

Fernanda Albuquerque

Doris Salcedo

## Artist and institution: a painful encounter

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Translated by Roberto Cataldo Costa

**Abstract:** This interview is about the work process of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo regarding her work *Shibboleth*, developed for *Turbine Hall*, at London's Tate Modern (2007) as part of the Unilever Series.

**Keywords:** Artist. Contemporary art. Context. Institution. Criticism. Doris Salcedo.

*Shibboleth* is Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's 2007 work made for Turbine Hall – the grand entrance hall of London's Tate Modern.<sup>1</sup> The work features a huge crack in the museum's gigantic lobby. A slit, a crack, a rupture, a cut, a fault. It is part of the so-called *Unilever Series*, a program developed between 2000 and 2012 and dedicated to annual commissioning of works created especially for Turbine Hall.

The term *shibboleth* refers to an Old Testament passage. It means a custom, a phrase or a particular use of language that works as a test of belonging to a group or community. By definition, it is used to exclude those considered inadequate or unfit to be part of a particular group.

Although *Shibboleth* takes shape as some sort of reverse of the monumental, the work's scale and the way it encompasses space have something spectacular, both for the image of destruction it produces – the fact that the gesture in question concerns the building as a whole, that is, it seems to check its foundations, its structure – and for the characteristics of the place where it is installed. Therefore, although *Shibboleth* occurs on the floor of Turbine Hall, its intervention affects that space, our perception of it and its monumentality as a whole.

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1. Tate Modern is a museum dedicated to modern and contemporary art produced in England and abroad from 1900 to the present day. The institution is part of the Tate complex, which also includes the museums Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives, and whose collection includes over 70,000 works. The museum is located on the south bank of the River Thames, in an old electrical station designed English architect Giles Gilbert Scott and remodeled by Swiss architects Herzog & De Meuron. Turbine Hall, the institution's main entrance hall, is 152 meters long, 22 meters wide and 35 meters high.

This interview was held at the artist's Bogotá studio in November 2013. It is part of the PhD thesis *Artistic practices oriented to context and criticism in the institutional sphere*, developed at the PPGAV-UFRGS with Prof. Mônica Zielinsky as its advisor.<sup>2</sup>

### Fernanda Albuquerque:

How was the research process around Turbine Hall and Tate Modern for proposing *Shibboleth*?

### Doris Salcedo:

I get the impression that for the Western world, Tate is like the cultural heart of Europe. It is really a place that managed to become a public space in the deepest sense of the term. There people think and reflect on highly important aspects of life. So when I'm invited – I'm a Third World person and I still use that term – the question is: What can I take to that center, that heart, to the center of the empire? I'll take myself, what I am, what I bring with me, a Third World person – we are clearly unwanted in Europe. What can I bring to a museum, to the center of art? The history of Western art is a history of white people. Since Byzantium the image of Christ has rapidly whitened. There was no Jew from Palestine – he's become Europeanized. I was very interested to see what role museums and art played in building racist thinking. That on the one hand. On the other hand, how are we dark-skinned people seen in the First World? How do they see us? Of course we are unwanted, we break Europe's cultural homogeneity. Besides, wherever we go there will be a fence, literally, to prevent us from entering. Therefore, inside the fissure there is a net. On the other hand, I was interested in the fact that the space occupied is a negative space. Everything is negative.

### FA:

What do you mean by negative space?

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2. *Práticas artísticas orientadas ao contexto e crítica em âmbito institucional*. The thesis was defended in June 2015 and the work was sponsored by PROPG-UFRGS (Grant for short scientific missions abroad) and Capes (PhD Scholarship at PPGAV-UFRGS e split PhD studies at TRAIN-UAL, London with Prof. Dr. Michael Asbury as co-advisor). Ricardo Romanoff translated the interview from Spanish into Portuguese.

**DS:**

Immigrants are called an underclass, a term that horrifies me – I find it hard to believe that it exists and it is used. Besides, all connotations are negative. If you are Colombian you are in the drug trade; we are supposed to be thieves... The Third World takes everything: disorder, from sexual to whatever. They think we're dirty... There is this whole stereotype about dark-skinned people from the Third World – Africa, Asia, Latin America. We'll always be inscribed within this negative frame of the negative. So I wanted to literally open up a negative space. And I was also interested in fissuring the museum institution because I believe that the museum participated in racism. You go to the galleries and, with a few exceptions, a *Juan de Pareja* by Velázquez, another black figure in Bosch's paintings... At the birth of Jesus, a black mage king is very rare, Degas's contortionist... But they are specific cases where we appear. So I was interested in taking that presence there. I was obviously thinking about context. Context defines the work: it means dying when crossing borders. Searching for that promised land, a person can travel under a train or a truck, cross the Mediterranean, die to get to that promised land that is a fallacy. That was my view.

**FA:**

From what you're saying, the research process came from your own research as an artist.

**DS:**

Of course racism was something I was interested in, but this interest appeared punctually at that moment. I begin to study all the physical obstacles that First World countries establish in order for these unwanted people not to enter. The fences, for example, these terrible moats of Ceuta and Melilla, fences with wire and all kinds of sharp elements to prevent them from crossing. There are so many sub-Saharan Africans who were cut all over or died hanging... These images were very important. The *pateras*, these small rafts sinking in the Mediterranean with sub-Saharan Africans who can't swim, horrified and absolutely immobile – during the journey and even when they are sinking. So immobile that they often lose their lower limbs and need to have their legs amputated. There are terrible migrations. And that seemed to make a lot of sense

to me in the context of racism in art; it's the same thing. Art is a very strong, very assertive device which helped forming the image of beautiful. Blue eyes are the color of the sky; red hair is the color of the sun... In language you'll find everything. To be *fair* means not only that you have white skin, but also that you are just. And the connection with darkness is always negative. So I was interested in everything in language and that's why I set out to articulate that image.

**FA:**

And we're talking about a monument-museum.

**DS:**

A monument-museum and a museum that has... Mr. Tate makes his fortune in the Caribbean islands with sugarcane, perhaps one of the most brutal of all plantations, which requires intense labor, which used to be slave. That's where Mr. Tate's fortune comes from. Everything is connected.

**FA:**

How was the work developed? How was the relationship with the institution in the process, that is, with the several professionals and departments involved in the work?

**DS:**

This is a very difficult and somewhat hostile question because there is no clear answer. I don't like this question, I don't like answering it, but I will try, against my will because I promised Moacir [dos Anjos, who intermediated the interview]. When a proposal as aggressive as mine is presented to a museum, an equal response is to be expected. The proposal is radically aggressive: to cut the museum in half. I was aware of that. And the answer was to be expected. The museum must protect itself from such direct aggression. The museum has some highly dedicated curators who work with moving devotion to the institution. They usually earn very low wages, work under very difficult conditions, seeking to obtain money as they can. The conditions of the people working in the museum are difficult and they are protecting an institution that is valuable to society. Suddenly, in this context, an artist arrives and wants to break the museum in half. It's very difficult; it was not a decision that could be made by

the curator [Achim Borchardt-Hume, who accompanied the development and installation of the work at Tate Modern]. The curator had neither the power nor the ability to take on such a responsibility as hosting *Shibboleth*, for it was a work that permanently disfigured the museum. The museum was scarred. And it was a very difficult decision to make. I believe that the relationship with the curator was very difficult, extremely difficult, but I understand why it was so; I understand that he couldn't do it. And then the situation is solved when you go higher. In fact, it was Nicolas Serrota's support that allowed the work to be done.



Figure 1. *Shibboleth*, Doris Salcedo, 2007. Tate Modern free use © Doris Salcedo

**FA:**

How do you think that that work, on the one hand, starts from the context in which it was done, and how does it also articulate interests, reflections and procedures peculiar to your research?

**DS:**

My intention when I arrived at Turbine Hall was to take what I am to meet what the museum is. Of course I'm a political artist, so this interest was always and still is present in this work. That is, it's no surprise that I touch these topics. I take what I am and I am what I've worked with throughout my life: my relationship with victims and statements. I offer what interests me, the political stances I have always taken.

There's no art for me without that. It has to be political. If it's not, it's hard for me to understand it.

**FA:**

Is it possible to say that the work articulates critical thinking around the context in which it is produced and for which it is realized?

**DS:**

It's somewhat obvious that the work articulates critical thinking. It's absolutely obvious, because the work itself is the evidence that there are – geological and institutional – faults in society. They are like these geological faults that are a metaphor for everything. I think the work is critical. It seems somewhat obvious to me that the work does articulate critical thinking. I also think the answer is in my first response to you. The thinking criticizes the stance of Western museums, of art. Not only the museum as an institution, but also the practice of art. And the visions society has about immigrants. I think I answered these two critical approaches in your first question. The opening in the floor itself, in the foundations of the institution, is absolutely obvious. I wouldn't know how to define it any other way. The geological fault is in society, it's in the museum institution, it's in art.

**FA:**

And there is the fact that this is the first intervention in this space that doesn't add anything to the place, that doesn't use the space to present something monumental.

**DS:**

That's because our presence is negative. The presence of immigrants or Third World people is negative, it doesn't really enter society. I was highly interested in changing that perspective. When people enter that space, they usually look up and there is a narcissistic view: "Wow, we humans are capable of building such spaces!" In fact I don't think the space is so wonderful or that the industrial space has something extraordinary. It's common and current for its time. Yes, it's got beautiful proportions, but not for people to respond by marveling at what humans are able to build upwards in terms of power, as an architecture of power. So I was highly interested in changing perspective and looking down. Where is that underclass? Where are we? Where is real life?

Where are those who have fallen? The fallen are there. Those below are literally there – below. I was very interested in that change of perspective. The answer about the relationship with the institution... I'm faithful, absolutely faithful [to the institution]. I don't want to be disloyal to the institution. That's why I won't give you more information. I think providing this information is up to the institution if they want to, not to me. The institution has a way of working that must be ordered so they can function as an institution. And artists have a way of working that must be stronger, a little more chaotic, disorderly, so they can have an impact. Such encounter is painful. The artist's encounter with the institution is painful both for the artist and for the institution. It's rather painful.

**FA:**

To conclude, I'd like to know how long it took to design and complete the work.

**DS:**

I don't remember it well – about 15 or 16 months. I went [to London] in early summer 2006 and presented the proposal already in October, very fast, to open in 2007. It took 14 months of work in Bogotá and a month of work in London. But it was all done here [in Bogotá]; the work was physically built here. Everything was built here and taken to London. It's a really complex construction. The interior is very complex, it has very complex challenges in terms of descriptive geometry. We were really trying to imitate the telluric movement. All the construction work was done in Colombia. What was done there [in London] was cutting the surface of the floor, removing a section, making an excavation and bringing the piece that came from Bogotá, built with structural beams that don't weaken the building – on the contrary, they reinforce it. It's an engineering job.

**FA:**

Would you like to add anything, any comments or information?

**DS:**

No, there isn't. The piece seems so clear to me that any words I might add would impoverish it. I think the piece doesn't need any mediation, it doesn't suit it.

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**Doris Salcedo:** was born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1958. She studied Arts at the University of Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, graduating in 1980, and completed a Master's degree at New York University in 1984. Most of her sculptures and installations, such as *Shibboleth*, have as their starting point the experience of the excluded and marginalized, victims of political and social violence. Some of her works start from particular historical events. Many of them are the result of collective undertakings in collaboration with architects, engineers and assistants, which is *Shibboleth's* case.

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**Fernanda Albuquerque:** is an art curator and a professor at UFRGS Museology School and Graduate Program in Museology and Heritage at the same institution. She holds a PhD in Visual Arts – History, Theory and Criticism from PPGAV-UFRGS, with an internship at the University of the Arts (UAL) in London. She was Assistant Curator of the 8th Mercosur Biennial (2011) and Curator of Visual Arts at the São Paulo Cultural Center (2008-2010). She has already developed projects at institutions such as Tomie Ohtake Institute, Goethe Institut Porto Alegre, Santander Cultural, Mercosur Biennial, São Paulo Biennial, Gabriela Mistral Gallery, Ecarta Foundation, Murillo La Greca Museum, and Maria Antonia University Center. Since 2014 she has been holding the Curatorial, Art and Education Laboratory with editions in Porto Alegre, Florianópolis, Rio de Janeiro, Vitória and São Paulo, working with artist and curator Mônica Hoff.

(\*)This text was submitted in October 2017.