

EFFACED NAMES. ART AND THE ETHICS OF IMMORTALITY

Abstract

In a renowned lecture delivered by Gilles Deleuze in 1987, later published under the title “Qu’est-ce que l’acte de création?” (“What is the Act of Creation?”), the French philosopher defined the creative act as an act of resistance—one that draws its energy from the shame of being human. A short fable by Marcel Proust and, above all, the sculptural intervention *Palimpsesto*, created in 2017 by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid, will serve as catalysts for reflection on this intimate relationship between art and resistance. The piece, an imagined cemetery where droplets of water emerge from tombstones to form the names of those who perished attempting to cross the Mediterranean in search of Europe, not only makes those absences palpable but also embodies the processes of political invisibility that underpin such deaths. By bringing Salcedo’s work into dialogue with the philosophical thought of Deleuze, as well as that of Jacques Derrida and Quentin Meillassoux, we will explore how *Palimpsesto* compels us to reconsider art’s role in reshaping how we feel and, in turn, transforming our subjectivity. In this sense, art becomes essential in the creation of a people yet to come, fostering an ethics of immortality in which new, peaceful bridges may be forged between the living and those who have suffered harrowing deaths—whose names, bodies, and lives have been erased.

Keywords:

Art as Resistance, Doris Salcedo, Ethics, Immortality, Specters.

A Brief Proustian Fable

In an extraordinary passage from *Within a Budding Grove*, Marcel Proust—the writer who sought, with unprecedented intensity, to capture that which was perpetually slipping through his fingers—composed an eloquent fable in which the interplay between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, the perceived and the perceiving is brought into play. As night falls, the newly installed electric light transforms the spaces of the Grand Hôtel de Balbec into a mesmerizing human aquarium. Spellbound by the scene within, the working-class inhabitants of the town gather outside the windows, while the human-fish inside the hotel remain oblivious to being watched.

[...] hidden springs of electricity flooding the great dining-room with light, it became as it were an immense and wonderful aquarium against whose glass wall the working population of Balbec, the fishermen and also the tradesmen’s families, clustering invisibly in the outer darkness, pressed their faces to watch the luxurious life of its occupants gently floating upon the golden eddies within, a thing as extraordinary to the poor as the life of strange fishes or molluscs. (Proust 1998, 353-54).

Suddenly, everything—both the seen and the seeing—has acquired a spectral, phantasmagoric quality. Paradoxically, the scene’s only solid element is the delicate glass that separates the carefree human-fish from their watchers in the darkness, projecting their desires beyond the pane. Could the glass shatter, granting those who

gaze longingly the chance to partake in society's privileges? Proust himself wonders. Might this rupture bring about what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière would later term the redistribution of the sensible (2004)?

(an important social question, this: whether the glass wall will always protect the banquets of these weird and wonderful creatures, or whether the obscure folk who watch them hungrily out of the night will not break in some day to gather them from their aquarium and devour them) (Proust 1998, 354)¹.

Perhaps, if those who inhabit invisibility and silence could articulate their existence, forcefully emerging into the realm of visibility, a sudden transformation could take place. Proust thus strengthens the bond between the visible and the invisible, envisioning the shattering of the glass as a catalyst for a radical reversal of roles.

Effaced Names. On Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsesto* (2017)

[...] a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced [...] (Proust 1993, 310)

Throughout the twentieth century, various artistic disciplines have developed, often prolifically, a mode of work that, rather than exposing trauma or cruelty through excess and saturation (Foster 1996), instead focuses on reduction, emptiness, or even nothingness (Wajcman 1998). Among them, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (Bogotá, 1958) has crafted a distinctive poetics of mourning that engages with political violence (Bal 2010; Schneider 2016). Let us trace the path outlined by the Proustian fable through *Palimpsesto*, an intervention created at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid in 2017.

Now, the interior of the Palacio de Cristal—the Proustian pane—has been transformed into an immense cemetery. From its tombstones, through a sophisticated engineering system concealed beneath the false floor, droplets of water seep—tears that merge to reveal a succession of names. Does this mark an inversion of the Proustian perspective? Not entirely. Rather, it appears to have been pushed to its radical extreme. The privileged continue to enter the Palacio de Cristal at their leisure, while the names that suddenly emerge—those who are symbolically disembodied and voiceless—belong to those who did not survive their passage across the Mediterranean. They are the ones who once looked in from the outside, trapped in war and misery, facing a West that was indifferent to their fate—if not outright complicit. Here, the earth itself seems to grieve one of the most ignominious tragedies of recent Western history—the consequence of a

numbed and desensitized European society, drifting further into the perilous confines of radical identity politics. Yet, over time, these names vanish, only to be replaced by others. Through this repetition, a rhythmic cycle emerges, as the floor retains the imprint of water—the faint trace of each name lingering even as it disappears.

One could say that Salcedo approaches her artistic projects from a stance of indignation or, perhaps, as Gilles Deleuze suggested, from a sense of shame at humanity's actions—a fundamental idea that led the French philosopher to define the act of creation as an act of resistance (Deleuze 2003)². An extensive process of research and interviews with survivors and the families of those who perished at sea constitutes the very foundation of her work. As she asserts, she seeks to

be a witness of the witness. I look for an intimate proximity with the victims of violence that allows me to stand in for them. One must feel close to another in order to stand in for him or her and create an artwork out of another's experience. As a result, the work is made using his or her testimony as its foundation. It is not my rational intent but rather the experience of the victim that tells us about trauma, pain, loss. As a sculptor, I am aware of every detail that informs the life of the victim: the corporeality, the feelings, the vulnerability, the failings, the space, his or her life's trajectory and language. I don't formulate the experience of the victim, rather, I assemble it so that it remains forever a presence in the present moment... Sculpture for me is the giving of a material gift to that being who makes his presence felt in my work. (Merewhether 1998, 19)

The artist first becomes a *witness* to an unresolved case. The bodies lost at sea leave an indelible mark on their survivors. The survivors and relatives oscillate between profound pain and fragility, yet also between the unyielding hope of one day finding their loved ones and the determination to honor the memory of those stripped of a voice, of all rights—condemned to invisibility, reduced to mere nullities. But how does one become such a witness? How does one cultivate such deep intimacy with the victim? How does one internalize a sorrow that is both immeasurable and inexpressible? Undoubtedly, this is not a process of identification in which the first person absorbs the pain of a third party—Salcedo herself affirms this (Bennett 2005, 66). Rather, this closeness paradoxically entails an insurmountable distance—one that the artist, like the wanderer who moves among the fleeting presences evoked by the names in the strange cemetery that *Palimpsesto* embodies, not only acknowledges but transforms into a source of unknown intensities. This distance could be defined as *wonder*—an estrangement born from a pause when facing the radically other, the unknown. In the

wonder of such an incomprehensible experience, the subject's center of gravity shifts, anchors are loosened, as if time itself had to halt to allow new coordinates to emerge. The illusion of proximity arises because the astonished subject remains motionless, as if molded by a reality that simultaneously invades and overwhelms them. The boundaries between interior and exterior become porous, at times even indiscernible. This is less an act of empathy than one of sympathy—the subject does not control the situation but rather receives it, seeking to absorb it affectively and intuitively.

Thus, the viewer of *Palimpsesto* also becomes a witness. Yet, as we have observed, this is an experience that extends beyond the first person. The bewildered wanderer does not fully grasp what they witness, and yet they feel the weight of those names that ceaselessly emerge and disappear—without a clear narrative, without a defined image. The subject finds themselves deterritorialized in the presence of these spectral traces, which impose themselves upon them as an imperative. A disturbing thought that can only reveal its true force when one has stepped beyond what is most familiar, thus experiencing it beyond the confines of one's own subjectivity. At that precise moment, they cannot be denied; their presence cannot be rejected. These moments of astonishment decisively expose the wanderer to other experiences and psyches; they reveal to the viewer alternative ways of life and new perspectives. However, due to the biopolitical—or rather, necropolitical (Mbembe 2003)—power exercised over the lives and deaths of those inscribed in these names, Salcedo has had to amplify the reality of these *presences*.

In this sense, Salcedo's work begins even before the specters—defined by Jacques Derrida—manifest themselves. It seems that the French philosopher initiates his profoundly ethical inquiry by addressing the heart of the matter: the specter is already among us—perhaps because its perpetual presence renders its absence impossible. In essence, Derrida's reflections begin when the specter has already taken on tangible form, *in media res*, persistently haunting us³. This echoes the spectral presence of Hamlet's father, whose mere apparition demands his son's attention, compelling him to act. But can we truly compare the influence of a king's ghost upon his own son with that exerted by the clandestine immigrant (Derrida 2006, 219)? Salcedo's work emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging the silencing of countless voices—the deliberate relegation of many subjects and events to a state of invisibility and inaudibility, depriving them even of the ability to haunt the present as ghosts⁴. Were they to manifest

as ghosts, they would do so lacking vitality, without the agency to appear and reappear. However, it seems that Derrida's emphasis on past specters might relegate the future to a secondary dimension of experience. And yet, are we not perpetually shaped by anticipations, hopes, and fears projected into the future?

The specters of *Palimpsesto* build a bridge to the past—even to a distant past. It is important to recall that the Palacio de Cristal was designed by Ricardo Velázquez Bosco in 1887 for the General Exhibition of the Philippine Islands, where indigenous peoples were exhibited as though they were museum artifacts, in a celebration of the Spanish colonial empire. Yet, in a place so densely layered with memory, Salcedo's specters decisively turn their gaze toward the future. In doing so, she seems to be powerfully reviving what Quentin Meillassoux terms the spectral dilemma (2006; 2009). In line with the thought of the French philosopher, Salcedo's intervention is not concerned with a meditation on finitude but rather with what could be described as an ethics of immortality. It demands a confrontation with the presence of the dead among us and their possible return—not as a utopian notion in the quasi-Blochian sense (Bloch 1996), but as a tangible, though still ungraspable, possibility. To summon the dead is to anticipate: the future thus becomes a contingent yet real threshold which, while non-existent, already influences the present (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 537). How, then, can this ethic—one that exists beyond finitude—be articulated through art? What role might art play in realizing the ultimate aspiration of ethics: universal justice? And how can a reconciliatory bond be forged between the living and those who suffered harrowing deaths?

Evanescent names—those crucial amplifiers of reality—function as metonymies that pull us inexorably into the abyss of their lost lives and deaths. Yet, as soon as a name emerges, it vanishes, fading and dissolving its contours, much like the sea erases footprints. The work seems to remember and forget with equal ease. And yet, in truth, the name never entirely disappears; rather, it lingers beneath new, superimposed names—a layering of singular lives, eternally mourned by the earth. *Palimpsesto* thus entwines itself with the intricate emotions of survivors, ceaselessly oscillating between hope and despair. The work does not merely intensify the presence of those forgotten lives; it asserts their right to exist—or, more precisely, to persist. However, the process of creating such a work and bearing witness is not without its own cruelties. Does it not risk assimilation into the very system it seeks to critique? Might the power of the

artwork be diminished when it functions within and serves such institutional confines? If we reflect upon the eloquence of deliberate silence—emphasized by the artist herself throughout her oeuvre—and acknowledge the power a name wields in inserting one into a pre-existing linguistic order that precedes individual will, does it not inherently carry the risk of political manipulation? A name, though inhabited, is never wholly possessed. In selecting certain names while omitting others, does the artist not, albeit inadvertently, reproduce a structure resembling the very system under scrutiny, determining who is resurrected and who remains unheard? When transformed into a war machine, the artwork mirrors certain aspects of what it interrogates, amplifying its emotional force by deepening the sense of vulnerability and fragility. These spectral presences do not simply speak for themselves; they lay bare the very attempts to erase them, to reduce them to nothingness. The work does not mark the end of those lives but, on the contrary, beautifully embodies the fact that their end has not yet come—and never will. Mortality becomes immortal, the limit becomes boundless.

The question of *limits* is also explored with great intensity in this work. The use of water as the primary sculptural material is not merely symbolic—embodying, through water itself, the names of those who have perished at sea—nor is it purely metaphorical, as though the earth itself were mourning these deaths. Rather, once again, the material serves to demonstrate that limits are not only surmountable but, in a sense, unattainable. Through the droplets of water, the ground becomes a kind of sensitive, vibratory membrane—one that demands a shift in perception, a recalibration of attention. It is, in many ways, a matter of rhythm: bodies never materialize, never take representational form. What is embodied instead is their ceaseless, restless agitation. Despite the absence of direct representation—an absence that prevents the work from slipping into banality or even questionable exhibitionism—this imagined cemetery is paradoxically a space teeming with life. Its animation arises precisely from the interplay of minimal, infinitesimal movements, unfolding a new way of seeing and making visible—one that compels us to reconfigure our perception and, in turn, our very subjectivity.

Conclusions, or Art as an Act of Resistance

In both Marcel Proust's fragment and Salcedo's *Palimpsesto*, everything seems to begin and end with the witness—a kind of circular journey that brings us back to the point of departure, and yet, we are no longer the same. After contemplating the possible consequences of the shattering glass, Proust's fable unfolds as follows:

meanwhile, perhaps, amid the dumbfounded stationary crowd out there in the dark, there may have been some writer, some student of human ichthyology, who, as he watched the jaws of old feminine monstrosities close over a mouthful of submerged food, was amusing himself by classifying them by race, by innate characteristics, as well as by [...] acquired characteristics (Proust 1998, 354).

The preceding possibility of a revolutionary and violent moment gives way to a time no less radical—one that belongs to the witness as a creator. Immersed in the scene, within the strange cemetery, lies that *meanwhile*—that evanescent moment of astonishment, lasting only as long as the revelation itself, the fleeting instant of awe capable of altering everything. The premonition that within these revelations—the impossibility of an end to lost lives, their immortality, but also the persistent attempts to render them void—there is something enigmatically fundamental is what transforms the mere spectator into a witness, forging their pact with the victims. That Proustian writer, capable of seeing both worlds simultaneously, is the witness embodied in Salcedo's work: the reconfiguration of subjectivity made possible by an artistic intervention such as *Palimpsesto*, or by the profound philosophical inquiries of Meillassoux or Deleuze. These allow us to contemplate, with renewed intensity, the individual responsibility we bear—as witnesses—to engage with and take seriously the ideas and proposals they set in motion. It is not a matter of dreaming or passively awaiting change, but of enabling, in the present, a future that may still be unrecognizable.

In this context, imagination assumes a crucial role, asserting itself as a force of political transformation and an essential component in the pursuit of ethics' ultimate aim—universal justice. However, the term *universal* may carry unintended connotations, suggesting that the *Other* must conceive both their visibility and their right to exist through the lens of the Western world. Yet such visibility would amount only to a form of self-blindness in favor of assimilation. The precise individualization of each name—that is, of each life, and indeed, I would argue, of each way of life—within the inclusive space shaped by *Palimpsesto* envisions universality as the sum total of all possible singularities. Thus, as long as a single singularity remains absent or erased from the frame, universality remains incomplete. Much like Meillassoux's proposition, this universality to come is radically immanent, lacking any form of legitimizing transcendence. In this sense, the boundaries between ethics and aesthetics become porous; the two disciplines inevitably intertwine, conspiring with one another. The close relationship between the act of creation and the act of resistance thus becomes clearer:

first, both derive their impetus from a present that is painful and unsatisfactory. More importantly, however, both are always directed toward an absent people. Simply depicting the cruelties of the present is not enough. The real imperative—and the true challenge—lies in *creating a people to come* (Deleuze 1992).

¹ While this passage warrants a dedicated commentary—one for which I lack the space here without straying from the central theme of my essay—Proust’s peculiar parenthetical remark has nonetheless sparked significant interest and provoked a wide range of responses, both laudatory and critical, due to its rich political resonances. See, for instance, the works of André Benhaïm and Edward Hughes cited in the references.

² I am fully aware that the notion of conceiving the act of creation as an act of resistance has undergone various reinterpretations since Deleuze first introduced it in a lecture at Femis on 17 March 1987. Perhaps the most significant and recent of these is that proposed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who seeks to think what Deleuze, supposedly, did not. While I cannot undertake a full critique of Agamben’s position here, I believe a brief clarification of my stance is necessary. My reservations stem, above all, from Agamben’s devaluation of the *act* in favor of *potentiality*—a potentiality defined through a kind of *via negativa*: all potentiality is, at its core, the potentiality *not* to act. In this sense, I believe Agamben overlooks the fact that, at times, the power *not* to act is a choice available only to those who already possess the ability to do what they forgo: Velázquez *could* have chosen not to paint *Las Meninas*, but before reaching such a state of potential impotence, he first had to attain the potentiality to paint. That is to say, every decomposition presupposes a prior composition. Agamben’s notion of resistance might even be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms: it suggests a form of self-restraint, bearing traces of sublimation—an inoperative power that seems to derive from the internalization of one’s own impotence. As this article suggests, I believe Salcedo’s work is far more aligned with the creation of forces of life and new forms of subjectivity in those who experience it. For this reason, an affirmative understanding of both the act of creation and the act of resistance seems to me far more fitting.

³ Perhaps the French philosopher would not agree with me on the effective reality of the ghost. What the specter reveals, as Derrida explores in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, is the necessity of interrogating the relationship between the real, reality, and language: “The question is here more acute and more urgent than ever since the point was to think the *logos* beyond the *logos*, to think the phantasm, the *phantasmata*, the phantoms and the revenants beyond the *logos*, well, in order to think the phantasm is what one believes one can oppose *to*, or rigorously distinguish *from*, the effective reality of what happens, and therefore from the undeniable effectivity of the event, it is necessary to think something like a *phantasm of the event* [...] it is necessary, then, to think this thingless thing that a phantasm of the event would be, but also by the same token, an event of the phantasm, a phantom of the event and an event, a coming or supervening of the phantom.” (2010, 185-186)

⁴ At times, even the stark visibility of the most raw and visceral facts concerning migrants in the Mediterranean has not been enough to transform European subjectivities. Consider the infamous case of

the photographs of young Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who drowned and was washed ashore on a Turkish beach. While it is true that the harrowing image prompted a shift in the stance of some European governments toward accepting refugees (a decision not devoid of cynicism), as well as a sense of guilt among the populace for having overlooked the victims of war, the reality is that this hospitality soon morphed into renewed distrust and fear toward migrants.

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