

# On Art, Compassion, and Memory<sup>\*</sup>

Daniel Jerónimo Tobón Giraldo<sup>†</sup>

*Instituto de Filosofía, Universidad de Antioquia*

ABSTRACT. The late twentieth century saw an upsurge of visual artworks that vindicate the importance of artworks that show the pain endured by victims of political violence in the name of art's unique ability to create shared memories. However, it is unclear what kind of memories art can create, and how can it create them. One common answer is that art can communicate empathically the most intimate perceptual aspects of pain and engrave them deeply in the spectator's mind. This paper proposes to consider that question and evaluate this answer within the framework provided by the cognitive theory of emotions (Nussbaum 2003; Goldie 2000). I will first provide an analysis of an artwork by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo with the help of the theory of "criterial prefocusing" (Carroll 1998). This allows me to claim that the artistic and political importance of this artwork derives from the fact that it does not only try to generate empathy, but models it through compassion. The strength and depth of the emotion makes the experience memorable, but the cognitive structure of compassion imposes certain conditions in what kind of memory can be generated: it's a memory not of the events recreated and not from the point of view of the victim, but a memory of the experience of the work and from the point of view of the spectator.

## **i. Introduction**

The following reflections address the assumptions and aspirations of some artworks that focus on the memory of pain. My main example will be the *Atrabiliarios*, by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, but I think this characterization applies as well to the work of other Colombian artists, like Erika Diettes (*Río Abajo*) and Clemencia Echeverri (*Treno*). These visual artworks deal with a physically, geographically, and politically localized

---

<sup>\*</sup> This paper derives from the research on *Arte y memoria en Colombia*, funded by a grant from the Comité de Investigaciones CODI of the Universidad de Antioquia.

<sup>†</sup> Email: danieljeronimo@gmail.com

pain: the pain suffered by the families of people disappeared in Colombia. They also share a strategy for artistically transfiguring this pain. They do not represent it through characters, nor do they contain any explicit narrative, or a history that may indicate what has happened or even whether *anything* has happened. They make the pain present only through the objects, the remains of personal life that the disappeared left behind. They all try to create community in pain and, through it, solidarity. The preference for oblique representation, the direct participation they give to the subjects they work with, the urgent need that impulses them, and the hope they put in the effect of their work are all revealing of the demands that fall on contemporary art.

Doris Salcedo has been particularly explicit about it and has stated, for example:

And, if I did anything right, then some aspects of the lives that were lost maybe are present. Then maybe the viewer can connect with those aspects. I think we all have memories of pain, and those memories maybe can connect with the memories of pain inscribed in these pieces. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

Erika Diettes has also commented on her own work in similar terms:

I was obsessed with capturing that suffocation of cry. When you see people inhale, but they forget to exhale. Is like something becoming breathless. I became obsessed with generating in images that “silence of pain”. So I devoted myself to see how people cried, how in that pain there is a point when there are no tears, when the cry is more internal than tears. In that moment I decided that I didn’t want to photograph pain as such but the pause of pain. Is such a deep pain (...). That’s why I tell you, there is a point that you reach when you find that there is so much on top of so much, so much, in an excess of excesses that is difficult for words or tears to translate. Cry itself is not enough. That is why there is something like a suffocation of crying. It’s not even crying. I don’t know, I insisted that the image had to be somehow palpable, that it had to be like listening that crying (quoted by Calle, 2008).

These artworks assume the task of overcoming barriers created by the lack of understanding and of interest, and try to create a place, a node in space

and time in which a shared experience between spectators, victims and artists is possible.

This conviction is accompanied by an *ambition to memory*, insofar as it presupposes that inside these artworks some experiences survive that otherwise would be lost in oblivion or wouldn't come to be part of common life.

But, is it possible to condense pain in an object? How and in what sense could these artworks create a place for a memory of pain? The statements made by these artists seem to indicate that the mobilization of the emotions of the spectator plays a central role in the process, and that if these artworks get to be unforgettable it is because they *move* us. It is the force and depth of the emotional reaction these works generate that makes an impact on our understanding of the experience of others.

## 2. Compassion and Fear as Value Judgments

Aristotle's theory of tragedy offers the classical -and still powerful- framework to think about the problems provoked by the artistic representation of human suffering. In his *Poetics*, he conceives the reaction to tragedy as a combination of fear and compassion mediated by the work and directed towards the pain of another being. The importance he bestows upon this emotional response is evident in several passages of *Poetics*, for example when he affirms that in tragedy "the imitation is not only of a complete action but of fearful and pitiable things [...]" (Aristotle, 2001, 1452a 1-2); or that recognition [*anagnorisis*] and reversal [*peripeteia*] "guide the soul" (Aristotle, 2001, 1450a 34) by arousing compassion and fear. He also claims that these emotions may be provoked by the spectacle or the "suffering" [*pathos*], that is, by the physical presence of destruction and damage on the stage, but ideally they should derive from the structure of the story [*mythos*] itself: "For the story must have been put together in such a way that, even without seeing, he who hears the events as they come to be shudders and pities from what occurs [...]" (Aristotle, 2001, 1453b 1-7)

This applies also to artworks like those of Doris Salcedo, as in this case the answer expected from the viewer does not seem to be *cold*, so to

speak, but emotionally charged. These artworks convoke an emotional reaction of fear and compassion inasmuch as they portrait the grave damage inflicted upon a human life.<sup>1</sup> Here also the structure of the artistic representation determines normatively our emotional answer to it, and without this reaction the experience of the work would not be complete.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle inaugurates a tradition in philosophical thinking about the emotions that connects directly with the cognitive turn that has led to theories of emotion as value judgment. Both Aristotle and contemporary cognitivist theorists consider that the core of an emotion is an ensemble of judgments about the world (or about what is present before us) and our relationship to it. Besides the bodily, neural, perceptual or felt components that may be part of the emotion, certain ways of seeing the world and judging its relationship with our own interests and needs constitute its nucleus.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, emotions would entail beliefs, insofar as they could only appear when we believe the world (or what is present to us) is one way or another. In fact, their identity as emotions of a certain kind would be determined by these judgments, which should then be considered constitutive elements. These judgments and their typical structure –and not their supposedly particular quality of feeling – are what allows us to distinguish between two emotions.

When considered as value judgments –even obscure and complex value judgments– emotions are not opposed to rationality, but are a part of it: they refer to the world and may be considered adequate or inadequate regarding certain objects, rational or irrational according to the reaction they imply to the situation, and they can be corrected through a change

---

<sup>1</sup> Salcedo has recognized that her work appeals to this model. In answer to the question of what can her work contribute to the viewer, she comments: “The confrontation with death, and specially with the death of a loved one, provokes what Aristotle called both terror and compassion” (Salcedo, 2000, p. 134).

<sup>2</sup> It must be noticed that emotions do not cover all of our possible affective responses to art. As Noël Carrrol (Noël Carroll, 2010) has pointed out, philosophy still has much to investigate concerning the role of moods, reflexes, phobias and affect programs in art.

<sup>3</sup> Here I consider the cognitive theories of emotion, especially those for which the emotion is a value judgment. John Deigh (Deigh, 1994), Ronald de Sousa (de Sousa, 2010) and Hjordt and Lavert (Hjordt & Laver, 1997) offer good overviews of the cognitive theories of the emotions and their contrast with competing theories. Among the recent defenses of the theory of emotions as value judgments those of Robert Solomon (2004) and Martha Nussbaum (2003) stand out.

in the judgments that constitute them. This theory, then, tries to dissolve the dichotomy between emotions and rationality.

This sketch of a theoretical framework might be understood more clearly through the explication it provides for two particular emotions: fear and compassion.

Aristotle defines fear as “a sort of pain and agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil” (Aristotle, 2007, 1382a 22-23). This characterization implies an affective element (the pain or agitation, which can be thought of as some kind of excitement) that would be generated and shaped by a set of judgments: the judgment of an evil appearing to be close (and which constitutes, therefore, a danger), and the judgment of that evil having a certain gravity.

Compassion, on the other hand, is defined by Aristotle as

[...] a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer, and this when it seems close at hand; for it is clear that a person who is going to feel pity necessarily thinks that some evil is actually present of the sort that he or one of his own might suffer and that this evil is of the sort mentioned in the definition or like it or about equal to it (Aristotle, 2007, 1385b 13-19).

The pain that characterizes compassion is the sensible side of a complex intellectual answer that demands from us much more than a simple contagion of the pain felt by another person or than our imagining a terrible situation and identifying with it. For there to be compassion, it is requisite that we acknowledge that situation as something harmful for the other and that we react with pain to that harm, recognizing at the same time that this person is different from us, and that what happens to her is a possibility also open to us, so that our shared frailty becomes a common bond.

### **3. The *Atrabiliarios***

The basic cognitive structure of compassion can guide our thinking about the emotional effect on the spectator of one of Doris Salcedo's works, and

help us to consider how and why compassion is one of the answers this work demands from us. To focus on compassion is, of course, just one possibility; one could also say that this artwork also seeks to elicit, for example, disgust and anger, or other responses that are not to be considered emotional or affective at all, but purely cognitive, as those concerning *only* the form of the work, its place in art history, its originality or lack of it, among others.



FIGURE 1. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-7.

The point I'm trying to make is that, insofar as an artwork highlights those aspects of experience that fit into the criteria required for a determinate emotion to take place, that emotion constitutes the emotional response towards that situation that the artwork proposes to its implicit spectator. The concept of "criterial prefocusing", proposed by Noël Carroll, explains the main mechanism through which artworks produce emotions. According to his analysis:

Whether verbal, visual, or aural, the text will be prefocused. Certain features of situations and characters will be made salient through description or depiction. These features will be such that they will be subsumable under the categories or concepts that [...] govern or determine the identity of the states we are in. Let us refer to this attribute by saying that the texts are criterially prefocused (Noël Carroll, 1998, p. 263s.)

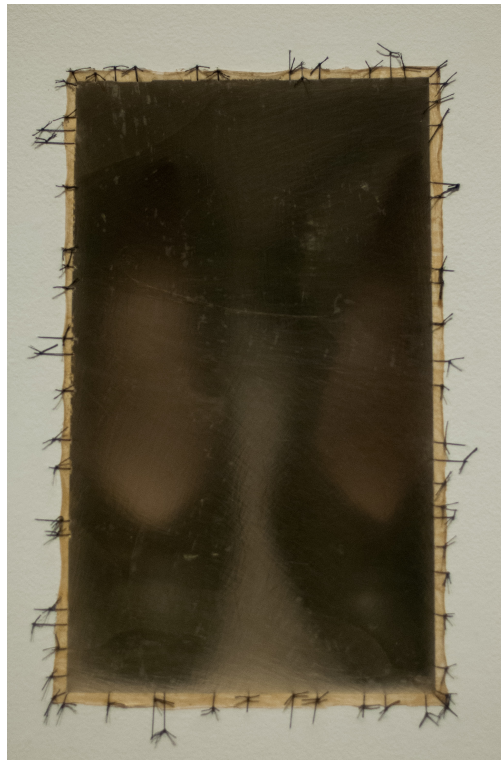


FIGURE 2. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-7.

*Atrabiliarios* is the common name given by Salcedo to a set of pieces she made in the early nineties that consist of a series of shoes arranged in square niches excavated in the wall of the gallery. All the shoes exhibit signs of wear; sometimes they are alone, sometimes in pairs; some are women's and some are men's shoes [FIGURES 1 AND 2].

The niches are covered by a translucent animal tissue, sewn to the wall with surgical thread [FIGURE 3].

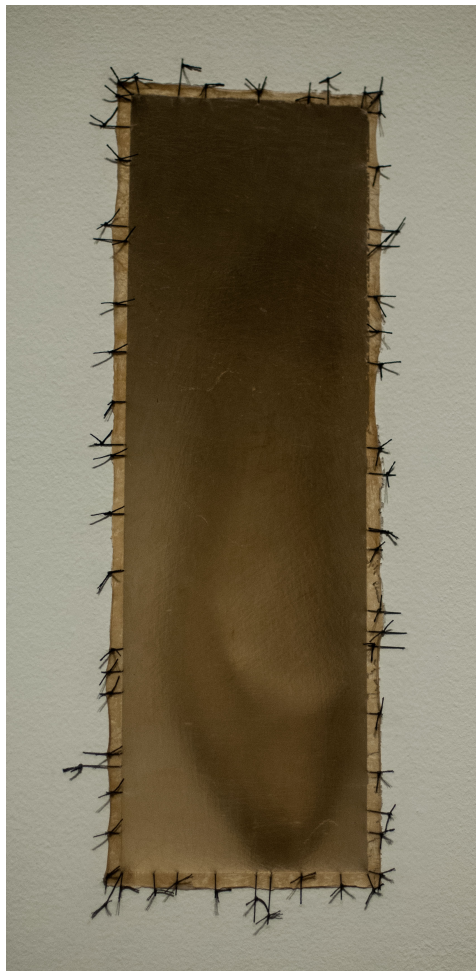


FIGURE 3. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-7.

As our hypothesis is that this work tries to generate compassion, we can take the basic structure of this emotion as a guide, and consider how the



work organizes our attention to the situation according to the relevant criteria.

What is the object of the emotion? Our attention is directed, first of all, to the work itself, and through it to the disappeared. The shoes act here as metonymic representations of the disappeared, who are made present here indirectly, but clearly (Cf. Malagón-Kurka, 2010, p. 157; Merewether, 1998, p. 19). The shoes are almost a bodily part, and refer to the body indexically, through the traces of quotidian use imprinted in them. In this works, the shoes *are* (metonymically) people, and our emotions are directed, through them, to the people they represent.

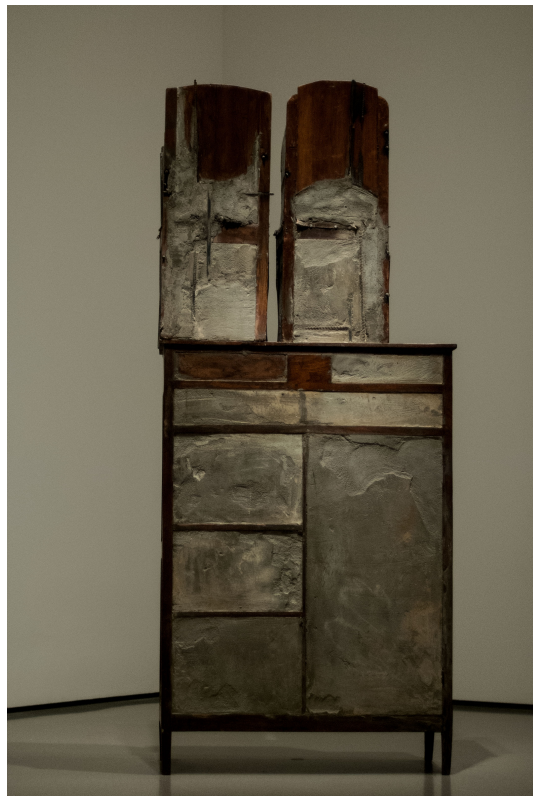


FIGURE 4. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-7.

Now, does the way in which the object is represented highlight those features that match the typical criteria of compassion? According to Aristotle, as we already quoted, compassion is “a certain pain at an apparently

destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer, and this when it seems close at hand [...]" (Aristotle, 2007, 1385b 13-19). The first criterion is damage or evil, with the additional requisite that it be grave and visible. Aristotle demands that this evil should be shown in appearance, brought closer to us or put *before our eyes*. And I think that the objects that constitute the work indeed testify to a certain damage. In other works by Salcedo – as her 1995 *Untitled* [FIGURE 4] – the damage inflicted upon the objects is quite evident: the object is cut up, pierced, hibrydized, filled up with concrete.

In contrast, in the *Atrabiliarios* the object is not altered in any visible way. It is rather just isolated from its usual context, in such a way that any attempt to connect them to their quotidian use leads to frustration: they are defamiliarized. (Bennett, 2005, p. 67). Besides, they have been installed in such a way that it is not possible to see them clearly, no matter how much the spectator approaches or distances herself from them [FIGURE 5].

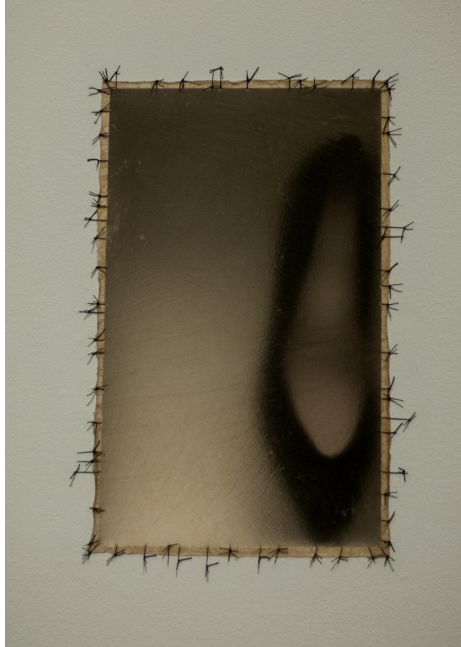


FIGURE 5. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-7.

Their view is clouded by the film of organic material that covers them: they are there, just in front of us, but it is impossible to distinguish any particular feature in them, eliciting the desire to extend our hand and remove the film. There is a more open violence in the aggressiveness of the stitches that sew this organic film to the wall: with their irregular and cramped distribution they resemble hasty, uneven and brutal crossing outs.

This corresponds to an important aspect of the damage suffered by the families of the disappeared: it is not so much a direct physical damage to the body of a family member as a damage to the fabric of the life they shared. The disappeared never leave their family completely, because life keeps taking them into account - *must* keep taking them into account: they are still there, even if they can only be seen through the opaque lenses of remembrance and hope, without direct contact (just like these shoes). Violence and damage are subtly represented, but with the utmost depth. The animal fiber of the film with its slightly repulsive character exposes this damage clearly. The reference to the disappeared and the quality of the damage represented are impossible to determine without contextual information, but it is nonetheless presented to the spectator as something experientially present through the visual and spatial relationship she is invited to have with the artwork.

Aristotle also demands, for there to be compassion, that the person suffering damage do not deserve it. We usually don't feel compassion for those who 'had it coming'. But even if the damage is a punishment for something the person has done, we can feel compassion if this punishment is exaggerated and is disproportionate to the transgression that originates it. Does this criterion apply to the case in point? I think this depends on our knowing that many of the disappeared were, as a matter of fact, innocent, and were only punished for stepping up for their communities (as many a syndicalist and community leader). But, even if they had done something, their families haven't. The families of the disappeared are always innocent in this sense, so that there is a punishment that is not justified for any blame; and even if we accused those families of having done something wrong, of having contributed somehow to this situation, the punishment they receive for it turns out to be always unjust and disproportionate, "insofar as nothing justifies the ordeal of chasing the ghost of a loved one, the pain of not being able to give closure to mourning"— as

Ileana Diéguez has pointed out. What could anyone have done to deserve *this*? And who has the right to execute *this sentence*?

Finally, we may consider the condition of likeness, the idea according to which the damage represented in the work should also appear as a danger to us and we should be made aware that we too are exposed to it. The experience of compassion demands and fosters the consciousness of our own frailty exposing the frailty of the others and emphasizing what makes us similar. This emotion situates us in a common space with the person that suffers damage. This is the reason why Aristotle speaks of compassion as an emotion that has fear as one of its components or is accompanied by it, especially in the experience of tragedy: I feel compassion for those things that I fear may affect me and those close to me. For this reason, compassion doesn't imply a position of superiority (in that case it would be mere benevolence), but a more *horizontal* relationship with the other. Considered from this point of view, compassion is not an experience of identification. I do not *become* another person. It is rather – I insist – an experience of getting closer to the other, of acknowledging a common space in an experience that opens itself up to the future: this might also happen to me.

In the artwork we are talking about, this is achieved through the quotidian and commonplace aspect of these shoes. They are not only metonymically associated to the bodies of the disappeared, but constitute objects that we all possess and use. In this way, they bring our own daily life into play. The object serves as a point in which the personal memories of each of the onlookers converges, and so shows forth our shared humanity with those who have suffered these ordeals.

This effect is also reinforced by what one could call the indexical appearance of the work. The objects look as if they had been used by the disappeared themselves, as if they still kept traces of their bodies. People familiarized with Doris Salcedo's work knows that in many occasions the families of the disappeared have given her memorabilia of their loved ones. As far as I know, she doesn't directly use these objects as part of the work, but the pieces she selects do look like they were. The viewer may entertain the idea that these shoes prove the historical fact that somebody existed and disappeared, that this objects testimony the actuality of these events, and so be almost forced to recognize that it is not just fiction, but

an actual possibility.

#### **4. Memory and Compassion**

So far, we have considered how the *Atrabiliarios* may arouse compassion and fear in the spectator. Our interpretation of the work has concentrated itself in showing that this happens when, through its formal structure, its choice of materials and the articulation of their connotations, the work makes possible for the spectator to understand perceptually and affectively some of the experiences constitutive of the impossible mourning in which the families of the disappeared are trapped. The defenselessness of the families before an aggression that erodes the fabric of quotidian life, the collision between the duty of keeping hope alive and the impossibility to materialize its presence, the distance that separates them from their loved ones, are all made present through the material analogues that give them expression. Through these sensitive analogues the spectator reaches something like an internal perspective that allows her to imagine aspects of these families' experiences.

Is it possible and adequate to say that these artworks condense the pain of the families of the disappeared and keep it inside them, crystallizing these experiences for collective memory? Is the artwork a device that allows a community to live an otherwise private experience? Some artistic declarations suggest as much. For example Doris Salcedo affirms that, through the work, "the experience had to be taken to a collective space", and Clemencia Echeverri indicates that the task imposed on her seemed to be "to generate in images that 'silence of pain'" that she perceived in the mothers of the disappeared.

This is a tempting idea that captures the fact that artworks allow an approach more immediate and sensitive to experiences than a cold description could. Nonetheless, taking into account the ideas on compassion and fear developed in this text, it would be possible and necessary to introduce a correction – or rather, a precision – into it. The core of this precision is that our pain before the work is not and cannot be *identical* to the pain these families feel, even if the artwork allows a shared affective experience for spectators.

Our emotional and affective response cannot be equated to that of the families of the disappeared, not only because we are numerically different individuals -it is entirely possible that several people feel a shared pleasure or pain before the same situation, for example when we all react with happiness before a shared victory, or with pain before a lost that affects us all the same way. What makes our response necessarily dissimilar is that our position before this situation is radically different, and this difference penetrates and transforms the whole of the experience. A work like this can offer us a rich affective image of the situation or, at least, certain aspects of it, but these images, affects and perceptions are coordinated from the perspective of a witness that contemplates the suffering of others without being able nor needing to do anything for them at the moment. Although sometimes we speak as if we identified with those who suffer, we must recognize that we are only spectators, at the same time powerless and safe in the space of the gallery or the museum. We do not fear for our lives nor are we forced to do anything for those people at the moment. It is precisely this freedom from the oppressing urges of immediate action that allows us to linger in this situation and focus on it, opening up a space where we can try to understand it and penetrate its nuances.

The work, then, may offer us enough knowledge to approach the perspective of the victims, to ponder how terrible their situation must be and how their worries relate to our own worries, and in this way give us tools to imaginatively understand their sufferings. But to understand an experience is not necessarily to live it, in the same sense as to understand someone is not to identify with that person, but to undergo a process of mediation in which I connect her point of view and mine and try to explicate the genesis of her experiences and reactions. This mediation is at the basis of compassion, and that is why to feel compassion is not to feel the same thing that somebody else suffers, either by contagion or identification, but to understand why the other suffers and co-suffer with her, but not for the same reason nor from her point of view: the perspective from which we live our experience penetrates and transforms it into something completely different.

As spectators, with the safety that comes from the fact that we contemplate a *representation* of suffering and not the event itself, for us the contemplation of these works is more similar to that offered by certain

novels which, according to Proust “(...) are like great but temporary be-reavements, abolishing habits, bringing us one more in contact with the reality of life, but for a few hours only..”(quoted by Nussbaum, 2003, p. 244). We might emerge from that experience transformed, enriched by a clearer and deeper understanding of the situation, but it does not constitute a part of the fabric of our life with the same weight or in the same sense as for the victim.

I reiterate: this does not mean that nothing is shared, that this is not a basis for a common experience. This might perhaps be made clearer if we distinguish between the experience which the work is about and the experience of the work. The experience of the families of the disappeared, that the work is about, is an experience that we cannot appropriate; it remains, so to speak, their exclusive property. But we can all share the experience of the work. This experience of the work enters the socially shared repertory and creates a memory of which we can all take part. This constitutes an enrichment of the common wealth of meaning.

As mediated and induced by the work, compassion offers a foundation for solidarity, inasmuch as it broadens our imaginative capacity to take interest in others, to worry about what happens to them and to consider our common future. The actualization of this solidarity presupposes, of course, ethical, political and cultural conditions that in our society exceed the powers of art alone. But the fact that this work fosters the subjective conditions of solidarity is, it seems to me, a substantial contribution. This may not be the only task art must undertake, but it is a task whose dignity we should not ignore.

## References

- Aristotle (2001), *Aristotle On poetics*. Trans. B. Seth & M. Davis. South Bend Ind.: St. Augustine's Press.
- (2007), *On Rhetoric: a Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. G. A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, Jill (2005), *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Carroll, Noël (1998), *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (2010). Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures. En *Art in Three Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deigh, John (1994), 'Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions'. *Ethics*, 104, PP. 824–854.
- De Sousa, R. (2010), 'Emotion'. In: Zalta, E. N. (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 Edition)*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/emotion/>
- Hjort, M. & Laver, S. (1997), 'Introduction'. In: Hjort M. & Laver S. (Eds.), *Emotion and the Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Malagón-Kurka, M. (2010), *Arte como presencia indéxica: la obra de tres artistas colombianos en tiempos de violencia: Beatriz González, Óscar Muñoz y Doris Salcedo en la década de los noventa*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
- Merewether, Charles (1998), 'To Bear Witness'. In: *Doris Salcedo*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven (2003), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salcedo, Doris (2000), Interview with Charles Merewether, 1988. In: *Doris Salcedo*. London: Phaidon.
- Solomon, Robert C. (2004), 'Emotions, Thoughts, and Feelings: Emotions as Engagements with the World'. In: *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*. Oxford University Press, USA.