

PERFORMING CITIZENSHIP: DECOLONIZING PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH  
PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN ART

by

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Performing Citizenship: Decolonizing Public Space through Participation in Contemporary Latin American Art

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Brianne Cohen and Associate Professor James M. Córdova

Abstract:

This thesis provides an interdisciplinary approach to Colectivo Sociedad Civil's *Lava la Bandera Bandera* (*Wash the Flag*, 2000-2001, Peru), Doris Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo* (*Act of Mourning*, 2007, Colombia), and Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* (*Shovels through/for Guns*, 2008-ongoing, Mexico), three case studies of contemporary participatory performance artworks in Latin America, examining the convergence of social and political engagement, participation and public space. Here I ask what a decolonizing artwork looks like and how local participants engage with it to further its intentions. These questions aid in grounding my discussion of the extensive and pervasive manifestations of colonial and imperial hierarchies of power that continue to inform global relations and foreign policy as it impacts regions of Latin America. My argument is that the events and issues addressed by the artworks in synchrony with public participation effectively reveal and elucidate the ways in which colonial systems of power impact the quotidian realities of participants and global relationships simultaneously. I investigate how the artists and participants render the performances as "decolonizing" through their privileging of the experiences of working class communities, thereby situating the narratives in opposition to dominant geopolitical forces. I specifically explore how the dissolution of colonial hierarchies works against U.S. hegemony as it impacts the subsistence of democracy in the region. This thesis critically engages with interdisciplinary theories of settler colonialism, the archive as a colonial document, and coloniality and modernity using these case

studies as a basis for comparison. My research establishes that public participation, contemporary artworks, and political and socio-economic conditions concurrently document and validate the impacts of colonial power dynamics on neglected communities in Latin America as detrimental to the everyday life and environment of citizens.

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## Introduction

Hand washing a tattered flag in a plastic washbasin with dish soap, lighting a candle, and planting a tree are unremarkable activities, in-and-of-themselves. But when carried out on a large scale, sometimes by many people simultaneously, and in the context of an artwork, the meaning is transformed and amplified. This thesis examines these simple gestures in a series of related art actions: Colectivo Sociedad Civil's *Lava la Bandera* (*Wash the Flag*, 2000-2001, Peru), Doris Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo* (*Act of Mourning*, 2007, Colombia), and Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* (*Shovels through/for Guns*, 2008-ongoing, Mexico). Each respond to challenging social and political circumstances that have imposed challenging circumstances on everyday life in the artists' respective nations. They allow everyday people to take part in a work of art in a public space that calls attention to broad issues that involve them. My thesis argues that these understudied works are significant decolonial projects because they relate history and discourse of the contemporary art world to working class, average individuals and the narratives of their experiences, concerns, and struggles. These communities are often not prioritized in discussions of state policy or international affairs. I suggest that *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo* and *Palas por Pistolas* are responses to local and global imbalances of power that ignore the voices and needs of average citizens, particularly the working class, through various co-factors, which include the devaluation of labor, censorship, and economic injustice in order to maintain colonial and imperial hierarchies in geopolitical terms.

This thesis focuses on *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo*, and *Palas por Pistolas* as exemplary of the decolonizing effect that can be instigated by public participation in a socially and politically engaged artwork. The goal of this research project is to present a more nuanced analysis of three case studies and offer a new perspective of the artworks, which will situate

them as responses to persisting colonial systems. I ask how mass public participation, especially by working class communities, plays a decolonizing role in these works, and what specific colonial manifestations are being implicated. I consider how public participation is encouraged and what it looks like. The artists and artworks react to the imbalances of power that remain from the colonial period by sharing and elevating the story of the masses, comprised largely of working-class individuals who are overlooked, especially when profits of industries are at stake.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that in participatory works, a revisioning of what an artwork looks like or is composed of is central in sourcing public participation. That is, in order to be effective, the “art object” aspect must be made approachable to the everyday onlooker. Each of these works accomplishes this in its own way. The centrality of public participation allows for a nuanced look at the artworks as “responses” to colonial systems of power by artists and communities.

My research relies on interviews with artists and participants, YouTube videos, and local news articles to support my discussion, which is otherwise rooted in theory and visual analysis. I acknowledge that my analysis is limited by the genre of participatory art. I have not participated in any of the case studies to be discussed in this paper. As Claire Bishop recognizes, it is impossible to discern a complete, full experience of a participatory project (which are dynamic and experiential) from photographs or video alone.<sup>2</sup> The experience of participating alongside strangers of all walks of life, and working towards a common socio-political goal, is profound and intimate. Such a memorable experience cannot be fully understood from text, images, or video. Watching a video of a participatory artwork online could not possibly convey to the

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, black and indigenous groups in Latin America are still struggling against U.S. influence and colonial systems. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012), 5.

viewer the onslaught of emotions that would impact a participant – anxiety, fear, paranoia, exhilaration, and so forth. This visceral reaction is saved for the brave volunteers. By involving themselves with these artworks, activists and protestors face imposing threats of violence and censorship. Participating in an activist work of art is unquestionably a risk. The question of who can take such a risk must be considered. Significantly, it must be noted that *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo*, and *Palas por Pistolas* do not clearly articulate the demographics of participants, but homogenize them under a singular, unifying cause that draws interest from disparate groups.

The scholarship of Claire Bishop informs my discussion of participatory artwork in a contemporary context. When people function as the primary medium of a work of art, often in a performative manner, Bishop considers the work to be participatory.<sup>3</sup> This shift also changes the role of the audience from spectator to participant or collaborator.<sup>4</sup> The works discussed in this thesis give agency to active participants. Like Bishop, I prioritize the “ideas, experiences and possibilities that result from these interactions.”<sup>5</sup> In my view, this is a practical way to begin to gauge the impact of a participatory work. The exchange amongst participants as co-producers gives insight into the range of the constituency, helping to identify the hopes of the public. In this way, agency is passed from the artist to non-artist participants, which contributes to disassembling the hierarchy of who can speak and who is heard. Artists are in a position of power to use their platform to amplify messages or call attention to issues. In utilizing the participatory genre, they facilitate a shift in power and agency that I see as decolonial. (It is

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 9.

decolonial in its destabilizing of the hierarchies of whose voices are heard and valued in a given society or system.) The artworks permit a civil, respectful statement of protest while providing a space for dialogue on strategies for progress, affirming that a strict consensus is not necessary to push for positive change as a group of citizens.

In participatory artworks or works of art action, artists generally conceive a situation or action and invite everyday people to join in. Often, participants are given agency to create variations, personalizing the gesture. In this way the traditional notion of artist as author is subverted, giving more voice to the average citizen. The shift away from the artist-spectator relationship creates a new, intangible dynamic between artist and participant as well as greater potential for a transformative and meaningful experience for the participant.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on interaction indicates that participatory works have the potential to draw out the complexities of society and social experiences.<sup>7</sup> In *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo*, and *Palas por Pistolas*, artists and participants address extant socio-political circumstances and injustices. Furthermore, they call into question and assert citizens' civil and democratic rights. Rooted in ritual, these works implicate the everyday, questioning the quality of life, or lack thereof, for working-class citizens, and they facilitate activism. I assert that participants turn out in large numbers because the artworks aid them in responding to events that impact their quotidian realities and that of their neighbors. Not only do the artworks implicate the everyday conditions under a corrupt political regime or in the face of injustice, but they serve to elevate the everyday by inviting

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan, "Introduction: Practicable – Art in the Conditional," in *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 1. See also: Katrin Gattigerr, "Why Participate? On the Concrete Experience of Participatory Performances," in *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 298.

<sup>7</sup> Gattigerr, "Why Participate?," 309.

average people to participate, addressing issues they care about, and using their respective concepts to effectively engage through symbolism and simplistic gestures. In my discussion, I will also draw on the scholarship of theorist Shannon Jackson and curator Nato Thompson, which gives insights into the processes of collaboration between artists and non-artists. Jackson critically examines the connections between art and social systems, dissolving artificial barriers between art and society. Thompson questions the power of art to affect change through methods like grassroots organizing and activist demonstrations. I observe each artwork as eliciting a grassroots or vernacular response in their own ways.

In the introduction to her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Bishop makes clear that she views participatory works as art, first and foremost. Jackson and Thompson explore socially engaged art, which is not the same as participation. Bishop contends that in general, art is socially engaged. I draw from Bishop in my analysis, but I also consider the artworks as social practices or situations that have social meaning beyond the context or duration of the artwork. After all, participants return to their everyday lives after taking part, perhaps never to be so integrated into “art” or the “art world” again. While the social implications may be impossible to quantify, I assert that even if an artwork only calls attention to an issue, it is significant, because the inclusive nature of the works amplify the voices of individuals and communities that need to be heard and recognized.

Critic and theorist Nancy Fraser writes “members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics.”<sup>8</sup> She calls these groups “counterpublics,” groups which can generate counterdiscourses to contribute their interpretations of their own identities, advocating

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 122.

for their own interests.<sup>9</sup> Public sphere theory allows me to present a more nuanced understanding of the social structures that artists and participants work within and seek to question. Fraser suggests that the growth of counterpublics concurrently leads to contestation, which is part of a healthy society.<sup>10</sup> I assert that accessibility of the art actions and the choice to lend agency to diverse counterpublics permits a decolonial response. Furthermore, decolonial scholars have placed importance on bringing forth a multitude of alternative historical narratives in order to displace Western hegemony. Exclusivity in the public sphere hinders a democracy's ability to thrive. In addition, without plentiful and diverse perspectives in a debate on an issue, public opinion is unclear.<sup>11</sup> In each art action, participants from many different walks of life come together. Participating in such an experience does not itself indicate that a singular public is formed. While the participants form a public as a group that rallies behind a socio-political cause, their diverse experiences and viewpoints allow the formation and co-existence of various counterpublics. The multiplicity of experiences and backgrounds from the participants adds richness to the public discourse, mimicking a true democratic scenario. A drawback of the artworks is that they do not clearly articulate multiple perspectives in favor of expressing a unified standpoint in protest. This means that while some diversity of opinions can be perceived, the true nuance is muddled. It means we are left to imagine the intricacies and entanglements of the publics and counterpublics. Perhaps maintaining the simplicity of the gesture comes at the cost of more clear expression of the variances.

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<sup>9</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 1, 3.

*Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo* and *Palas por Pistolas* intersect with the everyday in a selection of ways. The everyday aspect of these works provides a kind of grassroots or vernacular critical response to the colonial histories and international relations to which the works refer. The decision to use this vernacular visual language on the part of the artists results in a decolonial exercise done at an aesthetic level. The visual analysis and historical, socio-political context that I provide in each chapter will make connections between the symbolic physical actions and contextual circumstances of each art action.

My decolonial reading of the artworks is informed by theorists Lisa Lowe and Walter D. Mignolo, whose work is sensitive to the dominant narrative of history and the possibility of alternative histories. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), Lisa Lowe argues that the history of modernity privileges and reinforces Western epistemologies and narratives by imposing global systems of liberalism and colonialism. Lowe advocates the perspective of a ‘history of the present,’ which she uses to question and weaken structures of the past that endure today in order to reveal ‘intimacies’ between histories of different continents. By privileging narratives of events and individuals in history, that are presented as isolated from other cultures and ideologies, global connections are overlooked. Lowe argues that the histories of modernism, capitalism, colonialism, and slavery are interconnected and interdependent. In this work, Lowe suggests that the expansion and dominance of modernity is an ongoing project, one that is imperial and a continuation of colonialism. By connecting contemporaneous global histories, she proposes alternative narratives that can help us imagine alternative futures. I suggest that the experiences fleshed out by each artwork contributes to the formation of alternative narratives that are written by the masses, detailing how their circumstances do not align with the policy or agenda of the powers-that-be. Walter D. Mignolo employs the term “coloniality” to refer to the

reasoning behind the expansion and proliferation of Western civilization from the fourteenth century to today, a history which has been heavily informed by the conditions of colonialism, which have been often overlooked.<sup>12</sup> Mignolo argues that “modernity” is an intricate and convoluted narrative that extols the accomplishments of Western civilization while obscuring coloniality. In other words, modernity cannot exist without coloniality.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, “global modernities” today must coexist with “global colonialities.”<sup>14</sup> It is this compelling argument that frames my analysis. The project of modernity is still being carried out today, as nations with the greatest wealth use their economic and political influence to further their agenda in countries that do not have the same level of power. In the coming chapters, I suggest how the United States exercises control over Peru, Colombia and Mexico through varying means to benefit its interests, reinforcing its position at the top of the imperial power dynamic.

Today, the impact that such international imbalances of power have had on environmental issues is impossible to ignore. The disparity between the economic and technological capabilities of different nations reinforces environmental injustice and shifts the blame off of developed countries and onto developing nations.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, these developed countries are in fact the largest greenhouse gas producers, whose industries have contributed to the dangerous and concerning ecological effects experienced by small island nations.<sup>16</sup> The fight

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<sup>12</sup> “Coloniality” is a term that was first introduced by Anibal Quijano, Peruvian sociologist, in the late 1980s. See: Walter D. Mignolo, “Introduction: Coloniality: The Darker Side of Western Modernity,” in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo (Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Mignolo, “Introduction: Coloniality: The Darker Side of Western Modernity,” 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> T.J. Demos, “Climates of Displacement: the Argos Collective’s Maldives,” *Altern Ecologies: Emergent Perspectives on the Ecological Threshold at the 55th Venice Biennale*, ed. Taru Elfving and Terike Haapoja (Helsinki: Frame Visual Art Finland, 2015), 70.

<sup>16</sup> TJ Demos, “Climates of Displacement,” 70.

for climate justice is interwoven with movements for democracy, the rights of marginalized communities, and economic equality.<sup>17</sup> The first step towards environmental justice is recognition on the part of developed nations of their (disproportionate) role in causing climate change.<sup>18</sup>

The goal of this project is to connect the injustices and imbalances of power at play in the global network of international relations today to the artworks discussed as case studies in order to advocate on behalf of the principles of democratic and civil rights. I explore the properties of the artworks that I consider ‘decolonizing’ in the coming chapters. Widespread public participation, permitted through accessible art actions in public spaces, calls significant attention to the social and political motivation of the works. The gestures are intentional and meaningful, and when people take part, they lend their voices in support of the message, launching a mass demonstration of civic engagement. When a healthy democracy is challenged – in the presence of an authoritarian regime or in instances when the will of the constituency is ignored – there is an obvious imbalance of power between the working class and the state.

Civic demonstrations fight this disparity and challenge the state and by extension, malignant foreign influence that has become entangled with the state, to its detriment. The manifestation of ongoing colonial and imperial systems of power looks different in Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Many of these specific factors are localized extensions of the global systems of power. I suggest that these art actions speak out about not only the immediate local circumstances such as a dictatorship in Peru, a civil war in Colombia, or gun violence in Mexico. They simultaneously confront the global forces at play including CIA support for an

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<sup>17</sup> Activist groups such as Climate Justice Now! and the Global Justice Ecology Project argue these positions. See: TJ Demos, “Climates of Displacement,” 75.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

authoritarian regime, U.S. economic support and military presence, or U.S. gun and drug policy. In Peru, the U.S. pushed its preferred economic structures and policies to benefit its own private industry at the cost of the Peruvian economy, rendering the South American nation dependent on the U.S. for financial aid.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. military presence in Colombia is carried out in the name of the war on drugs, even though internal documents from the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have shown that the occupation does nothing to decrease the manufacturing or trafficking of illegal narcotics.<sup>20</sup> In Mexico, communities experience ubiquitous gun violence. U.S. gun policy enables easy access to guns, to the detriment of its neighbor to the south. U.S. action under the guise of the war on drugs has been proven to give power to drug cartels, reinforcing the cycle of violence.<sup>21</sup> It is critical to recognize that all the above factors and more are interconnected, with each thread of the global system of power relying on and relating to another.

Citing statistics from declassified government reports, recent scholarship in foreign policy supports the consistent pattern of safeguarding imperial and colonial systems of power that inform international relationships. Hierarchies of power are about maintaining control. The true motivations behind foreign policy decisions are revealed through now declassified documents. My thesis examines how U.S. monetary policy and occupation have influenced each country and made a negative impact for citizens. For example, in Colombia, the U.S. has influence over the agrarian sphere in the name of fighting the war on drugs, which has acted as a

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<sup>19</sup> Sebastian Edwards, "The Andean Community Reforms: How Much Progress? How Far to Go?" in *The Andean Community and the United States: Trade and Investment Relations in the 1990s*, eds. Miguel Rodríguez Mendoza, Patricia Correa, and Barbar Kotschwar (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1998), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (Zed Books, 2005), 122.

<sup>21</sup> Julien Mercille, "Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the 'War on Drugs' in Mexico," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 9 (2011): 1643.

detriment to the livelihood of local farmers. Large swaths of rural land are owned by U.S. citizens, thereby displacing small farmers. I assert, and documents support, that U.S. economic investment in the Colombian government is driven by the desire to maintain influence in order to benefit U.S. interests. These are very much colonial circumstances disguised as a fight for democracy, but really it is the exact opposite. They hinder democratic processes and the will of the people.

In chapter one, I argue that Colectivo Sociedad Civil's participatory artwork *Lava la Bandera* challenges the authoritarian Fujimori regime through empowering citizens in Peru with an accessible, symbolic gesture. Participants are invited to wash their national flags in plastic containers of soapy water in a public square in order to metaphorically cleanse the government of corruption. The setting of the Plaza Mayor adds much to the intentionality of the work, directly implicating the state through close proximity to the government buildings that surround the square. *Lava la Bandera* gives citizens the opportunity to publicly express their concerns and experiences, asserting their voices within the political discourse from which they had been pushed out. In these ways, local communities reclaim metaphorical and physical space from the authoritarian state. Furthermore, I argue that *Lava la Bandera* was a relevant contributing factor to the downfall of the Fujimori regime, as it successfully turned swaths of public opinion against him in a more active way.

Chapter two focuses on *Acción de Duelo*, a 2007 participatory installation by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. I argue that the artwork responds to colonial systems of power working within the country, causing violence and instability, for financial and political gain at the expense of Colombian citizens. Salcedo works against this trend by promoting the experiences and voices of average citizens in their everyday lives in a public collective gesture. I explain how Salcedo

uses a simple, collective gesture, functioning as a vigil, to elevate the voices of participants in the Plaza de Bolívar, surrounded by government buildings. The meaningful setting of the public square is a commonality between *Lava la Bandera* and *Acción de Duelo*, making the occupation of public squares and close physical proximity to architectural embodiments of the state central to the efficacy and presence of the two artworks.

Chapter three examines Pedro Reyes's ongoing project *Palas por Pistolas*, in which he collects surrendered firearms from communities and repurposes the metal into spades for basic shovels. The shovels are used to plant trees. Along the way, participants have the opportunity to participate through submitting their weapons, to discuss that decision with family and friends, to connect with local businesses and neighbors, and to plant trees with the artist in an act of community service. I argue that the project is decolonizing in that it asserts the rights and autonomy of citizens to take action in favor of their wellbeing and quality of life. U.S. gun and labor policy negatively affects Mexican citizens in the name of profits for private industry, which influences the legislation. I specifically examine how *Palas por Pistolas* affects tangible, local change through grassroots action and vernacular visual language.

Throughout my discussion of these case studies I ask: how symbolic gestures create community and yield social and political power; what are the power dynamics at play at national and international levels that influence the socio-political circumstances of the country - that in turn impact the masses; how does each artwork form communities among diverse groups of participants; and to what extent do these performances affect actual change?

My discussion of the intricacies of these artworks contributes to decolonizing scholarship. When government policy and the decisions of the state impact citizens' quality of life, it is not only important to critique that power imbalance, but to also point to additional

hierarchies of power that inform the path of that institution. In other words, when a country's government is making decisions against the best interests of its people, it is productive to consider what higher powers influence that nation. With each case study, I discuss the political and economic influences of the United States on each nation. This influence is exercised to maintain colonial and imperial systems of power that benefit the U.S. at the expense of colonized regions.

A central common factor to these artworks is the participation of non-artists. This shift, which allows public participants to become co-authors alongside the artist, permits an equalizing experience, with the artist and participants exercising similar amounts of authority. In a non-participatory scenario, observers are subjugated to the direction of the artist. In participatory art, the work is the interactions between the artist(s), participants and the situation. When public engagement takes center stage, a democratic response is invoked. Other important commonalities among the case studies that is discussed are the use of space within the urban landscape for public gathering, repetition of nonviolent gestures, and unity through diversity under a common cause.

I assert that it is productive to entertain how artistic gestures can play a key role in social and political movements. A creative component can render an issue more approachable and accessible. An individual might ask what they can possibly do to affect political change in their country, while an artist proposes they take part in a simple action alongside their neighbors to form a coalition. That represents the beginning of a movement for localized change on the community level.

## Chapter I: Colectivo Sociedad Civil's *Lava la Bandera*: Activating the Citizenry in Peru

In observing an iteration of *Lava la Bandera*, it is not apparent that it is a work of art. Instead, one can expect to see a crowd of people of all ages gathered in Lima's Plaza Mayor, often chanting and singing in unison. Clotheslines are suspended throughout the square as citizens clean their own Peruvian flags in washbasins amongst the company of neighbors, friends and strangers alike. A large banner broadcasts the name of the artist collective that conceived the idea: Colectivo Sociedad Civil (Civil Society Collective or CSC).<sup>22</sup> Members of the CSC include contemporary artists Jorge Salazar, Fernando Bryce, Claudia Coca, Luis García Zapatero, Emilio Santisteban, Susana Torres, and Abel Valdivia, as well as occasional members who are not part of the art world.<sup>23</sup> The group's name does not explicitly reveal that they are leading a work of performance art, leaving little to no indication as to true nature of the gathering for passersby. Despite the feelings of camaraderie and community that the crowd emanates, it must not be forgotten that citizens gathered in protest of an authoritarian regime.

In this chapter, I argue that the Colectivo Sociedad Civil's participatory performance artwork *Lava la Bandera* (2000-2001) challenged the Fujimori dictatorship through the intentional use of public space and the application of accessible and symbolic, tactile objects as props in a gesture that functions as a civil demonstration. I also argue that this demonstration asserts democratic rights and principles in order to combat a dictatorship that acted as a detriment to the interest of citizens. This chapter considers how *Lava la Bandera* is an assertion of democratic use of public space and discourse, as well as an assertion of the democratic *right* to

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<sup>22</sup> "Documental – Sociedad Civil – YouTube," YouTube, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCLazxCXtI4>

<sup>23</sup> "Colectivo Sociedad Civil," VADB, accessed January 20, 2019. <https://vadb.org/institutions/colectivo-sociedad-civil>.

exist in public space and take part in political discourse. The reclamation of tangible and metaphorical spaces was done through the gesture of washing the Peruvian national flag in a symbolic act of cleansing.

I also examine how *Lava la Bandera* functions as a symbolic gesture. I introduce the relationship between the Fujimori dictatorship and support by U.S. intelligence to argue that these forces were anti-democratic (against the will of the people within a democracy) and that by fighting against the dictatorship, participants also challenged U.S. dominance over foreign affairs. The CSC and *Lava la Bandera* became a political force that helped contribute to Fujimori's downfall.<sup>24</sup> Finally, I conclude that *Lava la Bandera* proposes a model for healthy democracy by putting forth an art action that takes the form of a highly symbolic public demonstration in order to organize dissenting and diverse opinions against the Fujimori regime. The gesture of *Lava la Bandera* acts a mediator between the artist collective and participants – average citizens – in order to rally them for this cause. The symbol – the Peruvian flag – privileges participants' sense of national identity and pride in a gesture of unity.

Alberto Fujimori was elected to be president of Peru in 1990. For the better part of his term, Fujimori was supported by a majority of the population.<sup>25</sup> However, after his reelection in 1995, he began to decline in popularity as impoverished constituents from rural and urban areas

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<sup>24</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Lava la Bandera* emerged at the tail end of a period of violence known as the *Manchay Tiempo*, an amalgamation of Quechua and Spanish words that translate literally to the Time of Fear. The catalyzing event of this era is widely agreed upon to be the burning of ballot boxes the night before elections on May 17, 1980 in Chuschi, Ayacucho. This enabled the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), a leftist guerilla group, to begin its campaign against the state. The government struck back with a violent counterinsurgency campaign that put regular Andeans in the line of fire. Alberto Fujimori received credit for bringing the violence to an end. He achieved this victory by consolidating power to the presidency, acting with unflinching aggression against his opponents. This continued after the violence subsided. See: Felipe Cala Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru: Performing Citizenship in the Time of Fear," in *Cultural Producers and Social Change in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 53. Also: State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "Peru, Freefall." National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 237 (July 31, 1997) 15.

experiencing poverty did not benefit from an increase in living standards.<sup>26</sup> Citizens were becoming disillusioned with the president's corruption. His refusal to pursue investigations against the head of the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (National Intelligence Service or SIN), Vladimiro Montesinos, was a point on which he was heavily criticized.<sup>27</sup> Fujimori's unpopularity compelled him to increase funding to social expenditures in order to regain favor, but he simultaneously doubled down on his corrupt practices to ensure his claim to power.<sup>28</sup> A breaking point for much of the constituency came in 1997, when the Fujimori government removed three justices from office for voting against the *Ley de interpretación auténtica* (Law of Authentic Interpretation). University students and employees protested in the streets, confronting what they perceived to be apathy and fear that had prevented the citizenry from taking action during the previous seven years of the regime.<sup>29</sup> Public space hereafter becomes the center stage for moral and ethical politics. The CSC's performances are just part of this trend that enriched understandings of political power and citizenship.

Under Fujimori's regime, Peru's economy transformed significantly in ways that conformed to the preferences and agenda of the United States. His willingness to abide by the preferred economic policy of the U.S. marked the transition from troubled relations to a partnership between the nations. This represents a significant contrast to the policies of former president Alan García, who disagreed with U.S. positions on international debt and refused to consider the advice of the international financial community.<sup>30</sup> Fujimori implemented new

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<sup>26</sup> Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Peru, Freefall."15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. In 1997, 82% of citizens polled said Montesinos should resign. In the same poll, approximately one third of respondents said they believed Fujimori was in control of the government, while 22% chose the military, and 30% answered that Montesinos was in charge.

<sup>28</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 55, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sebastian Edwards, "The Andean Community Reforms," 20..

positions straightaway, spending the better part of the 1990s converting the Peruvian economy from static to free-market in a dramatic shift, to answer countries looking to invest in Peru.<sup>31</sup> When the Peruvian economy opened up to foreign interests, the presence of U.S. companies in Peru became more substantial.<sup>32</sup> Notably, these international financial institutions were heavily swayed by the U.S. Treasury Department.<sup>33</sup> During this period, Peru's most important trading relationship was with the U.S.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, U.S. investment in Peru doubled between 1994 and 1997.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, between 1993 and 1998 the U.S. increased foreign aid spending in Peru, surpassing U.S. spending in any other country in Latin America or the Caribbean.<sup>36</sup> The substantial increase of foreign investment in Peru bolstered the country's prominent economic growth through the mid-1990s.<sup>37</sup> Despite high GDP growth and low inflation, however, the perceived political instability ultimately impacted international business ventures within Peru.<sup>38</sup>

As the 2000 presidential election neared, Fujimori was aware that living standards overall had not improved under his administration, recognizing that Peruvians were becoming

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<sup>31</sup> Sebastian Edwards, "The Andean Community Reforms," 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Jorge Camet, Minister of the Confederación Nacional de Instituciones Empresariales Privadas (Confederation of Private Business Institutions or CONFIEP), largely allowed the international financial community to inform Peru's economic policies during his tenure.

<sup>33</sup> Efraín Gonzales de Olarte, *El Neoliberalismo a la Peruana: Economía Política del Ajuste Estructural: 1990-1997* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1998), 44.

<sup>34</sup> Carlos Boloña and Javier Illecas, "Trade and Investment between Peru and the United States," in *The Andean Community and the United States: Trade and Investment Relations in the 1990s*, ed. Miguel Rodriguez Mendoza, Patricia Correa and Barbara Kotschwar (Organization of American States, 1998), 200-202.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. companies with a new presence in Peru during this time include Mobil Oil, Newmont Mining, Southern Peru Copper Cooperation, McDonalds, Marriott, and Coca-Cola, among many others. See: "Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin America and the Caribbean," accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/type/preliminary-overview-economies-latin-america-and-caribbean>

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants and Assistance from International Organizations: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945-September 30, 1998, and annual editions.

<sup>37</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin America and the Caribbean 1998, 83-85.

<sup>38</sup> Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Peru, Freefall," 15.

increasingly skeptical about the free-market model.<sup>39</sup> Fujimori did not react well to criticism and became increasingly aggressive throughout his time in office, claiming the press was “corrupt” and seeking to discredit his critics.<sup>40</sup> Throughout his presidency, Fujimori ruled in clear authoritarian and anti-democratic fashion. He repeatedly altered the constitution to support his agenda and greed for power in the name of economic prosperity, progress, and national safety.<sup>41</sup> His choice to concentrate all power to the executive branch brought along severe human rights violations.<sup>42</sup> The corruption escalated as Fujimori’s term progressed, culminating in the 2000 election, in which Fujimori himself produced outrageous propaganda, writing headlines for media organizations under his control.<sup>43</sup> His sensationalist rhetoric was mostly targeted towards people who would pass by newsstands to see the top stories listed on the print publications. The stories had no real substance.<sup>44</sup> The regime was a clear threat to democracy, looming over Peru.

In the 2000 election, Fujimori ran for his third term successfully. Immediately, speculation that election fraud had been committed flooded public discourse. Public confidence in Fujimori was undermined slowly, as critics became more vocal.<sup>45</sup> The Fujimori regime censored, exiled, imprisoned, and even murdered those who spoke or acted against the government.<sup>46</sup> Artists were not immune to these threats. Importantly, life under the dictatorship had repercussions on the daily lives and cultural practices of average individuals.<sup>47</sup> Thus,

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<sup>39</sup> Sally Bowen, *The Fujimori File: Peru and Its President 1990-2000* (Peru Monitor Press, 2000), 301-302.

<sup>40</sup> Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “Peru, Freefall.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 58.

<sup>45</sup> Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “Peru, Freefall.”

<sup>46</sup> Gustavo Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera: The Colectivo Sociedad Civil and the Cultural Overthrow of the Fujimori-Montesinos Dictatorship,” In *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, ed. Grant H. Kester and Bill Kelley Jr. (Duke University Press, 2017), 24.

<sup>47</sup> Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera,” 22.

fighting against the regime involved the struggle for the preservation of personal and traditional lifeways. The cultural fight against a dictatorship requires tradition to change, and for a new society to be constructed by an active citizenry.<sup>48</sup> Active participation in citizenship may take the form of involvement in social processes and contribution to the ongoing narrative, meaning that their voices and concerns are part of the political discourse.<sup>49</sup> According to Gustavo Buntinx, art historian and member of the Colectivo Sociedad Civil, the opposition to the Fujimori regime involved an “active citizenship, articulated beyond the state,” purporting that a defined role of “citizen” in this context stood apart from government corruption, and perhaps, societal norms.<sup>50</sup> As philosopher Étienne Balibar has contended, “active citizenship” emerges from a grassroots level, not from an elite or ruling class.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Aftermath of the Election of 2000 and the Emergence of Performative Artistic Responses**

Responses to the results of the 2000 election were highly emotional and foreshadowed the emergence of a robust culture of artistic protests and demonstrations. On April 10, 2000, Fujimori lost the popular vote (with less than 50% of voters supporting him) but declared himself the winner anyway.<sup>52</sup> In reaction, a group of protestors carried out a small collection for funds on the street, walked to a funeral parlor and purchased a casket. They carried the casket more than twenty blocks to the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (National Bureau for Electoral Processes) in a spontaneous funeral procession.<sup>53</sup> A witness to the action, Buntinx

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Tony Fisher, “Radical Democratic Theatre,” *Performance Research* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 17.

<sup>52</sup> A runoff election was required, but Fujimori’s opponent Alejandro Toledo refused to participate, wanting the election to be annulled. Fujimori won the runoff election uncontested. Ibid, 65, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 65.

described the gesture as “simply the result of an overflow of civic devotion and creative energy.”<sup>54</sup> In a separate protest that night, a group of artists gathered in front of the Palacio de Justicia (Palace of Justice), with candles, crucifixes, and funeral wreath in hand, to mourn the symbolic death of electoral authority and justice.<sup>55</sup> Buntinx reveals that the Colectivo Sociedad Civil came into being after observing these funerary protests, stating that the circumstances called “for a massive movement of civil disobedience.”<sup>56</sup> The CSC sought to form a response that would gather the masses in a democratic moment of dissent, confronting undemocratic practices.

One of CSC’s first actions, titled *Cambio, no cumbia (Change, not Cumbia)*, rendered the cityscape luminescent, plastered with posters boasting fluorescent colors, appropriating the style of technocumbia (a style of electronic dance music).<sup>57</sup> The title suggests viewers should focus on pressing issues, confronting them instead of carrying on as usual. At the bottom of the posters was an invitation to email the CSC along with resources to connect to different human rights and activist organizations, asking viewers to engage with the movements.<sup>58</sup> Figure 1.1 shows the posters with the full text, which reads, “No al tecno fraude. Cambio no cumbia. Que no nos bailen mas” or “No to techno fraud. Change, not cumbia. Do not dance anymore.”<sup>59</sup> These posters from the campaign expressed an attitude of dissent towards the state’s control of popular culture.<sup>60</sup> They ask viewers to not accept the current status quo and to make a change in the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Buntinx cites “the *Emergencia artística: Arte crítico 1998-1999 (Artistic Emergency: Critical Art 1998-1999)* exhibit as an important precedent to this coalition, which emerged out of a sense of opportunity, spontaneity and urgency, but also the convergence of the cultural, political, and social capital of its members.” See: Ibid, 65, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>59</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>60</sup> Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 54.

spheres in which they participate. This work reflects the accessibility of *Lava la Bandera*, suggesting that inclusivity was a priority of the CSC. Plastered on city walls, the posters called out towards passersby using neon colors and referencing popular culture. While not all viewers would have had access to the internet, and thus would not have been able to connect with the advertised groups online, the ideas penetrate public consciousness one person and one poster at a time until a large population was thinking about taking action against impending circumstances.

*Lava la Bandera* unquestionably contributed to the Fujimori regime's decline in popularity.<sup>61</sup> The project began with a group of artists and activists, with the intention of protesting the corruption and abuses of the regime.<sup>62</sup> The Colectivo Sociedad Civil initiated the action shortly after Fujimori was officially declared victor of the uncontested runoff election.<sup>63</sup> The free, participatory work took place in Lima's central Plaza Mayor every Friday from 12:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon from April of 2000 to May of 2001.<sup>64</sup>

In a conscientious ritual, Peruvian flags were washed in red plastic tubs (seen in figure 1.2) with bars of Bolívar soap, rung out, and hung to dry on temporary clotheslines and stands in front of the Palacio de Government (Governmental Palace).<sup>65</sup> Bolívar soap, a common household item, was intentionally used to evoke the legacy of Simón Bolívar, also known as *El Libertador* (or the Liberator), who led the secession of territories which are now Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela from the Spanish Empire. His identity rooted in his role

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 53, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Grant Kester, "The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique: A Response to Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 25, no. 53 (January 2017): 59.

<sup>63</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 65, 67.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 53, 56.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 67. See also: "BBC Mundo - Perú: Suspenden El Lavado de Banderas, Por Ahora... - 24.11.2000," accessed March 31, 2019, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/spanish/news/news001124perubanderas.shtml>.

in independence, Bolívar is commonly associated with nationalism and pride.<sup>66</sup> Participants' usage of the Bolívar soap asserts that opposition to Fujimori had the spirit of the revolutionary leader on their side. The choice equates the Peruvian peoples' struggle with that between colonizers and the colonized, just as Bolívar rose up against the Spanish Empire. Figure 1.3 provides insight into the expanse of the action. Participants filled the Plaza and held up their flags to passengers in cars driving by as if to call attention to themselves. Though the flags alone do not announce the action as a protest, the presence of so many in the Plaza was meant to pique the curiosity of others. This setting contributes to the symbolism of *Lava la Bandera*, which is expanded by the action itself and its humble props.<sup>67</sup> The plastic washbasins were provided at the Plaza by members of the CSC, the water taken from the fountain, and household soap passed around and shared, and Peruvian flags of various conditions and sizes were the participants' personal possessions.<sup>68</sup> In another instance, Fujimori's constitution was washed on the steps of the Palacio de Justicia, along with previously archived judiciary files that discuss "tortures and political assassinations."<sup>69</sup> In some instances, army uniforms were also washed, presenting a more specific criticism to the state of the Peruvian military.<sup>70</sup>

### **Lima's Plaza Mayor as Center Stage**

The setting of *Lava la Bandera* was Lima's Plaza Mayor, often seen as the center of the establishment in Peru.<sup>71</sup> It has obvious connections to government, as the Plaza is enclosed by civic buildings, and houses a water fountain that was constructed and installed during the

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<sup>66</sup> Germán Carrera Damas, *Mitos políticos en las sociedades andinas: Orígenes, invenciones, ficciones* (Miranda: Equinoccio, 2006), 398.

<sup>67</sup> Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 26.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 26, 28-29.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 25, 26.

colonial period (figure 1.4).<sup>72</sup> In a view from above, figure 1.5 captures the Cathedral Basilica of Lima on the right, with the Government Palace in the left half of the frame. In the center of the image, the fountain is partially obscured by trees. Additionally, a monument to the Spanish conqueror of the Inca state, Francisco Pizarro, remains erect in the space, another reminder of the imposing and difficult legacy of colonialism (figure 1.6).<sup>73</sup>

This site, the main square of the city, is highly visible. The setting puts the people in control of how they are seen in public space; the gesture makes their message clear. *Lava la Bandera* represents an attempt to reclaim a space seized by the dictatorship.<sup>74</sup> Art historian W.J.T. Mitchell articulates that physical and rhetorical presence in space is an act of resistance, especially during the occupation of public space, which is controlled and occupied (physically or otherwise) by the state.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Mitchell poses the question, is mass assembly itself an artistic practice?<sup>76</sup> The artworks discussed in this paper rely on the assembly of human participants as the primary medium, though each project is envisioned and planned by artists. While in each case, a creative component is at play, it should also be asked how heavily a gathering of people should be weighed in the discussion of such a work. Mitchell continues that “artists have been experimenting with new ways to occupy public space and to free that space from its obsession with monumental representations of sovereignty and the exploitation of the masses as ornaments of state power, citing examples such as the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring.”<sup>77</sup> Is it possible to inhabit public space without the overhanging cloud of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>74</sup> Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 67.

<sup>75</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012): 10.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution,” 23.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 8, 9, 29.

governmental power? Can the people be separated from the state? Or are the two unchangeably entwined?

By default, artists work within systems of cultural production. In questioning the values and expectations placed on that system (or of any system in which we take part), artists and members of the public can more reasonably work towards sustainable solutions.<sup>78</sup> Under Fujimori, the media was censored and controlled by his regime. The CSC and participants of *Lava la Bandera* were forced to work outside of the systems of print journalism and television news media to use a more experimental form of cultural production that went beyond the model of the art object as the final product.

The mission of the CSC was to put civic consciousness on center stage.<sup>79</sup> The group vigorously opposed the dictatorship, calling attention to citizens' rights violations as well as the country's troublesome social conditions.<sup>80</sup> The CSC proposed a new definition of citizenship that aided in cultivating community.<sup>81</sup> Literary critic Walter Mignolo observes that a culture's national emblems provide unity on a national level.<sup>82</sup> A national identity is shared, creating a commonality amongst the national community, and defining a public. The CSC strategically chose the Peruvian flag, already a national emblem, to be the root of their protest against political corruption.

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<sup>78</sup> Thompson, "Introduction," vii.

<sup>79</sup> Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 22, 24.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Mignolo goes on to state that in the nineteenth century, countries like France and England used this idea of a national culture to create hierarchies of 'superior' and 'inferior' cultures. During this time there is another period of colonial expansion.) See: Walter D. Mignolo, "Preface: Uncoupling the Name and the Reference," in *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), xvii.

Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities reflects the type of community that *Lava la Bandera* fostered. He discusses the catalyst for the creation of imagined communities: the advent of the printing press, which led to affordability of print materials, accessibility through printing in the vernacular, and an increase in the exchange of ideas. In other words, ordinary people had increased access to ideas, which impacted how they viewed themselves within their community and their country.<sup>83</sup> Affordability of text and translation into numerous languages meant that disparate communities could communicate in more profound ways, leading to the development of new ideologies.<sup>84</sup> Through connection to a larger expanse of the population, beyond the immediate locale, average people could relate themselves to the actions of others and react to a broader sphere of people constituting an "imagined community" – the nation.<sup>85</sup> Members of imagined communities do not need to personally or intimately know other members, but they share an image of their community as the nation.<sup>86</sup> Despite differences in economic status, race or ethnicity, gender, or social standing, a community is imagined due to the inherent fraternity of a nation.<sup>87</sup> Nationalism comes out of large cultural systems within a society. It is not a direct line from political ideology.<sup>88</sup> The offenses of the colonizers on colonized peoples so shaped the development of imagined communities in the Americas so that, as Anderson asserts, no combination of factors could have yielded the same results in Europe.<sup>89</sup> *Lava la Bandera* draws on this idea by focusing on the shared cultural and societal experience of

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<sup>83</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 1983), 41, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Jason Xidias, *An Analysis of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities* (London: Routledge, 2017), 11.

<sup>85</sup> Xidias, *An Analysis of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 16.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> It is the creole communities in the Americas that had the "historic role" according to Anderson. *Ibid.*, 65.

neocolonial oppression felt by the masses in Peru during the 1990s. The CSC's audience is the imagined community of Peru as a power or force independent of the political sphere.

### **Gestures as Symbolic Power**

Many countries have careful guidelines that dictate how the national flag should be handled. In the United States, for example, it is against etiquette to allow the flag to touch the ground. Many other countries have similar codes. It is not at all commonplace to use a national flag for anything other than proud display. Any instance of perceived "mishandling" of a flag would likely be quickly viewed as a protest. The national flag may be the most profound symbol of a nation; the act of washing it is daring. Further, the notion that the emblem must be cleansed is charged. It calls to mind casual phrases such as to "wash (or air) one's dirty laundry." *Lava la Bandera* takes this idea and puts it into practice. In a very tactile gesture, artists and participants symbolically wash and air the regime's "dirty laundry," represented by the national flag, while very publicly denouncing the regime's corrupt practices.

Fujimori was known for using symbolic acts strategically to promote himself. For example, in 1994 he took part in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a school in Huaycán (a migrant settlement in Lima), and stated, "I work like this: silently. You wanted a school for your children, and here it is, for them to enjoy. I do not make empty promises."<sup>90</sup> He played up his identity as an outsider, publicly riding motorcycles and donkeys and wearing traditional Andean clothing, thereby informalizing the public perception of power.<sup>91</sup> The CSC was aware of Fujimori's tactics, using the same logic in their interventions to demand more from the leadership by employing symbolic power and language to rally the citizenry.<sup>92</sup> With a clear-cut

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<sup>90</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 56.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 64.

gesture, *Lava la Bandera* brings to light the immorality of the regime. This is the function of the CSC's work. The gesture itself is straightforward. The project is representative of the "dissent" of radical democracy, beginning with a symbolic action.<sup>93</sup> In a "participatory ritual of patriotic cleansing," citizens were invited to collectively wash their national flags and hang them to dry on clotheslines that were suspended above the Plaza (figure 1.7).<sup>94</sup>

There was the sense that participating citizens claimed the establishment center as the home of citizens, not of the few in power.<sup>95</sup> In this way, *Lava la Bandera* was a literal and symbolic act of dissent.<sup>96</sup> Participants did not fight with physical violence, but with words and images, exercising their democratic right to free speech.<sup>97</sup> Buntinx observes that *Lava la Bandera* spurred the proliferation of a dialogue that expanded beyond the initial participatory action.<sup>98</sup> The CSC chose the Peruvian flag in order to move beyond strictly artistic visual tropes or references. The flag acted as a catalyst for the empowerment of the participating community and anyone who witnessed or heard about the action.<sup>99</sup> In the view of the protestors, the washed flags and military uniforms that had already been sullied; washing them restored the symbols to the standard of dignity and pride that they were supposed to represent. The CSC's belief that power could be symbolic as well as political supported their bold project as they sought to reclaim both types of power from the government.<sup>100</sup>

### **Opposition to *Lava la Bandera*: Participants Resist Policing and Intimidation**

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<sup>93</sup> Tony Fisher, "Radical Democratic Theatre," 17.

<sup>94</sup> Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 26.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 35, 36.

<sup>100</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 71.

The consistent repetition of *Lava la Bandera* in the Plaza meant that the site became highly watched: with the occurrence of the weekly ritual, the square was under constant surveillance by the regime.<sup>101</sup> Those who spoke or acted out against the Peruvian government's rule would have faced serious consequences, and artists were no exception. In the aftermath of the initial iteration of *Lava la Bandera*, members of the CSC faced violence and controversy. Many were divided regarding the ethics of the act of washing the flag.<sup>102</sup> Often, the police would move to halt the performance before it began.<sup>103</sup> Participants in Lima were putting themselves at risk.

In the end, there was no way of stopping *Lava la Bandera* from occurring each week. In one instance, the water supply to the fountain in the Plaza Mayor was shut off.<sup>104</sup> To ensure the protest would proceed, merchants from nearby businesses provided water in anything they had – bottles, tubs and even plastic bags.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, participants often sang songs together while washing their flags. When the government loudly projected military marches through brand new speakers installed in the Plaza, the participants simply adapted the lyrics of their songs to the tune of the marches.<sup>106</sup> Police threatened to take down the temporary clotheslines suspended across the square, but participants wrapped their bodies in the wet flags and sang the national anthem.<sup>107</sup> These refusals to submit to police and military pressure transformed the space that had become unwelcome under the corrupt regime into a space for expression, creativity, and

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101 Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 26.

102 Ibid, 27.

103 Grant Kester, "The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique," 75.

104 Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 27.

105 Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru," 71.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

interaction.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, it was again a space for citizens. It is clear from the constant police and military presence that the Fujimori regime immediately recognized the project as an act of direct opposition.<sup>109</sup> Buntinx describes this discordance: “Washing the flag became a ritual gesture for the mobilization of all the necessary energies (of every type) for the recovery and defense of citizens’ rights – of citizenship itself.”<sup>110</sup> These anecdotes of perseverance give the sense that participating in *Lava la Bandera* was the last stand for the citizens, as if they simply had to put a stop to the dictatorship and its abuse of democracy and civil rights, and this was the defining moment. The push against the dictatorship, which before *Lava la Bandera* was perhaps lacking cohesion, a guiding emblem, or rally cry, culminated with this participatory art action. It is rumored, now perhaps an urban legend, that dictator Montesinos stated in frustration “*Lava la Bandera* is a cancer.”<sup>111</sup> Indeed, by mid-September of the same year, the action had spread across the entire country, with iterations occurring every week throughout rural and urban spaces alike.<sup>112</sup>

While the majority of participants in *Lava la Bandera* were not part of the CSC, the artists were present each week during the demonstration, which would often coincide with street marches against the regime.<sup>113</sup> *Lava la Bandera* was just one of many protests that occurred each week in Lima.<sup>114</sup> Another group inspired the washing of military uniforms, while various groups of women held sit-ins in front of the Palacio de Justicia (Palace of Justice) every Thursday.<sup>115</sup>

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108 Ibid.

109 Grant Kester, “The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique,” 75.

110 Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera,” 27.

111 Ibid, 28

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid, 33.

114 “BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now.”

115 Ibid.

Another protest was the “minute of resistance,” in which whistles were sounded every Friday evening at six o’clock in a park of the Miraflores neighborhood.<sup>116</sup>

### **Participation as Democratization**

There is much to be said about the unparalleled experience of taking part in a participatory artwork. It is often impossible to fully comprehend or experience such works from images or testimony alone.<sup>117</sup> Instead of placing emphasis and value on an (art) object, participatory art privileges social interaction and collectivity.<sup>118</sup> The participatory genre allows the quotidian experience to be interrogated, as the medium itself is human participation and action. *Lava la Bandera* confuses the distinctions between social and artistic contexts.<sup>119</sup>

Actual and metaphorical divisions that were implemented through colonialism persist today, separating “first,” “second,” and “third” worlds into ranked categories that are considered to have differing values.<sup>120</sup> Our idea of Latin America stems from colonial and imperial foundations, impacting knowledge production and the unfolding of “modernity.”<sup>121</sup> While many hold an an outdated view of Latin America (i.e. the idea that Latin Americans are a “people without history”),<sup>122</sup> those who have been pigeonholed by these stereotypes have valuable perspectives that, when vocalized, “can open up possibilities for radical change.”<sup>123</sup> Mignolo calls for a multitude of perspectives to be equally valued in order to combat colonial

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116 Ibid.

117 Bishop, “Introduction,” 5.

118 Ibid, 6.

119 Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera,” 34.

120 Mignolo, “Preface: Uncoupling the Name and the Reference,” x.

121 Ibid, x-xi.

122 Ibid, xvii. Mignolo observes that the view of Latin America and the “Third World” as a whole during the Cold War was still that of lesser, second-class cultures – people who did not have “the science and sophisticated history of Europe.”

123 Ibid, xv.

epistemologies, arguing that “instead of translating rich, diverse histories and knowledges into abstract universals, the kind of translation called for in the world of many worlds would allow each its own dignity without reduction, and maintain the autonomy of local, non-dependent histories.”<sup>124</sup>

The simple gesture, *Lava la Bandera*, offered the opportunity for expansion. Geographically, the action spread beyond the Plaza Mayor in Lima, the number of participants grew, and people began washing military uniforms in addition to their flags.<sup>125</sup> The expeditious spread of the action reflected and supported feelings of solidarity and collective disobedience in Peruvian citizens who participated in the movement against Fujimori.<sup>126</sup> Peruvians abroad began the practice as well, with *Lava la Bandera* taking place in twenty different countries.<sup>127</sup>

The occurrences of *Lava la Bandera* that took place after the original action in the Plaza Mayor were not caused by the CSC; the accessibility of the action allowed anyone to participate independently.<sup>128</sup> After all, the aspiration of the collective was not to produce artworks that could be displayed in a gallery or sold and purchased through the art market, but rather to create an adaptable “situation” by which Peru’s citizens could be active, not passive, participants and “coauthors.”<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, the framework of the action itself was flexible, giving participants the agency to add a step or vocalize an opinion. In this way, the CSC succeeded in reinstating confidence to parts of Peru’s citizenry who participated in or were impacted by the project,

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<sup>124</sup> Mignolo observes that ‘translation’ has been used historically within colonial structures as a one directional, imperial tool. It obscures the conditions of coloniality and benefits only the imperial force. See: Walter Mignolo, “After ‘Latin’ America: The Colonial Wound and the Epistemic Geo-/Body-Political Shift,” in *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 44.

<sup>125</sup> Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 68.

<sup>126</sup> Kester, “The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique,” 75.

<sup>127</sup> Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 68.

<sup>128</sup> Tony Fisher, “Radical Democratic Theatre,” 17-18.

<sup>129</sup> Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera,” 33.

allowing them to express their dissatisfaction with the political circumstances through their presence and participation in the public action in the Plaza.<sup>130</sup> The participatory nature of *Lava la Bandera* allowed the work to facilitate communication between the artists of the CSC, participants, and others not directly involved.<sup>131</sup>

Among collaborators on a given project, there is a level of exchange that contributes to the ongoing development of the gesture or work.<sup>132</sup> The recognition of the imagined public of the citizenry lends agency to the people in their fight to restore democratic rule. It serves to mobilize the citizenry, facilitated by CSC and similar groups, through critical interventions and intersections of public space, the city, citizenship, ethics and aesthetics.<sup>133</sup> The CSC sought to conceive an image that was applicable and empathetic to the widest Peruvian audience possible, an emblem that defined the particular political and historical moment.<sup>134</sup> And what they thought the country could use during such a tumultuous time was a reinvention of national identity, exploring what it means to be Peruvian.<sup>135</sup> The CSC considered themselves citizens, first and foremost, a priority reflected in their choices of material, aesthetics and public spaces.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, seeing native participants in traditional dress join in was not a rare sight.<sup>137</sup> In addition to participating in *Lava la Bandera*, they called on Andean deities to support the

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130 Ibid.

131 Ibid, 34.

132 Kester, "The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique," 75.

133 Buntinx, "Lava la Bandera," 24.

134 Ibid, 31.

135 Ibid, 23.

136 Ibid, 33-34.

137 According to data gathered in recent years, approximately sixty percent of Peruvians are mestizo, while about twenty five percent are Amerindian. The poverty rate has been recorded at about thirty percent overall and fifty five percent in rural areas, remaining static for almost a decade. More than three quarters of the population live in urban areas. See: "CIA World Factbook – Peru" See also: Buntinx, "Lava la bandera," 27.

movement for democracy and renewal.<sup>138</sup> Buntinx writes, “In numerous cases, the participants would spontaneously murmur almost magical litanies while scrubbing the banners in an attempt to exorcise Peru of its political demons.”<sup>139</sup> Indigenous peoples in Peru, as they have largely been ejected from their homelands in the Andes, face economic and social violence.<sup>140</sup> Indigenous Andeans who live in Lima almost exclusively inhabit the city’s shantytowns, rundown areas that house the economically depressed.<sup>141</sup> Here, indigenous female artisans working in embroidery would reference *Lava la Bandera* in their work by depicting images of the clotheslines in the Plaza Mayor. Some women included captions, such as “El acto del lavado de la bandera es muy importante” and “Deben ser las banderas más limpias del mundo” (The act of washing the flag is very important, they must become the cleanest flags in the whole world).<sup>142</sup>

The occurrence of *Lava la Bandera* iterations outside of Lima and abroad illustrates the plurality of the project’s “imagined community.” While economic and social challenges are vary between rural and urban areas, and amongst different cultural and ethnic groups, *Lava la Bandera* proposes an action that protests a unifying cause in opposition to groups that are diverse culturally, economically, socially, and geographically. Artists used the platform of a “cultural fight” against the regime to catalyze social change and provide a creative component to activist movements. The artwork of this moment took the form of “experiences” that were “radically socialized” – gestures that responded to and intervened in the various public spheres in

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138 Buntinx, “Lava la Bandera,” 27.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid, 30-31.

141 Ibid, 30-31.

142 Ibid.

turmoil.<sup>143</sup> These are “experiences” specific to each individual spectator or participant.

Defining new traditions and roles within the context of citizenship democratizes public space, reaffirming citizens’ claim to urban space and the literal and metaphorical city.<sup>144</sup>

### **The Final Iteration of *Lava la Bandera***

The tone of the final iteration of *Lava la Bandera* was a bit lighter than that of previous performances, with some participants hopeful for a new, democratic administration. Others who took part were not as optimistic, continuing to criticize the Fujimori regime’s ongoing depravity. Reporting on its last iterations in 2001, Diana Zileri of the BBC joined forces with organizers in Lima to report the details of the meaningful action. This last iteration was to mark the democratic transition of the new president, Alejandro Toledo.<sup>145</sup> In this iteration, participants sang the national anthem before performing the gesture.<sup>146</sup> Hundreds of collaborators from various civil organizations and social movements took part.<sup>147</sup> Participant Guillermina Alfaro rung the flag out with her hands, stating, “I hope we wash all the corruption and conscience of politicians.”<sup>148</sup> Her statement reinforces the profound implications of the symbolic gesture. A participating father shared, keeping his eyes down towards his flag, “My children are smart and cannot enter the university for lack of money. We want to work.”<sup>149</sup> His sentiment illustrates the diverse and personal reasons citizens chose to participate in *Lava la Bandera*. While some participants in this iteration had been partaking each week, for some it was their first experience.<sup>150</sup>

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143 Ibid, 22.

144 Ibid, 23.

145 “BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now.”

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

148 Translation of this quote done by BBC reporter Diana Zileri.

149 Translation of this quote done by BBC reporter Diana Zileri.

150 “BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now.”

Despite the immediacy of a prospective new beginning for Peru, a lineup of police staved off protestors from nearing the gate of the governmental palace.<sup>151</sup> Participants became increasingly agitated, shouting phrases such as “Leave! Leave!” “Fujimori listen to the people you repudiate!” and “There is no president, there is a *delicuyente* (offender)!”<sup>152</sup> Zileri observed “violent struggles” between participants and police but noticed “a group of women [who] managed to reach the fence with trash bags in which they had stamped the photos of Fujimori and Montesinos and threw them on the other side of the fence.”<sup>153</sup> During iterations of *Lava la Bandera*, the CSC distributed more than 300,000 trash bags embellished with pictures of Fujimori and Montesinos dressed in black and white prison stripes in an initiative titled *Pon la basura en la basura* (*Put the Trash in the Trash*). The bags were filled with air and placed on the steps of government buildings and in front of the houses of regime officials known to be corrupt. One such example is congresswoman Martha Chávez, who received trash bags in front of her house. In response, she “proceeded to throw her own garbage at the participants who gathered there.”<sup>154</sup>

Citizens aspiring to make a positive impact within the government took part in the performance as a sign of good faith. Notably, Susana Villarán, Fuerza Social party presidential candidate in the 2000 election, washed the flag in front of the building of the Consejo Nacional de la Magistratura (National Council of Magistrates or CNM) in protest of Law 28665, which proposed to install military officials to the Ministerio Público, an autonomous body with judicial

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151 Ibid.

152 Translation of these quotes done by BBC reporter Diana Zileri.

153 Buendía, “The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru,” 54, 68, 69.

154 “BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now.”

powers.<sup>155</sup> Villarán believed the proposed legislation to be unconstitutional and feared it would enable human rights violations and other dangerous crimes.<sup>156</sup> She spoke to the press on the front steps of the building after taking part in the action, joining many Peruvians in calling for then presidential candidates to ascend to positions of power, instead of military officials.<sup>157</sup> Villarán's highly visible actions forced other candidates to take a position on the law.<sup>158</sup> Her participation in *Lava la Bandera* was an indication of progress towards a more just, democratic system in Peru and set precedent for other politicians to engage with the constituency in similar ways.

***Cose la Bandera (Sana Tu País) (Sew the Flag [Heal Your Country])***

The initiative titled *Cose la Bandera (Sana Tu País) (Sew the Flag [Heal Your Country])* is complimentary to *Lava la Bandera*. The action was commenced by Colectivo Sociedad Civil on May 25, 2001.<sup>159</sup> Conceived in collaboration with the "Comision de la Verdad ¡Ya!" (Truth Commission, Now!) campaign and sponsored by a multitude of democratic organizations, *Cose la Bandera* was carried out in remembrance of those who had died or disappeared at the hands of the dictatorship.<sup>160</sup> Again utilizing the Plaza for a large scale domestic gesture, the CSC turned the square into a sewing workshop.<sup>161</sup> Participants worked together to sew a massive Peruvian flag. The flag was without its typical red coloring in a gesture of mourning, in honor of the disappeared and of those still grieving.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, the absence of red pointed to the "forced"

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<sup>155</sup> Villarán did not win the presidency, but acted as Minister for Women and Social Development in Valentín Paniagua's transitional government in 2001. "Susana Villarán lava la bandera ante CNM contra nueva jurisdicción militar."

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru: Performing Citizenship in the Time of Fear," 36.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

absence of bodies.<sup>163</sup> It was a protective gesture; the union of all of the fabric, sewn together by the participants, was meant to symbolize the democratic practice of the country moving forward while memorializing those who had fallen victim to the regime. Participants sewed a variety of textiles into the makeshift flag, ranging from "traditional Andean skirts to military uniforms - and even an erotic corset sewn into the quilt by a transvestite."<sup>164</sup>

The communal flag became a visual representation of the diverse coalition formed through the movement against Fujimori's regime, embracing indigenous cultures, the LGBTQ community, students, elders, and everyone in between. It was the symbol of a new community, the renewed citizenship that needed to be mended. This action allowed participants who had fought together through *Lava la Bandera* to come together again, as a way to foster some sense of closure and direction forward. It was both an acknowledgement of ruin, as well as a celebration of community. In contrast to its engagement with *Lava la Bandera*, the military took no action against *Cose la Bandera*.<sup>165</sup> In a meaningful bookend to the year of protest, the army took out a full-page, full-color advertisement in the newspaper after *Cose la Bandera* took place. It read, "On this Flag Day, we renew our commitment to the union of all Peruvians." The text is complimented by an image of a child sewing a flag.<sup>166</sup> The gesture was almost apologetic; it was a promise of reconciliation between the state and the people.

## Conclusion

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 367.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Buendía, "The Cultural Resistance of Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru: Performing Citizenship in the Time of Fear," 37.

It was ultimately the infamous *Vladivideos* tapes that incriminated the Fujimori regime, after he sought his third term.<sup>167</sup> While the protest may have contributed to the pressure put on Fujimori by the constituency, it was a leaked video released by the press in September 2000 showing one of Fujimori's officials bribing a politician that forced the president to flee in a self-imposed exile to Tokyo, enabling Peru to begin to heal and rebuild. Fujimori was eventually forced to resign while in Japan. On that day, *Lava la Bandera* was carried out in 27 cities throughout Peru and abroad.<sup>168</sup> Two months later, on January 29, 2001, participants returned to the Plaza Mayor, this time with a new mission. Citizens draped their flags over fences in a gesture of protection, as a response to a wave of propaganda that infiltrated the airwaves, at the hand of Montesinos and Fujimori's still loyal subordinates.<sup>169</sup> Their program was an attempt to undermine the country's return to democracy, and the citizens' provocative reply was unequivocal.<sup>170</sup> Phrases such as "embandera tu mirada (flag your gaze)" and "ver para votar (see to vote)" appeared on signs, posters, and billboards around Lima.<sup>171</sup>

When interim president Valentin Paniagua began his term, the CSC presented him with a tattered but clean Peruvian flag in a gesture that emphasized the gravity of his commitment to the citizenry and democracy.<sup>172</sup> It was also a statement of optimism, a pledge for all who would come after him to honor.<sup>173</sup> With the appointment of Paniagua and a successful democratic transition to the new administration, flags that had been washed each week in the hopeful ritual

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>168</sup> "BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now."

<sup>169</sup> Buntinx, "Lava la bandera," 32.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

were “ironed, folded, and sewn up.”<sup>174</sup> The Colectivo Sociedad Civil “warns that they will remain on alert,” because in their view, “the Peruvian civilian population has symbolically demonstrated greater capacity than the political parties.”<sup>175</sup> The group’s commitment to ensuring that Peruvian citizens retain their power speaks to the potential power of civic demonstrations. After all, it is the shared cultural experience that forms the imagined community of Peru. *Lava la Bandera* demonstrates the influence of an intentionally crafted symbolic gesture. Although I do not argue that the performance caused the downfall of Alberto Fujimori and his regime, I suggest that it was a prominent factor.

Through the discussion in this chapter, I have demonstrated that *Lava la Bandera* put pressure on the state by calling attention to its corruption through a consistent weekly gesture of dissent. The occupation of the Plaza Mayor by countless people of all walks of life rendered the experience of average citizens visible to the regime. The challenge they present is against the state and all other forces that ignore the everyday experience of the masses in favor of pursuing a selfish agenda. Fujimori’s willingness to concede to economic pressures by the U.S. did not benefit him or the country in the long term. Just as Fujimori prioritized making profit off his position, so did the U.S., which benefitted financially from trade with Peru, while U.S. businesses did the same. These power dynamics have proven to have a corrupting influence. In the following chapter, I examine a similar, participatory action, Doris Salcedo’s *Acción de Duelo*, and I draw out the entanglements of international economic interests and state compliance at the expense of the prosperity of the masses.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> “BBC World - Peru: Suspend the Washing of Flags, for Now.”

## Chapter II: Memorializing the Everyday in Doris Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo*

How do we commemorate a tragedy? As individuals, we often look inward to begin a process of healing in the face of a devastating event. A symbolic gesture is usually carried out in groups: perhaps families will plant a tree, frame a photograph, or share memories over a meal in honor of someone they have lost. What is the purpose of a memorial or a vigil? It does not attempt or claim to right wrongs or enact vengeance. The image of a candlelight vigil is familiar to us. We have seen it on the local news, when a member of the community has passed away, most often under tragic circumstances. Now imagine this taking place on a much larger scale and in the context of an artwork. Does the meaning and function change? In Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo (Act of Mourning)* (2007), the artist invited the people of Bogotá to participate in an installation comprised of almost 24,000 illuminated white candles, arranged on the ground of the Plaza de Bolívar in a communal gesture of mourning and remembrance.<sup>176</sup>

The installation responds to the death of police officers from the Valle de Cauca region of Colombia that had been taken hostage five years prior. This artwork calls into question the line between the everyday and the art world, what is art and what is an ordinary memorial, and the purpose of memorializing. Through community action, Salcedo places value on the experiences and concerns of the people. She affirms that the impact of the country's internal violence is widely felt, and she forces people to pay attention to the effect violence has on everyday life. This public demonstration leads us to ask questions about the source of violence and why it continues.

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<sup>176</sup> "Doris Salcedo | *Acción de Duelo*," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Accessed April 1, 2019, [https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/accion\\_de\\_duelo/](https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/accion_de_duelo/).

Motivations of greed and cultural biases often dissuade European and American businesses and governments from questioning or rethinking their perception of Latin America, as they benefit from the systems of power in place. Specifically, they thrive off economies that were built through the exploitation of the region and its peoples through colonialism.<sup>177</sup> Between approximately 1980 and the present, artist collectives have emerged in regions of Latin America with the goal of challenging what has become “normal” in the everyday under dictatorial regimes.<sup>178</sup> Recently, scholars have observed an artistic or creative aspect in social movements.<sup>179</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Doris Salcedo’s 2007 artwork *Acción de Duelo* is a direct response to the colonial and imperial systems of power working within the country as international powers forcefully advocate for their own agendas at the expense of Colombian citizens. Furthermore, I assert that Salcedo challenges these power dynamics by elevating the memories, experiences, and voices of everyday people in a simple, collective gesture.

This chapter considers how widespread violence is dismissed in favor of maintaining the status quo and the power imbalance, which takes the form of colonial hierarchies of power. It is clear that an international imbalance of power continues to impact (post)colonial Colombia. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of *Acción de Duelo* is the opportunity it presents to average citizens to amplify their voices to express their experiences of the everyday. The act of lighting a candle and placing it amongst thousands of other candles in the grid is that act of expression.

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<sup>177</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “After ‘Latin’ America: The Colonial Wound and the Epistemic Geo-/Body-Political Shift,” in *The Idea of Latin America*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 128.

<sup>178</sup> Ana Longoni, “A Long Way: Argentine Artistic Activism of the Last Decades,” in *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, ed. Grant H. Kester and Bill Kelley Jr. (Duke University Press, 2017), 99.

<sup>179</sup> Longoni, “A Long Way,” 100.

The illumination of the candle, continual through the duration of the piece, is symbolic of the presence of participants, even if they have themselves departed from the Plaza.

The chapter concludes by suggesting that by memorializing events that negatively impact the people, the installations present a counter narrative or an alternative to the dominant narrative of policy decisions, military activity, and casualties that would enrich a history textbook – a narrative that reflects the experience of everyday life during times of internal conflict. Salcedo helps construct a narrative that matters more to the people than the financial interests of the government and the U.S.

### **Civil War and International Agendas in Contemporary Colombia**

Largescale violence in Colombia is related to the war on drugs. It continues because of foreign agendas at work there and because the Colombian government privileges this involvement over the well-being of its people. Colombia has endured violent internal conflict for decades, beginning with the period known as *La Violencia* (1948-65) and continuing through the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>180</sup> It was not until late 2016 that Colombia's congress, under the leadership of President Juan Manuel Santos, approved a peace accord that ended the persisting war.<sup>181</sup> For decades, murder, disappearances, and displacement were an everyday reality for Colombians, as the symptoms of war became normal parts of life.<sup>182</sup> It is estimated that more than 200,000 people were murdered since the mid-1960s by “government armed forces, paramilitary death squads, drug cartels, revolutionary guerilla forces, and organized and

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<sup>180</sup> Mary Schneider Enriquez, “In Context: Violence and Contemporary Art in Colombia,” In *Doris Salcedo: The Materiality of Mourning*, ed. Mary Schneider Enriquez (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Art Museums, 2016), 15.

<sup>181</sup> Joshua Partlow and Nick Miroff, “Colombia’s Congress Approves Historic Peace Deal with FARC Rebels,” *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/colombian-congress-approves-historic-peace-deal/2016/11/30/9b2fda92-b5a7-11e6-939c-91749443c5e5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.88684acfed48](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/colombian-congress-approves-historic-peace-deal/2016/11/30/9b2fda92-b5a7-11e6-939c-91749443c5e5_story.html?utm_term=.88684acfed48).

<sup>182</sup> Schneider Enriquez, “In Context,” 15.

disorganized crime.”<sup>183</sup> In addition to the estimated number of casualties, approximations identify around 6 million people who have been displaced, a contender for the world’s most devastating refugee crisis at the moment.<sup>184</sup> Overall, the conflict in Colombia has been the “longest-running civil conflict in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>185</sup> Rebecca Comay notes that “the role of the U.S. military has not been negligible” in contributing to the country’s turmoil.<sup>186</sup> This points to the colonial and imperial systems of power still in effect.

Walter Mignolo asserts that in today’s global context, the idea of “Latin America” is an imperial one.<sup>187</sup> In this view, Latin America is often reduced to “a vast territory and a resource for cheap labor, full natural resources, exotic tourism, and fantastic Caribbean beaches waiting to be visited, invested in, and exploited.”<sup>188</sup> This romanticized view of the region has persisted for centuries, since the time of contact between indigenous groups and European conquistadors that marked the beginning of the colonial period. Mignolo observes that these perceptions amplified during the Cold War, when neoliberal regimes were implemented in Chile (General Augusto Pinochet), Argentina (Juan Carlos Menem), and Bolivia (Sanchez Gonzalo de Losada) and Colombia (Álvaro Uribe Vélez), just to name a few cases.<sup>189</sup> It was during this time that Latin America became heavily associated with “communism.”<sup>190</sup> After a number of civil wars and communist revolutions took place in Latin America in the late 1970s, the region became a

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183 Rebecca Comay, “Material Remains: Doris Salcedo,” *Oxford Literary Review* 39, no. 1 (June 30, 2017): 43.

184 Comay, “Material Remains,” 43.

185 Doris Salcedo, “A Work in Mourning,” in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Doris Salcedo, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, and Madeline Grynstejn (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 18.

186 Comay, “Material Remains,” 43.

187 Mignolo, “After ‘Latin’ America,” 96.

188 *Ibid.*

189 *Ibid.*

190 *Ibid.*, 98.

major focus of U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s. The U.S. sought to maintain favorable relationships with Central and South American countries, fearing they would become pro-Soviet governments.<sup>191</sup> To combat this concern, the U.S. protected its interests through influencing puppet governments, which in turn neglected impoverished citizens and the working class.<sup>192</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union, the implementation of neo-liberalism in Central and South America was seen as the best solution to promote a capitalist-centered global economy.<sup>193</sup> The U.S. pursued a path to “secure acquiescence with neoliberalism” through a program of legitimization.<sup>194</sup> The region became targeted by U.S. development and modernization projects in order to respond to this perceived threat to the region.<sup>195</sup> The imposition of control and its impact directly correlate with the circumstances Salcedo responds to in her installation.

Doug Stokes, a specialist in U.S. foreign policy and international security, argues that the U.S. has not been honest about its true motivations for their involvement in Colombia.<sup>196</sup> The official reason for U.S. involvement is the war on drugs. U.S. military forces have fought the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and other guerilla groups.<sup>197</sup> Intelligence from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has discovered that these groups have minor involvement in the drug trade. Stokes argues that the U.S. has sought stability in the country by maintaining the economic status quo there, which

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<sup>191</sup> John Weeks, "An Interpretation of the Central American Crisis," *Latin American Research Review* 21, no. 3 (1986): 31-34.

<sup>192</sup> Weeks, "An Interpretation of the Central American Crisis," 31-34.

<sup>193</sup> Ruth Blakeley, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North and the South* (Routledge, 2009), 109.

<sup>194</sup> Blakeley, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North and the South*, 109.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. Mignolo defines neo-liberalism as “a political theory combined with political economy that makes the market the main principle of the organization of society.” He furthermore states that, “the collapse of the welfare state at the end of the 1970s led to privatization and market-driven state regulation.”

<sup>196</sup> Stokes, *America's Other War*, 68.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

advantages the U.S., even when it means further destabilizing Colombia's economy, to the disadvantage of its people.<sup>198</sup>

U.S. involvement in Colombia under the guise of the war on drugs is one way this attitude has manifested in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. A 1986 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense found that the use of military force in opposition to illicit drugs entering the U.S. was largely ineffective, and actually might increase profits of cartels.<sup>199</sup> A CIA report from 1992 concluded that the drug trade in Colombia would not be "substantially disrupted in the short term by attacks against guerillas. Indeed, many traffickers would probably welcome, and even assist, increased operations against insurgents."<sup>200</sup> Subsequent reports by the DEA have supported this assertion.<sup>201</sup> During these decades of U.S. involvement, there was a rise in paramilitary attacks, while opposition to illicit drug activity has decreased.<sup>202</sup> Ultimately, there is no indication that U.S. aid has led to a decrease in the production of coca, used in the production of narcotics.<sup>203</sup> If anti-drug initiatives have been proven ineffective in Colombia, perhaps U.S. interests continue for a more complex array of reasons.

### **Works of Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo* Collection in Conversation**

The scale of Salcedo's site-specific, public installations makes the works difficult to ignore. These interventions often guide viewers and participants in a gesture of collective recognition of a tragic, impactful event. Her first project, titled *Acción de Duelo*, was enacted between 1999 and 2000 in response to the murder of Jaime Garzón, a well-known Colombian

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198 Ibid.

199 Stokes, *America's Other War*, 122.

200 Ibid.

201 Ibid.

202 Stokes, *America's Other War*, 68.

203 Ibid, 122.

activist and journalist.<sup>204</sup> The work was carried out in a series of three related actions.<sup>205</sup> Along with dozens of collaborators, seen in figure 2.1, Salcedo arranged five thousand red roses along the length of a wall, which spanned approximately 150 meters.<sup>206</sup> In a completed section of the wall, captured in figure 2.2, it is clear how Salcedo uses common objects – the roses – against the chipping white paint of the wall to call attention to beauty and tragedy. Located along a sidewalk, the installation intersects with the everyday paths and routines of people in the community. Below the trail of roses, Salcedo and her collaborators – non-artist volunteers - hung sheets of cloth and paper with tape, providing a platform for community members to express themselves. This part of the installation functions as a sort of community message board. In this work, Salcedo experiments with themes of participation, intervention and exchange that play out in *Acción de Duelo* (2007).

One of Salcedo’s most well-known works, *Noviembre 6 y 7* (*November 6 and 7*), is considered part of the “acts of mourning” collection by the artist herself.<sup>207</sup> With this project, Salcedo engages with the dichotomy of presence and absence and how that is experienced. The installation was constructed over the course of two days, November 6 and 7, coinciding with the timeline of the fatal hostage situation that played out inside the Palace of Justice in 1985.<sup>208</sup> In figures 2.3 and 2.4, the beginning stages of the project are shown. In the first image, the Palace of Justice looks completely ordinary save for one wooden chair, hung at the very top of the building. Passersby are challenged to notice the intervention. In the following image, Salcedo

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204 Widholm, “Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo,” 23.

205 Ibid.

206 Mieke Bal, “Acts of Memory,” in *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo’s Political Art*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 200.

207 Bal, “Acts of Memory,” 204.

208 Ibid, 200.

adds more than two dozen more chairs to the exterior of the building, one chair for each life lost. The chairs appear on the side of the building in accordance with the timeline of the hostage deaths. Figure 2.5 captures the final stage of the installation. For the duration of the two days, Salcedo's installation acts as a constant reminder of the tragedy, intersecting and intervening in the daily routine of those who pass by the building. With this work, Salcedo amplifies the presence of violence in everyday life through visual language in a gesture that legitimizes and elevates the concerns of the people through a work of art. In contrast to *Acción de Duelo* (1999-2000), *Noviembre 6 y 7* focuses less on exchange of community experiences and ideas in favor of a model that disrupts everyday life through its presence in the cityscape. The latter work proposes another mode of commemorating a tragic event in a public, collective way. A brief look at these earlier works by Salcedo allows for a comparative analysis of the artist's ongoing moves to engage with tragic events alongside the public in different ways.

On June 29, 2007, the story broke that the FARC had killed the eleven state parliament members from Valle after holding them hostage for five years. Founded in the 1960s by farmers and agrarian workers, FARC is rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology. They sought to respond to the country's wealth disparity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Colombian government sold off significant portions of land to private owners in order to pay down debt. Members of FARC wanted more rights to and control of the land. Those private landowners and the state saw FARC's ideology as a threat, and sent the army to disband the group. After this, armed conflict began. In the 1960s, an Accelerated Economic Development (or AED) policy was implemented, promoting agribusiness by giving advantage to large, industrial farms through

subsidies. This plan was the brain child of Lauchlin Currie, a U.S. economist who owned land in Colombia.<sup>209</sup>

In response to the devastating result of the hostage crisis, Salcedo commenced another *Acción de Duelo*.<sup>210</sup> With the help of hundreds of non-artist participants, Salcedo arranged 24,000 illuminated candles in the Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá on July 3, 2007 (figure 2.6).<sup>211</sup> As the square is illuminated at night, the dancing flame of each flickering candle conjures a sense of presence and life within a dark, desolate space; lives lost in Colombia's conflict are recognized. Just as the enlivened candles symbolize life, they also represent the inevitable expiration of life and the ephemerality of existence. The setting of the outdoor Plaza contributes to the sense of vulnerability, the flames exposed to the open air. The candles were arranged in a grid formation in the open space of the Plaza. Participants were invited to light a candle and place them amongst the others.<sup>212</sup> The grid formation calls to mind Holocaust memorials, specifically, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Germany. In discussions of Colombia's ongoing national violence, scholars often articulate connections to the Holocaust, considering the events parallel.<sup>213</sup>

The organized installation suggests cooperation, teamwork, and collaboration by the participants and leadership by Salcedo.<sup>214</sup> Figure 2.7 captures participants lighting candles,

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<sup>209</sup> Dennis M. Rempe, "Guerillas, Bandits, and Independent Republics: US Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Colombia 1959-1965," in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 6 (3) (Winter 1995): 322-327.

<sup>210</sup> Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," 26.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. See also: Bal, "Acts of Memory," 200.

<sup>212</sup> Bal, "Acts of Memory," 200.

<sup>213</sup> See: Tatjana Louis, "La memoria histórica en Colombia y la perspectiva alemana," *Memoria y Sociedad; Bogotá* 20, no. 40 (June 2016): 44-56; and Lorena Cardona González, "Silencios. Memoria visual del Holocausto en Colombia," *Revista Colombiana de Sociología; Bogotá* 40, no. 1 (2017): 133-60.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

speaking to one another and embracing each other in gestures of comfort. Though simple, this action gave the participants a sense of being heard or being part of something bigger than oneself. In fact, perhaps simple is better. Writer Ana Longoni observes that the most successful collaborations between the visual arts and social movements select materials, actions, or resources that are easily appropriated and accessible.<sup>215</sup> And though participants do not necessarily need to say anything, their silent gesture speaks forcefully. The silence of protesting bodies in space can be seen as a powerful “spoken” gesture. As Judith Butler contends in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), assembly as performative actions are meaningful without any spoken message. Providing a critique to Hannah Arendt, Butler argues that actions, as well as speech, can be dissenting. She focuses on occupation as a mode of protest and speech. Assembly conveys the “will of the people” as a “plurality of bodies who enact their convergent and divergent purposes in ways that fail to conform to a single kind of action, or reduce to a single kind of claim.”<sup>216</sup> The plurality of bodies in synchrony does not equate to conformity or sameness, but maintains its contradictory nature through diversity of background, thought, and so on.

With *Acción de Duelo* (1999-2000) and *Noviembre 6 y 7* in mind, I observe that *Acción de Duelo* (2007) employs the most overt and active involvement of participants, existing in an incredibly profound moment of mourning. The earlier *Acción de Duelo* took place over a longer, undefined period of time. After the paper, cloth and roses were in place, Salcedo stepped back, taking a more hands off approach. In this instance, passersby could record their thoughts and messages without the direction or presence of the artist. The work could take on a life of its own.

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<sup>215</sup> Longoni, “A Long Way,” 110.

<sup>216</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 157.

*Noviembre 6 y 7* was a more controlled work by Salcedo. Passersby were merely observers of the unfolding of the artwork. The chairs were installed according to Salcedo's direction, without any variability due to crowd participation. While in my view these works successfully call attention to tragedy, *Acción de Duelo* (2007) most clearly leads public participants through a process of mourning through allowing them to actively take part from start to finish. Because of this, the 2007 work brings attention to to lack of complacency on the part of the participating publics in terms of the ongoing circumstances of violence in Colombia.

### **Effectual Symbolism through Simplicity**

In her study of artist collectives in Argentina between 1980 and the present, Longoni explains that candlelight vigils are a common form of public demonstration.<sup>217</sup> In many contexts, the illuminated candle stands in for something or someone – a force, spirit, or idea not present or visible. For example, in Christian churches, the faithful can light a candle in someone's name as a blessing, protection, or memory of someone who is missing or deceased. In *Acción de Duelo*, Salcedo's candles recognized those who had recently and tragically joined the ever-expanding category of victims of Colombia's war.

Art historian Véronique Goudinoux entertains the idea of participatory art as a democratic practice and, citing Claire Bishop, states that many collaborative and participatory works operate within an “emancipatory dimension” that is highly similar to “the political form of democracy.”<sup>218</sup> In line with this approach, Salcedo relinquishes claim to full authorship of the artwork, despite conceiving it herself, and thereby fosters a more equalizing, *democratic*,

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>218</sup> Véronique Goudinoux, “Collaborating and Participating: A Connection Worth Examining,” *In Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 260.

scenario. Participatory performances can draw out the affective, interpersonal experiences facilitated by societal forces.<sup>219</sup> Such works decenter the traditional role of artists and incorporate the physical, emotional, or intellectual contributions of participants.<sup>220</sup>

As Nato Thompson notes, “Salcedo notably does not depict violence, identify victims or perpetrators, supply the forensic details of the crime, elucidate its political and economic context, or provide moral instruction. There is no information signage, no verbal supplement.”<sup>221</sup> Though subtle, her works prompt viewers and participants to reflect within themselves and with each other as part of a public discourse.<sup>222</sup> It is not necessary for Salcedo to hang photographs of acts of violence or of the missing, as everyone in her audience is already aware of the somber reality. Her work allows for mourning on a public and collective level and connects mourners who may not otherwise have come into contact with each other.<sup>223</sup> In many ways these connections and interactions can be considered part of the medium of the work. It is important to note that Salcedo’s works do not assert that circumstances will change for the better if the process of collective mourning is enabled.<sup>224</sup> In fact, as philosopher Rebecca Comay suggests, the artist’s use of repetition points to the ongoing sense of widespread outrage against prevalent abjection of the state’s dealings that shows no signs of improvement.<sup>225</sup> However, the artist places value on the process, having stated, “There is nothing more human than mourning; it restores

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219 Katrin Gattigerr, “Why Participate? On the Concrete Experience of Participatory Performances,” In *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 308.

220 Gattigerr, “Why Participate?,” 308.

221 Comay, “Material Remains,” 43.

222 Widholm, “Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo,” 18.

223 Ibid, 19.

224 Comay, “Material Remains,” 44.

225 Ibid.

humanity.”<sup>226</sup> She states that she addresses the victim of tragedy with her work but makes sure to “maintain a distance in order to leave that person intact, untouched.”<sup>227</sup>

### **Mourning Everyday Violence through Memory Making**

For decades, murder, disappearances, and displacement were an everyday reality for Colombians. Having spent most of her life in Colombia, the reality of the country’s political situation is omnipresent in Doris Salcedo’s daily life and her work. She has said about the impact of war on her body of work: “Life in Colombia has many brutal aspects. Re-working them allows us to survive because otherwise we would be in total chaos. Art is a necessity throughout the planet, but it takes on a greater sense of urgency in a country at war.”<sup>228</sup> A strong continuance of cultural production can serve to bind together communities in times of urgency and survival. Salcedo questions what it looks like and what it means to make art during war time. The artist often uses quotidian objects in her work, seeking to classify them as objects of resistance against the intrusion of the violence of a war-torn country into the lives of everyday citizens.<sup>229</sup> Salcedo has specifically used roses, chairs and candles to connect mourning and memory to everyday life, thereby recognizing the omnipresence of violence in the lives and minds of Colombian people. Because of the affordability of these commonplace items, Salcedo sets forth a model for observers and participants to produce similar actions in their own lives. She sets forth the idea that by recognizing war’s impact on daily life through physical objects

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<sup>226</sup> Sociologist Paul Gilroy observes that, “In Latin America, postcolonial life supplies an invitation to mourn the losses involved in subjugation and to imagine what another, less belligerent developmental journey might have involved. See: Widholm, “Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo,” 18.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Enriquez, “In Context,” 27.

<sup>229</sup> Laura Garcia Moreno, “‘Troubled Materiality’: The Installations of Doris Salcedo,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 43, no. 2 (2010): 96.

and actions, there is a sense of rejection produced that stems from being taken hostage by those circumstances. Such actions allow people to take control of the memory making process within the confines of circumstances that often seem very out of control. War is central and omnipresent in the mind of the artist. She observes:

I believe war is the main event of our time. War is what defines our lives...it creates its own laws. War forces us to generate ethical codes which exclude whole parts of the population; once this happens we can attack and destroy them because they are no longer viewed as human, and we have used these false ethics as a tool to expel people from humankind. We see civil wars happening everywhere, every day. We read about these terrible events that shape the way we live. What I am trying to show in my work is that war is part of our everyday life.<sup>230</sup>

The artist has stated that her audience is made up of people affected by violence, fellow Colombians and citizens of other countries who experience similar circumstances. Her work seeks to counteract the divisions described in the above statement and emphasize that it is crucial to maintain true and just ethics and relations during times of strife. There is a clear political response contained within Salcedo's installations, as well as a sensitivity to the impact of violence on human life and the social experience in public and private sectors.<sup>231</sup> In her work, Salcedo responds to political circumstances by directing her focus towards the everyday experiences of those most impacted. Salcedo's work does not explicitly depict scenes of violence, but rather addresses persisting grief in the aftermath of a tragedy, which impacts the body and mind on a daily basis.<sup>232</sup> The central focus on emotion and the grieving process as opposed to graphic instances of violence places the human experience of tragedy on center

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<sup>230</sup> Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," 18.

<sup>231</sup> Moreno, "Troubled Materiality," 96.

<sup>232</sup> Julie Rodrigues Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Doris Salcedo, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, and Madeline Grynsztein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 17.

stage. Her public installations are often subtle, appearing so ordinary that viewers are not sure where or what the artwork is at first glance.<sup>233</sup> Her projects typically respond to a singular event that she learns of through the news or in media.<sup>234</sup> Salcedo often conducts research by speaking to witnesses, victims, and families, using testimony to enrich her knowledge of a given event with intimate, personal narratives.<sup>235</sup> It is important to recognize that these are not mere anecdotes that Salcedo relies on, but memories of an experience that linger.<sup>236</sup> Her works attempt to perceive or capture what has passed.<sup>237</sup> Salcedo is attentive to the personal hardships of citizens through her interest in the burden of violence on everyday life. Instead of citing high numbers of casualties, Salcedo asserts that personal loss is profound, recognizing individual experiences instead of statistics.

Salcedo does not construct work that depicts people who have been hurt or lost. However, her focus on the event of tragedy in conjunction with public participation ensures that human presence and experience remains on the minds of the artist and her collaborators. In this way, Salcedo highlights Colombian bodies that have perished or disappeared in her works. Salcedo's presence within the international art scene permits the devastating reality of the missing and murdered to be transmitted to an audience outside of Colombia.<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, Salcedo asserts that these bodies matter enough to be included in that conversation and in art

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<sup>233</sup> Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>234</sup> Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," 17.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Salcedo, "A Work in Mourning," 215.

<sup>237</sup> Salcedo, "A Work in Mourning," 215.

<sup>238</sup> Bal, "Introduction," 19.

history.<sup>239</sup> Art historian Mieke Bal interprets this as an attempt to honor those who have been “dishonored” by violence.<sup>240</sup>

### **Elevating the Everyday through Public Participation**

The setting of the very public Plaza de Bolívar contributes to the feeling of empowerment. The space exposes participants – out in open air in an expansive space. Their actions are on view for members of the surrounding crowd and inhabitants of the buildings that enclose the Plaza. Just like in the case of *Lava la Bandera*, the action is intentionally set in a public plaza encircled by historic government buildings that have a multitude of meanings.

The Palace of Justice, the National Capitol building, the Primary Cathedral of Bogotá, and the Liévano Palace (home to the office of the mayor) are situated along the perimeter of the square.<sup>241</sup> The Plaza was a center of Spanish colonial power, as viceroys would make public announcements in the space.<sup>242</sup> As the city grew under the Spanish Empire, those with high social status and wealth lived closest to the Plaza, while mestizos, indigenous peoples, and peasants lived further away.<sup>243</sup> Today a gathering in the Plaza foregrounds this history. The Plaza has historically been a space for the elite and those in power.

Like Lima’s Plaza Mayor, the Plaza de Bolívar displays a statue of a prominent figure. Instead of conquistador Francisco Pizarro, the square in Bogotá boasts a monument to former president Simón Bolívar (also known as *El Libertador* or the Liberator). Just as the Colectivo

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239 Ibid.

240 Ibid.

241 “Lo que usted no conocía de la Plaza de Bolívar de Bogotá,” Bogota.gov.co, accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.bogota.gov.co/article/temas-de-ciudad/cultura-y-recreacion/lo-que-usted-no-conocia-de-la-plaza-de-bolivar-de-bogota>.

242 “Lo que usted no conocía de la Plaza de Bolívar de Bogotá.”

243 Ibid.

Sociedad Civil and participants of *Lava la Bandera* utilized Bolívar soap as a nod to the leader of independence, the presence of the statue of Bolívar within the context of *Acción de Duelo* conjures revolutionary sentiments. This large-scale gesture of an eclectic community working together in a collective act of mourning elevates singular, individual experiences rooted in trauma, as if being validated by Salcedo. Here the artist connects history and memory, solidifying the importance of memory in social movements and the social agency of Colombians.<sup>244</sup> Salcedo uses this association to speak to those in power because she doesn't need to speak to other people who are participating. She, along with the participants, need to get their message across to those who are calling the shots. The lack of communication between Salcedo and her participants is first and foremost permitted by the simplicity of the gesture. The participant is tasked with lighting a candle and situating it in the grid formation within the Plaza. This much is straightforward. It also implies that the candlelight vigil is a ritual familiar to participants, as they did not need guidance to understand the concept. These implications perhaps point to a positive result, as the lack of communication suggests that participants are or would be able to carry on similar gestures of commemoration and mourning in their own lives. Furthermore, a ritual gesture of mourning carried out by participants who are strangers to each other, in relative silence, working together towards the same goal is powerful. It is an act of recognition that the lives of many are hindered by the circumstances.

One of Salcedo's most profound hopes for her artwork is to "cross through history to make present the extreme experiences that lay forgotten in the past."<sup>245</sup> Curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm observes the theme of presence and absence in Salcedo's work in terms of the

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<sup>244</sup> Bal, "Acts of Memory," 204.

<sup>245</sup> Salcedo, "A Work in Mourning," 217.

country's place globally. Colombia as a culture has endured much loss, as have other countries in Latin America. Widholm calls attention to the term *desaparecidos*, or "the disappeared," which refers to the countless missing individuals who have been lost due to conflict.<sup>246</sup> In many works, Salcedo takes an empty space (symbolizing what or who has disappeared or gone) and fills or inhabits them with objects or bodies (in a gesture of reappearance).<sup>247</sup> Widholm also sees Salcedo's work as a voice or outlet for marginalized peoples, arguing, "Salcedo negates apathy toward others and instead invites us to experience empathy, reminding us of our common humanity through our bodies and our everyday rituals."<sup>248</sup> These works place importance on the visibility and voice of society's vulnerable, everyday people.

Public participation in arts practices is a departure from the more traditional "do not touch" museum model.<sup>249</sup> It complicates and makes increasingly intimate the relationship between art and audience, subject and object, and must be couched theoretically.<sup>250</sup> According to Claire Bishop, the most valuable qualities of participatory artwork aren't always visually apparent. Emphasis on "a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, [and] a raised consciousness" are the most crucial aspects of such highly experiential works.<sup>251</sup> Bishop believes this utilization of human participants "stands as a consciousness-raising weapon against an even greater brutality (the dictatorship)."<sup>252</sup> The participatory work will connect with some aspect of

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<sup>246</sup> Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo," 18.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid..

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>249</sup> Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan, "Introduction: Practicable – Art in the Conditional," in *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>250</sup> Bianchini and Verhagan, "Introduction: Practicable," 2.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. Also see: Claire Bishop, "Introduction," in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, ed. Claire Bishop (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012), 6.

<sup>252</sup> Bishop, "Introduction," 6..

the everyday cultural lives of the participant. In this way, participants add their experiences, perspective, “gestures and memories” to the work.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, this allows often unheard of or silenced voices to be amplified. The interruption in daily life that Salcedo’s installation fosters is not as imposing as other social forces at work in the lives of the participants.

## Conclusion

The struggle for peace is a work in progress. In October 2016, a gathering of twenty protestors occupied the Plaza de Bolívar, setting up camp indefinitely, demanding a peace agreement between the government and the FARC.<sup>254</sup> The protest followed the “March of Silence,” in which thousands of students marched towards the capital in support of peace.<sup>255</sup> On November 30 of the same year, Congress signed and approved a peace deal.

Although I do not suggest that *Acción de Duelo* takes the same activist tenor as *Lava la Bandera*, what I do suggest is both artworks take the form of large scale participatory gestures in highly visible spaces connected to centers of power (the government) to assert the value and relevance of the will and experiences of average citizens, which they feel is being dismissed or overlooked. There are parallels between the symbolism and accessibility of the gestures. While *Lava la Bandera* directly and explicitly challenges and critiques the Fujimori government, *Acción de Duelo* focuses on and seeks to aid in the grieving process without the explicit intention to protest.

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<sup>253</sup> Anna Dezeuze, “Habitable: Spectator Participation in Everyday Life,” In *Practicable: from Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 218.

<sup>254</sup> “Jóvenes acampan indefinidamente en Plaza de Bolívar para pedir que salven acuerdo con Farc,” *El Espectador*, last modified October 6, 2016,

<https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/jovenes-acampan-indefinidamente-plaza-de-bolivar-pedir-articulo-659031>.

<sup>255</sup> “Jóvenes acampan indefinidamente en Plaza de Bolívar para pedir que salven acuerdo con Farc.”

In the end, *Acción de Duelo* challenges the political, cultural and environmental circumstances that lead to violence. It is these same conditions that have facilitated and led to the displacement of Colombians through sale of public land to private U.S. investors, that have empowered radical groups to take action, contributing to the internal violence. Salcedo advocates for the improvement of quotidian circumstances, and helps others advocate on their own behalf, through *Acción de Duelo*.

### **Chapter III: A Call to Disarm: Community Action in Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas***

Upon encountering contemporary Mexican artist Pedro Reyes's ongoing project *Palas por Pistolas* (*Shovels through/for Guns*) in a gallery setting (figure 3.1), one could easily mistake the seemingly ordinary shovels, displayed in a row, for a conceptual work or a readymade that evokes Marcel Duchamp. The journey and transformation undergone by the shovels is not immediately apparent. In fact, a viewer unfamiliar with Reyes's body of work would likely be surprised to learn that those shovels were once guns. Indeed, firearms – deadly weapons that have contributed to the epidemic of gun violence in Mexico – were freely donated to the artist to support his mission of deactivating the powerful pieces of metal. To date, Reyes's project holds the national record for highest number of voluntarily surrendered firearms<sup>256</sup>

Much that has been written about Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* takes the form of interviews with the artist and newspaper articles that advertise local iterations of the project after the initial rendition in Culiacán. This chapter presents a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the project, focusing on the inaugural project that took place in Culiacán, Mexico in 2007.

I argue that *Palas por Pistolas* is a decolonizing project that asserts the rights and autonomy of citizens, laborers, and the environment while implicating global systems and international political policy in Mexico's crisis of gun violence. Specifically, I contend that U.S. gun policy and labor policy negatively affects Mexican citizens, who do not have a say in the legislation that ultimately informs their lives.

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<sup>256</sup> Marguerite Ward, "Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade," World Policy Institute, Last modified November 19, 2013, <https://worldpolicy.org/2013/11/19/guns-to-gardening-ending-illegal-arms-trade/>

This chapter demonstrates how persisting colonial viewpoints of Mexico and its people, held by the U.S., continue to inform policy that affects the lives and communities of Mexican citizens today. As I have shown, participatory art projects have the potential to enable and encourage grassroots action that can effect localized change, which may take the form of community building and gathering a general consensus on wide-reaching issues have repercussions on the entire country with the caveat that within any public exists a plethora of diverse and contradictory viewpoints – the basis of a healthy democracy.

I focus here on the role of community action that combats policies detrimental to the general public, namely gun laws. I also consider how U.S. policy has negative consequences for Mexican citizens in terms of environmental violence and unjust labor practices in order to present a more rounded picture of the power imbalance that exists to continually benefit U.S. interests. This hierarchy privileges the interests of the U.S. and prevents Mexico (which is in a subjugated position) from advocating for its own favor in many cases.

Doris Sommer, professor of Latin American Literature, asserts that Reyes is able to enact change because he has recognized “the agency of art and interpretation,” which has prevented him from trying to do too much or too little.<sup>257</sup> Relinquishing some agency allows him to work within a culture that already exists and does not rely on him, as the artist, to dismiss or deconstruct it.<sup>258</sup> Participants in *Palas por Pistolas* begin their engagement already with certain localized or personally contextualized views regarding an epidemic of gun violence. Communities have the will to participate in the surrounding dialogue in any way they desire.

### ***Palas por Pistolas* (2007-ongoing)**

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<sup>257</sup> Doris Sommer, “Art and Accountability,” in *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Duke University Press, 2012), 84-85.

<sup>258</sup> Sommer, “Art and Accountability,” 84-85.

In 2007, Reyes inaugurated *Palas por Pistolas* in Culiacán, Mexico, which he likens to a “gun slinging town in the American West.”<sup>259</sup> He was inspired by this location, wishing to address the gun violence epidemic after speaking with local residents who had been impacted by it.<sup>260</sup> Almost everyone with whom Reyes spoke knew of someone who had been shot.<sup>261</sup> In order to promote and execute the project, Reyes partnered with the Botanical Garden of Culiacán, curator Patrick Charpenel, and patron of the garden, Agustin Coppel, a philanthropist.<sup>262</sup> He attributes his project’s success, in part, to his partners, who desired to improve their city and their country. Charpenel and Coppel are also community members who have been affected by the ongoing violence.

The artist and his partners facilitated the exchange of guns for vouchers, coupons, or food stamps that could be used to buy electronics, appliances, or other necessities at local businesses.<sup>263</sup> Throughout its stages, the project involves these local businesses, as well as the government and military and the media. While *Lava la Bandera* and *Acción de Duelo* work outside of institutions in order to present a critique, *Palas por Pistolas* involves these structures. In this way, Reyes sets up a model for collaboration and cooperation within various aspects of the local community, perhaps laying the foundation for future (perhaps more wide-reaching or ambitious) projects. According to Reyes, the Botanical Garden is “a visionary initiator of

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<sup>259</sup> Pedro Reyes, “Disarm: Transforming Guns into Art, from Mexico to the U.S,” *Creative Time Reports*, May 20, 2013. <http://creativetimereports.org/2013/05/20/disarm-transforming-guns-into-art-from-mexico-to-the-united-states/>.

See also: Carolee Thea, “Building New Topias: A Conversation with Pedro Reyes,” *Sculpture* 28, no. 5 (2009): 50.  
<sup>260</sup> Reyes, “Disarm.”

<sup>261</sup> Thea, “Building New Topias: A Conversation with Pedro Reyes.”

<sup>262</sup> Additionally, *Palas por Pistolas* in Culiacán was funded by private money provided by Enrique Coppel Luken (Chairman and CEO of Coppel, S.A., a chain of 210 department stores across Mexico, and board member of the Economic Development Council of Sinaloa, Mexico). Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Reyes, “Disarm.” See also: “Artist Pedro Reyes to Reproduce His Work, ‘Palas Por Pistolas’ (Guns into Shovels), in North Lawndale,,” *Targeted News Service*; Washington D.C., September 19, 2017.

contemporary public art projects.”<sup>264</sup> Right from the onset, the community was involved in *Palas por Pistolas*, and he also had the support of the local police.<sup>265</sup> *Palas por Pistolas* is a collaborative project that emerged out of the joining of many voices and experiences. In interviews, Reyes frequently emphasizes the collaborative nature of his project, always naming and giving credit to those with whom he works. As Reyes elaborates, “The ritual has a pedagogical purpose: if the overwhelming power of a gun can be transformed, so, too, can other realms of human experience and production.”<sup>266</sup> By participating in any part of *Palas por Pistolas*, the idea is that citizens will use that momentum to propel them forward through a chain reaction of decisions that positively impact the community. At the very least, they will be inspired to think twice about how their decisions and actions function within larger, perhaps global, systems beyond themselves. Through collaboration and partnership with institutions and publics, Pedro Reyes enacts and inspires social and political change in various communities, beginning in Culiacán, Mexico, with his ongoing project.

*Palas por Pistolas* was promoted with the help of the news media in his initial iteration of the project in Culiacán, Mexico. Temporary television spots aired in 2007 on news channels to publicize the idea to local communities.<sup>267</sup> Figure 3.2, a frame from one such advertisement, asks “¿tienes una arma en casa? (do you have a gun at home?).” Reyes gave the channels creative freedom in making the advertisements, allowing them to lead the way in how they thought best to connect with their viewers.<sup>268</sup> The stations employed the language of popular soap operas in

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264 “E8.2 Dossier - Palas Por Pistolas,” *Hemispheric Institute*, Accessed February 25, 2019. <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-82/reyes>.

265 Ward, “Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade.”

266 “E8.2 Dossier – Palas Por Pistolas.”

267 Ward, “Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade.”

268 Ibid.

order to make participation in the project seem more appealing.<sup>269</sup> The drama of the commercial is apparent in the still of figure 3.3. Here a man looks thoughtfully at his gun, as if pondering whether he should contribute it to the project. Additionally, these television spots often included a narrative that was directed towards women, a strategy grounded in the idea that women could take the issue of gun violence to the core of the family (figure 3.4).<sup>270</sup> Reyes explains, “For the gun owners, the incentive was economic, activating a mechanism within their family where the wife or mother would say something like, ‘I’d like a new fridge, we need a new fridge, so why don’t we give up that weapon stashed in the closet?’”<sup>271</sup> Reyes’s decision to partner with local businesses to offer the voucher exchange has turned out to be extremely effective and appealing. Families could choose to rid their home of a dangerous machine in favor of one that would not pose a threat. Through this advertising, women in particular were compelled by the opportunity to make a decision that benefitted the entire family. While this could certainly be a concern of men, as well, Reyes utilizes and reinforces traditional gender roles in the publicity for his project. Perhaps a future direction for the ongoing project could be the expansion of messaging and promotion to speak to demographics, like men, who are somewhat discredited in this iteration.

Participating in *Palas por Pistolas* is simple, even if the process of transforming the guns is complex. Citizens turn in their firearms in exchange for vouchers. The artist and his collaborators have a “no questions asked” policy when community members turn in their weapons.<sup>272</sup> The weapons are then destroyed by a steamroller (figure 3.5).<sup>273</sup> The sheer number

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269 Ibid.

270 Ibid.

271 Thea, “Building New Topias: A Conversation with Pedro Reyes.”

272 Ward, “Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade.”

273 “Sculptor Melts Guns to Make Shovels,” *Sculpture Digest*, last modified June 16, 2016, <https://sculpturedigest.com/sculptor-melts-guns-make-shovels/>.

of weapons that Reyes has received is difficult to comprehend or imagine visually. To carry out this phase of the project, Reyes has received support from the government and military in order to safely and legally handle the weaponry.<sup>274</sup> The process of flattening and breaking down the surrendered weapons with a steamroller (figure 3.6) and other machinery suggests an onslaught of sensory experiences. The rumble of the construction equipment, for example, is deeply audible and might be felt from head to toe. The sound of metal being crushed in on itself can pierce the eardrums as the steamroller makes its way across the expansive pile of firearms, rendering them harmless. Once in this decommissioned state, the guns are then taken to a foundry (figure 3.7), and a local factory reconstructs the materials into shovels (figure 3.8).

These choices indicate that Reyes places importance on cultivating partnerships with local, small businesses, including them in the material transformation process and in the acquisition of vouchers for exchange. At the end of Reyes' initial collection drive, the artist and his partners received 1,527 guns.<sup>275</sup> Forty percent of those collected were "high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use."<sup>276</sup> Surprisingly, these were all broken down and converted into shovels, simple tools for working the land.

Furthermore, after transforming the guns into shovels, the recycled products are then used by the artist and community members to plant trees of all varieties (figure 3.9).<sup>277</sup> One tree is planted for each shovel made. This final step of the process is critical in instilling a sense of civic pride and action in community members who wish to feel empowered in the face of the violent

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274 Thea, "Building New Topias: A Conversation with Pedro Reyes."

275 Reyes, "Disarm."

276 "Sculptor Melts Guns to Make Shovels."

277 Reyes, "Disarm."

gun epidemic. The tree planting ceremony, led in Culiacán by local youths, was public.<sup>278</sup> The teens' involvement in the project is sure to be a lasting memory for them, empowering participants as actors in the democratic process and a belief in the power of change at the local level. Overall, the project is a public affirmation of nonviolence, as opposed to public celebrations of violence such as gun shows or parades.<sup>279</sup> The tree planting ceremony was supported by festivities akin to that of a "community day."<sup>280</sup> Following the use of the shovels in planting trees, the recycled objects are then sent to museums or galleries, nonprofit organizations, or public schools.<sup>281</sup> To someone unfamiliar with the project, the shovels appear typical, nothing out of the ordinary, but Reyes believes that they tell the story of the campaign to transform an agent of death into an agent of life.<sup>282</sup>

### **Taking Action Against the Gun Violence Epidemic**

Reyes views gun violence as a pressing issue that calls for a response. He often discusses gun legislation in Mexico and the U.S. in the context of his work. He places blame on the U.S. for its gun policy, which he views as insufficient. While this is a complex issue, and I propose no solutions in this chapter, some current positions and analyses are worth considering in the context of Reyes's oeuvre. Editorial assistant for the World Policy Institute Marguerite Ward observes an uneven, inconsistent, and incomplete gun trafficking policy and enforcement on the part of the U.S.<sup>283</sup> It is clear that the issues of gun violence and the drug trade are intricately

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<sup>278</sup> Ward, "Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade." See also: Sommer, "Art and Accountability," 82.

<sup>279</sup> Ward, "Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade."

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> "Sculptor Melts Guns to Make Shovels."

<sup>282</sup> "E8.2 Dossier – Palas Por Pistolas."

<sup>283</sup> Ward, "Guns to Gardening: Ending Illegal Arms Trade."

linked.<sup>284</sup> Ward agrees with Reyes that when guns are taken from cartels, they are rendered less powerful.<sup>285</sup> Moreover, U.S. positions on the legality of firearms and drug trafficking are often unreconcilable, resulting in ineffective laws.

The Organization of American States (OAS), which fights against the illegal trade of firearms, has a mission that aligns with *Palas por Pistolas*. The OAS aids the Program of Assistance for Control of Arms and Munitions in Central America (PACAM) in its goal of deactivating weapons.<sup>286</sup> Since 2006, the PACAM has facilitated the decommissioning of “more than 3,600 firearms, 1,600 tons of ammunition of various caliber, 660,000 cartridges and 8,000 grenades.”<sup>287</sup> The leader of OAS has applauded *Palas por Pistolas* as exemplary of how art can permeate popular and civic culture to become part of the discourse.<sup>288</sup> *Palas por Pistolas* is an example of how an art project can be political, and potentially controversial, but still bring in members of the community. The mission of the project is possibly contentious in the context of ongoing debates surrounding gun policy and control on local, national, and international levels. Though pro-gun ownership viewpoints are quite removed from this project, there are many people who are in opposition to gun control. For some, the very idea that firearms are dangerous and undesirable is offensive. As Reyes says, we have two options – make guns “ubiquitous or rare.”<sup>289</sup> He adds, “Disarmament remains the harder direction to take. But I want to live in a world that is moving toward common trust rather than universal fear.”<sup>290</sup> The community

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284 Ibid.

285 Ibid.

286 “OAS Supports Mexican Artist’s Work ‘Palas Por Pistolas.’”

287 “OAS Supports Mexican Artist’s Work ‘Palas Por Pistolas.’”

288 Ibid.

289 Reyes, “Disarm.”

290 Ibid.

involvement that is integral to this project helps Reyes build toward a society of trust over fear. Working together fosters an environment of codependence and trust, allowing participants to better know their neighbors and work towards a common goal of making their community safer.

Reyes takes a critical position against the complicity of the United States in the gun violence epidemic. The artist connects unabating gun violence in Mexico to unregulated policies in the United States. Reyes observes that although gun violence has increased since he began the project, he still receives many weapons donations from all over Mexico.<sup>291</sup> He calls for the U.S. to lead the way towards change, stating, “As it stands now, the United States is an extremely dangerous neighbor. It’s impossible to buy a weapon in Mexico; there are no armories here. But with such lax gun laws across the border, drug traffickers only need to take a short drive to any of the nearly seven thousand gun retail shops along the U.S.-Mexico border.”<sup>292</sup> The goal of this project is thus to render the weapons nonfunctional. Reyes points out that unrestrictive gun laws in the United States directly impact Mexico, claiming that “over 250,000 guns are smuggled into Mexico each year” from the U.S.<sup>293</sup> Approximately 87% of firearms used by drug cartels come from the U.S.<sup>294</sup> He asserts that “For gun companies to thrive, you need conflict. You need fear, you need wars and you need crime.”<sup>295</sup> While drug trafficking, gun violence, and the war on drugs are staggeringly complex issues to which Reyes does not attempt to provide a solution, his project does function as a small solution, working on a local level. In the face of fear, Reyes

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291 Ibid.

292 Ibid.

293 Ibid.

294 Mercille, “Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘war on Drugs’ in Mexico,” 1643.

295 Reyes, “Disarm.”

provides a concrete solution for people in a community: they can eliminate some weapons in their area. While it is not a complete solution, this is an improvement to a dire situation.

*Palas por Pistolas* lessens fear of gun violence through the process of creation, not destruction. Reyes works with the community to transform their weapons into shovels that are used to plant trees – something that the community can enjoy or benefit from. Instead of loss (loss of life), the project helps communities gain. Instead of the violent trafficking of weapons and drugs, Reyes proposes a course of action that is nurturing and generative, in the concrete physicality of planting trees that remain rooted to a given locale, as a reminder that even the most intimidating situations can be ameliorated.

In a discussion on the politics of fear and migration from Mexico to the U.S., Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, Terence Garrett, and Michelle Keck explain that on local, state, and federal levels, it is the U.S. policy to target, deter, and criminalize undocumented workers while simultaneously supporting those workers' entrance to the U.S. for cheap labor and corporate profits.<sup>296</sup> Meanwhile, the media focuses on an impression of violence that is based on xenophobia.<sup>297</sup> The U.S. profits off the labor of undocumented migrant workers while pursuing a foreign policy agenda that negatively impacts Mexico's working class.<sup>298</sup>

The U.S. economy is increasingly dependent on low-paid labor and imported goods and services.<sup>299</sup> Scholar of Latin American social and political movements Pablo Calderón Martínez

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<sup>296</sup> Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, Terence Garrett, and Michelle Keck, "Administrative Surveillance and Fear: Implications for U.S.-Mexico Border Relations and Governance," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 0, no. 96 (March 1, 2014): 37.

<sup>297</sup> Correa-Cabrera, Garrett, and Keck, "Administrative Surveillance and Fear: Implications for U.S.-Mexico Border Relations and Governance," 37.

<sup>298</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality: The Darker Side of Western Modernity," in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>299</sup> Tony Payan, "Immigration and the U.S.-Mexico Border," in *Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2016), 144.

concludes that attempts by the U.S. to implement democracy and influence economic policy are contradictory, more often than not undermining democratic processes in his study of the successes and failures of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).<sup>300</sup> He considers the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico an “extreme case” that exemplifies how the promotion of democracy can be absent from “internationalization projects.”<sup>301</sup> With this project, the U.S. takes advantage of its economic upper hand while fostering a relationship that renders Mexico dependent on continued U.S. partnership.

### **Localized, Tangible Change**

Reyes, a self-described “old-fashioned pacifist,” holds strong opinions about the role of violence in Culiacán.<sup>302</sup> In discussing his partnership with the Botanical Garden of Culiacán, he points out the juxtaposition of the garden’s beauty with the violence of the city outside and notes, “Taking these guns out of circulation actually saves a few lives, but the real purpose of the piece is to add a story to the world, so in the neighboring cities they will say ‘In Culiacán they did that.’”<sup>303</sup> Reyes hopes that *Palas por Pistolas* will empower members of the Culiacán community and call attention to the violence that the city endures. He would like the city to be known, in part, for instigating change and standing up to greater, insidious forces at work.

*Palas por Pistolas* seeks to shift the perspective of participating communities and present more peaceful alternatives. Reyes provides a platform upon which citizens can voice their

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<sup>300</sup> Pablo Calderón Martínez, “Recommendations for a Democratic NAFTA,” in *NAFTA and Democracy in Mexico: A Successful Failure?* (New York: Routledge, 2019), page #.

<sup>301</sup> Calderón Martínez, “Recommendations for a Democratic NAFTA,” 167.

<sup>302</sup> Cuevas and Reyes, “Pedro Reyes,” 25. See also: Kylie Northover, “In Right Hands, Banned Guns Now Weapons of Mass Entertainment,” *Sunday Age*; Melbourne, Vic. October 13, 2013, <https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/1441478762/abstract/1C00E7D68D554DF2PQ/35>.

<sup>303</sup> Cuevas and Reyes, “Pedro Reyes,” 25.

concerns to fellow neighbors and have the experience of making palpable change, if they decide to turn in their firearm. This is exactly how Reyes sets up *Palas por Pistolas*. He does not hide behind the aesthetics of a painting or tuck his mission statement away on the white walls of a gallery but constructs a system within which average people can feel comfortable working. This project is in stark contrast to the commercial art scene. *Palas por Pistolas* is an example of an artwork that has a decolonizing effect on the traditional art market, asserting that wellbeing and sufficient quality of life at the local, community level has prevalence over profits or the status symbol of owning artwork. With this decision, Reyes demonstrates one way in which art can have a transformative effect on communities, furthering social and political causes.

Grant Kester critiques the existing discourse on collaborative and community-based art practices as limited by a Euro-American perspective.<sup>304</sup> The scope of work Kester examines is outside the mainstream art scene. He privileges collaborative, community-based projects that employ action and resistance to lead to institutional transformation.<sup>305</sup> He writes, "In each case, these projects are characterized by a receptive, improvisational approach; an openness to the insights generated through practice and action; and a desire to both learn from, and move beyond, the limitations of past narratives of political emancipation. And in each case the groups involved seek to address a public that is both receptive to claims of social justice and able to act upon them."<sup>306</sup> Kester privileges the ability of collaborative art to produce tangible change, and considers the openness and transformative potential of community-based art to be a positive feature, rife with potential for further exploration.

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<sup>304</sup> Grant Kester and Bill Kelley Jr., "Introduction," in *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art, 1995-2010* (Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>305</sup> Kester and Kelley Jr., "Introduction," 10.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

I suggest that this utopian dream can be made closer to reality through localized projects like this. Even though Reyes critiques broader issues, he engages with them at the community level. He convinces community members that his vision is possible in their communities. Through the project's advertisements on television, through the Botanical Garden, local businesses, and news organizations, *Palas por Pistolas* makes its destruction and recycling of weapons quite public. Reyes does not seem to fear backlash against his ideas but encourages conversation, as he believes in using art to start a dialogue on pressing social issues. Through *Palas por Pistolas*, he sparks localized, tangible change.

### **Creating Sustainable Futures through Community Led Action**

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), Lisa Lowe argues that the history of modernity is composed of global, interconnected systems of colonialism and liberalism, which reinforce Western epistemologies of advancement.<sup>307</sup> Importantly, Lowe situates histories of colonialism, capitalism, modernism, and liberalism as intertwined; they emerge out of and exist because of their codependence.<sup>308</sup> After the Second World War, the role of the U.S. in Latin America centered around securing “adequate production in Latin America of, and access by the United States to, raw materials essential to U.S. security.”<sup>309</sup> In the case of Mexico, this means retaining access to the nation's oil reserves.<sup>310</sup> Reyes takes on this issue with the incorporation of tree planting as a bookend to the process of *Palas por Pistolas*. As opposed to extracting oil or other desirable materials from the land, Reyes and participants take part in a gesture of renewal, planting a tree to enliven the landscape, benefitting the local ecosystem. They privilege

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<sup>307</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015), 2-6.

<sup>308</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2-6.

<sup>309</sup> Mercille, “Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony?” 1641.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

supporting the environment as opposed to utilizing it for their own benefit. Now declassified U.S. national security documents indicate that it was the agenda of the U.S. to encourage Latin American countries to root their economies in private industry and privilege private investment from domestic and foreign sources.<sup>311</sup> These intentions have guided U.S. policy towards Mexico, and not the war on drugs.<sup>312</sup> Based on this knowledge, the argument that drug, firearm and labor policies are unnecessary detrimental to working-class communities is not far-fetched. This speaks to the U.S.'s need to bolster its power and dominance on the world stage, maintaining the upper hand over countries like Mexico.

### ***Palas por Pistolas: an Ongoing Initiative***

Since the project began in Culiacán in 2007, Reyes has led various iterations of it in cities across North America and Europe. In April of 2008, Reyes partnered with the Vancouver Art Gallery to host an occurrence of *Palas por Pistolas* in the city's MacLean Park.<sup>313</sup> The recycled garden tools used at this event were produced in a "limited-edition selection distributed or sold to collectors or galleries with one condition – that they're used to plant trees."<sup>314</sup> While on one hand this could be interpreted as a typical artist and collector transaction, I see this as an intentional choice on the part of Reyes that furthers the reach of his message. Even if the average person could not afford to purchase one of Reyes's shovels, it would be sold to a wealthy collector who would be required to utilize it in the same way everyone else did – planting trees. In this way,

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> For this exhibition, a group show called "The Tree: From the Sublime to the Social," Reyes's shovels are displayed on the walls with video footage of the creation process and the tree planting ceremony on monitors to provide context. Lynn Mitges, "Digging New Beginnings; Vancouver the First to Plant Reyes' Idea," *The Province*; Vancouver, B.C., April 4, 2008."

<sup>314</sup> Mitges, "Digging New Beginnings; Vancouver the First to Plant Reyes' Idea."

Reyes ensures that the experience of engaging with his work is more equal and balanced than it might typically be. Furthermore, his inclusion in the exhibition “The Tree: From the Sublime to the Social” places his work in an explicitly environmental context. The show, overall, explores the role of trees in art through time, geography, and media.<sup>315</sup> It privileges the power of the natural world while calling into question humanity’s relationship with it.<sup>316</sup> Additionally, Reyes continued *Palas por Pistolas* in Denver when the city hosted the 2010 Biennial of the Americas throughout the month of July.<sup>317</sup> The themes of the biennial were “innovation, sustainability, [and] community and the arts.”<sup>318</sup> Lastly, on September 23, 2017, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the North Lawndale community partnered with Reyes for an iteration of *Palas por Pistolas* in Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood.<sup>319</sup> These are just a few examples of the project’s ongoing life since 2007.

## Conclusion

This case study proposes a model for community engagement and action to enact tangible change. Results may not be immediate, but *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo*, and *Palas por Pistolas* have proven to be relevant components in movements for social and political change in their respective countries. There are parallels between the three projects in their prioritization of the empowerment of communities. In this instance, Reyes facilitates a process of action, guiding

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315 “Turning Guns into Trees,” *The News*; Abbotsford, B.C. October 3, 2011.  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/896048645/abstract/6D67BC9CFFE94A8EPO/1>.

316 “Turning Guns into Trees.”

317 “Denver Biennial of the Americas Announces Inaugural Exhibition,” *Art Daily*, Accessed February 25, 2019. <http://artdaily.com/news/38265/Denver-Biennial-of-the-Americas-Announces-Inaugural-Exhibition>.

318 “Denver Biennial of the Americas Announces Inaugural Exhibition.”

319 Other partners include Representatives of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council, 2017 Year of Public Art Chicago, Enterprise Community Partners, and L-Evated Chicago. “Artist Pedro Reyes to Reproduce His Work.”

participants through the process of ridding their homes and communities of negative factors (the guns) and concluding with a positive action (planting trees to benefit the local environment). This chapter concludes by suggesting that Reyes uses *Palas por Pistolas* to suggest an active involvement in issues at the community level to begin a decolonizing process that slowly undermines the unwanted influence of U.S. agendas on the daily lives of Mexican citizens.

## Conclusion

The three artworks discussed in this thesis propose varying models of how community action can lead to a democratic consensus for certain changes in a locale. Caring about community level issues is the basis for a healthy, thriving democracy. As I suggested in the introduction, a more approachable, accessible performative action attracts more participation from average people. Each of the artworks discussed in this paper situates itself within everyday contexts in its own way. In other words, accessibility can look different in each artwork.

In the introduction, I asked, “in what ways can these participatory, performative artworks affect actual change in the world?” In chapter one, *Lava la Bandera* energized citizens to voice their dissenting opinions against Fujimori, impacting his approval rating. It was a constant disrupting force and critique in the minds of the citizens of Peru. *Acción de Duelo*, in turn, affected change in the least direct way of the three case studies. I argue that it contributed to the movement for peace, which resulted in a cease-fire between FARC and the government in 2016. Certainly, Salcedo's large-scale project was impossible to ignore in real time and space. *Acción de Duelo* called attention to the ongoing circumstances of violence in Colombia. In the third chapter, Pedro Reyes guides citizens through the process of making change in their communities. He proposes an idea: turning in personal, household guns to local police with a no questions asked policy - making it easy for them to make a decision based on what they think is best for their family. *Palas por Pistolas* creates tangible change by removing weapons from the locale. Finally, he gathers community members in a concluding act of planting trees, ending on a positive note. He leads participants through actions that are in their best interest (and this can be said no matter what the opinion on guns - because they voluntarily turned them in). The Colectivo Sociedad Civil, Doris Salcedo, and Pedro Reyes construct situations in which the

participating publics experience effectual moments, inspiring ongoing involvement in community action for the betterment of various populations.

This thesis advocates for decolonial readings of artworks in art history. I contribute to this mission through the nuanced analysis of three understudied works from contemporary Latin America that draw out the local and global, national and international systems of power that coalesce in complex ways. Though the artworks did not all directly result in concrete political change, their central meaning resides in the the power of mass participation in a public, symbolic gestures and the exchange within and amongst communities in order to articulate alternative narratives and experiences of the current political and cultural moment. *Lava la Bandera*, *Acción de Duelo*, and *Palas por Pistolas* have proven that the inclusion of an accessible, creative component in social and political movements can yield significant, localized transformation. Anonymous, nonviolent resistance through repetitive, simple gestures encapsulates the diversity and difference of participating publics, motivated by a shared cause.

The themes considered in this thesis present an abundance of opportunities and avenues for continued research. Future studies could delve deeper into the demographics of participating publics in each artwork to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of widespread public participation and collaboration. A more expansive scope might produce more insight into the efficacy of performative gestures in inspiring localized community action and grassroots organizing. A key line of questioning considers the risk factor of participation in public protest. Subsequent analysis would also benefit from considering *Acción de Duelo* as a memorial, within the context of counter-monuments. *Palas por Pistolas* could be viewed in a new light if examined from an ecological perspective. Yet another avenue for research may be focused on the

role of indigenous groups within the framing of Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" in conjunction with persisting colonial legacies.

At the center of these kinds of artworks is the potential for democratization through public participation. Scholars must consider how artists engage with the participating public; through what means are publics speaking for themselves? Additionally, the efficacy of such works as nonviolent acts of protest is a critical component that offers much complexity. Subsequent studies might result in a better understanding of the development of visual and performative participatory rituals as acts of protest, as I have examined here. Future scholars must recognize that meaning is rooted in public participation as empowerment, occupation of public space as courageous and ritual symbolic actions as protest.

Chapter I Figures



Figure 1.1: Colectivo Sociedad Civil, *Cambio, no Cumbia*, 2000, Lima, Peru.



Figure 1.2: Colectivo Sociedad Civil, *Lava la Bandera*, 2000-2001, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru.



Figure 1.3: Colectivo Sociedad Civil, *Lava la Bandera*, 2000-2001, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru.



Figure 1.4: Water fountain, c. 1650, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru.



Figure 1.5: View of Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru. Reproduced through Wikimedia Commons.

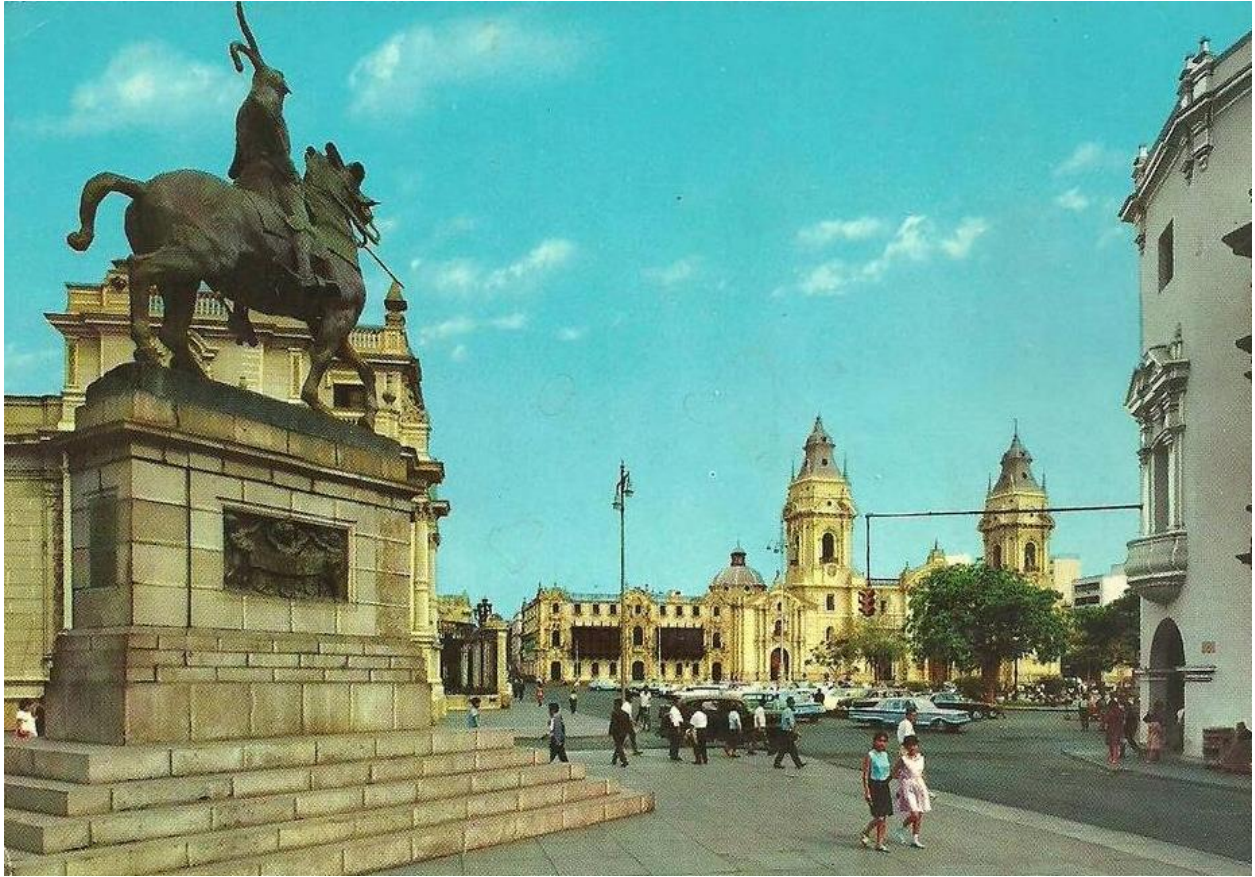


Figure 1.6: View of Plaza Mayor with the Statue of Francisco Pizarro, c. 1935, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru. Reproduced through Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 1.7: Colectivo Sociedad Civil, Women participating in *Lava la Bandera*, c. 2000-2001, Plaza Mayor, Lima, Peru.

## Chapter II Figures



Figure 2.1: In progress view of Doris Salcedo's *Acción de Duelo*, 1999, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.2: Doris Salcedo, *Acción de Duelo*, 1999, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.3: Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7, 2002*, Palace of Justice, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.4: Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002, Palace of Justice, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.5: Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002, Palace of Justice, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.6: Doris Salcedo, *Acción de Duelo*, 2007, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá, Colombia.



Figure 2.7: Doris Salcedo, *Acción de Duelo*, 2007, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá, Colombia.

### Chapter III Figures



Figure 3.1: Pedro Reyes, *Palas por Pistolas*, 2008, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.

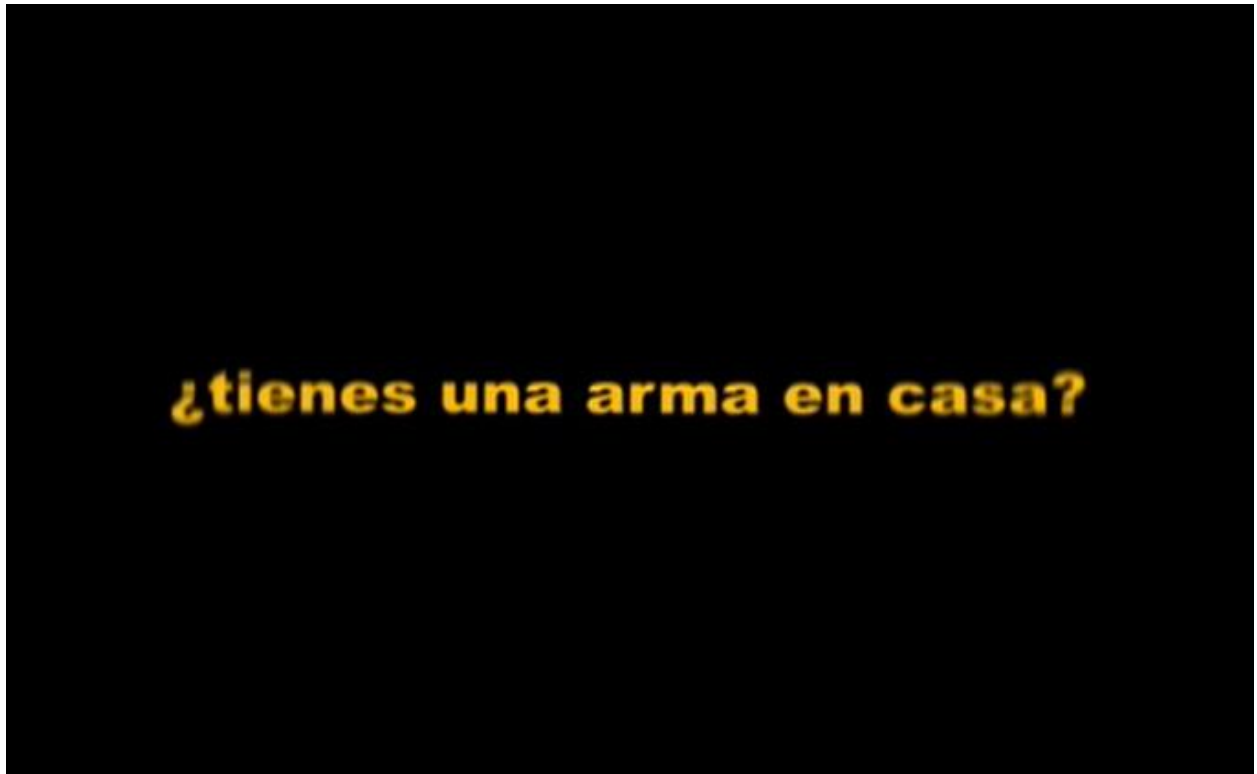


Figure 3.2: Still from local television spot for Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* project, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.3: Still from local television spot for Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* project, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.4: Still from local television spot for Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* project, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.5: Guns collected through *Palas por Pistolas*, about to be steamrolled and broken down at a local site, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.6: Guns collected through *Palas por Pistolas*, about to be steamrolled and broken down at a local site, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.7: Guns collected through *Palas por Pistolas*, casted and molded at a local foundry, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.8: Guns collected through *Palas por Pistolas*, molded into shovel spades at a local factory, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.



Figure 3.9: Community members use new shovels, made from metal from recycled guns from Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* initiative to plant trees, 2008, Culiacán, Mexico. Reproduced through PedroReyes.net.

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