since the Mass is an act of obedience to the command of Jesus and an imitation of his supper in the upper room, it follows that the Eucharistic Prayer is what determines the very nature of the Church’s Eucharist.”25 That is, the Eucharistic Prayer transforms the bread and wine of Mass into the body and blood of Christ. This occurs as the prayer is recited, since it calls upon God’s intervention on the bread and wine, leading to transubstantiation.26

Comparing the “secular” rituals held for the NNs with the ritual of the Eucharist demonstrates a strong parallel between the two: in both cases, performative acts make particular things (e.g. human remains, bread and wine) sacred. The work of Geertz and Connerton, as discussed in Chapter 1, substantiate this claim.27 I suggest that in addition to the verbal and conceptual “system of symbols” that religion offers, it also provides a gestural, bodily vocabulary that bestows practitioners a guide on how to perform in the face of the abstract concepts of transubstantiation and the afterlife.

Connerton focuses on these bodily practices of remembrance. He argues that memory is stored in the body, making us containers of the past.28 This is demonstrated through the concept of “habit memory,” or what might otherwise be called “motor memory,” where although we might not


25 Ibid., 20.

26 Mazza, “The Scholastic High Middle Ages” in The Celebration of the Eucharist, 206.


remember how, when, or where we first learned how to do something, the memory resides in the body so that the movement seems automatic. He differentiates these bodily practices into two distinct categories: incorporating, and inscribing practices. Incorporating practices include the memorization of culturally specific postures or actions, and inscribing practices stem from a “gestural vocabulary” that acts as a “reference system” for practitioners. He adds that culturally specific bodily practices are largely a product of habit-memory.

Geertz and Connerton discuss how religion can impact our processes of remembering, because religion can provide us with tools to understand secular, abstract concepts and engage with them in a physical, bodily, and gestural way. Religion, in other words, offers a pre-made gestural vocabulary for behavior in the face of abstract concepts like death and the afterlife. In Catholic Mass, for instance, which celebrates the consecration of the Eucharist, worshippers cross themselves, bow in respect, pray in unison, hold hands while reciting the Lord’s prayer, give monetary offerings to the church, kneel, and process towards the sacred altar to receive the Eucharist and wine after being consecrated. These performances are done to engage with the divine through transubstantiation.

Geertz and Connerton illuminate how gestural practices performed for religious rites might also be redirected as a way to act in other contexts that similarly require an activation or transformation of the sacredness of an object. I suggest this is a strong influencing factor that explains how individuals in Colombia relate to the desaparecidos in such an intimate, spiritual, and respectful way.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 72-73.
31 Ibid., 88
During an interview I had with Erika Diettes, she highlighted a number of these similar performative aspects that, oftentimes unintentionally, became a part of her work.\textsuperscript{32} The opening of \textit{Río Abajo}, unbeknownst to the artist, for instance, occurred within the framework of \textit{La Jornada de la Luz (The March of Light)} in the department of Antioquia. This performance is a symbolic act in Eastern Antioquia, where people from various towns gather and enter a town (in this case it was Granada) using the same path that armed forces had once taken to capture that town.\textsuperscript{33} This is meant to be a way for the locals to symbolically take their town back, and they perform this march with lit candles.\textsuperscript{34}

The night of the \textit{Río Abajo} opening, those that were taking part in the \textit{Jornada de la Luz} chose this exhibition as their stopping point. They processed in with their candles and used them to light up the photographs that depicted clothes or other material remains from the \textit{desaparecidos} floating peacefully in water, an allusion to the thousands of bodies thrown into rivers in the wake of violence in Colombia (Fig. 3.3).\textsuperscript{35} Watching this on the night of the opening, Diettes mentioned that the participants of the march would leave their lit candles in front of the photograph that depicted the garments that belonged to their loved one as an offering, and that they would also pray in front of them.\textsuperscript{36} These actions are largely what played such an integral role in heightening the sacredness of the garments, or “relics,” that were depicted in the photographs. They understand that these were not just photographs of objects, but portraits of the \textit{desaparecidos}. As I discussed in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Diettes, Interview by Serrano.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Diettes, Interview by Serrano.
\end{itemize}
Chapter 2, this maintains an understanding of the photographs as reliquaries that house the sacred “relic” depicted within.

These actions also underscored the religious influences at play as processants walked to Diettes’ exhibition, interacted with her photos through prayer, and left candle or flower offerings. I argue that these performances animated and reactivated the sacred qualities of the artworks in a symbolic, but also literal, sense because the candles used to light up the photographed garments made the water in which they were floating appear kinetic. This was because Diettes printed the over life-size photographs on glass, so as viewers came up to the photographs with candles either in front or behind the photograph, the flickering effect of the candlelight played with the waves of the water. The result was as if the garment was actually floating in real time, right in front of the viewer’s eyes.

Although they have not so far been exhibited in a religious space, Relicarios also had a number of performative characteristics that established their sacredness while they were on display at the Museo de Antioquia in Medellín. Relicarios, which are reliquaries that contain some of the desaparecidos’ actual “things,” are placed on the floor in an organized, systematic way that alludes to tombstones. Diettes stated that she did this purposefully in order to force the viewers to bow their heads or kneel in order to see them, and also because these are gestures of respect. The close placement of the Relicarios also encouraged the viewer to slowly process through the space,

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37 So far, they have only been exhibited in the Museo de Antioquia, though Diettes is currently working on the installation of their next exhibit, which is in El Centro Cultural de Memoria Haroldo Conti in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

38 Diettes, Interview by Serrano.

39 Ibid.
Diettes said, just like a sacred cemetery.\textsuperscript{40} These respectful, religious gestures come from a pre-ordained gestural bodily vocabulary. Diettes draws from this same vocabulary, even though she is facilitating the enactment of them here. That is, she is not creating the rules or these gestures, but drawing on the same body of knowledge her audience had drawn from in the opening of \textit{Río Abajo}.

The first three opening days of \textit{Relicarios} in the Museo de Antioquia were reserved solely for the families and loved ones that had owned the items that were encapsulated into the reliquaries. Diettes notes that for the entire duration of the exhibition, she and the museum granted free admission to the families, and that they frequently came to visit the \textit{Relicarios} and bless them (Fig. 3.10).\textsuperscript{41} This again demonstrates the strong spiritual relationship held with the things encapsulated in the reliquaries, which stems from a religious understanding that the thing is a proxy for the \textit{desaparecido}.

Although the gestures and actions performed in front of the \textit{Río Abajo} photographs were spontaneous and unplanned, while those performed with the \textit{Relicarios} were mediated by Diettes, the religious influence is evident in both cases. Not only do these works and things inherently elicit an action that stems from a religious gestural vocabulary, equating secular souls with sacred souls, but the works themselves \textit{require} these performances in order to transform into sacred souls that can mediate and facilitate communication with the divine. Joe Nickell, drawing on text written by St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, quotes principles the saint outlines on the veneration of relics:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\end{quote}
It is clear... that he who has certain affection for anyone, venerates whatever of his is left after death, not only his body and the parts thereof, but even external things, such as his clothes and such-like. Now it is manifest that we should show honor to the saints of God, as being members of Christ, and children and friends of God, and our intercessors. Wherefore in memory of them we ought to honor any relics of theirs in a fitting manner: principally their bodies, which were temples, and organs of the Holy Spirit dwelling and operating in them, and are destined to be likened to the body of Christ by the glory of the resurrection. Hence God himself fittingly honors such relics by working miracles at their presence.42

The “relics” of the desaparecidos are venerated in such overtly religious ways because they are likened to the body of Christ, and are “temples” of the Holy Spirit. Thinking of their possessions, photographed garments, or corporeal remains in this way, and venerating them accordingly, gives grounds for the understanding of a spiritual animacy and relational connection within the desaparecidos’s things because they work through God.

Conclusion

A Catholic religious framework informs Colombian works on violence and trauma. This relation results in likening the deaths of the desaparecidos to saints and martyrs of the church. There is a visual parallel between secular souls and religious souls (in what that remembrance process looks like) and a spiritual parallel that likens the desaparecidos to saints who intercede on behalf of the living.

Performances carried out to honor the deceased are crucial in forming a lasting bond between the deceased and the living. The deceased is thus able to intercede in the granting of miracles, loved ones maintain a form of communication with that deceased person, and the living are ultimately able to activate the sacred qualities of the corporeal remains or personal items of the

42 Nickell, Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas in “The Cult of Relics,” 18.
deceased so as to transform into powerful saintly “relics.” As the adopters in Echavarría’s video documentary explain, without performative acts, the souls are not “reanimated” and will not, therefore, help you with what you ask of them.⁴³ Performances must be regularly acted out with the things in order to activate its miracle-producing powers, and to maintain it as an extension of the desaparecido.

⁴³ Echavarría, Requiem NN Film.
Conclusion

The framework of religion primarily mediates Colombian memory on the violence and trauma that it has experienced over the last half-decade. It unifies living victims’ innumerable and varying memories and experiences, and provides them with ready-made forms of expression. The deceased’s clothes, shoes, and even bones that make up memorial works align with overarching Colombian and Catholic cultural traditions of public and private commemoration. Remembering in Colombia involves the re-membering of certain physical elements that composed each victim’s individuality in a meaningful, sacred way.

Erika Diettes’ oeuvre exemplifies the three essential components of the argument to this thesis, which is how religion’s scaffolding mediates the visual and relational expression of memory through spaces, materials, and performances. Though each “reliquary” contains various and specific things that serve as proxies for the bodies of deceased victims, collectively they produce a unified appearance and feeling of sacredness. The sacred aura is further augmented by the performative behaviors her viewers enact before these works. Here we see how Colombian memory on violence takes on a religious tenor, and how the individual voices of many are simultaneously and collectively expressed. Each reliquary that makes up Diettes’ three bodies of work I have discussed (Relicarios, Río Abajo, Sudarios) does not stand alone, but is a part of a unified whole; a series of exhibited things. This is also true for the works of Juan Pablo Ortiz, Doris Salcedo, and Juan Manuel Echavarría. Re-membering does not produce an isolated product in Colombia. Instead it is part of a collective whole. These artists respond to violence through beauty and presence, rather than abstraction and absence, demonstrating that aesthetics and politics
do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{1} Although these works are not meant to be aesthetically beautiful, they are meant to be \textit{sacred}, which just happens to be beautiful.

The case of Colombia’s visual articulation of memory problematizes James Young’s premise that unified visions of remembrance are illusory, and that multiple memories cannot take such a collective form.\textsuperscript{2} He favors the “counter-monument” because of the negative space that comprises it, which welcomes a place for differing memories on an event to be projected onto the space. However, Colombian memorial works, constructed and understood in religious terms local to the country, emphasize presence through their relic, reliquary, and saintly references. These works and their sites speak at a cohesive, national level.

The concepts I detail in this thesis are rife with possibilities of further research, as Colombia is only just beginning to memorialize the victims it has lost from its civil conflict. It would be worthwhile to track how this “memory boom” keeps materializing and how it relates to what I have written here. The Museo Nacional de la Memoria (National Museum of Memory) in Bogotá, for instance, is proposed to be completed in mid-2019, which may open up a new avenue of scholarship depending on its public reception, its appropriateness in representing the “national” part of memory that it describes in its title, and on the kind of materials it exhibits. Yet another avenue for research may be focused on what the Catholic church’s stance is on the memorialization practices I have described above, and what its opinions are on the saint-like fashion in which Colombia’s deceased victims are being understood and venerated. Lastly, examining the


connections between historic objects, images, and materials in Colombia (e.g., colonial religious paintings of saints and martyrs), on one hand, and contemporary Colombian memorial works, on the other, would enrich this project and expand its framework diachronically.

This thesis focuses on Colombia’s first wave of memorials that commemorate its recent national trauma in religious terms due to Catholicism’s strong cultural influence there. Future studies on Colombia’s visual formalization of memory might produce a more diachronic account of the visual and performative commemorations I have studied here. Despite the visual forms that future memorialization in Colombia takes, meaning remains on the fact that the country’s initial articulations were so closely tied to the traditional religious practices and understandings that already comprised their day-to-day, which future scholars should take into account.
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Reproduced in The 9/11 Memorial and Museum webpage.
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Reproduced in artist’s website.
Bibliography


