

**Precarious occupations:  
The fragile figure of home in contemporary art**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“Precarious Occupations: The Fragile Figure of Home in Contemporary Art”**

This dissertation addresses contemporary art’s capacity to facilitate ethical encounters with the suffering of others. Arguing that any effort to understand how trauma marks the present must also recognize ours as an age in which “home,” particularly for those vulnerable to contingency (the exile, the migrant, the asylum seeker, the homeless), can no longer accommodate its presumed status as a stable haven from the troubled world, I identify and analyze a select group of contemporary artists who seek to mediate legacies and conditions of trauma through representations or evocations of the fractured, fragile, or otherwise unsettled home. In the practices of Krzysztof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar, Emily Jacir, Ursula Biemann, Yto Barrada, Tony Labat, and Mona Hatoum, I suggest, loss is represented as an “unhomely” experience and home is imagined and remembered as a site of provisionality, a lost territory of belonging, and a tenuously sustained but tenaciously held memory. Drawing on but also challenging the assumptions of psychoanalytically-informed trauma studies, I furthermore suggest that these practices harness the constructive and creative nature of melancholic attachment to loss in order to facilitate recognition of both the material nature of loss and the universality of human vulnerability. I propose that the fragile figuration of home, which I theorize as an “unhomely” aesthetic, has a twofold function: first, to construct (literally or figuratively) a material structure around loss that preempts the cathartic resolution of unresolved situations; and second, to imagine this material structure as a liminal space of unresolved trauma that articulates the fragility of self-other relations and, in the process, transforms home into a potential site for empathetic engagements with the suffering of others. In the process, these artists provide critical insights into how we might bear ethical witness to the suffering of others, and how contemporary art might be uniquely positioned to facilitate such an experience.





## RÉSUMÉ

### “Occupations précaires: la figure fragile du domicile dans l’art contemporain”

Cette thèse aborde la capacité qu’a l’art contemporain de faciliter des rencontres éthiques avec la souffrance des autres. En tentant de saisir la manière dont le traumatisme marque le présent, il nous incombe de constater que le « domicile » à notre époque, particulièrement pour ceux vulnérables aux imprévus (l’exilé, le migrant, le demandeur d’asile, le sans-abri) n’a plus la stabilité nécessaire pour pouvoir soutenir son statut traditionnel de refuge au sein d’un monde perturbant. Dans cet esprit, cet ouvrage identifie et analyse le travail d’un nombre d’artistes contemporains cherchant à négocier les conditions et les héritages du traumatisme à travers de multiples représentations ou évocations d’un domicile fracturé, fragile ou autrement déstabilisé. Son corpus est donc précis, incluant le travail de Krzysztof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar, Emily Jacir, Ursula Biemann, Yto Barrada, Tony Labat, et Mona Hatoum. Je propose que la notion de perte est représentée dans ces œuvres comme expérience de « l’abri inquiet » (*unhomely*) et que le domicile est imag(in)é en tant que site provisoire, un territoire d’appartenance perdu, un souvenir qui persiste obstinément malgré son caractère précaire. M’appuyant (tout en les contestant) sur les théories psychanalytiques du traumatisme, je soutiens que ces pratiques artistiques exploitent l’attachement mélancolique à la perte dans sa dimension constructive et créatrice afin de mieux saisir la nature matérielle de celle-ci ainsi que l’universalité de la vulnérabilité humaine. Je propose d’examiner la figuration fragile du domicile, que je théorise en tant qu’esthétique de « l’abri inquiet », sous ses deux fonctions. D’abord, sa capacité de constituer (au sens propre ou figuré) une structure matérielle autour de la perte qui anticipe une résolution cathartique de situations irrésolues. Mais aussi sa capacité de produire un espace liminal traumatique irrésolu qui dévoile la fragilité des relations soi-autre tout en transformant le domicile en un lieu potentiel d’engagement empathique avec la souffrance de l’autre. En articulant ces deux

fonctions de « l’abri inquiet », les artistes du corpus formulent des intuitions critiques sur la manière dont nous, en tant que public, pourrions témoigner de la souffrance de l’autre dans une dimension éthique, ainsi que sur la potentialité de l’art contemporain de faciliter de telles rencontres.

Trad. par Marc Couroux

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*Take me as a relic from the mansion of sorrow.  
Take me as a verse from my tragedy;  
Take me as a toy, a brick from the house  
So that our children will remember to return.*

Mahmud Darwish



## INTRODUCTION

### Precarious occupations

#### The fragile figure of home in contemporary art

In 1995, South Africa launched its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a non-judicial forum to hear and record testimony from victims and perpetrators of race-based violence in order to facilitate the process of collective healing in the troubled country. That same year, the lesser-known Commission on Restitution of Land Rights was also convened. Designed to arbitrate the land claims of black South Africans whose property had been confiscated under racist Apartheid laws, the Land Commission—referred to by its first chief as the “Cinderella of commissions”<sup>1</sup>—failed to capture the public’s (and world’s) interest in the manner of the TRC, and for several years only the most modest of progress was made.<sup>2</sup> In his 2003 “Theorizing the Loss of Land,” historian David Johnson seeks to understand this apparent failure. Investigating the tribulations of the Land Commission in the context of Sigmund Freud’s distinction between mourning (the therapeutic working through of grief) and melancholy (a

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<sup>1</sup> Land Commission chief Joe Saremane, in Ann Eveleth, “Land Restitution Lags Behind,” *Mail and Guardian* (Cape Town), 12-18 December 1997, 12; cited in David Johnson, “Theorizing the Loss of Land: Griqua Land Claims in Southern Africa, 1874-1998,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 290.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of 1998, over 36,000 claims had been filed, and only nineteen settled (see *ibid.*). However, procedural changes to the Commission in the late 1990s led to a dramatic increase in settlements; as of February 2009, 75,000 claims have been settled and 2.3 million hectares of land restored to 300,000 households (see South African Government Information, “Media Statement Issued by the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights Regarding Progress on the Restitution Process,” 3 February 2009, <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2009/09030413451004.htm>), although Johnson also notes that a 1997 survey identified 25.6 million people in need of land. For analysis of land claims commissions in both South Africa and Canada, see Joan G. Fairweather, *A Common Hunger: Land Rights in Canada and South Africa* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006).

pathological attachment to the lost object, or mourning without end),<sup>3</sup> Johnson wonders whether the post-Apartheid justice process, premised on the assumptions and goals of testimony and conflict resolution—or the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis—can adequately accommodate issues of rights and reparation. Asking provocatively whether it is “possible to mourn something you want back,” Johnson suggests that the “hierarchy of loss” (in other words, the privileging of mourning over melancholia) that is explicit in the Freudian model and implicit in South Africa’s adoption of that model neglects to properly address the material dimensions of loss.<sup>4</sup> Johnson proposes that in cases of social justice where redress is sought, it is necessary instead to consider the productive potential of melancholia’s persistent attachment to what has been lost, advocating a “state of incomplete mourning...as the subjects actively and creatively seek to make good the loss suffered.”<sup>5</sup>

In this dissertation, I identify and analyze a select group of contemporary artists who likewise insist on acknowledging both the materiality of traumatic experience and the constructive and creative nature of melancholic attachment to the losses sustained by violence and oppression. I suggest that these artists—including Krzysztof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar, Emily Jacir, Ursula Biemann, Yto Barrada, Tony Labat, and Mona Hatoum—seek to mediate legacies and conditions of trauma through representations or evocations of the fractured, fragile, or otherwise unsettled home. In these works, I argue, loss is represented as an “unhomely” experience—an experience, to quote post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, where the often-elided links between “the

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<sup>3</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, “Theorizing the Loss of Land,” 293.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history” and “the wider disjunctions of political existence”<sup>6</sup> are brought to life.

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze these art works, and to investigate how, to what ends, and to what effect these representations or evocations of home as a precariously occupied space intervene in recent debates taking place in both contemporary art discourse and the burgeoning field of trauma studies. My central problematic will follow three interconnected vectors: First, how do trauma-related art practices deploy the concept of home as a lever for catalyzing empathetic responses to traumatic experience? Second, can recent critical developments in theorizing the culture of trauma provide a useful model for rethinking and reevaluating an inclination in recent art practice and theory to seek resolution and reconciliation via recourse to Freudian models of trauma recovery? Finally, can art practices that convey the unhomely as a tactical site for what historian Dominick LaCapra terms “empathetic unsettlement”<sup>7</sup> articulate possibilities for more complex understandings, and even enactments, of ethical intersubjectivity? I propose that the fragile figuration of home has a twofold function: first, to construct (literally or figuratively) a material structure around loss that preempts the cathartic resolution of unresolved situations; and second, to imagine this material structure as a liminal space of unresolved trauma that articulates the fragility of self-other relations through the motif of “home,” a concept that has itself become as fragmented, disillusioned and fragile as the concept of “self” in contemporary society. I argue that these art projects, which in a certain sense endeavor to give loss a home, transform this home into a potential site for empathetic intersubjective encounters based on shared acknowledgement

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<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 144.

<sup>7</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).



**FIGURE 1.1**  
Donald Rodney, *In the House of My Father*, 1996-97



**FIGURE 1.2**  
Steve McQueen, *Deadpan*, 1997 (video still)



of what Judith Butler calls the “universality of human precariousness.”<sup>8</sup> In the process, these artists enable critical insights into how we might bear ethical witness to the suffering of others, and how contemporary art might be uniquely positioned to facilitate such an experience.

To properly frame my objectives, let us briefly consider a few artworks, all of which point to contemporary art’s engagement with home as both metonym and locus of human vulnerability. The first is Donald Rodney’s *In the House of My Father* (1996-97), a close-up photograph of the artist’s outstretched hand cradling a miniature makeshift house, barely held together with pushpins and constructed with sections of the artist’s own skin removed during surgery to treat sickle-cell anemia (a disease to which Rodney succumbed the following year) (fig. 1.1). The second, Steve McQueen’s silent four-minute film *Deadpan* (1996), is an homage to the slapstick comedies of Buster Keaton in which the façade of a house falls over the artist standing motionless in front of it, who is saved by an empty window frame; the scenario, filmed repeatedly from various angles and projected in slow motion on a wall-sized screen, transforms a comedic gag into the obsessive reenactment of a near-death experience (fig. 1.2). The third work is *In This House* (2005) by Akram Zaatari, a two-channel video installation documenting the artist’s search for a letter buried in a backyard in southern Lebanon by a soldier who occupied the home in 1978 during the protracted Civil War; the letter’s excavation—accompanied by interviews with prior and present occupants—reveals a tension between the desire to unearth the past and the equally strong impulse to bury its painful memories (fig. 1.3). Finally, and perhaps most patently, is Rachel Whiteread’s public installation *House* (2003), which saw an entire terraced house in London’s East End cast in concrete *in situ*;

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 40.



**FIGURE 1.3**  
Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005



**FIGURE 1.4**  
Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993

the resulting sculpture is an inverted and hauntingly immobilized domestic interior both permanently enclosed and brutally exposed. Offering prosaic traces of past occupancy (from wallpaper patterns to the imprints of worn doorknobs), it stood as a silent monument to the lives that define a sense of place and the places that mark their inevitable absence (fig. 1.4). In all of these works, “home” is figured as a fragile space whose anticipated capacity to provide shelter to its human inhabitants is radically compromised. But the works also point to home’s tenacious, if tenuous, function as a site of belonging and a locus of memory. Whether it is evoked as a metaphor (in Rodney’s work) for the body’s own fragility, an enactment (in McQueen’s piece) of the instability of our structures of inhabitation, or an archive of sorts (in Whiteread’s and Zaatari’s projects) in which memories of belonging and attachment exist as silent relics, home in recent art practices figures as a site of traumatic memory whose fractured remains nevertheless serve as melancholic traces of a lost but not forgotten past.

We live, as many commentators have observed, in an age of trauma. Although the condition is conventionally linked to the epistemic forces (large-scale mechanized warfare, mass atrocity and annihilation, and alienating processes of urbanization, industrialization and colonization) that characterize the modern age,<sup>9</sup> it is undoubtedly the postmodern period that has embraced the culture of trauma as its own. As Andreas Huyssen suggests, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been “haunted by trauma”<sup>10</sup>—a spectre that arises ever more frequently in discourses surrounding everything from slavery and apartheid, to AIDS, to child abuse and family violence, to the September 2001 attacks in Washington and Manhattan. At a global level, however, any effort to

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<sup>9</sup> See E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

understand how traumatic experience marks the present must also recognize ours as the age of mass migration—a period of unprecedented mobility, often involuntary and often involving oppressive and alienating experiences of exile, asylum, immigration, internal displacement, and statelessness. A brief look at United Nations statistics from 2007—sixteen million documented refugees worldwide (up from ten million the previous year), an unprecedented fifty-one million internally displaced persons (roughly half uprooted by natural disaster and the other half by political conflict), and an additional twelve million people classified as stateless<sup>11</sup>—lends credence to political philosopher Giorgio Agamben's hypothesis that the refugee "is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time."<sup>12</sup> But while for Agamben, the refugee marks a radical crisis in the anachronistic concept of nation that will enable the advent of new forms of political community unmoored from the "originary fiction of [state] sovereignty,"<sup>13</sup> the lived realities of the refugee (and, to varying extents, the immigrant, the exile, the asylum seeker, the stateless, and the urban homeless) also demand recognition of the daily struggles, humiliations, and sense of radical alienation suffered by those millions of people whose lives have been upended by war, famine, ethnic cleansing, poverty and, increasingly, climate change.<sup>14</sup> Home, for these millions of displaced and disenfranchised citizens of the world, is inextricably linked to trauma and loss.

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<sup>11</sup> UN Refugee Agency, "2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons," June 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" (1993), in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>14</sup> In 2007, the non-profit group Christian Aid released an alarming report predicting that increasingly scarce resources around the world, caused by global climate change, would lead to an unprecedented crisis of forced migration and territorial conflict. See Christian Aid, "Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis," May 2007, <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/human-tide.pdf>.

Nor is the Western world immune from the twenty-first century's increasingly unsettled relationship to home. As I write this, a sub-prime mortgage crisis and ensuing global economic meltdown, coupled with already increasing levels of poverty and destitution, have seen millions of American individuals and families lose their homes in the past year.<sup>15</sup> Then, at a collective level with global consequences, the attacks of 9/11 constituted—as many have noted—a shattering of the North American illusion of safety and security; the chickens, so the adage goes, came home to roost on that day, and the American conception of home would itself be permanently altered. As I argue in the second chapter of this study, if the promise of home (or homeland) as a safe haven from the troubles of the world has always been a myth screening out more brutal realities both at home and just outside its borders, then that myth is simply no longer sustainable.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, America's collective sense of homeland (in)security had international repercussions that only exacerbated the precarious state of contemporary global society following 9/11. At various levels, response to the attacks—the formation of a federal department of Homeland Security, heightened restrictions on entry into the country, and countless reports of hostility to, even violence against, Muslim-Americans—saw the US quickly transformed into a uniquely “unhomely” place of fear, suspicion, and xenophobia, while the subsequent launch of a “war on terror,” resulting in the wars against and the occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq, witnessed

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<sup>15</sup> A snapshot of the crisis provided by <http://www.realtytrac.com>, an online marketplace that tracks and advertises foreclosed and bank-owned properties: In the first three months of 2008, almost 650,000 homes were foreclosed in the US—a 112 percent increase from the first quarter of 2007.

<sup>16</sup> As Slavoj Žižek observes insightfully, “the US, which, until now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing this kind of things only from the safe distance of the TV screen, is now directly involved”—the image on the screen, in other words, “has entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality).” In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 16.

massive refugee crises in both countries as citizens fled their homes in the face of war.<sup>17</sup>

The question this dissertation asks is: In what ways can contemporary art respond productively to “the aftermath of displacements, migrations, enslavements, diasporas, cultural hybridities and nostalgic yearnings” that art historian Irit Rogoff has identified as the conditions of contemporary subjectivity?<sup>18</sup> Taking as my starting point Rogoff’s assertion that art, which can no longer presume a transcendent position vis-à-vis the world, has instead assumed the role of an interlocutor that “chases [us] around and forces [us] to think things differently, at another register,”<sup>19</sup> I argue that the art practices surveyed in this study, which materialize both the spaces of loss and the borders of hope, possess a unique capacity to propose new models of intersubjectivity that recognize the precariousness of human existence.

### **The parameters of the study**

I begin this study with a review, in chapter 1, of the fundamental tenets of trauma theory and some of the debates that its application has engendered, with particular attention to the recent attention to melancholia as a constructive model for politicizing traumatic experience. In this chapter, I also consider how the questions raised in theorizing trauma have facilitated the formulation of what might be called an ethical aesthetics of secondary witnessing, and I explore how theorists apply such an ethics to the work of artists seeking to mediate ethical

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<sup>17</sup> According to the UN Refugee Agency’s annual “Global Trends” report, an astonishing twenty-seven percent of the global refugee population in 2007 originated in Afghanistan. In 2008, the non-profit lobbying organization International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimated that over four million Iraqi civilians had been displaced by the five-year conflict. See IRC, “Iraqi Refugees in Dire Straits,” March 2008, <http://theirc.org/where/iraq>.

<sup>18</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

encounters between traumatic events in the past and spectatorship in the present. Finally, advancing my claim that a significant aesthetic strategy for achieving this goal is the employment of home as a trope of unsettlement in representations of trauma, I consider the literature that has emerged from the aesthetic of the uncanny (the *unheimlich*, which translates literally into the “unhomely”), often associated (especially in Freudian psychoanalysis) with the repression of trauma. I briefly trace the genealogy of the term, with particular attention to the ways in which it has been taken up in postcolonial theory, and the ways in which this shift allows for the theorization of the “unhomely” as both a condition of contemporary global society and an aesthetic strategy for mediating the traumatizing consequences of the precarious occupation of domestic space and facilitating ethical practices of witnessing.

The remainder of the study is organized into four chapters, all of which investigate different ways in which home has been troped in contemporary art practices that seek to convey the precariousness of human existence and to propose new models for intersubjective encounters with the suffering of others. The artworks whose analysis forms the bulk of this study were all produced from the 1990s to the present, and indeed one of my central claims is that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a unique and global confluence of pressures associated with the occupation of space that have been addressed in art practices committed to testing and advancing visual culture’s capacity to respond ethically and aesthetically to the challenges of geopolitical displacement. My analysis begins, however, with a short step back in time. In chapter 2, I trace a twentieth-century genealogy of Western art’s troubled relationship to home, beginning with the avant-garde rejection of the domestic realm in favor of an exalted state of existential exile (which I link, however, to the pervasive condition of geopolitical exile that accompanied the intra- and post-

war periods). Suggesting that the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a paradigmatic shift in artists' attention to home (precipitated by a range of contemporaneous social concerns, from feminist reevaluations of the domestic sphere to a sharp rise in urban homelessness across North America), I focus on two artists, Martha Rosler and Gordon Matta-Clark, both of whom expose the home as a fractured and fragile space of social contest and repressed desire. I concentrate in particular on Rosler's photo-collage series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* of 1967-72 (which inserts harrowing scenes of war in Vietnam into pristine settings of suburban domesticity) and Matta-Clark's literal interventions into domestic spaces (such as the 1974 *Splitting*, in which the artist cleaved a suburban house in two), and I argue that Rosler and Matta-Clark can be understood as significant antecedents to more contemporary investigations of the precarious occupation of home; their strategies of engagement with both its conceptual and lived realities reveal their work to have uncanny relevance to today's social and aesthetic contexts. At the same time, however, comparison with recent practices that clearly draw on Rosler and Matta-Clark in both formal and conceptual ways also reveals the extent to which the stakes of representing home have shifted in the past fifteen to twenty years.

My intentions in this chapter are threefold: First, I examine twentieth-century instances of the fragile figuration of home in order to provide a measure of historical (and art historical) context for current aesthetic practices. Although, as I argue throughout this study, ongoing contemporary crises of displacement have compelled artists to respond innovatively to the challenges of bearing witness to the suffering of others, it also seems important to acknowledge that the vocabulary employed by current artists does not emerge from nowhere, but rather contains within it important precedents that can serve to both frame and nuance current aesthetic and ethical concerns. Second, I use this chapter as an



opportunity to reconsider the work of Matta-Clark and Rosler, especially in light of a recent renewal of interest in both artists. Without seeking to “traumatize” the practices of two artists whose concerns clearly privileged the political over the melancholic, I nevertheless argue that, seen from today’s perspective, their work is haunted by a future in which home is increasingly understood as a precariously occupied space of shelter and belonging. Finally, I introduce ways in which the strategic figuration of the fragile home has recently been employed to register the unprecedentedly unhomely nature of contemporary global society. Comparing the practices of Matta-Clark and Rosler to recent works by Paulette Phillips, Vito Acconci and Melanie Friend, I argue that whereas Rosler and Matta-Clark in a sense declared war on the American home in order to expose its entangled complicity with multiple socio-political problematics of the day, artists today are instead insistently charting the traumatic impact of war, exile, poverty, and oppression as these phenomena mark the home itself as a zone of war whose presumed status as a shelter from global realities is as shaky and tenuous as the façade that tumbles over and over again in Steve McQueen’s haunting video.

In the third chapter, I theorize the ways in which an unhomely effect is harnessed in contemporary art to convey the unsettling impact of geopolitical dislocation, and analyze both the advantages and limits of applying psychoanalytically informed trauma theory to such practices. My focus here is on Polish-American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, both of whom treat the themes of social alienation and geographical displacement, and both of whom engage an uncanny aesthetic that reveals the condition of not-belonging to be deeply traumatic. The differences, however, between the artists’ strategies of engagement are as illuminating as their commonalities. In works like *Ægis: Equipment for a City of Strangers* (1998), a wearable device that allows its user to address strangers via a prosthetic screen,

Krzysztof Wodiczko draws explicitly on the psychoanalytic methodologies of Freud and Julia Kristeva in order to propose that art possesses the capacity to facilitate testimonial acts that, by publicly airing repressed or concealed narratives of alienation, might contribute to healing the wounds of not-belonging while creating opportunities for productive stranger relations. Santiago Sierra, on the other hand, insists on pouring salt onto the wounds of alienation. In projects like *Workers who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* (2000), for which Sierra hired undocumented Chechen asylum seekers in Berlin a minimal stipend to sit concealed inside boxes for four hours per day, Sierra excludes any possibility of art's therapeutic value, instead proposing that at best, aesthetic practices have the capacity to draw dramatic attention to forces of marginalization and xenophobia by reenacting them in settings where their traumatizing effects cannot be easily overlooked. Employing Dominick LaCapra's insights into the ways in which representational practices tend either to "work through" trauma by producing harmonizing narratives of closure and catharsis (a tendency I associate with Wodiczko's therapeutic work) or to "act out" suffering with melancholic re-enactments of traumatic experience (which I identify in Sierra's antagonistic practice), I argue that both models actually risk foreclosing on art's potential to facilitate ethical engagement with the suffering of others—an engagement that would seek neither premature closure nor some sort of re-traumatization but instead a spectatorial position of empathetic unsettlement—elaborated in the following pages as a subversion of the working-through/acting-out binary opposition.

Chapter 4 tests LaCapra's hypothesis on the practice of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, whose work, I argue, exemplifies the aesthetics of empathetic unsettlement. Portraying the precarious occupation of home as a catalyst for intersubjective relations based on neither the false transcendence of working

through nor the nihilistic resignation of acting out, Salcedo's work activates an unhomely effect that treats empathy itself as an unsettling experience, and home as a fragile archive of memory and belonging. I focus in particular on an untitled 2003 public installation that saw hundreds of wooden chairs piled, like corpses in a mass grave, into an empty lot in a working-class neighborhood of Istanbul. Arguing that melancholic attachment to loss has the capacity to produce collective sources of political agency, I apply recent theorizations of the archive as an unstable repository for traces of the past to theorize Salcedo's installation as a "melancholic archive"—an archive that clings to its status as a home for loss but also recognizes its own ontological provisionality. In this and other works, Salcedo enacts a process of excavation and archivization that translates testimonies and experiences of trauma into haunting evocations of loss—spaces of contemplation and remembrance that, by failing to coalesce into sites of closure or redemption, disclose art's capacity to unsettle our collective access to the past while insisting nevertheless on ethical engagement with the suffering of others.

In the fifth and final chapter, I shift gears slightly to attend to the contemporary art world's own troubled relationship with the concept of home. Since the mid-1990s, the embrace of what is now referred to as "biennial culture" has precipitated a series of questions connected to the ways in which international exhibitions interact with and intervene in global society's uneasy (and uneven) processes of neoliberal globalization. In this chapter, I address the biennialization of contemporary art in the context of geopolitical conditions of migration and exile. Here I ask: Does biennial culture offer a utopian vision of transnational harmony? Or does it simply epitomize the colonizing tendencies of global corporatism? Treating biennial culture as an example of what postcolonial theorist David Scott terms the "problem-spaces" of contemporary society—

spaces that host “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs”<sup>20</sup>—I argue that large-scale international exhibitions tend to engage in a kind of complicit critique: they participate in and profit from the deterritorialization of the global marketplace, but are therefore also uniquely positioned to address its excesses. I focus specifically on the Second International Seville Biennial of Contemporary Art, curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2006 and entitled *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, an exhibition which both investigated and was itself haunted by global society’s “phantom scenes” of unsettled cohabitation. Suggesting that the exhibition manifested what art historian Carol Becker has termed a “romance of nomadism” in the contemporary art world,<sup>21</sup> I introduce the term “reluctant nomadism” to refer to artists who challenge biennial culture’s romanticization of itineracy and transnational mobility from within. I spotlight three artists, Tony Labat, Yto Barrada and Ursula Biemann, all of whom seized the Seville Biennial as an opportunity to subtly interrogate the assumptions of transnational mobility that attach to biennial culture—assumptions that elide the traumatizing realities of exile, migration, and forced relocation that characterize the lives of those involuntary “nomads” who do not have the beneficence of a global art world underwriting their travels. Employing Mieke Bal’s concept of “migratory aesthetics” and Irit Rogoff’s advocacy of a “smuggling aesthetic,”<sup>22</sup> I argue that

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<sup>20</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Carol Becker, “The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (summer 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Mieke Bal, “Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time,” paper presented at the Encuentro II: Migratory Politics/Politics of the Migratory workshop, ASCA, Amsterdam, 19-21 September 2007, <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/page3.html>; Irit Rogoff, “‘Smuggling’: A Curatorial Model,” in *Under Construction: Perspectives on Institutional Practice*, ed. Vanessa Müller and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Köln: Walther König, 2006).

Labat, Barrada and Biemann, who participate in biennial culture while drawing subtle connections between its nomadic tendencies and the barriers and exclusions engendered by global capitalism, are reluctant nomads whose complex mediations on the unhomely migrant experience compel us to reconsider the precarity with which spaces of home are occupied in contemporary global society.

### **Coda: The limits of nostalgia**

Any study that imagines home as a site of precarity and provisionality risks sliding into the slippery realm of nostalgia. Literally a longing to return home (from the Greek *nostos*, or return home, and *algia*, or longing), nostalgia, like melancholia, is an order of feeling that attaches itself to a lost object or ideal, specifically a home or homeland. Nostalgia is furthermore inevitably an attachment to a fantasy—a fantasy rooted in personal memories, family lore, cultural narratives, and, frequently, political exigencies.<sup>23</sup> To this extent, the personal fantasy of nostalgia often accommodates, and is accommodated by, nationalist discourses that proffer a narrative of the “right of return”—a narrative which, as Irit Rogoff observes, is “problematic not only for the legitimation it provides for [contestable] territorial claims but also for the seamless naturalization of the concept of ‘home’ which it puts forth as a cultural metanarrative.”<sup>24</sup> To consider the possibility of belonging, Rogoff suggests, is to risk the naïve assumption that there, somewhere, exists a “coherent site of absolute belonging.”<sup>25</sup> In her 2000 study of the “unhomed geographies” of contemporary art and visual culture, Rogoff proposes a methodological approach

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<sup>23</sup> That nostalgia is a “romance with one’s own fantasy” is acknowledged by Svetlana Boym in her otherwise spirited reclamation of the sentiment. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

to belonging and estrangement that recognizes the contingencies of emplacement but insists nevertheless on maintaining a productive relationship with a politics of location, albeit one that is “permanently in flux.”<sup>26</sup> Such an approach, she suggests, would “puzzle out the perils of the fantasms of belonging as well as the tragedies of not belonging.”<sup>27</sup>

It is in this spirit that the present study will situate contemporary art practices that resonate with Rogoff’s description of an “unhomely geography,” which she defines as an “unease inscribed both with a sense of loss of that earlier seamless emplacement we might have thought we had and with the insecurity of not yet having a coherent alternative to inhabit.”<sup>28</sup> Seeking to communicate the embedded vulnerabilities of memory, inhabitation, and indeed human existence, the aesthetic practices that occupy this dissertation exist in a dynamic space between redemptory catharsis and resigned nihilism. In this liminal space, I locate a set of aesthetic practices wherein home is imagined as a space whose capacity to safeguard both its human inhabitants and their memories is tenuous at best. But in its precarious state, I argue, the figure of home comes to function as a productive site for negotiating ethical responses to the suffering of others, which are mobilized via what I am calling an “unhomely” aesthetic. I associate this unhomely aesthetic with art practices that treat the home as a site where the fragile but insistent traces of war, atrocity, and geopolitical displacement come to function as melancholic rem(a)inders of those traumatizing moments when the home and the world come into violent contact. In so doing, these artists also treat these moments of contact as opportunities to facilitate an ethics of witness

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15.

premised on acknowledgement of both the universality of human vulnerability and the limits of empathy.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Trauma, witness, and the aesthetics of the unhomely

*We prefer to think of buildings as solid, of home as a place of safety, of ourselves as separate from our neighbours, and of our bodies as made of living flesh not inorganic atoms. A traumatic event demonstrates how untenable, or how insecure, these distinctions and these assumptions are. It calls for nothing more or less than the recognition of the radical relationality of existence.*

Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the mediation and memorialization of trauma has become a subject of immense interest both in popular culture and in critical theory, where scholars have endeavored to identify ethical models for bearing secondary witness to traumatic experience.<sup>2</sup> In current investigations of the ethics and aesthetics of mediating traumatic memory, three key questions have emerged. First, to what extent does the contemporary fascination with commemoration “over-remember”<sup>3</sup> some events at the expense of others, and how can cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110-11.

<sup>2</sup> A by-no-means exhaustive list of significant studies not otherwise mentioned in this chapter would include Linda Belau and Petar Ramadanovic, eds., *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory* (New York: Other Press, 2002); Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Susannah Radstone, ed., *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000); Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas, eds., *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001); Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999); and Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

producers intervene in the concomitantly “differential allocation of grievability”<sup>4</sup> in memorial culture? Second, do current approaches to trauma and testimony, rooted as they tend to be in psychoanalytic theory, provide a valuable framework for “listening” to trauma’s fundamental inarticulability,<sup>5</sup> or do they instead minimize the political dimensions of historical violence and urgent questions of human rights by privileging personal narratives of suffering and recovery?<sup>6</sup> And finally, how can representational strategies deployed by authors and artists respond to mass trauma in ways that acknowledge the spatio-temporal gap separating trauma survivors and secondary witnesses? These questions are addressed throughout this dissertation, as I examine aesthetic practices that endeavor to convey traumatic memory in ways that trouble our putative access to the past. I argue, along with critics of the widespread mobilization of psychoanalytic theory in the context of trauma representation, that recourse to this model tends to neglect the material dimensions of loss, proposing a cathartic resolution that is all too often premature. In this chapter, I introduce the main theoretical concepts I will be discussing in the remainder of this thesis—namely trauma and testimony, the politics of melancholia, the ethics of witnessing, and the aesthetics of the unhomely. I contribute to these discourses by identifying ways in which the trope of the fragile home facilitates an ethics of witnessing that, by mobilizing the productive dimensions of melancholic attachment to loss, simultaneously unsettles our presumed identification with the suffering other while engaging us in affectively charged encounters with the universality of human precariousness.

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 28.

### Trauma and testimony

The 1990s witnessed the precipitous rise of a field now known as “trauma studies,” broadly speaking a poststructural engagement with psychoanalytic theory that seeks to provide a set of methodologies for bearing witness to traumatic experience, particularly in the context of Holocaust remembrance, but also, and increasingly, in other traumatizing contexts and their aftermaths. Cathy Caruth’s two major contributions to trauma theory, the anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *The Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), have become, along with Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s 1992 *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, canonical works in the field of trauma theory. Building on a psychoanalytic framework for treating massive trauma, and particularly Freud’s conceptualization of *Nachträglichkeit* (the deferred experience and compulsive repetition of a traumatic event that constitutes trauma’s hold over the subject),<sup>7</sup> Caruth proposes that the traumatic experience, which produces a shock so unanticipated and unimaginable that it cannot be assimilated at the moment of its occurrence, returns belatedly and repeatedly to possess the traumatized person “against the will of the one it inhabits.”<sup>8</sup> Thus possessed, the traumatized subject is unable to integrate the experience into memory: “The traumatized...carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>9</sup> Caruth applies this insight to her poststructural

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<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology I” (1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1966), 353-54.

<sup>8</sup> Cathy Caruth, introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5. See also Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, [1921] 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 5. Caruth also draws on Bessell A. van der Kolk’s neurophysiological theory of trauma, which argues that traumatic experiences are imprinted or engraved in

reasoning that the “impossibility” of possessing trauma challenges the secondary witness, or “listener,” to bear witness precisely to this impossibility,<sup>10</sup> and explores the ways in which psychoanalytic, cinematic, and philosophical texts “both speak about and speak through”<sup>11</sup> the impossibility of listening to trauma. Caruth proposes what she terms an “ethics of memory” to characterize these texts, and suggests, following Jacques Lacan’s notion that to awaken from a trauma-induced dream is to be awakened to “the necessity and impossibility of responding to another’s death,”<sup>12</sup> that testimony is the act of “passing the awakening on to others.”<sup>13</sup> To accept this transmission, which Caruth establishes as the role of post-traumatic cultural practices, demands an “encounter with the Real,”<sup>14</sup> an ethical imperative to listen to historical truths that can only be transmitted in the experiential and referential gaps of immediate understanding.

Like Caruth, literary theorist Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub employ a Freudian model for understanding trauma as an experience that precludes its own registration, and the testimonial process as a means of bearing witness to that aporia. In their co-written book *Testimony*, Laub pays particular attention to the Holocaust, which he describes as an event that “produced no

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the right side of the brain—an engraving that disassociates the experience from language centres in the left side of the brain, thus rendering it literally incomprehensible. For a brief introduction to van der Kolk’s theory, see Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158-82. But see also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. 229-65, a biting critique of van der Kolk’s “weakly supported” neurobiological account of trauma and the naïve tendency of “humanists,” specifically Caruth, to “take his claims to scientific accuracy at face value” (265, 305).

<sup>10</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4. Key writers for Caruth include, besides Freud and Lacan, Paul De Man and Marguerite Dumas.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. See Jacques Lacan, “Tuché and Automaton,” in *The Four Fundamentals Principles of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. In “Tuché and Automaton,” Lacan describes trauma as a “missed” encounter with the Real (55).

witnesses.”<sup>15</sup> By this, Laub means not only that the Nazi genocide sought to exterminate all eyewitnesses to the crime, but that the massive scale of the traumas inflicted rendered it impossible for survivors to find a voice with which to bear witness. Thus the transmission of traumatic memories of the Holocaust requires an interlocutor who acts as a “blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed.”<sup>16</sup> The task of the listener, then, is to participate in, even co-own, the event: “through his very listening he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.”<sup>17</sup> Shoshana Felman, however, complicates this process by insisting that the practice of bearing “secondary witness” to the “primary witness” (i.e. the traumatized party) will always constitute a *crisis* of witnessing. With Laub and Caruth, Felman theorizes Holocaust survival as an inarticulable experience (a “radically unique, non-interchangeable and solitary burden”)<sup>18</sup> that is, at the same time, an address to others. This apparent paradox paves the way for Felman’s proposition that psychoanalysis offers a framework for rethinking testimony in all its myriad forms, “by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to possess or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it.”<sup>19</sup> The task of the secondary witness, therefore, is twofold: to devise methods of bearing witness to testimony that

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<sup>15</sup> Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Marita Sturken injects a feminist analysis into this concept, arguing that the analyst’s commitment to believing the patient (which Laub contrasts with the historian’s insistence on historical fact) is particularly relevant in the context of women’s memories of sexual abuse, because “the question of belief is inextricably tied to the history of disbelief with which women’s testimony has been received.” See “Narratives of Recovery: Repressed Memory as Cultural Memory,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 237.

<sup>18</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

escapes narrativization<sup>20</sup> and to formulate an ethics of witnessing that will catalyze a “community of listeners” in the present and future.<sup>21</sup>

The basic tenets of trauma theory as proposed by Caruth, Felman and Laub—the belatedness and inexpressibility of trauma, and the challenge of bearing witness to that which it is impossible to tell—have been mobilized in studies and practices pertaining to mass trauma and the ethics of bearing witness that far exceed the spatial and temporal domain of Holocaust studies. Indeed the issues, insights, and critical vocabulary of Holocaust-related trauma studies have proven paradigmatic in their transfer to other sites of extreme human suffering, a development welcomed by Andreas Huyssen, who suggests that Holocaust studies has become a globalizing discourse that (notwithstanding the critiques of theorists who “lament the relativization of the Holocaust when it attaches itself...to historically very different situations”) enables the articulation of global strategies of critical cultural memory.<sup>22</sup> In the present study, we will see how

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<sup>20</sup> For this task, Felman privileges modernist non-narrative literature (such as that of Albert Camus and Paul Celan)—a stance that has been criticized by scholars like Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, who argue that Felman’s arguably West-centric, “high-culture” bias “is surprisingly prescriptive, and blind to the cultural contexts in which practices of representation and commemoration are produced and enacted.” See their introduction to *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, ed. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 10.

<sup>21</sup> On the risks, limits, and productive potential of forming communities around trauma, see Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, eds., *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), an anthology that posits that communities are forged through testimonies of trauma that shift private suffering into public memory. On the formation of communities of trauma as sources of collective political agency, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003); and Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 99. This transferal of theoretical frameworks has been a source of concern to some, like historian Dominick LaCapra, who theorize the Holocaust as a “limit event” whose terms of reference cannot be transferred without distortion, and who censure especially the inclination to conflate the traumas associated with the Holocaust with post-Holocaust history *tout court*. See LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 76. But LaCapra is also careful to note that the Holocaust, while arguably the most staggering, is not the only atrocity in history to which the term “limit event” can be applied, and indeed his own work (discussed below) proposes itself as a pertinent model for the study of massive historical trauma before and since the Holocaust.

trauma theory propelled by psychoanalytic frameworks for theorizing Holocaust remembrance and testimony can and has been applied to traumatizing situations ranging from ongoing civil war in Colombia, to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, to migrant experiences in northern Africa and northern Mexico.

Huyssen, however, also stresses that such global strategies require acute attendance to the situational contingencies of traumatic experience, an emphasis that is not, according to some critics, always maintained, particularly in the application of trauma theory as formulated by Caruth, Laub and Felman. One of the objectives of this dissertation will be to identify both the productive aspects and the lacunae of trauma theory when it is applied to art practices seeking to mediate and convey traumatic experience. I argue that psychoanalytic theory provides a compelling model for understanding the challenges of bearing witness to massive loss, but question the extent to which a discourse rooted in Western practices of personal therapy can be mobilized to produce an ethics of bearing collective witness to historical atrocity as well as continuing contexts of traumatic suffering in contemporary global society.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, an ongoing concern among scholars of memory and trauma is that to consider the effects of trauma as a pathological condition is to negate or diminish the extent to which trauma, as Ann Cvetkovich argues, can be theorized as “a collective experience that

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<sup>23</sup> While peripheral to the present study, the perceived overdetermination of “authenticity” and “truth value” in witness and survivor narratives has been another source of debate that broadly pits the Lacanian Real, epitomized by Caruth’s contention that to bear witness is to enter into an ethical relation to the Real (*Unclaimed Experience*, 96) against Foucaultian discourse, which underwrites the understanding that “personal memory is always connected to social narrative” (Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, introduction to *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (London: Routledge, 1996), xx). Memory, according to Antze and Lambek, is always a product of discursive contexts which are always culturally contingent—thus any effort to associate testimony with truth, authenticity, or the Real will occlude the many layers of mediation that construct and define even the most intensely personal traumatic memories. See also Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, who advance a similar argument in their introduction to *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

generates collective responses.”<sup>24</sup> As a corrective of sorts, Cvetkovich introduces the notion of *critical* trauma cultures—“public cultures that form in and around trauma” and through which new practices and publics are formed.<sup>25</sup> Of particular interest to Cvetkovich is how cultural production—art, literature, performance, and activism—can generate public cultures capable of both working through trauma *and* transforming the conditions producing it.<sup>26</sup> For Cvetkovich, the pathologization of traumatic experience in conventional trauma studies obstructs this potential for collective, public, and political responses to traumatizing events. This sense of obstruction is also addressed by political scientist Jenny Edkins, who draws on Foucault’s prison model of subject-formation to argue that trauma treatment is actually a form of “therapeutic governance” whose translation to the socio-political realm has troubling consequences.<sup>27</sup> Taking as her cue Ian Hacking’s term “memoro-politics”—which he uses to define a third realm (after anato-politics and bio-politics) of power, in this case mediated by scientific expertise<sup>28</sup>—Edkins proposes that therapeutic discourses of trauma function as mechanisms of control that pathologize survivors of war, genocide,

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<sup>24</sup> Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> In her elaboration of how public cultures of trauma might be productively formed, Cvetkovich also calls for a reconceptualization of the archive as a repository for cultural practices that would itself function as a “form of mourning” (*ibid.*, 238); in chapter 4, I apply Cvetkovich’s insights to the melancholic archival art practices of Doris Salcedo.

<sup>27</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 51. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, [1977] 1991), Foucault writes: “The prison establishes a particular category of person, about whom information is gathered, sifted and analyzed.... Any political voice they might have has been removed. They may safely be ignored” (281).

<sup>28</sup> Ian Hacking, “Memory Sciences, Memory Politics,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze (London: Routledge, 1996). Both Hacking and historian Kerwin Lee Klein link the pathologization of traumatic memory to its sacralization. For Klein in particular, terms such as testimony, mourning, working through, healing, catharsis, redemption, and trauma itself have become unmoored from the psychic realm to circulate as “quasi-religious” alternatives to history that can only, however, purge history of any possibility of “real intellectual radicalism” See “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations*, no. 69, Special issue: Grounds for Remembering (winter 2000): 140. See also Barbara A. Misztal, “The Sacralization of Memory,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 1 (2004).



and oppression, marking them as harmless victims who are offered “sympathy and pity in return for the surrender of any political voice.”<sup>29</sup>

Criticism of the psychoanalytic model of trauma and testimony has been particularly acute in South Africa, where the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission, premised on the therapeutic logic of testimony and healing, has been problematized by analysts who identify the limitations of such a discourse when it speaks “a language of amelioration and reconciliation in situations where the material or political conditions do not in fact justify such a move.”<sup>30</sup> This focus on trauma, testimony and reconciliation has led many, like Andreas Huyssen, to suggest that “the transnational discourse of human rights may give us a better handle on such matters than the transfer of psychoanalysis into the world of politics and history.”<sup>31</sup> Others, however, have sought—like David Johnson, whose provocative question, “How do you mourn something you want back?,” opened this study—to reconfigure, rather than simply reject, the psychoanalytic model. To do so, theorists have begun to reconceptualize the Freudian understanding of melancholic attachment to loss as a critical tool for engaging with histories of trauma without forfeiting the right to seek justice for losses sustained. Throughout this dissertation, particularly in the third and

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<sup>29</sup> Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 9. The concept of “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” actually entered the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1980 due to the political mobilization of Vietnam veterans’ advocates who regarded recognition of the condition as essential to compensation claims. However, as Allan Young demonstrates in his study of veterans’ treatment clinics, veterans’ feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, treated as pathological symptoms, often excluded the possibility of political (or economic) recompense. See *Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Christopher J. Colvin, “‘Brothers and Sisters, Do Not Be Afraid of Me’: Trauma, History, and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa,” in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 76. For an in-depth analysis of how trauma discourse circulates in this and other truth and reconciliation commissions, see Michael Humphrey, *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From Terror to Trauma* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 9.

fourth chapters, I engage with these discourses as I advance the argument that by mobilizing the trope of home as a fragile shelter for memories of lost belonging, contemporary artists attend to loss in ways that facilitate what Judith Butler refers to as “melancholic agency”—the constructive “persistence of a certain unavowability that haunts the present.”<sup>32</sup> Like Rachel Whiteread’s mute concrete memorial to a rapidly disappearing urban environment in *House* and Akram Zaatari’s excavation of buried narratives of war and occupation in *In This House*, “home” in these practices becomes what I term a “melancholic archive” that bears witness to absence by tracing its remains. In this introductory context, I sketch out the issues raised by recent efforts to theorize melancholia as a critical methodology for bearing witness to trauma.

### **The politics of melancholia**

In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud identifies two ways in which subjects respond to the loss of a loved person, object, or ideal. “Mourning” describes the laborious but vital process of de-cathecting or withdrawing libidinal attachment to the lost loved one in order to make room for the formation of new attachments. A “melancholic” response to loss, or “mourning without end,” denotes instead a condition in which “the free libido was not displaced on to another object” but rather “was withdrawn into the ego.”<sup>33</sup> The result, Freud postulates, is a state of dejection wherein “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged...as if it were an object, the forsaken object.”<sup>34</sup> The melancholic subject, in other words, is

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 468.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 249.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

unable to fully detach from the lost object, instead floundering in a self-annihilating state of identification with it: “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, Freud’s paradigm privileges the process of mourning over what he terms the pathological state of melancholia. However, recent efforts to theorize a politics of mourning *rooted* in melancholic attachment to the past have seized on the idea that Freud’s understanding of melancholia as a refusal to transcend loss enables it to be re-tooled as a “creative process.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, the association of melancholy with creativity is hardly new. Since the Aristotelian *Problemata* asked why it was that “all those men who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or the arts are clearly melancholic,”<sup>37</sup> melancholia has been understood as a Janus-headed condition of pathological dysfunction on the one hand and creative genius on the other.<sup>38</sup> What is new, and profoundly relevant to the present study, is the mobilization of Freudian melancholia as a source of collective political agency, or, as cultural theorist Jonathan Flatley puts it, as a productive methodology for attending to the “social structures, discourses, institutions [and] historical processes” embedded in socio-political contexts of loss.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>36</sup> David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Problemata* 30.1.54, reprinted in Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies on Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 18. The authorship of the *Problemata* (likely not Aristotle himself) remains contested.

<sup>38</sup> The history and historiography of philosophical and clinical understandings of melancholia is beyond the scope of this chapter; for an introduction to and analysis of the concept, see Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Stanley Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). On the historical association between art and melancholia as read through Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), see Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

In their introduction to the 2003 book *Loss*, a collection of essays that profoundly unsettle cultural conventions of mourning and memory, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian argue that the “pervasive losses” of the twentieth century have generated a productive politics of mourning in the twenty-first, in which the “will to melancholia”<sup>40</sup> is a key catalyst for critical encounters with trauma. Acknowledging that Freud considered melancholia a pathological condition, Eng and Kazanjian nevertheless theorize the melancholic subject’s inability (or unwillingness) to reconcile or resolve loss as an “ongoing and open relationship with the past” that facilitates, rather than hinders, an ethical engagement with traumatic experience.<sup>41</sup> According to Eng and Kazanjian, the most productive way to consider the political potential of “melancholic agency” is through engagement with loss’s remains—an idea that I elaborate in chapters 3 and especially 4 as I apply these observations to the art practices of Doris Salcedo. In Salcedo’s work, I argue, absence becomes a political presence in the animation of what remains of it, and loss is “melancholically materialized”<sup>42</sup> in such a way that the past comes to bear witness to the future of memory.

As Eng and Kazanjian acknowledge, this notion of melancholia as a source of agency corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s “historical materialist” approach to the past. In his 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin challenges traditional historicism’s tendency to construct “fixed and

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<sup>40</sup> Literary theorist Leigh Gilmore’s advocacy of a “will to melancholia” is discussed in chapter 3. See her “Autobiography’s Wounds,” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> See also Douglas Crimp, who proposes that in the context of the AIDS crisis, grief and activism are not necessarily dichotomous terms that oppose pathology and politics; rather, they can (and indeed do) constitute the conditions under which a sustained militant response to severe loss can be galvanized. In a reversal of Freud’s formulation, Crimp concludes that, “For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy.” In “Mourning and Militancy” (1989), in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 237.

<sup>42</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, 5.

totalizing narratives”<sup>43</sup> that seek to relive, recover and redeem the past, instead proposing an active dialogue with a past that “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instance when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”<sup>44</sup> But while Benjamin’s advocacy (in both “Theses” and his earlier *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*)<sup>45</sup> of a dynamic engagement with loss and its remains understands melancholia’s role in enabling a relationship with the past that is equally attuned to the political exigencies of the present, he also warns of the limits of melancholia as a critical strategy. In his 1931 “Left-wing Melancholy,” for instance, Benjamin takes to task the popular German poet Eric Kästner, whose over-indulgently nihilist radicalism, according to Benjamin, is marketed to the bourgeoisie in such a way as to feed their appetite for “negativistic quiet,” thus abandoning any possibility for “corresponding political action” and settling, instead, for “complacency and fatalism.”<sup>46</sup> As Jonathan Flatley has recently proposed, for Benjamin “all melancholias are not the same”<sup>47</sup>—melancholic attachment to loss must, if it is to assume any criticality, be insistently connected to a sense of political purpose in the present.<sup>48</sup> And it is precisely this nuanced understanding of both the limits and the possibilities of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1. See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1950), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 255.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, [1925] 1985).

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Left-wing Melancholy” (1931), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 425-26.

<sup>47</sup> Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> On Benjamin’s ambivalent take on melancholy, see Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholia,” and Charity Scribner, “Left Melancholy,” both in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003). See also Max Pensky’s *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), which proposes a “dialectic” of melancholy in Benjamin’s thought.

melancholia as a critical strategy that, as will become clear, informs the present study.

But while a “politics of mourning” rooted in melancholic attachment to loss is compelling in its insistence that traumatic memories can become catalysts for social justice rather than simply diagnosable pathologies, it nevertheless fails to capture the extent to which an arguably over-indulgent attachment to the past is actually integral to psychoanalytically-informed trauma theory’s models for bearing witness to trauma, and the attendant dangers that this sort of attachment entails. According to the model proposed by Felman and Laub, in order for a trauma survivor to work through or take possession of his or her traumatic memories, the witness to the witness (or “listener”) must “feel the victim’s victories, defeats, and silences, know them from within.”<sup>49</sup> The listener, Dori Laub insists, “through his very listening, comes to partially experience trauma in himself.”<sup>50</sup> This collapse, or at least partial collapse, of boundaries between primary and secondary witness constitutes, for historian Dominick LaCapra, the fundamental shortcoming of trauma theory as espoused by Caruth, Felman and Laub, and the concomitant shortcoming of melancholia as a critical rejoinder to the therapeutic quietism of mourning. While LaCapra, whose own studies of Holocaust trauma and testimony are grounded in psychoanalytic theory, agrees that a measure of investment on the part of the secondary witness is required to avoid the over-objectification of traumatic experiences (which he regards as the central flaw of conventional history), excessive identification with victims of trauma is equally troubling.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Laub, “Bearing Witness,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> LaCapra singles out filmmaker Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* as exemplary of the tendency to take on the role of “surrogate victim” (in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998], 135-36), as well as Felman’s own advocacy of what LaCapra terms the “histrionic simulacrum” of traumatization, both in her

As I argue throughout this thesis, contemporary artists intervene productively in the ongoing debates regarding the applicability of psychoanalytic trauma theory to socio-historical contexts of traumatic experience by activating a critically engaged melancholic engagement with loss. Foregrounding home as a fractured site of longing, belonging, and memory, these artists insist on registering the materiality of loss in ways that avoid both the cathartic resignation of mourning and the risk of over-identification that comes with melancholia. In this way, artists like Doris Salcedo enact an aesthetic response to the suffering of others that resonates with LaCapra's proposal for a practice that he terms "empathetic unsettlement."

As I explain in chapter 3, empathetic unsettlement is a strategy of engagement that subverts the binary logic of melancholia and mourning (or Freud's analogous opposition of "acting-out"—the compulsive reenactment of the repressed traumatic event—and "working-through"—the therapeutic process of overcoming that repression),<sup>52</sup> with the understanding that the two terms are equally problematic when seen as strategies aimed at either transcending the past or enacting a fatalistic, compulsive repetition of trauma. Indeed, it should be clarified that the intention of this dissertation is not to forward a romantic notion of the artist deliberately performing a kind of melancholic subjectivity. The psychic condition of melancholy is a deeply unconscious process that in any case, as Christine Ross demonstrates in her 2006 book *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, has been largely absorbed by a "depressive paradigm" in late-modern culture (advanced by cognitive science's neurobiological model of subjectivity and

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reading of Lanzmann and her classroom exercises in trauma studies (in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 102).

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)" (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958).

promoted by the pharmacological pursuit of profit)—a paradigm that, Ross argues, is registered in certain “depressive” trajectories of contemporary art.<sup>53</sup> However, in these pages I argue that contemporary artists and theorists are *reclaiming* melancholia and the critical dimensions associated with it, and proposing that in certain cases and in specific ways, melancholic attachment to loss can enable an ethics of witnessing that recognizes the material nature of loss and both the fragility and persistence of memory’s remainders. At the same time, LaCapra’s notion of empathetic unsettlement, defined as “empathy that resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other” while acknowledging both “one’s own potential for traumatization [and] that another’s loss is not identical to one’s own loss,”<sup>54</sup> is nevertheless compelling in its insistence on tracking the boundaries of identification and the limits of empathy. And, as I argue in what follows, it is a notion that becomes particularly useful in conceptualizing art practices equal to the task of facilitating ethical responses to the suffering of others.

### **The ethics and aesthetics of witnessing**

If, as writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel hypothesizes, the post-Holocaust generation invented the art of testimony in response to the horrors of the twentieth century and in order to bear witness for the future,<sup>55</sup> one of the fundamental challenges to face the generation that follows has been how to receive this testimony, and how to carry it forward to the next. For if it is also

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<sup>53</sup> Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), esp. 1-49. Key artists include Ugo Rondinone, Vanessa Beecroft, and Rosemarie Trockel.

<sup>54</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 79.

<sup>55</sup> Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration,” in Elie Wiesel, et al., *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9; cited in Shoshana Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 113-4.



true, as Paul Celan laments, that “no one bears witness for the witness,”<sup>56</sup> the question becomes how to bear witness to the impossibility of doing so. To bear witness, as sociologists Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert suggest, is an obligation to “translate stories of past injustices beyond their moment of telling by taking these stories to another time and space where they become available to be heard or seen.”<sup>57</sup> But the task of translation, as Benjamin reminds us, is never seamless, and never without risks.<sup>58</sup> To bear witness is also to carry the burden of translating the “untranslatability of the story of trauma.”<sup>59</sup> It is to enact what Giorgio Agamben terms an “ethics of testimony”—an acknowledgement of both the inarticulability of the traumatic experience *and* the imperative to articulate on its behalf.<sup>60</sup>

For Huyssen, this burden must also be understood as “a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity.”<sup>61</sup> As Huyssen and other theorists of

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Celan, “Ashes-Glory,” cited in Felman, “Education and Crisis,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Roger I. Simon and Claudia Eppert, “Remembering Obligation: Pedagogy and the Witnessing of Testimony of Historical Trauma,” *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l’éducation* 22, no. 2 (1997): 178.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1923), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

<sup>59</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission,” in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>60</sup> In his important text *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), Agamben suggests that an ethics of testimony must acknowledge that “whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness...knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness” (34). For Agamben, however, this “impossible dialectic” does not emerge from the Freudian repression of an “unclaimed experience” (as it does for Caruth), but instead from the indistinction between human and inhuman that was propagated in the Nazi concentration camps. Testimony, therefore, is enacted “where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech” (120). At the same time, the impossibility of speech must not be conflated with the “unsayability” of the Holocaust—a recourse which, Agamben argues, only functions to mystify atrocity (31-33). An ethics of testimony, it follows, must refute both the comprehensibility of genocide *and* its incomprehensibility.

<sup>61</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2-3.

visual culture's engagement with trauma and memory elaborate, trauma-related art has the capacity to forge ethical relations with traumatic memory when it resists redemption or closure, acknowledges the vicariousness of cultural memory, and engages audiences in a way that triggers embodied perceptions of the suffering of others. In such practices art can, as Mieke Bal argues, "mediate between the parties to the traumatizing scene...and the reader or viewer," thus creating the conditions for "political and cultural solidarity."<sup>62</sup> The danger, however, is the assumption of a *facile* solidarity wherein the audience is encouraged to over-identify with the suffering other. As Patricia Yaeger puts it, "How are we allowed to taste the deads' bodies, to put their lives in our mouths? How do we identify the proper tone, the proper images—for holding, for awakening, someone else's bodily remains?"<sup>63</sup> One of the major questions that emerges in this dissertation is therefore that of representation itself, as I observe in contemporary art practices a propensity to disavow the direct visualization of trauma. Such a disavowal insists, as art historian Jill Bennett suggests, upon "an imagery that evokes a place transformed by pain"; as spectators, we are taken "into this place, not as witnesses shadowing the primary subjects of this pain, but in a manner that demonstrates, at the same time, the limited possibilities of either containing or translating pain."<sup>64</sup> In particular, I identify ways in which the image of home is employed, like in Donald Rodney's tiny skin house, as a metonymic stand-in for the suffering human body. I argue that this strategic figuration of the home in distress has the capacity to defer the presumption of visual mastery over

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<sup>62</sup> Mieke Bal, introduction to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), x.

<sup>63</sup> Patricia Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma; or, the Pleasures of Merely Circulating," in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>64</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 65.

the suffering other while simultaneously providing audiences a path “into this place” of testimony, witness and empathetic engagement.

Judith Butler’s latest project has been to explore the degree to which one’s *own* experience of loss can be a foundation from which to recognize and thus bear witness to the losses of others. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler proposes a reconsideration of vulnerability and loss as proof of global interdependency and impetus for global solidarity. Building on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the “bare life” (a state of being under which the subject’s status of subject is suspended under absolute power),<sup>65</sup> Butler proposes that the “equivocation of the human”—which was operationalized at the Nazi camps, and at military detention camps ever since—forces acknowledgement of the “geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability,” and thus a human rights discourse whose task is “to reconceive the human when it finds that its putative universality does not have universal reach.”<sup>66</sup> This discourse, Butler argues, can be facilitated by a politics of melancholia that recognizes that to grieve is not necessarily to be resigned to inaction.<sup>67</sup> The issue, instead, is how to make grief a vehicle for *non-violent* political response. To her own question, “What, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war,”<sup>68</sup> Butler responds that the recognition of universal suffering and a re-articulation of the stakes of grief might mobilize non-violent, politically connective, responses to loss.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 74, 29, 91.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>69</sup> In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Kelly Oliver argues that Butler’s recognition model of intersubjectivity is inextricably bound to the politics of visibility, a focus that mirrors, rather than transcending or escaping, the subject-object dualism that characterizes oppressive relations. Oliver proposes instead a “witness model” which relies not on the conferral of

As Butler notes, America's violent response to collective grief following the attacks of September 11, 2001, was predicated on a "differential allocation of grievability" that produced "exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human."<sup>70</sup> This distribution of grief along national borders was facilitated, as Jill Bennett has argued, by recourse to the vocabulary of collective trauma—a recourse that, for Bennett, demonstrates the limitations of trauma discourse when it is applied collectively. As Bennett notes, trauma emerged as a key word in post-9/11 America—according to one poll, seventy-three percent of Americans considered themselves to be traumatized by the attacks.<sup>71</sup> This embrace of surrogate victimhood, Bennett argues in affinity with Butler, was rendered "co-extensive with nation,"<sup>72</sup> and thus off-limits to victims (whether gay victims of the attacks, Muslim victims of racism in America, or post-war Afghan asylum-seekers) who are less assimilable to normative conceptions of American national identity. Bennett attributes this phenomenon to over-identification with a "select

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recognition, but rather on recognition of the un-recognizable. Her conclusion, however, that "address" and "response" are the keywords of a mode of witnessing that transcends the limits of recognition, is not incongruent with Butler's thesis. In fact for Butler, it is precisely through address and response that recognition is activated. Butler, like Oliver, is dubious of visibility as a strategy of recognition, as she elaborates in her reconceptualization of Levinasian faciality (128-51).

<sup>70</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiv.

<sup>71</sup> Jill Bennett, "Tenebrae after September 11: Art, Empathy, and the Global Politics of Belonging," in *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, ed. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 181. Several contributions to Judith Greenberg's edited anthology *Trauma at Home: After 9/11* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), to which Bennett contributed a shorter version of this text, themselves seem to resort to surrogate victimhood. Both Greenberg and Nancy K. Miller, for instance, position themselves as "secondarily traumatized," with Miller in particular claiming: "Having lost no one close to me on September 11, I'm no less located on the map of loss it produced—a map of trauma whose borders are still missing" ("Reporting the Disaster," 46). In the same volume, Peter Brooks cautions that invocations of collective trauma are constructed and mobilized by a political leadership that "has used the cover of our mourning to forward its highly partisan political agenda" ("If You Have Tears," 50).

<sup>72</sup> Jill Bennett, "The Limits of Empathy and the Global Politics of Belonging," in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, ed. Judith Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 133.

kind of victim,"<sup>73</sup> concluding that the tendency to over-identify necessitates a radical rethinking of empathy's own borders.

Bennett employs Dominick LaCapra's framework for empathetic unsettlement to theorize ways in which ethical engagement can guard against the traps of over-identification, and LaCapra's proposition is likewise central to the claims of this thesis. LaCapra's critique of over-identification both problematizes and raises the stakes of bearing witness, which, he suggests, is too easily conflated with witnessing itself. If to witness is to experience an event firsthand (notwithstanding the questions that can and must be raised in regards to the "truth value" of witness testimony),<sup>74</sup> to bear witness (or to act as secondary witness) is to bear the responsibility of carrying that knowledge forward in time, but to bear also the recognition that this knowledge is both belated and mediated. Only under these circumstances, LaCapra argues, can an ethics of witnessing mobilize engagement in the present without appropriating the traumatic memories of others. Thus LaCapra advocates practices that engage audiences in empathetic relations but at the same time prevent "the indiscriminate generalization of historical trauma into...the notion that everyone is somehow a victim."<sup>75</sup>

LaCapra's notion of empathetic unsettlement coincides, as he notes, with Kaja Silverman's concept of heteropathic recollection, which likewise calls upon the mediating party or secondary witness to "participate in the desires, struggles, and sufferings of the other" while relinquishing the assumption of "psychic access to what does not 'belong' to us."<sup>76</sup> But while LaCapra is writing as an

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<sup>73</sup> Bennett, "*Tenebrae* after September 11," 183.

<sup>74</sup> See note 23 of this chapter.

<sup>75</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

historian about the ethics of writing (trauma's) histories, Silverman's specific concern is with visual cultures of memory, and thus perhaps more attuned to the particular ways in which art can mediate a relationship between the suffering other and the viewing spectator, who "can be brought to identify at a distance with bodily coordinates which are...markedly divergent from his or her own."<sup>77</sup> For Silverman, such a relationship can be facilitated by art practices that acknowledge that "it is not possible to 'remember' someone else's memories," and that instead perform a sort of memory work that remembers "imperfectly." Silverman identifies two modes of self-other identification: "idiopathic" identification which forms an incorporative, assimilative, even annihilatory relationship with the other; and "heteropathic" identification, which exteriorizes, rather than interiorizes, one's position in relation to the other.<sup>78</sup> The goal of ethical aesthetic enterprises, she insists, must be to facilitate heteropathic forms of identification: to designate "the scene of representation as radically discontinuous with the world of the spectator."<sup>79</sup>

What Silverman is delineating here is a genre of cultural practice that conveys what is considered fundamentally unrepresentable—the traumatic memories of others—in a way that both avoids the hazards of over-identification and transforms vicarious memories of traumatic experience in the past into

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>78</sup> Silverman borrows, but radically revises, terminology developed by German philosopher Max Scheler, who argues that idiopathic identification "self-despotizes," while in heteropathic identifications, "the one self is entirely 'lost' in the other." See Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 24-25. Silverman also acknowledges some congruence with Bertolt Brecht's theatrical model for counteracting "crude empathy" with the "alienation effect," but she challenges what she considers his "adversarial relation to identification" (84), instead insisting on the value of identification as "an agency of psychic and social change" (85). See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1978), 1964.

<sup>79</sup> Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 84. Silverman points to Chris Marker's 1982 film *Sans soleil* as a work that conveys the impossibility of accessing authentic memories, while creating the conditions for the past to "reverberate within" the spectator in the present (185).

vehicles for ethical engagement in the present. This call for an “art of witness” that will grapple with, and carry forward, legacies of trauma while demarcating the limits of empathy has been heeded by theorists and practitioners in a range of visual media, including art and monumental architecture. In this dissertation, I argue that the trope of home can facilitate just such an ethical encounter. Like Akram Zaatari’s video, in which home figures as a precarious reliquary that marks and contains but cannot fully disclose the horrors of civil war, the artists whose works I pursue in the following pages “bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present.”<sup>80</sup>

At this point, it will be helpful to disentangle the multiple layers of witness that emerge in discourses of trauma, testimony, and representation. These include the primary witness, who experiences the traumatic event firsthand but who requires an interlocutor in order to record and convey that experience; the secondary witness, whether historian, writer, or artist, who takes on the task of mediation in order to translate and transfer the burden of memory; and the audience—the receiver in the mediating process—who might be termed a tertiary witness but for the fact that he or she is, in turn, laden with the task of carrying forward mediated memories of trauma. Whom, then, do we identify as the witnessing agent in contemporary art’s engagements with trauma and testimony? As will become evident, the artists analyzed in this dissertation take on the responsibility of witnessing with studied attention to the ethical and aesthetic implications of such a practice. However, I would like to propose that while these practitioners certainly pursue what can be described as an art of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 189.

witness, nevertheless they should not be understood to be using “witness” as an aesthetic strategy. Art, in other words, enables but does not itself bear witness. Instead, these artists seek aesthetic means to *facilitate* ethical modes of witnessing. In the art practices framed by this study, I will argue shortly, this interlocutory gesture is performed via the aesthetic strategy of the unhomely, which “melancholically materializes” loss in order to unsettle conventional practices of witnessing. But before elaborating, it will be useful to survey how the “art of witness” has been theorized as a way of mediating legacies of traumatic memory.

In the limited but rapidly expanding literature that reflects on the role that art plays in mediating traumatic memory,<sup>81</sup> scholars, critics, and artists have begun to consider how art can be conceived as a vehicle for ethical engagement with the past that expands into the future. According to art historian James Young, the artist’s task is to pursue aesthetic strategies that are anti-redemptory—a task that reflects, at least in part, an ongoing commitment to Theodor Adorno’s well-known prohibition against aestheticizing mass atrocities

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<sup>81</sup> Significant contributions, not directly related to the Holocaust, to the study of art as witness to trauma, include Bennett, *Empathic Vision*; Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007); Kyo Maclear, *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999); and Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 2006). Most of the existing scholarship, however, relates to the aesthetics and ethics of representing of the Holocaust, including Dora Apel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, eds., *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003); Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Michael S. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Barbie Zelizer, ed. *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).



like the Holocaust, a commitment that is reiterated in most of the literature surrounding contemporary Holocaust representation.<sup>82</sup> For Young, anti-redemptive aesthetic strategies of engagement with second-hand experiences of historical trauma can function not only to foreclose on the potential for transforming a traumatic event into a thing of beauty or an object for consumption, but also to implicate the viewer of trauma-related art in a politics of testimony that carries the burden of the past into the present and future. In this, Young draws on Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemorial art"—art practices that create the conditions for an empathetic viewing experience but nevertheless insist upon its belatedness by allowing the spectator "to imagine the disaster 'in one's own body' but evading "the transposition that erases distance, creating too available, too direct an access to this particular past."<sup>83</sup> For Young, postmemorial art can and must trouble contemporary culture's tendency to recuperate the past into a benign vehicle for smug moralism—the tendency, in other words, to mobilize memories of past injustice in order to forget those in the present. Postmemorial art, instead, "resists closure, sustains uncertainty, and allows us to live without full understanding."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies* and Lang's *Holocaust Representation*, both of which apply Adorno's critique to contemporary representations of the Holocaust. Less discussed is Adorno's addendum to the often-cited dictum, which he later qualified and complexified by insisting that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric [but] literature must resist this verdict.... It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice." In Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 312. For further analysis of the relevance of Adorno's verdict for contemporary representations of the Holocaust, see Gene Ray, "Conditioning Adorno: 'After Auschwitz' Now," *Third Text* 18, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>83</sup> Hirsch, "Marked by Memory," 88. Taking her cue from Silverman's notion of heteropathic recollection, Hirsch argues that postmemorial artists (second- or third-generation bearers of recollections of traumatic experience) develop an ethical, as opposed to an identificatory, relationship with the oppressed or persecuted other when they convey both the interconnections between generations and cultures, and the inherent "untranslatability of the story of trauma" (ibid.). See also Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 6. Young is emphatic on this point, insisting that "memory work about the Holocaust cannot, must not, be redemptive in any fashion" (9).

Young's proposition for the task of postmemorial art both draws from and reworks the fundamental premises of trauma theory. Where psychoanalysis can be understood to seek at least partial closure, postmemorial art resists it; and where Caruth and Laub insist that the "listener" must co-own the traumatic event, postmemorial art insists instead on revealing the vicariousness of the secondary witness's experience. Young and Hirsch agree that massive trauma, while not *inherently* in excess of narrative representation, nevertheless demands aesthetic strategies that recognize the limits of direct access to traumatic memory. Indeed, most theorists associated with trauma studies agree that the relationship between traumatic experience and its expression in cultural forms is a tenuous one. But the question remains—whether one seeks an integration of, or rather an ongoing confrontation with, traumatizing pasts—how to forge a productive relationship between the experience of trauma and the realm of normative memory. How can the gap between trauma and memory, event and representation, be understood, as Huyssen suggests it can, as "a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity"?<sup>85</sup>

As Jill Bennett has noted, a gap seems to exist between trauma theory—which tends to privilege literary texts—and art history—which tends to treat the subject of "trauma" in art as a symptom of a general postmodern malaise, rather than in the context of trauma theory or of trauma itself as a lived experience.<sup>86</sup> Emblematic of the latter is Hal Foster's investigation, in his 1996 *The Return of the Real*, of how trauma and abjection are troped in contemporary art, rather than how traumatic experiences in the everyday world are conveyed through art.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 2-3.

<sup>86</sup> See note 81, above, for recent exceptions to this premise.

<sup>87</sup> Foster's critique of the "return of the real" in contemporary art is discussed in chapter 4. See Foster's *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

Bennett's own work, however, seeks to bridge the two fields. In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), Bennett considers art practices that respond to traumatic experience, arguing that what makes visual culture unique is its capacity to generate critical empathetic responses to the suffering of others by linking affective investment to ethical engagement. Drawing on French poet and Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo's differentiation between "representational" (i.e. accessible and narratable) memory and "sense" memory (also known as "deep" memory, which operates not through word and image but rather "through the body,")<sup>88</sup> Bennett suggests that although sense memory is "the property of another self" (as opposed to the "present 'me'") and therefore resistant to rational acts of memory in the present, it is nevertheless the source of what Bennett terms a poetics or art of trauma. Sense memory, Bennett argues, "retains a capacity to touch and affect, to trigger emotion in the present."<sup>89</sup>

Delbo's "deep memory" is locked, as she explains evocatively, within an impervious skin, but it is also capable of rupturing the membrane of her "common" memories in nightmares and flashbacks.<sup>90</sup> To convey this rupture, Bennett suggests, is to convey "that memory continues to be felt as a wound rather than seen as contained other,"<sup>91</sup> and herein lies the potential for visual culture to activate sensations that engage "with differential positions, colliding in the present."<sup>92</sup> In the context of the present study, where I analyze art practices that seek to convey the traumatic experience of radical dislocation in ways that avoid both facile harmonization and nihilistic repetition of that experience, the

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<sup>88</sup> Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Delbo writes: "Sometimes...I feel it again through my whole body, which becomes a block of pain.... It takes days for everything to return to normal, for memory to be 'refilled' and for the skin of memory to mend itself" (cited in *ibid.*, 41).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

notion of “collision” is crucial. For Bennett, the conveyance of felt experience in trauma-related art is not co-extensive with a direct transmission of traumatic experience. Indeed, Bennett draws a useful distinction between transactive and communicative art, suggesting that trauma-related art is of a transactive nature—“it often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience.”<sup>93</sup> Drawing on Brecht’s alienation effect, Adorno’s critique of aesthetic recuperation, and LaCapra’s notion of empathetic unsettlement, Bennett suggests that artists who take on the role of secondary witness aim to devise strategies for “aligning audiences with the subjective position of those who grieve,”<sup>94</sup> but eschew idiopathic relationships with these subject. For Bennett, this is what makes the art practices about which she writes laden with political significance. Distinguishing between the triggering of an affective reaction in, for instance, horror films, and the affective experience conveyed in trauma-related art practices (consider again Donald Rodney’s own wounded skin of memory), Bennett mobilizes Brian Massumi’s concept of the “shock to thought,” arguing that whereas in the first case, affective triggers are deployed as “blunt instruments” that shock the viewer into an involuntary somatic response, trauma-related art has the capacity to “thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry.”<sup>95</sup> In this, Bennett identifies “a political as well as an affective mode” of transmission that, she concludes, “move our conception of trauma beyond the realm of the interior subject into that of inhabited place, rendering it a political phenomenon.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 11. See Brian Massumi, “Introduction: Like a Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>96</sup> Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 151.

Like Bennett, I am interested in identifying ways in which contemporary art is uniquely positioned to convey trauma as an inhabited, political phenomenon, and in so doing to facilitate ethical practices of witnessing. I argue in this dissertation that the fragile figuration of home is precisely one such strategy, and to further this argument, I theorize the emergence of an “unhomely” effect in contemporary art—an effect that at once extends and challenges the basic tenets of the Freudian uncanny by describing both a condition of radical displacement and an aesthetic strategy of troubling the boundaries between self and other and the borders between home and away. In the following section, I introduce what I see as a shift from the *unheimlich* to the unhomely in contemporary thought, and begin to explain how this shift can be usefully adopted to theorize how the fragile figuration of home in contemporary trauma-related art practices might enable practices of witnessing that recognize both the precariousness of human inhabitation and the materiality of loss.

### **From the *unheimlich* to the unhomely**

An aesthetic sub-category of the Burkeian sublime related to a particular class of frightening encounters with supernatural beings, events, and forces (from doppelgangers to the undead), the uncanny is a concept that has been developed in psychoanalytic theory to identify a particular manifestation of the return of the repressed. In his 1919 essay “*Das Unheimliche*,” translated into English as “The Uncanny” (but literally translatable as the “unhomely”), Freud traces the etymology of the term to discover that *unheimlich* (defined as “eerie, weird; arousing gruesome fear”) exists not simply in opposition to *heimlich* (defined as “intimate, friendly comfortable; arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house”).<sup>97</sup> Instead, what gives it its

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<sup>97</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press

terrifying power over the psyche is the fact that the *unheimlich* is actually a condition of the *heimlich*, because *heimlich*, a word that denotes comfort, familiarity, and safe enclosure, also bears within it connotations of withdrawal, concealment, secrecy, even danger. Thus *heimlich*, Freud concludes, “is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it firmly coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”<sup>98</sup> With this in mind, Freud comes to link the uncanny to his ongoing investigations of the repression of traumatic memories: Drawing on nineteenth-century philosopher F.W.J. Schelling’s definition of the *unheimlich* as “everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light,”<sup>99</sup> Freud defines the uncanny as “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”<sup>100</sup>

Clearly, Freud’s evocation of the uncanny as an aesthetic phenomenon that conveys home as a site of repressed trauma will have relevance to any study of art practices in which home is likewise figured as a place of trauma and estrangement. Indeed, throughout this dissertation I refer back to the Freudian uncanny in my investigations of artworks that employ the trope of home in order to bring to light that which “ought” to have remained hidden. This study, however, is not an investigation of the uncanny (or haunted) house in contemporary art, although this is certainly a prolific genre. Perhaps the most

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and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955), 222. In both cases, Freud is referring to Sanders’ German Dictionary of 1860. Freud’s foray into aesthetic theory is qualified by his definition of aesthetics as that which relates to “qualities of feeling” (219) rather than any sort of Kantian aesthetics of beauty. At the same time, his analysis is limited mainly to examples from the realm of the arts (E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1816 short story “The Sand-Man” in particular) as opposed to its occurrence, say, in therapeutic practice.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>99</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Eric Randolph Miller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [1835] 1966), 649.

<sup>100</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241. The *unheimlich*, Freud adds, is “what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix ‘*un*’ is the token of repression” (245).

evocative example is Gregor Schneider's *Die Familie Schneider* (2004), in which the artist occupied two neighbouring houses in London's East End that he redesigned to be identical in the interior, and hired identical twins to perform identical acts (from washing dishes, to masturbating in the shower, to crouching, face hooded, beside a bed) as visitors walked through one space and then the other.<sup>101</sup> In contradistinction to Schneider's installation, which reveals home as an uncanny sphere of fantasy, nightmare and repression, the homes that occupy this dissertation are haunted not by what has been hidden or repressed within their confines, but rather by unsettled memories of their own incapacity to shelter their occupants from the terrors of the world at large. In this study, therefore, I pursue a reading of the unhomely that levers it away from psychoanalytic thought and toward its application in and to an era increasingly characterized by war, exile, migration, and the socio-economic vagaries of global flow.

In his investigation of what he terms the "architectural uncanny" in modern and contemporary art and architecture, architectural historian and theorist Anthony Vidler has observed that the deployment of the *unheimlich* as an aesthetic expression of alienation is confronted with "special urgency" when faced with the resurgent problem of homelessness; as Vidler notes, "The formal and critical expression of alienation...does not always neatly correspond to the work of transforming or even ameliorating such conditions in practice," and furthermore "risks trivializing or, worse, patronizing political or social action."<sup>102</sup> In part to address this disjuncture between the formal properties of the uncanny and the geopolitical conditions of un-homedness, I therefore advocate a subtle shift in focus from the *uncanny*—wherein "home" is imagined as a site of

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<sup>101</sup> See Andrew O'Hagan, Colm Tolben, James Lingwood, and Gregor Schneider, *Gregor Schneider: Die Familie Schneider* (London: Artangel, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 12-13.

repressed desire and terror—to the *unhomely*—which endeavors to account for the profound condition of geopolitical displacement that characterizes the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this way, my reading of the unhomely is better aligned with Okwui Enwezor’s invocation of the term to describe global forces of defamiliarization in the twenty-first century (from the “war on terror” to the rise of religious fundamentalism) that have bred worldwide conditions of indifference, hostility, and xenophobia in response to the contemporary situation of ongoing globalization, in which “we are in constant contact with people, goods, images, and ideas that are permanently on the move, in constant circulation, reconfiguration, tessellation”<sup>103</sup> (although in the fifth chapter of this study, I read Enwezor’s own practice as a peripatetic curator of international exhibitions as itself indicative of the deterritorializing and defamiliarizing logic of the contemporary global art world). One might even go so far as to suggest the unhomely as the flip side or underbelly of the uncanny: where the uncanny is associated with exposing the demons which haunt from within, therefore facilitating reflection on the limits of home’s status as both site and source of domestic bliss and safety, the unhomely instead invokes the constant threat of external intrusion. The unhomely, to quote Homi K. Bhabha, represents that interstitial space in which “intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions.”<sup>104</sup> A site of hybridity or inbetweenness that marks, especially for the diasporic subject, the displacement of the border between “home” and “world,” the unhomely signals the moment at

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<sup>103</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society,” in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* (Seville: Foundation for the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville, 2006), 15.

<sup>104</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 141.



which “the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”<sup>105</sup>

This is not to suggest that the Freudian uncanny is entirely without geopolitical resonance. Vidler, for instance, argues that the periodic resurgence of the uncanny as an aesthetic phenomenon (during and after the two World Wars, and again in the postmodern age) can be largely mapped along the twentieth century’s trajectories of voluntary and involuntary geographical dislocation. As Vidler suggests, “estrangement and unhomeliness have emerged as the intellectual watchwords of our century, given periodic material and political force by the resurgence of homelessness itself.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, this sense of the uncanny as a moment of radical alienation in which the self encounters a strange world has been taken up by philosophers from Theodor Adorno to Martin Heidegger, both of whom acknowledge that the early twentieth century in particular called for special attention to the unhomely nature of global society. But whereas Heidegger, who famously observed that “Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the work,”<sup>107</sup> sought to counteract this force with nostalgic meditations on the lost nature of dwelling,<sup>108</sup> there also developed within the avant-garde of the post-World War II period a collective sense that in the wake of the atrocities and dislocations of war, to quote Adorno, “It is immoral to feel at

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Letter on Humanism” (1947), in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: Harper Books, 1993), 243.

<sup>108</sup> See, in particular, Heidegger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (1951), in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971). Also paradigmatic here are Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, [1958] 1994); and Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, [1961] 1969), both of which equate home with the safety of childhood.

home in one's own home"<sup>109</sup>—a confluence of the aesthetics of the uncanny with the geopolitics of homelessness and exile that I touch on briefly in chapter 2.

Perhaps the most sustained deployment of the Freudian uncanny as a vehicle for coming to terms with global social relations in the twentieth century is Julia Kristeva's 1991 book *Strangers to Ourselves*. In it, Kristeva seeks to understand the xenophobic anxiety with which foreignness is treated in post-Enlightenment European society (particularly France).<sup>110</sup> Arguing that the modern nation-state conflates "human" with "citizen" in such a way that "he who is not a citizen is not fully a man," Kristeva concludes that the figure of the "foreigner" represents a "scar" between human and citizen<sup>111</sup>—a scar that troubles the assumption of a unified national body, and thus demands a new model for self-other relations.<sup>112</sup> For Kristeva, the Freudian uncanny provides precisely such a model, and indeed there is a spatiality implicit in the concept of the *unheimlich* (unlike the uncanny), *heimlich* being etymologically linked to *Heimat* or homeland, that lends itself well to investigations of foreignness and xenophobia. As Kristeva notes, Freud himself observed that several European languages link the *unheimlich* directly to the idea of foreignness (the Greek translation, for instance, is *xenoi*, or foreign, and in French the term translates similarly to *étranger*), but does not himself pursue this trajectory. Nevertheless,

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<sup>109</sup> In Theodor Adorno, "On the Question, 'What Is German?'" (1965), *New German Critique* (Special issue on *Heimat*), no. 36 (fall 1985): 121. Adorno elaborates that "the house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labor and concentration camps, merely precede as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans" (ibid.).

<sup>110</sup> Other key texts on this subject include Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985); and Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

<sup>111</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 97-98.

<sup>112</sup> In "Beyond Human Rights," Giorgio Agamben makes an analogous argument for the refugee, who, "by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and between nativity and nationality, brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis" (162-3).

Kristeva maintains that Freud “teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves,”<sup>113</sup> arguing that the uncanny, which “sets the difference within us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being with others,” facilitates a way of being with others that does not depend on the integration or expulsion of the other, but instead “welcomes us to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours.”<sup>114</sup>

Kristeva’s deployment of the Freudian uncanny as a way to rethink social relations from the perspective of a “paradoxical community”<sup>115</sup> of foreigners is addressed in the third chapter as I investigate the art practices of Polish-American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose own aesthetic strategies for unlocking recognition of the “stranger within” reveal both the productive potential and the limitations of Kristeva’s approach. I suggest that the risk of this sort of logic is that recourse to the uncanny might unduly psychologize, even pathologize, stranger relations. Furthermore, whereas the Freudian formulation maintains that the foreignness we perceive in our encounter with the uncanny is actually familiar but estranged or repressed, I’m interested in how the unhomely can instead be mobilized to understand encounters with those subjects who fall *outside* the purview of the homely—the stranger, the foreigner, the exile, the refugee and asylum seeker, the urban homeless. The unhomely in this way is less a psychological condition than a sociopolitical one, in which the strange(r) is brought into proximity with the self. It is, to quote Homi Bhabha, “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world.”<sup>116</sup> For Bhabha, whose own theorizations of “the world and the home” simultaneously draw on

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<sup>113</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 191.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>116</sup> Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 141.

and challenge both the Freudian uncanny and Kristeva's application of it,<sup>117</sup> the unhomely represents both a time and a space out of bounds, existing in an interstitial realm at the self's boundaries and the nation's borders. As such, it manifests as both a geopolitical condition and an opportunity to intervene in that condition. For in the space of the unhomely, the boundaries that define and limit stranger relations "may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality that provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and emergent."<sup>118</sup>

In this dissertation, I align myself with Bhabha's effort to theorize aesthetic processes that produce what he terms an "unhomely moment," described as "a moment of 'transit,' a form of temporality that is open to disjunction and discontinuity and sees the process of history engaged, rather like art, in a negotiation of the framing and naming of social reality."<sup>119</sup> But it is Vidler who gestures most usefully, if obliquely, to an aesthetics of the unhomely in contemporary art. In his analysis of Rachel Whiteread's *House*, Vidler observes that the installation became the object of much anxious criticism that derided her "mutilation" of a home. Several local and international articles, he observes, "referred to the silencing of the past life of the house, the traces of former patterns of life now rendered dead but preserved."<sup>120</sup> In this way, *House* appeared to evoke the horrors and anxieties of the uncanny, its entombed form seeming to

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<sup>117</sup> Bhabha's project parallels, as he acknowledges, Kristeva's effort to translate the Freudian uncanny into a politics of stranger relations. Bhabha, however, reprimands Kristeva for speaking "perhaps too hastily of the pleasure of exile," particularly in her earlier essay, "Women's Time." See Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 140.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>119</sup> Bhabha, "The World and the Home," 144.

<sup>120</sup> Anthony Vidler, "A Dark Space," in *Rachel Whiteread: House*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 68.

suggest that it held “unaccounted secrets and horrors.”<sup>121</sup> But, Vidler continues, *House* was less a nightmare of containment than of expulsion, and thus it actually turned the uncanny itself inside out. In Whiteread’s installation, he suggests, “where even the illusion of return ‘home’ is refused, the uncanny itself is banished.” He concludes:

No longer can the fundamental terrors of exclusion and banishment, of homelessness and alienation, be ameliorated by their aestheticization in horror stories and psychoanalytic family romances; with all doors to the unheimlich firmly closed, the domestic subject is finally out in the cold forever.<sup>122</sup>

Like Whiteread’s concrete cast (and Steve McQueen’s tumbling façade, for that matter), the art projects addressed in this dissertation banish the uncanny, instead invoking home as a space of radical disjuncture, where the private can no longer be presumed sheltered (or concealed) from the public. The artists whose works are addressed in the following pages articulate home as neither a space of withdrawal from the other nor a nomadic non-place where self collapses seamlessly into the other, but instead as a dangerous, precarious, but nonetheless productive space of inter-subjective relations.

In this study, my aim is to show how the home rendered unhomey in contemporary art practices becomes a liminal space of negotiation—a conceptual space in which the viewing subject comes to recognize, even empathize with, the predicament of the traumatized other. In this way, I am concerned not simply with how certain representational strategies speak about trauma and particular traumatic experiences, but also with how these representations speak *to* trauma theory. For while, as I have demonstrated, significant research has been done on the ethics and aesthetics of representing trauma, what has yet to be adequately

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 72.

theorized is the extent to which trauma theory is capable of providing a relevant model for addressing the traumatizing consequences of mass displacement that have rendered the present era so uniquely unhomely. The art works that are addressed in this thesis speak of the traumas of exile, displacement, and forced mobility in and through the language of trauma. Employing the fragile figure of home as a vehicle for melancholic expressions of the material nature of loss, they furthermore challenge trauma studies to reconsider its own foundations. In the following chapter, I contextualize these practices in order to demonstrate both their embeddedness within contemporary art history *and* what I identify as a radical shift in artists' conceptions of (and aesthetic responses to) the precarious occupation of domestic space in contemporary society.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Domestic tension: A contemporary art genealogy

*...the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house  
was already an indication of my body.*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*<sup>1</sup>

*There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*

"Welcome to the memory industry," begins historian Kerwin Lee Klein's methodical evaluation of the directions that have been taken in recent memory discourses, an evaluation that offers a scathing critique of the ways in which memory has been deployed as a key word in the arts and humanities.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, an attention to memory—variously referred to as an industry, a boom, an avalanche, and a crisis—has undeniably manifested itself in culture and discourse of late. The turn to memory, as Andreas Huyssen observes, can be mapped along three identifiable trajectories: the rejection of modernity's blind trust in progress and development; the articulation of anxiety around the increasing flux of postmodern globalization; and an emphasis on minority rights and marginalized histories. In his 2003 book, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Huyssen argues that the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century memory boom—manifested in everything from historical theme parks to the "globalization of Holocaust discourse"<sup>3</sup>—reflects a collective anxiety surrounding what David Harvey has called postmodernity's space-time

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1957), 325.

<sup>2</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations*, no. 69, Special issue: Grounds for Remembering (winter 2000): 127.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13.

compression—a disorienting condition that has generated a turn to memory for both comfort and spatio-temporal “anchoring.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the memory boom has been complicated by a twentieth-century history of atrocities that “mars *a priori* any attempt to glorify the past,”<sup>5</sup> and thus the turn to memory has necessarily constituted a *crisis* of memory.

For Huyssen, the memory boom/crisis is a double-edged sword. On one hand, memory discourses (particularly those that develop out of the language of trauma) tend to privilege personal narratives of pain and suffering in ways that risk occluding both the political dimensions of historical violence and the socioeconomic imperatives of reparation. Memory, Huyssen stresses, “can be no substitute for justice, and justice will inevitably be entangled in the unreliability of memory.”<sup>6</sup> But the contemporary memory crisis also has enabling dimensions, foremost among them the impossibility of treating the past nostalgically. As Huyssen observes, the twentieth century “does not give us easy access to the trope of a golden age”—we are required, instead, to write history “in a new key.”<sup>7</sup> He concludes that,

while the hypertrophy of memory can lead to self-indulgence, melancholy fixations, and a problematic privileging of the traumatic dimensions of life with no exit in sight, memory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future...in a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space.<sup>8</sup>

Advocating what he terms “critical cultural memory” practices, that is, cultural practices that mobilize the productive potential of Western culture’s memory crisis, Huyssen points in particular to a group of contemporary artists (among

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 24-25, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6.



them Rachel Whiteread and Doris Salcedo) whose works, identified by the neologism “memory sculpture,” convey memory as a lived, corporeal experience that “activates body, space, and temporality, matter and imagination, presence and absence in a complex relationship with their beholder.”<sup>9</sup> In these works, the past figures as a series of traces whose materiality constitutes the present as a palimpsest of experiences that resist consignment to the dustbins of history. Defying the politics of redemption, the spectacularization of memory, and the aestheticization of trauma, memory sculptures instead operate as “inscriptions of time and displacements of space” that demand recognition of the “indissoluble relationship among space, memory, and bodily experience.”<sup>10</sup>

In significant ways, Huyssen’s diagnosis of contemporary culture’s “hypertrophy” of memory and his prescription for critical practices that challenge and complicate it provide a relevant framework for the socio-political issues and aesthetic concerns to which this dissertation attends; like Huyssen, I am interested in understanding how contemporary art practices can unsettle our conventional ways of accessing experiences to which we in fact have little to no access. But one claim in particular functions as a motivating force for the present chapter. Introducing the recent emergence of memory sculpture in the international art world, Huyssen suggests that artists who convey memory “as a displacing of past into present” therefore represent a challenge to the persistence of avant-gardism in the arts:

As opposed to much avant-garde practice in this century, then, this kind of work is not energized by the notion of forgetting. Its temporal sensibility is decidedly post-avant-garde. It fears not only the erasure of a specific (personal or political) past that may, of course, vary from artist to artist; it rather works against the erasure of pastness itself, which, in its projects, remains indissolubly linked to the materiality of things and bodies in time and space.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 111.

Throughout this dissertation, I consider the ways in which artists employ the fragile figure of home as a sort of tattered reliquary, carrying the precarious materiality of the past into the present. Indeed, I argue for the emergence of a new aesthetic strategy in contemporary art, one that treats home as neither a nostalgic cipher for an idealized notion of comfort and security nor a menacing site of cloistered depravity, but instead as a container for traces of lost belonging. But to commit to a concomitantly “post-avant-garde” reading of such practices, it seems imperative as well to acknowledge and account for some of the *art* historical traces that haunt the art works themselves. For while I am convinced of a significant shift in how and to what ends both the concept and material conditions of home are articulated in recent art practices, the artists whose works I investigate also exist within and contribute to—whether consciously or not—a lineage of twentieth-century art practices representing home as a site of spatial, temporal, and/or affective disjuncture.

The lineage that I trace in this chapter begins in the early twentieth century with modern art’s disavowal of the domestic in its quixotic quest for a permanent state of existential exile—an elevation of the artist-as-wanderer that we will see echoed, in chapter 5, in the recent “biennialization” of contemporary art. However, the bulk of the chapter concentrates on American art of the late 1960s and 1970s, during which an interrelated set of conditions—the challenge to modernist (Greenbergian) orthodoxies of the artist as outsider, the rise of feminism, the ongoing suburbanization and consumerization of postwar families, the degradation (and then rapid gentrification) of urban centers (which generated, and then exacerbated, an epidemic of homelessness), and the American aggression in Vietnam—provoked among artists an unprecedented interest in exploring the complexities of house, home, and domesticity. I spotlight

two artists in particular, Martha Rosler and Gordon Matta-Clark, whose art practices in the 1970s, I argue, most resonate with today's artists. Apart from the coincidence of being New York-based artists who were fairly successful in the 1970s but whose works of that period have since become iconic, Rosler and Matta-Clark appear at first glance to have little in common: Rosler was, and continues to be, a pioneering feminist photographer and video artist whose marriage of Dada-inspired agit-prop and postmodern photo-conceptualism spoke directly and unflinchingly to the gender and class politics of the day. Matta-Clark, a member of contemporary art royalty (his father was Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta; his godfather was purportedly Marcel Duchamp) who trained as an architect, was conceptually indebted to land artists like Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim; his investigations of site and non-site<sup>12</sup> in the context of urban decay combined a sharp contempt for architectural convention with a playful sense of the radical possibilities of space and light. But in projects such as Rosler's *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* of 1967-72 (a photomontage series that inserted documentary photographs of the Vietnam War into the opulent spaces of the suburban American home) and Matta-Clark's *Splitting* of 1974 (which saw a suburban house literally bisected), the artists demonstrate a shared concern for investigating the contested nature of home, with all the psychological and political implications of this contestation.

Rosler and Matta-Clark are responding to specific sociopolitical issues that have little, if anything, to do with the traumatizing experiences of displacement and dislocation that characterize so many lives lived today, and that animate so much recent art. But when Matta-Clark's building cuts and

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Smithson defined sites as specific physical locations that are uncontainable and unclassifiable (deserts, for instance). Non-sites are unspecific locations in which information and experience are contained, classified, and abstracted from any sense of place (such as museums). See *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), esp. 175-76 and 364.

excavations are reappropriated by artists like Urs Fisher in post-9/11 New York, and when Rosler's photoconceptual strategies are given new life by Melanie Friend in photo-text installations documenting the domestic consequences of upheaval in Kosovo (or by Rosler herself in an updated Iraq War version of *Bringing the War Home*), I suggest that Rosler and Matta-Clark's practices obtain a new level of relevance, and acquire the capacity to make insightful contributions to the questions that attach to recent practices. But if one of the main claims made in this dissertation is that contemporary artists possess a unique capacity to evoke the precariousness of home as a lever with which to generate ethically and affectively charged responses to the suffering of others, my intention in this chapter is not to anachronize, or worse "traumatize," the fractured homes in the practices of Rosler and Matta-Clark. Instead, I chart these practices in order to understand how they become colored by the contemporary world's fascination with trauma (and particularly with the traumas associated with the precarious occupation of space), and how their work in turn can add nuance, even a sense of hope, to contemporary renderings of that precarity.

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### **"Modernist homelessness" and the postmodern unhomey**

The late 1960s and early to mid-1970s constitute a pivotal moment in considerations of the links between art, home, and traumatic experience. Indeed, it can and has been argued that only during this period did Western artists—particularly American artists—begin to seriously consider home and the domestic realm as worthy subject matter. The phenomenon of domesticity actually emerged in tandem with the advent of modernity in the nineteenth century, inextricably bound to the interrelated contexts of free-market capitalism, technological advances and post-Enlightenment ideas of the subject. But the concurrent development of an "avant-garde" in the arts—from Baudelaire to

Greenberg, and from the brothels of Degas and Picasso to architect Adolf Loos's "distinctly unhomely...cold storage warehouse cubes"<sup>13</sup>—was conceived as an escape from the confines of home toward the "landscapes of the great city."<sup>14</sup> There exist, of course, significant exceptions to modern art's complex estrangement from home, for instance in the practices of female Impressionists Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, who were not afforded the freedoms of their male flaneur counterparts,<sup>15</sup> and British modernist William Morris, whose Arts and Crafts movement engaged primarily and unapologetically with the aesthetics of the home. But for the most part, when home does appear in modern art, it does so as the return of the repressed. As art historian Christopher Reed observes, "The domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion."<sup>16</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the Surrealist movement, whose collective challenge to the rationalism of modernism took the form of an embrace of the uncanny, proved itself most committed to investigating the complexities of home in the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Several Surrealists—including Leonora Carrington, Tristan Tzara, Salvador Dalí, and Roberto Matta—explored, as

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<sup>13</sup> Witold Rybczynski, in *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 199, cited in Christopher Reed, introduction to *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), trans. Jonathan Mayne, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 11.

<sup>15</sup> See Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), for an insightful feminist analysis of the treatment of the domestic realm in Impressionist painting.

<sup>16</sup> Reed, *Not at Home*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> For analysis and insight into Surrealism's obsessive relationship with home, see Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), esp. 147-66. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), for a treatment of the Surrealist aesthetics of the uncanny, here understood as "a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order" (xvii).



**FIGURE 2.1**  
Roberto Matta,  
*La Iniciación*, 1941



**FIGURE 2.2**  
Marcel Duchamp,  
*La Boîte en valise*, 1941

architectural historian Anthony Vidler observes, the “irrational possibilities...of home and dwellings,” with Matta in particular challenging the rationalist domestic architecture of modernists like Le Corbusier and Loos with propositions for what Tzara termed “intrauterine” architecture.<sup>18</sup> In a 1938 article in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, Matta proposed an apartment with walls “like wet sheets that deform and marry themselves to our psychological fears”<sup>19</sup>—a proposal that was given form in paintings such as *La Iniciación* of 1941 (fig. 2.1), which likewise imagines home as an uncanny space of repressed fears and desires.

But while Surrealists were exploring the dark, psychological aspects of the domestic realm, other artists in the first half of the twentieth century rejected home altogether in favor of a kind of critical nomadism. In fact, the severed relationship between modernism and domesticity is reflected in Rosalind Krauss’s vision of the twentieth-century avant-garde, which gives both conceptual and geopolitical context to modernism’s renunciation of home. In her 1979 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss coins the phrase “modernist homelessness” in her analysis of sculptural practices that exhibit formal markers of their “essentially nomadic” nature—in other words, their unmooring from any sense of historical, geographic, or cultural specificity.<sup>20</sup> Exemplary in this respect is the work of Constantin Brancusi, whose fetishization

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<sup>18</sup> See Anthony Vidler, “Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture,” *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 1 (2003): 1. In response to modernist architecture, which, “as hygienic and stripped of ornaments as it wants to appear, has no chance of living...because it is the complete negation of the image of the dwelling,” Tzara proposed intrauterine architecture as soft, tactile, primitive constructions that would symbolize “prenatal comfort.” In “D’un certain automatisme du Goût,” *Minotaure* (Paris), no. 3-4 (December 1933); cited in Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 151-52.

<sup>19</sup> Roberto Matta Echaurren, “Mathématique sensible—Architecture du temps,” *Minotaure* (Paris), no. 11 (May 1938): 43; cited in Anthony Vidler, “Architecture-to-Be’: Notes on Architecture in the Work of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark,” in *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Betti-Sue Hertz (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2006), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, no. 8 (spring 1979).

of the pedestal (insofar as the sculpture either *becomes* the base or enters into a symbiotic relationship with it) functioned as a “marker of the work’s homelessness integrated into the very fiber of the sculpture,” and whose fragmentation of body parts also signals “a loss of site, in this case the site of the rest of the body, the skeletal support that would give to one of the bronze or marble heads a home.”<sup>21</sup>

What Krauss acknowledges only implicitly, however, is the extent to which the “modernist homelessness” at play in sculpture’s expanding field coincided not only with an avant-garde aesthetic sensibility of exile, but also with a period of mass displacement (both forced and self-imposed) between and during the world wars. According to architectural historian Anthony Vidler, this geopolitical condition (which saw a great number of Europe’s leading artists transplanted to North America) “only reinforced the growing feeling that modern man was, essentially and fundamentally, rootless,” and that homelessness, quoting Martin Heidegger’s well-known aphorism, was “coming to be the destiny of the world.”<sup>22</sup> A salient example of this congruence is Marcel Duchamp’s *La Boîte-en-valise* of 1935-40 (fig. 2.2), a series of suitcases outfitted with reproductions of readymades that responded, as art historian T.J. Demos suggests, to both the “uprooting tendencies of capitalism, artistic institutionalization, and photography” and to “the transitory existence of the subject in exile”<sup>23</sup>—specifically, Duchamp’s own experience of dislocation during

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>22</sup> See Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 8; and Martin Heidegger, “The Letter on Humanism” (1947), in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: Harper Books, 1993), 243.

<sup>23</sup> T. J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), 38. See Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 36-72, for an insightful reading of how the suitcase is mobilized in contemporary narratives to signify “the moment of rupture, the instance in which the subject is torn out of the web of connectedness that contained him or her through an invisible net of belonging” (37).



the Nazi occupation of Paris. Demos, however, is careful to advise against too smooth a conflation between the “modernist homelessness” identified by Krauss and its geopolitical cousin, acknowledging that a vast gulf separates Duchamp’s playful suitcases (and equally playful wartime escapades across Nazi checkpoints) and, say, the suitcase of Walter Benjamin, one of few items in his possession when he took his life after a failed attempt to flee the Nazis in 1940. For Duchamp, “displacement could be a desired and productive condition,” whereas Benjamin’s experience of exile was instead “a traumatic, involuntary sentence with deathly threats.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, as Demos argues persuasively, it is nevertheless productive to read Duchamp’s aesthetics of exile in the context of an “ethics of exile”<sup>25</sup> that emerged during and after the war, fuelled first by the lived condition of displacement faced by many artists, and secondly by a disavowal of fascism’s mobilization of “home” (*Heimat*)<sup>26</sup> to rouse nationalist sentiment, both underwritten by Theodor Adorno’s maxim that it is “immoral to feel at home in one’s own home.”<sup>27</sup>

It was not until the 1960s and ‘70s that the aesthetics of exile began to be challenged by art practices that “made domesticity a central element in their defiance of modernism.”<sup>28</sup> But even then, this embrace was troubled and

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<sup>24</sup> Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, 18. Here, Demos quotes both Duchamp on displacement (“The artist should be alone.... Everyone for himself, as in a shipwreck”) and Benjamin on exile (“a man at home between the jaws of a crocodile”).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

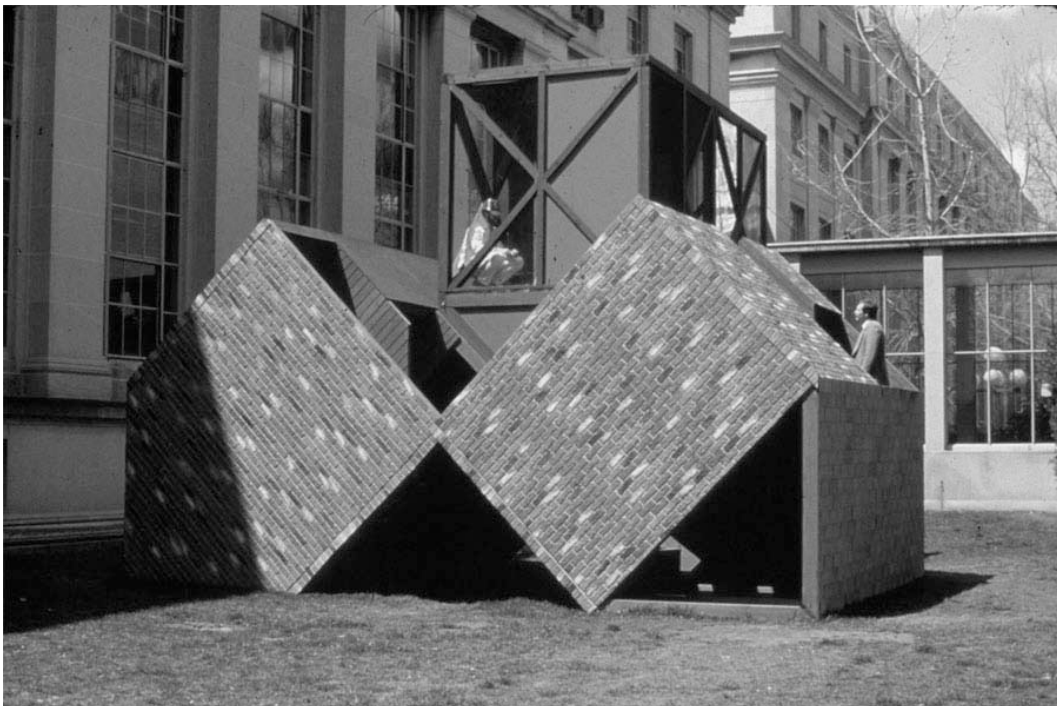
<sup>26</sup> The German term has no direct equivalent in English, and refers to both home and homeland.

<sup>27</sup> Theodor Adorno, “On the Question, ‘What Is German?’” (1965), *New German Critique* (Special issue on *Heimat*), no. 36 (fall 1985): 121. See also George Steiner, who identifies a similar rationale for the “unhomeliness” of post-war literature (such as that of Joyce, Conrad, Kafka and Nabakov). In *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed, “Coming Home: A Postscript on Postmodernism,” in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 253. Haar and Reed point in particular to the Pop and Feminist art movements.



**FIGURE 2.3**  
 Dan Graham,  
*Alteration to a Suburban House*, 1978



**FIGURE 2.4**  
 Vito Acconci,  
*Bad Dream House*, 1984

equivocal. Conceptual artist Dan Graham's proposal for an *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978), for instance, which saw the façade of a typical American home replaced with a sheet of glass and the open-concept interior bisected by a ceiling-height two-way mirror, reflected on the increasing insularity and narcissism of middle-class families (fig. 2.3). Much of Vito Acconci's work, too (from *Seedbed* of 1972, a performance in which the artist masturbated under a raised platform in the gallery, quite literally exposing the seedy underbelly of the private sphere as a public spectacle, to *Bad Dream House* of 1984, an inhabitable but structurally disorienting and dysfunctional space) (fig. 2.4), suggests, as Christine Poggi observes, that "The private, domestic sphere remains at once a myth to be debunked and a trap to be avoided."<sup>29</sup> But it was the advent of second-wave feminism in particular that inspired artists to reconsider the stakes and perils of domesticity, and to challenge both the avant-garde negation of home *and* more nostalgic visions of home as a space of comfort and security.

Like the Surrealists, many feminist artists in the 1970s figured the domestic sphere as a deeply uncanny space, but the uncanny in these works was imbued with political resonance, reflecting home as a site of patriarchal power, sexual repression, and the oppression of women—concerns that already inhabit Surrealist artist Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* drawings of 1946-47 (fig. 2.5), in which headless female bodies are fused awkwardly with architectural structures to become, quite literally, house-wives. As Angelika Bammer suggests, "home in a sense has always been *unheimlich*, unhomely; not just the utopian place of safety and shelter for which we supposedly yearn, but also the place of dark secrets, of

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<sup>29</sup> Christine Poggi, "Vito Acconci's Bad Dream of Domesticity," in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson), 252. Poggi attributes this aversion to Acconci's "modernist ethos of the singular, heroic, transgressive male, whose independence drives him from home" (237).



**FIGURE 2.5**  
Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1946-47



**FIGURE 2.6**  
Sandra Ogel,  
*Linen Closet*, from  
*Womanhouse*, 1972



**FIGURE 2.7**  
Karen LeCocq and  
Nancy Youdelman,  
*Leah's Room*, from  
*Womanhouse*, 1972



**FIGURE 2.8**  
Judy Chicago,  
*Menstruation Bathroom*, from  
*Womanhouse*, 1972

fear and danger,"<sup>30</sup> and it is precisely this understanding of home that animated several feminist art projects of the 1970s, including *Womanhouse* (1972), a collaboration of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts headed by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. For the month-long project, inspired both by Bourgeois' early work and by the pioneering investigations of American feminist Betty Friedan into the imprisoning dimensions of suburban femininity in the 1960s,<sup>31</sup> a group of twenty-three artists occupied an abandoned mansion in Los Angeles, California, and transformed it into a series of installation and performance spaces, all of which reflected on (and rendered scandalously public) women's ambivalent relationship with the domestic sphere and all the rituals, secrets, and banalities that are concealed, confined, and devalued within.<sup>32</sup> Thus Sandra Ogel's *Linen Closet* (fig. 2.6) consisted of a mannequin literally trapped in her domestic context, Karen LeCocq and Nancy Youdelman's performance installation *Leah's Room* (fig. 2.7) featured a young woman monotonously applying, removing, and reapplying makeup *ad infinitum*, and Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (fig. 2.8) saw an otherwise pristine bathroom rendered abject by a trashcan overflowing with tampons and pads soaked in blood-red paint, an uncanny evocation of "everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Angelika Bammer, "The Question of 'Home'," *New Formations*, no. 17 (1992): xi.

<sup>31</sup> Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963) was a groundbreaking and controversial exploration of the notion that "fulfilment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother" (38). Other influential books of the period included Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, [1952] 1974); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970); and Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> For documentation and analysis, see Miriam Schapiro, "The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse," *Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (spring 1972); Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994); and Temma Balducci, "Revisiting *Womanhouse*: Welcome to the (Deconstructed) Dollhouse," *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (fall/winter 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Eric Randolph Miller

*Womanhouse* “turned the house inside out,” as Arlene Raven suggests, in order to express the “isolation and anger that many women felt in the single-nuclear-family dwelling in every suburb of America.”<sup>34</sup> However, the unacknowledged assumptions underlying this critique (i.e. the conflation of white, heterosexual, upper-middle class housewives with a universal notion of “Woman”) would be sharply scrutinized by African-American feminists, notably bell hooks, who argues that for Black women, “homeplace,” far from a site of oppression, was traditionally a subversive space of critical consciousness and resistance.<sup>35</sup> Class-based analysis would furthermore call into question the very presumption of a stable (and presumably well-appointed) dwelling that underwrote some feminist critiques of the post-war American home. For whereas, as David Morley puts it, “home is an inevitably problematic space, still to be without a home in a home-centered culture is a traumatic experience.”<sup>36</sup> In this respect, it is significant that the 1970s also witnessed the onslaught of housing crises in cities across North America, especially New York City—where a fiscal crisis combined with poor city management saw parts of the city, notably Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx, transformed into landscapes of dilapidated and abandoned tenements, and where rates of homelessness and inadequate housing seemed to multiply exponentially overnight.<sup>37</sup> It was in this context, as we will

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(Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [1835] 1966), 649; cited in Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 241.

<sup>34</sup> Raven, “Womanhouse,” 61.

<sup>35</sup> However, hooks decries the extent to which the appropriation of white bourgeois sexist norms has transformed “that subversive homeplace into a site of patriarchal domination of black women by black men.” In “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), 47.

<sup>36</sup> David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

<sup>37</sup> See Kim Hopper, *Reckoning with Homelessness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), for a history and sociology of homelessness in the US.

see, that Gordon Matta-Clark produced several scathing critiques of the architectural establishment's failure to respond to the housing crisis unfolding literally under its feet; it was also in response to New York's increasingly dire housing situation that German Conceptual artist Hans Haacke produced one of his most acclaimed institutional critiques, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (fig. 2.9). A series of one-hundred forty-two photographs of tenement buildings in Harlem and lower-eastside Manhattan (all belonging to the wealthy and well-respected Shapolsky family) and accompanied by detailed documentation of their transaction histories, the installation unraveled a tangled narrative of one family's greed, wealth, fraudulence, and slum dwelling mismanagement; at a more general level, it furthermore indicted all of upper-class Manhattan for turning a blind eye to the rapid deterioration of their city.<sup>38</sup>

The situation was only exacerbated in the 1980s, when regeneration and gentrification of America's urban cores combined with the regressive social and economic policies of the Reagan administration saw the housing crisis in New York and other American cities spiral out of control to such an extent that it could no longer be ignored—although Herculean efforts were made to do just that. As Rosalyn Deutsche puts it, “by the late 1980s it had become clear to most observers that the visibility of masses of homeless people interferes with positive images of New York, constituting a crisis in the official representation of the

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<sup>38</sup> Some have speculated that this is one of the reasons the exhibition was notoriously cancelled six weeks ahead of its scheduled opening by Guggenheim New York's director Thomas Messer, who famously referred to the work as “an alien substance [that] violates the supreme neutrality of the work of art.” In “Guest Editorial,” *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 8 (summer 1971): 4-5. For documentation and analysis, see Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); and Walter Grasskamp, Molly Nesbit, and Jon Bird, *Hans Haacke* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2004).







city.”<sup>39</sup> The “solution” was to make homelessness (or rather, the homeless) disappear by sweeping the poor and destitute off the streets and into underfunded shelters and marginalized neighborhoods with inadequate infrastructure. And it was precisely the enforced invisibility of homelessness as a socioeconomic issue that propelled artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko (and, as we will see in the following section, Martha Rosler) to confront the crisis in ways that would “disrupt the coherent urban image that today is constructed only by neutralizing homelessness.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in 1988-89 Wodiczko produced the *Homeless Vehicle* (fig. 2.10), designed in collaboration with homeless men in New York City as a mobile shelter with compact compartments for sleeping, washing and storage. Intended, according to the artist, as a “speech-act machine,” the vehicle sought to enable self-representation and challenge “the preconceived, fixed, and *a priori* image of the homeless population and its identity produced and reproduced by existing official networks of communication.”<sup>41</sup> The *Homeless Vehicle*, then, was meant neither to symbolize homelessness nor to provide a practical solution. Instead, like Wodiczko’s *Homeless Projection Proposal* of 1986 (a rejected proposal to project still images of homeless men and women onto civic monuments in Union Square, New York City), the project functioned as what Dick Hebdige calls a “Trojan Horse” in increasingly fortified urban spaces—an uncanny instrument that, by “making strange our habituated ways of seeing”<sup>42</sup> (or failing to see) homeless people, registers not so much the return of the repressed but rather, as I suggest

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<sup>39</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Poliscar” (1991), in *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Dick Hebdige, “Redeeming Witness: In the Tracks of the Homeless Vehicle Project,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 184.



**FIGURE 2.11**  
Martha Rosler,  
*Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975



**FIGURE 2.12**  
Martha  
Rosler, *If You  
Lived Here...*,  
Dia Art  
Foundation,  
New York,  
1989

in chapter 3 when we return to Wodiczko's uncanny aesthetics, the return of the dispossessed.

### **Bringing war home: Martha Rosler**

In an ongoing art practice that reflects many of the same concerns addressed by Krzysztof Wodiczko, New York-based artist Martha Rosler has, since the 1960s, employed video, photography, collage and large-scale installations to investigate the social, economic, and political complexities of home from a class-based feminist perspective. First, and in keeping with feminist contemporaries such as the participants of *Womanhouse*, Rosler's practice in the 1970s often cast a skeptical gaze on nostalgic notions of home as a place of respite and retreat, instead revealing it as a discomforting space of drudgery and confinement. Perhaps most incisive in this respect is the 1975 *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in which the artist "performs" the post-war suburban American housewife as part-automaton, part-renegade (fig. 2.11). A ruthless parody of the popular "Suzy Homemaker" stereotype of the 1960s and '70s, the six-minute video sees a deadpan Rosler standing behind a counter, mechanically itemizing everyday kitchen instruments but wielding them like weapons and then flinging them disdainfully away. In the process, home is revealed as a tense battlefield in the spirited gender politics of the day, as the work productively unites Foucault's analysis of the body as "the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration"<sup>43</sup> with the feminist understanding of home as itself a contested space of subjectivity where "differing

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 83.

interests struggle to define their own spaces within which to localize and cultivate their identity.”<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, Rosler’s practice has agitated on behalf of the notion that housing is a human right, and this is in fact the title and message of an LED billboard project in Times Square that accompanied Rosler’s exhibition *If You Lived Here....* (1989). The exhibition, actually a series of three group exhibitions and four discussion forums over a period of six months, concerned the interconnected issues of suburbanization, gentrification and homelessness, particularly in New York City (fig. 2.12).<sup>45</sup> Like Wodiczko, Rosler sought to implicate practices of urban renewal in the rapidly worsening housing crisis: the exhibition’s title was borrowed from a popular real estate advertising campaign that lured wealthy suburbanites back into the gentrifying core with the enticing promise, “If you lived here, you’d be home now.” As if to draw out the implicit message behind the advertisement and urban renewal more generally, the wall at the entrance to the exhibition space was stenciled with then-Mayor Ed Koch’s infamous declaration at the onset of his war against New York’s poor, “If you can’t afford to live here, move!”<sup>46</sup> As Dick Hebdige explains, both Wodiczko and

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<sup>44</sup> Karen Fog-Olwig, “Contested Homes: Home-Making and the Making of Anthropology,” in *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*, ed. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 226.

<sup>45</sup> These concerns are also brought to bear in the video project *How Do We Know What Home Looks Like?* (1993), Rosler’s contribution to the group exhibition *Projet Unité*, organized by Yves Aupetitallot to reflect on Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Firminy (his last and largest housing project and the subject of much debate among urban planners and residents alike). Rosler’s video consists of tours of abandoned apartments in the complex and interviews with the few remaining residents involved in a struggle to preserve their threatened community. More recently, demonstrating that issues of homelessness and social housing remain critical around the world, Rosler exhibited *Sur/sous le pavé* (2006) in Rennes, France, where she displayed artwork related to housing and homelessness along with a reading room devoted to local housing issues.

<sup>46</sup> The exhibition is documented and analyzed in Brian Wallis, ed., *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism. A Project by Martha Rosler* (New York: New Press, 1991).

Rosler aim to draw attention to the elided connections between gentrification, free-market capitalism, and homelessness, wherein,

the homeless are revealed to be less the victims of their own inadequacies than of that linked process of economic and social transformation which Marshall Berman has dubbed “urbicide,” whereby speculative property developments, the suspension of planning controls, redlining, blockbusting, gentrification, soaring rents, the casualization and deskilling of manual labor and drastically reduced welfare and public housing programs actively conspire to *produce* homelessness.<sup>47</sup>

In a move reminiscent of Haacke’s Shapolsky installation, Rosler also declares war on the New York art world, drawing attention to the extent to which successful urban artist communities (such as New York’s SoHo, where the exhibitions took place) simultaneously benefit from urban decay (by occupying destitute neighborhoods) and facilitate rapid gentrification (via their cultural capital). At the same time, by forging links between participating artists and housing activists, Rosler also facilitated the development of an oppositional public (art) sphere that, as Alexandro Alberro notes, “helped set the context for a whole array of 1990s [art] work involved in community and social change.”<sup>48</sup>

Above all, Martha Rosler has maintained throughout her career that home—in all its social, psychological, and material dimensions—is a complex site of contestation and negotiation requiring nuanced, multidimensional responses that acknowledge that the comforts of the few are almost always a product of the deprivations of many. But if the apparent comforts of middle-class domesticity during the second half of the twentieth century both concealed and exacerbated severe housing crises across the Western world, they were also deeply implicated

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<sup>47</sup> Hebdige, “Redeeming Witness,” 177. Hebdige is referring in this passage to Marshall Berman, “Take It to the Streets: Conflict and Community in Public Space,” *Dissent* 33, no. 4 (summer 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Alexandro Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy,” in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Vienna: Generali Foundation; Cambridge and London: MIT Press), 110.



**FIGURE 2.13**  
Martha Rosler,  
*Red Stripe Kitchen*, from  
*Bringing the War Home: House*  
*Beautiful*, 1967-72



**FIGURE 2.14**  
Martha  
Rosler,  
*Vacation*  
*Getaway*,  
from *Bringing*  
*the War Home:*  
*House*  
*Beautiful*,  
1967-72

in the military-industrial complex that developed during that period, and thus in the late 1960s and early 1970s, another war drew Rosler to what she terms “the riddle of segregated representations of clean spaces and dirty spaces of human habitation.”<sup>49</sup> From 1967 to 1972, the US conflict in Vietnam compelled Rosler to produce a series of twenty photo-collages entitled *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. Intended for insertion into anti-war pamphlets and broadsheets,<sup>50</sup> the photo-collages comprised photojournalistic images of the ongoing war in Vietnam inserted into advertising scenes of domestic luxury. Most of the photographs for the series were gathered from *Life*, a magazine that embodied the paradox of cold-war America—its pages filled on the one hand with celebratory images of the bourgeois trappings of suburban American family homes, and on the other with investigative reports of battles being fought well beyond the borders of this comfort zone.<sup>51</sup> In *Life* magazine, as Laura Cottingham remarks evocatively in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition of Rosler’s series in 1991, “documentary accounts of blown bodies, dead babies, and anguished faces flow seamlessly into mattress ads and photo features of sophisticated kitchens, fastidiously fertilized lawns and art-hung living rooms.”<sup>52</sup> In response, Rosler’s aesthetic strategy was to reveal that these two dichotomous and seemingly irreconcilable pictures of America were actually negative imprints of one another. For Rosler, the photo-collages represented “a felt need to insist

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<sup>49</sup> In Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “A Conversation with Martha Rosler,” in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Vienna: Generali Foundation; Cambridge and London: MIT Press), 50.

<sup>50</sup> The collages were designed for black-and-white reproduction in non-art contexts. They were first exhibited as color photographs at Simon Watson Gallery in 1991, during the first Gulf War. For a review of the exhibition, see Brian Wallis, “Living Room War,” *Art in America* 80, no. 5 (February 1992).

<sup>51</sup> See Wendy Kozol’s *Life’s America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) for a study of how middle-class domesticity is staged in *Life*.

<sup>52</sup> Laura Cottingham, “The War Is Always Home: Martha Rosler,” in *Bringing the War Home: Photomontages from the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Simon Watson, 1991), n.p.

that the separation of the here and the elsewhere, the *ici et ailleurs*...were not simply illusory but dangerous.”<sup>53</sup> Thus a perfectly appointed modern kitchen is invaded by two soldiers on the prowl; a young Vietnamese man carrying a wounded child climbs the stairs of a spacious house in search of aid; and the picture windows of a luxury vacation home overlook a fiery battle scene (figs. 2.13-2.15).

In her 2007 book *Domesticity at War*, architectural historian Beatriz Colomina reveals an intricate matrix of links between developments in American post-war domestic architecture and an ongoing culture of war—from Buckminster Fuller’s militarization of the house as a defensive shelter to suburbia’s transformation of the lawn into a “makeshift battlefield” against pest invasions.<sup>54</sup> From the 1950s on, Colomina observes, American-style domesticity was furthermore dispatched quite blatantly as a weapon of the cold war, with “expertly designed images of domestic bliss...launched throughout the entire world as part of a carefully orchestrated campaign.”<sup>55</sup> This collective façade of peaceful domesticity was also deployed as a shield, first to conceal (and protect American’s peaceful image against) the disquieting cold-war escalation, and then to blunt the corollary execution of war in Vietnam during the 1960s and ‘70s. As Colomina puts it, “cold-war anxieties about global threats were masked by endlessly multiplied images of the absolute control of domestic details and permanent smiles.”<sup>56</sup> The uncanny afterimage, however, is of an almost

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<sup>53</sup> Martha Rosler, “Here and Elsewhere,” *Artforum International* 46, no. 3 (November 2007): 50. Rosler is likely referencing Jean-Luc Godard’s 1976 film *Ici et ailleurs*, which, as Cottingham notes, also dealt with the hidden causality between comfort here and deprivation there (in Godard’s case, between French consumer culture and the Palestinian struggle). See Cottingham, “The War Is Always Home,” n.p.

<sup>54</sup> See Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.





**FIGURE 2.15**  
Martha Rosler,  
*Balloons*, from *Bringing the War Home:*  
*House Beautiful*, 1967-72



**FIGURE 2.16**  
Martha Rosler,  
*Cleaning the*  
*Drapes*, from  
*Bringing the*  
*War Home:*  
*House*  
*Beautiful*,  
1967-72

aggressively idyllic vision of domesticity revealed to be deeply traumatized by a militarized culture into whose service it has been covertly enlisted.<sup>57</sup>

*Bringing the War Home* gives form to this repressed traumatic relationship. Consider, for instance, what is perhaps the most iconic image from the series. In *Cleaning the Drapes* (fig. 2.16), an advertisement pictures a “typical” American housewife with perfectly coiffed hair and a calm, demure facial expression gracefully staging a demonstration of a vacuuming appliance on her damask curtains. Outside the large picture window of her modern suburban home, we are abruptly transported to a rocky Vietnamese terrain where American soldiers in combat gear appear to be waiting for orders. The housewife, of course, is blissfully oblivious to this scene as she concentrates her attention on the task at hand—her insular world is well fortified, and the battleground outside the window is as innocuously distant as if it were broadcasting from the television set. Instead, it is left to the viewer to mark the uncanny proximity of the two stages.

Rosler’s technique is informed equally by the early twentieth-century political photomontages of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield and her own photoconceptualist deconstructions of the medium’s discursive functions, such as the photo-text installation *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–75), which interrogates documentary photography’s assumption of unmediated objectivity.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, this technique is predicated, as Jacques Rancière has observed, on the deployment of the uncanny as a Brechtian aesthetic device to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>58</sup> In this work, Rosler combines Walker Evans-style photographs of New York’s infamous “skid row,” void of human presence, with lists of synonyms for “drunk.” See also Martha Rosler, “In, around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)” (1981), in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

reveal the “heterogeneity of the opposite.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, two seemingly opposed worlds are revealed as both deeply imbricated *and* completely incompatible, producing “the strangeness of the familiar, in order to reveal a different order of measurement that is only uncovered by the violence of a conflict.”<sup>60</sup> In this way, Rosler’s series conforms to Rancière’s description of political art’s production of a double effect: “the readability of a political signification and a sensible of perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.”<sup>61</sup> But while Rancière is correct to suggest that Rosler’s collages enable what Brian Massumi would call a “shock to thought,” triggering a transformative moment of political consciousness,<sup>62</sup> this shock is not simply prompted by the juxtaposition of images. For the fact is that images of peaceful domesticity and protracted war (like those juxtaposed in *Cleaning the Drapes*), while seemingly incapable of coexistence, did indeed appear side by side in visual culture of the 1960s and ‘70s—on the pages of *Life*, and also on suburban America’s increasingly ubiquitous television screens, where nightly broadcasts of death and mayhem in Vietnam led eventually to its common designation as the first “living-room war.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, to the extent that the Vietnam War was experienced in the US, it was largely mediated as a screened spectacle. In this way, it is useful to consider America’s domestic experience of

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Misadventures of Universality,” paper presented at the Symposium on Philosophy, 2nd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, 17-18 November 2006, [http://2nd.moscowbiennale.ru/en/sassen\\_report/](http://2nd.moscowbiennale.ru/en/sassen_report/).

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2007), 57.

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 63. It should be noted that Rancière is not endorsing this strategy, which, he suggests, seeks a political mobilization that is at best incalculable and at worst self-neutralizing (by tying its aesthetic means to specific political ends). See also Rancière’s “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art,” *Art and Research* 2, no. 1 (summer 2008), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html>.

<sup>62</sup> See Brian Massumi, “Introduction: Like a Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> See Michael J. Arlen, *Living-Room War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

war (and Rosler's ubiquitous use of screens in her series) according to Freud's concept of "screen memories"—memories that facilitate the repression of traumatic experience by displacing more painful memories.<sup>64</sup> Marita Sturken has suggested that Freud's understanding of screen memory is particularly pertinent to the study of contemporary practices of cultural memory production, since "cultural memory is produced through representation—in contemporary culture, often through photographic images, cinema, and television."<sup>65</sup> As Sturken argues, these representations also act as screens, "actively blocking out other memories that are more difficult to represent."<sup>66</sup> And it is precisely in this manner that scenes of domestic order and bliss in the 1960s and '70s, which reflected the American family back to itself in idealized form (in *Life* magazine, and in a host of popular television programs from *Bewitched* to the *Dick Van Dyke Show*), screened those same families from the more disturbing scenes of chaos and brutality being simultaneously broadcast and repressed through their television screens.

With *Bringing the War Home*, Rosler's intervention was not simply to bring these incongruent but entangled elements together, for they already coexisted in the living rooms of America. Instead, her uncanny move was to render the very familiarity of their co-existence strange, by collapsing or distorting the screen that was their only separation; in Rosler's collages the American home becomes literally invaded by gruesome television scenes. But of course, the screen is not eliminated entirely. Instead, images of war are inserted into more threateningly intimate liminal spaces, such as doorways, staircases, and especially windows.

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<sup>64</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories" (1899), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1962).

<sup>65</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 8.

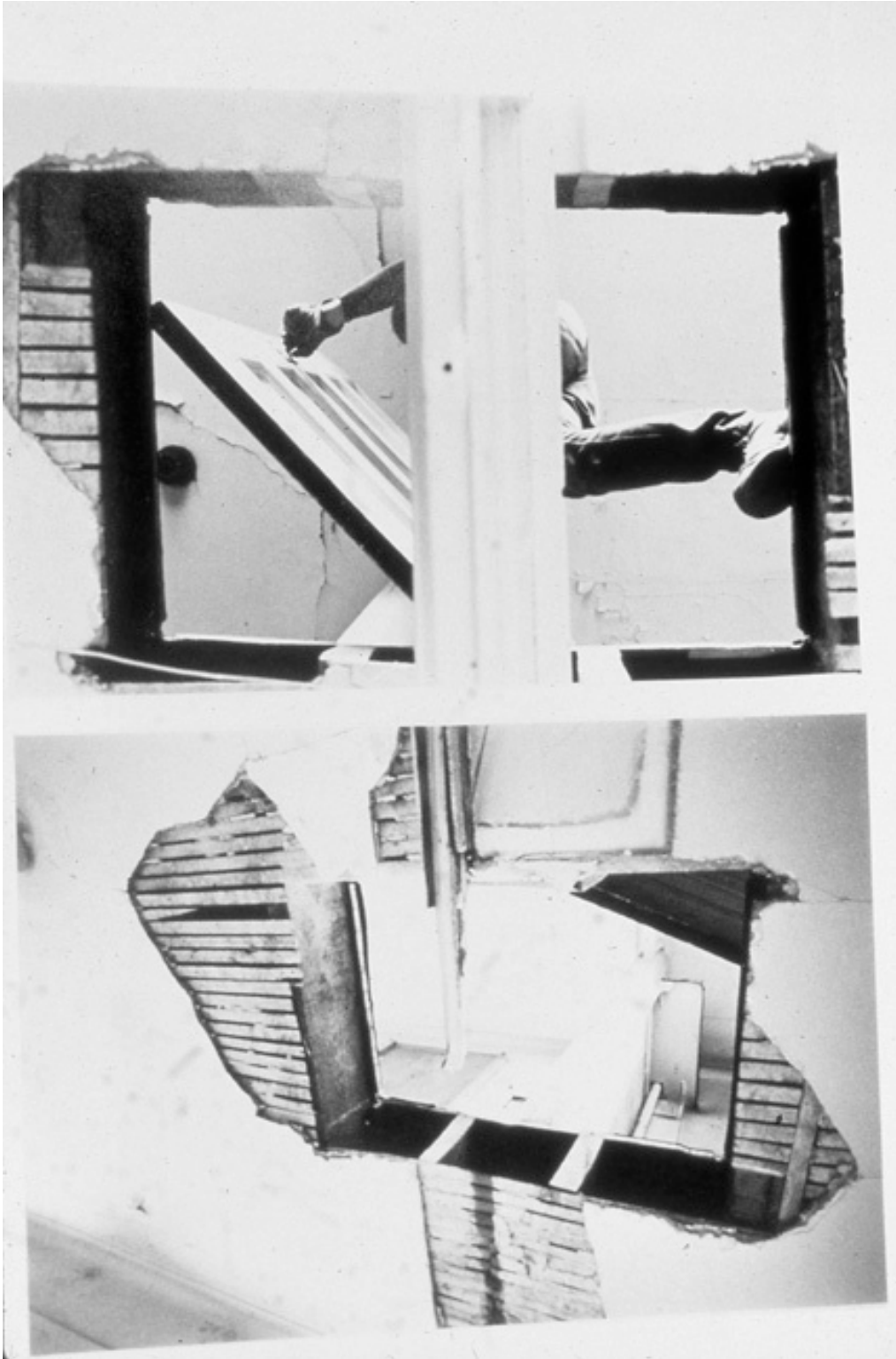
<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

As Brian Wallis observes, “the suburban home is converted into a type of panopticon bunker, its picture windows constantly exposing one to the nightmare landscape outside but affording only the most fragile protection.”<sup>67</sup>

By exposing the American home to the nightmare of war, Rosler also exposes the screen that would otherwise block this nightmare from the collective conscious. In other words, Rosler disturbs conventional understandings of home as a space of comfort and safety in order to mobilize the “return of the repressed,” and in this way, her work resonates with (and, as we will see shortly, both predicts and nuances) much of the trauma-related art that will be investigated in this dissertation. This is not, however, to suggest that Rosler’s work is itself easily subsumed within the category of trauma-related art practice. But as will become apparent as this chapter, and this dissertation, progresses, Rosler’s aesthetic strategy of employing screens to collapse the presumed distance between “the here and the elsewhere” will re-appear in contemporary art practices—from Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Aegis: Equipment for a City of Strangers* (fig. 3.5), which employs video screens as prosthetic speech devices intended to facilitate stranger relations, to Wafaa Bilal’s *Domestic Tension* (fig. 4.14), which mobilizes the computer screen to create an interactive war-at-home environment. In these and other art works that will be discussed in the following pages, home—like in Rosler’s work—figures as a fraught battleground, both materially and ideologically. But, as I will argue, contemporary artists no longer seek to reveal the horrors lurking behind the curtain of domesticity’s myth of security and stability, for these curtains have long since become transparent—in America and, much more markedly, in the rest of the world. Instead, contemporary artists, as we will see, borrow the aesthetic strategies of Rosler (and Matta-Clark) in

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<sup>67</sup> Wallis, “Living Room War,” 105.



**FIGURE 2.17**  
Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Bronx Floors: Threshole*, 1972

order to bear witness to the precariousness with which we occupy domestic space in contemporary global society. I will return to this shift shortly. First, let us turn to Gordon Matta-Clark and his own uncanny renderings of domestic tension.

### **Declaring war on the home: Gordon Matta-Clark**

In 1972, the year Martha Rosler completed her *Bringing the War Home* series, the US began its long, drawn-out withdrawal from the conflict in Vietnam. That same year, a different sort of war was declared on an iconic monument to modernism's project for domestic architecture. On March 16, 1972, the massive Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri, designed by Minoru Yamasaki (the architect of record for another ill-fated modernist icon, the World Trade Center), was demolished in a well-publicized event that constituted what many, notably postmodern architect Charles Jencks, refer to as the day modern architecture died.<sup>68</sup> Built in 1956 according to the principles of Le Corbusier and the International Congress of Modern Architects (CIAM), Pruitt-Igoe was initially heralded as a breakthrough for urban renewal, and modern architecture's solution to America's low-rent housing shortage crisis. The demolition of the thirty-three-building complex, precipitated by its rapid descent into a crime-ridden ghetto plagued by poor design, mismanagement, disrepair, and unsustainable vacancy rates, represented modern architecture's perceived failure to transform its utopian dream of domestic architecture as a "machine for living" into reality.<sup>69</sup> But it was also indicative of the fact that America's worsening

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.

<sup>69</sup> In *Collage City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), critics Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter suggest that by the 1970s, "The city of modern architecture, both as a psychological construct and a physical model, has been rendered tragically ridiculous, ...every day found increasingly inadequate" (4, 6). On Le Corbusier's idea of the house as a machine for living in, see *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: Architectural Press, [1927] 1970).

housing situation was reaching an untenable level, and that the architectural discipline had few conceptual resources with which to tackle it.

It was perhaps with this in mind that, also in 1972, New York-based artist Gordon Matta-Clark began cutting fragments out of the floors of abandoned tenement buildings in the Bronx (fig. 2.17).<sup>70</sup> The series, entitled *Bronx Floors*, marked some of the artist's earliest interventions into architectural space—interventions that would include massive infrastructural piercings into a suburban home in New Jersey (*Splitting*, 1974), an abandoned pier in lower Manhattan (*Day's End*, 1975), and a pair of townhouses in Paris (*Conical Intersect*, 1975). But as much as the *Bronx Floors* cuts constituted material incisions into New York City's crumbling domestic infrastructure, they also represented an intervention into both the failing state of urban renewal (as Matta-Clark suggested, "the availability of empty and neglected structures was a prime textual reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization")<sup>71</sup> and the current state of the discipline of architecture, which he believed was itself abandoning the poor in its profitable drive toward urban gentrification ("I don't think," Matta-Clark opined, "that most practitioners are solving anything except how to make a living").<sup>72</sup>

Matta-Clark's most emphatic response to the perceived indifference of the architectural elite when confronted with a rapidly decaying urban core came in 1976, when he was invited to participate in a group exhibition called "Idea as

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<sup>70</sup> For a thorough analysis of the reverse echoes of Le Corbusier in Matta-Clark's practice, see James Attlee, "Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier," *Tate Papers* (spring 2007), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07spring/attlee.htm>.

<sup>71</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, undated and unaddressed proposal, c. 1974, Archive of the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark on deposit at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (hereafter GMC Archive).

<sup>72</sup> In Donald Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," *Arts Magazine* 50, no. 9 (May 1976): 78.



Model" at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York, then considered a hotbed of current thinking on architectural issues. In a last-minute alteration to his intended contribution, Matta-Clark shot out the windows in the exhibition hall with a pellet gun; in the window frames, he installed photographs of the façades of derelict Bronx apartment buildings, whose own broken windows resembled the aftermath of a bombing (fig. 2.18). In this way, as Pamela M. Lee writes, Matta-Clark constructed a visceral link between "the abstract tendencies of modern architecture—the very notion of 'idea as model'"—and "the degeneracy these models wrought in the urban environment."<sup>73</sup> The circumstances surrounding the event are vague, and no photographic documentation exists, but what *is* documented is that hours before the exhibition opened, the installation had been dismantled and the windows replaced—a disappearing act that seemed to confirm Matta-Clark's suspicion of the architectural profession's willful indifference toward "those condemned to live in social housing projects designed by architects that never set foot in their neighbourhoods."<sup>74</sup>

Matta-Clark's project, then, aligns with those of Hans Haacke, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Martha Rosler during the 1970s and '80s, with many (if not the majority) of his works addressing how home is represented vis-à-vis those without a home—those who live, as he wrote, "beyond, between and without

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<sup>73</sup> Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>74</sup> Lisa Le Feuvre, "Skyhooks and Dragon Buildings. About Hot Air—What Can It Do?," in James Attlee and Lisa Le Feuvre, *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between* (Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press, 2003), 57. Thomas Crow also makes this point, arguing that "the critical point was neatly made, with greater power than any polemic.... If this deterioration was intolerable to Eisenman [the Director of the IAUS] and his colleagues for even a moment, why was it tolerable day in and day out in the south Bronx or Lower East Side?" Thomas Crow, "Survey," in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 103, 105.



**FIGURE 2.18**  
Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Window Blow-Out*, 1976



**FIGURE 2.19**  
Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Splitting*, 1974

walls, putting to waste the most presumptuous building plans.”<sup>75</sup> But if Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al* dug into city archives to uncover the economic engines of New York’s uneven development, and if Rosler, in *If You Lived Here*, facilitated the construction of communities of art activism around issues of homelessness, and if Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle*, finally, sought to give voice and space to the city’s dispossessed, Matta-Clark’s own strategy was to bring to light the conditions and effects of New York’s housing crisis by etching them into the very material fabric of the city. In this process of rendering domestic spaces dangerously “unhomely,” one can also identify a debt to the “uncanny” architectural musings of Roberto Matta, who likewise sought to transform homes into sites of strangely familiar disorientation. As Anthony Vidler observes, Matta’s uneasy spaces “held out the potential of an architecture that would lend a truly psychological depth to life; and Matta-Clark, for his part, achieved that space through cutting, splitting, surveying, and filming, in a way that...accomplished his father’s vision.”<sup>76</sup> But Matta-Clark’s building cuts furthermore propel the uncanny into the realm of the unhomely in ways that render his practice a significant precedent for contemporary art. By pursuing aesthetic strategies to bear witness to the conditions of alienation and dislocation that increasingly characterized urban living in the 1970s, Matta-Clark’s interventions recall Homi Bhabha’s formulation of the unhomely as that

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<sup>75</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, “An Old Man Crossing,” draft manuscript, undated, GMC Archive. Other notable examples include *Garbage Wall* (1970), a shelter prototype built with tar, plaster, chicken wire and rubbish, and *Open House* (1972), an impromptu dwelling constructed from a dumpster and salvaged doors. Both were used as temporary performance venues.

<sup>76</sup> Vidler, “Architecture-to-Be,” 59. Judith Russi Kirschner also identifies parallels between Matta’s proposal for an “*architecture du temps*” and Matta-Clark’s own disorienting architectural spaces. In “Non-u-ments,” *Artforum International* 24, no. 2 (October 1985): 104-06.

interstitial space in which “intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions.”<sup>77</sup>

The unhomely nature of Matta-Clark’s practice is especially evident in *Splitting* of 1974, in which the artist dissected an entire suburban house in Englewood, New Jersey, and removed the four corners of its roof, thus exposing the vacated interior space to the exterior world (fig. 2.19).<sup>78</sup> At a formal level, of course, the project illustrates a central tenet of the uncanny aesthetic by literally bringing to light the *unheimlich* (repressed) dimensions of the *heimlich* (intimate, concealed) domestic sphere. And, to the extent that the work was intended as an intervention into the politics of the suburban home, *Splitting* once again illustrates the political nature of Matta-Clark’s cuts, thus aligning them not only with the practice of Martha Rosler, but also that of Dan Graham<sup>79</sup> (and even Womanhouse, which also sought to reveal the hidden and repressed aspects of the typical suburban home).

But before considering the implications of an unhomely aesthetic at work in the Englewood cut, it is also important to observe that interpretations of Matta-Clark’s work are remarkably diverse, even contradictory, suggesting that any one reading will likely be inadequate; indeed Matta-Clark’s own shifting perceptions of *Splitting* reveal these same contradictions. In a 1974 interview, he insisted that the work was “anything but illusionistic.... It’s all about a direct physical activity, and not about making associations with anything outside it”; in the same interview, Matta-Clark refers to *Splitting* as an “exhilarating” process of

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<sup>77</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 141.

<sup>78</sup> The house, already scheduled for demolition, was split in half using chain saws. The foundation at one end was then gradually chiselled away so that one half of the house could be tilted down and away from the other half.

<sup>79</sup> Matta-Clark actually asked visitors to *Splitting* to recall Graham’s *Homes for America*, a photo-based installation and insert in *Arts Magazine* (1966) that interrogated the conformity and privacy that the suburban home represented. See Crow, “Survey,” 77.

introducing “motion in a static structure.”<sup>80</sup> One year later, the artist would radically revise this stance, arguing that he employed buildings “neither as objects nor as an art material but as indications of cultural complexity and specific social conditions.”<sup>81</sup> The following year, Matta-Clark further clarified that his cuts were a response to the ubiquity of “suburban and urban boxes as a context for insuring a passive, isolated consumer” and “a reaction to an ever less viable state of privacy, private property and isolation.”<sup>82</sup> But notwithstanding the artist’s own seeming ambiguity regarding his project, analysis of cuts such as *Splitting* does tend to emphasize their thrillingly dangerous nature, especially for the few friends and critics who had the opportunity to visit these sites before their inevitable and imminent demolition. Describing the experience of crossing the widening crack as she made her way up the house’s divided staircase, for instance, sculptor Alice Aycock recalls that, “You really had to jump. You sensed the abyss in a kinesthetic and psychological way”<sup>83</sup>—a sensation that is elaborated by Thomas Crow in a description of *Splitting* that evokes an aesthetic of the sublime:

As the light stabbed into the previously cramped and dim interior, the visitor’s vision...arced upward toward the sky.... That passage of vision set the course for a disorienting physical journey with sufficient intimation of danger to wrench the experience out of art’s normal realm of consoling spectacle.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> In Lisa Bear, “*Splitting: The Humphrey Street Building*,” *Avalanche* (December 1974): 36.

<sup>81</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, “Étant d’art pour locataire,” draft manuscript, Paris, 1975, GMC Archive.

<sup>82</sup> In Wall, “Gordon Matta-Clark’s Building Dissections,” 76.

<sup>83</sup> In Joan Simon, “Interviews,” in Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), 33.

<sup>84</sup> Crow, “Survey,” 82. Yve-Alain Bois instead invokes Bataille’s notion of the informe to describe the vertiginous effect of Matta-Clark’s cuts, in which “one suddenly realized that one could not differentiate between the vertical section and the horizontal plane.” In “Threshold,” in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 191.

In her own analysis, Pamela Lee draws on these visceral experiences of Matta-Clark's cuts to explore what she terms a "phenomenology of the sublime" in works such as *Splitting*. For Lee, foregrounding the sublime as an aesthetic strategy is a useful way to avoid more nihilistic accounts that ascribe to Matta-Clark's practice a kind of decadent violence.<sup>85</sup> Instead, Lee suggests that Matta-Clark's actions, while "unquestionably aggressive," provoke a "destabilizing experience of place" that "throws into relief the perspectivism of the building as it sees, and is seen, by the viewer coursing throughout it; and that implicates the communicative and sensorial function of the body in that body's destabilization, vertigo, and even ascension."<sup>86</sup> Lee's analysis relies for the most part on site-specific reception of Matta-Clark's cuts from invited visitors to the sites who might be assumed predisposed to positive response, but she does acknowledge that reactions to his work could also be troubled, even hostile. Perhaps most vitriolic (and also perhaps most apocryphal) is the response of Peter Eisenman, then Director of the IAUS, to Matta-Clark's *Window Blow-Out* at the Institute, which Eisenman apparently compared angrily to *Kristallnacht* (the "Night of the Broken Glass")—a 1938 pogrom that saw 30,000 Jewish-German residents deported to concentration camps, and thousands of synagogues, shops and homes destroyed overnight.<sup>87</sup> Eisenman's response was not unique; instead, it was representative of a sense of anxiety and apprehension that often attended the artist's work. In 1975, for instance, a New York developer to whom Matta-Clark had appealed for a site seemed to equate the artist's practice with a misguided death drive, replying, "I believe in the great demise but I believe in life more and

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<sup>85</sup> See Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, esp. ch. 3, "On Matta-Clark's 'Violence'; Or, What is a 'Phenomenology of the Sublime'?", 114-61.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, 45, 60.

<sup>87</sup> This response is recalled by the IAUS exhibition's curator Andrew McNair, in Simon, "Interviews," in Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 96.

I resent the infringement of death processes prolonged as a devitalization of the living.”<sup>88</sup> Matta-Clark also admits, in a 1978 interview, to receiving other angry letters, which ranged from claims that he was “violating the sanctity and dignity of abandoned buildings” to the accusation that he was engaging in a sort of architectural rape.<sup>89</sup> This last criticism is elaborated by critic Maud Lavin in a 1984 review of his work. Responding specifically to Matta-Clark’s cuts into domestic spaces, Lavin suggests that they reveal a “modernist macho-individualism,” charging specifically that “Matta-Clark’s wounding of a house can be seen as a male violation of a domestic realm with female associations.”<sup>90</sup>

By reading Matta-Clark’s cuts as misogynist (even sexually violent) cleaves into the space of the home, Lavin is arguably reinscribing a myth of the domestic sphere as one of (feminine) security and stability—a myth which had already been deconstructed in feminist projects such as *Womanhouse*. If anything, works like *Splitting* serve to unmask what Pamela Lee rightly identifies as “the deep-seated *insecurity* of [middle-class America’s] most treasured icon, the suburban home.”<sup>91</sup> Lee eventually concludes that *Splitting*, far from an act of destruction, might instead be understood as a “‘liberating’ gesture, a freeing up of the box-like form of a common frame house.”<sup>92</sup> But while this analysis—to which we will return shortly—is persuasive, it also glosses over the cleave itself, which—whether malevolent or liberating, nihilistic or critical—is in any case a gesture that seems to enact or recall a trauma (remembering that a “trauma” is literally a wound to the body). The question then to be asked is whether it is

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<sup>88</sup> Melvin Kaufman, letter to Gordon Matta-Clark, 9 February 1975, GMC Archive.

<sup>89</sup> In Judith Russi Kirshner, “Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark” (1978), in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Maria Casanova (Valencia, Spain: IVAM Centro Julio González, 1993), 394.

<sup>90</sup> Maud Lavin, “Gordon Matta-Clark and Individualism,” *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 5 (January 1984): 141.

<sup>91</sup> Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

possible or useful to read Matta-Clark's cuts as wounds in the body of domestic architecture, wounds that might then evoke Sartre's poetic notion that "the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body insofar as the house was already an indication of my body."<sup>93</sup> Can we, in other words, read these building cuts as traumatic re-enactments of the precariousness with which home is inhabited in contemporary society? Certain biographical details would seem to support such a reading: in 1973, the artist's only cousin was killed in a freak accident in midtown Manhattan when his apartment ceiling collapsed;<sup>94</sup> then, a few months before the *Window Blow-Out* performance-installation in 1976, Batan Matta (the artist's twin brother) fell or jumped to his death from Matta-Clark's studio window<sup>95</sup>—a tragedy that makes it tempting to read the IAUS event as a visceral acting-out of Matta-Clark's grief, and which might then facilitate a traumatic reading of his broader project.

But even without these details,<sup>96</sup> Matta-Clark's disorienting interventions into domestic spaces (other examples include *A W-Hole House* of 1973, which saw a square section cut from the pyramidal roof of a building in Genoa, Italy,<sup>97</sup> and *Bingo* of 1974, in which an exterior wall of a Niagara Falls house was removed in nine pieces) imbue the uncanny with a criticality that, as Dan Graham has suggested, insistently exposes society's repressed remainders. Graham's Benjaminian reading of Matta-Clark's cuts as "negative monuments"<sup>98</sup> that

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<sup>93</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 325.

<sup>94</sup> See Attlee, "Towards Anarchitecture," n.p.

<sup>95</sup> In 1977, Matta-Clark produced *Descending Steps for Batan*, a two-week performance during which he excavated a progressively deeper hole in the ground below the Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris. See Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*, 99.

<sup>96</sup> It should be noted that Batan Matta's death in 1976 occurred *after* many of the major building cuts were performed.

<sup>97</sup> The building used for this intervention was not actually a house, but as Pamela Lee suggests, it is instructive that Matta-Clark described it as one (*Object to Be Destroyed*, 18).

<sup>98</sup> In a slightly different vein, Matta-Clark offers the neologism "non-u-ment," which he defines as "an expression of the commonplace that might counter the grandeur and romp



“desire to ‘open up’ history and historical memory, which could lead to a critical view of present oppression,”<sup>99</sup> usefully aligns Matta-Clark with the more recent “memory sculptures” that populate this dissertation, and that, as Huyssen notes, likewise work “against the erasure of the past itself.”<sup>100</sup>

Huyssen’s framework can also be productively applied to one of Matta-Clark’s most ambitious projects, *Conical Intersect* of 1975, a cone-shaped hole that spiralled through two condemned seventeenth-century row houses in Paris’s Rue Beaubourg to generate a street-level telescopic view of the Centre Georges Pompidou, then being constructed as part of a massive overhaul of the district (figs. 2.20 and 2.21). *Conical Intersect* was intended from the start to function as a “non-monumental counterpart”<sup>101</sup> to the Pompidou, whose construction was a source of controversy within the complex debates surrounding the Beaubourg district’s modernization (Jean Baudrillard, for instance, famously referred to the Pompidou Centre as a “huge black hole” that “openly declares that our age will no longer be one of duration, that our only temporal mode is that of accelerated cycle”).<sup>102</sup> Like the memory sculptures theorized by Huyssen, *Conical Intersect* “is about memory at the edge of an abyss.”<sup>103</sup> An intervention into obsolete, even abject relics of an urban context that was being rapidly dismantled to make way for a modernizing Paris, Matta-Clark’s massive hole brought to light these

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of architectural structures and their self-glorifying clients” (in Wall, “Gordon Matta-Clark’s Building Dissections,” 72).

<sup>99</sup> Dan Graham, “Gordon Matta-Clark,” *Parachute*, no. 43 (June/July/August 1986): 25. Matta-Clark, argues Graham, takes on the task that Walter Benjamin assigns to the historian: to “reconstitute memory, not conventional memory as in the traditional monument, but that subversive memory which has been hidden by social and architectural façades and their false sense of ‘wholeness’” (24).

<sup>100</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 111.

<sup>101</sup> Gordon Matta-Clark, in Florent Bex, “Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark, Antwerp, September 1977,” in *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Antwerp: International Cultureel Centrum, 1977), 12.

<sup>102</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion and Dissuasion” (1977), trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October*, no. 20 (spring 1982): 7,5.

<sup>103</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 118.



**FIGURE 2.20**  
Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Conical Intersect*, 1975



**FIGURE 2.21**  
Gordon  
Matta-Clark,  
*Conical Intersect*,  
1975

concealed (and soon to be destroyed) traces, revealing, as art historian Dalia Judowitz suggests, “the sedimented layers of lived meaning or memory attached to the dwellings” in such a way as to cast “the evidence of human life as a haunting absence.”<sup>104</sup> Thus *Conical Intersect* performs an operation analogous to the practices to which this dissertation attends, which likewise treat the home’s inherent uncanniness as a vehicle for simultaneously evoking human inhabitation, the precariousness of this inhabitation, and furthermore home’s precarious role as a memorial to absent human presence.

But if there is one Matta-Clark image that speaks most evocatively to the “fragile figure of home” in recent trauma-related art, it is a photo-collage that he produced in 1975 as a corollary to the *Splitting* project (fig. 2.22). In this work, five photographs of the Englewood house’s split interior are arranged so as to reconstitute the space into a dissected architectural Frankenstein of sorts. As Anne Wagner suggests, “Never has a domestic domain been more thoroughly anatomized; never did its restoration seem more willfully dream-like, a more fragile effort to reassemble a (scarred) whole.”<sup>105</sup> The destroyed Englewood home rises from the grave, but it does so as a shattered memory whose reconstitution reveals the past as a series of irrecoverable traces or Benjaminian flashes, melancholic remainders of home’s precarious status as shelter from the world and archive of erstwhile belonging.

Here, affinities with Martha Rosler’s practice reveal the resonance of their work today. Both artists employ the formal properties of collage to “deconstruct”<sup>106</sup> the myths of safety, security, and privacy that attach to

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<sup>104</sup> Dalia Judovitz, “De-Assembling Vision: Conceptual Strategies in Duchamp, Matta-Clark, Wilson,” *Angelaki* 7, no. 1 (2002): 105.

<sup>105</sup> Anne M. Wagner, “Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture,” *Grey Room*, no. 14 (winter 2004): 39.

<sup>106</sup> I use this term advisedly. As Pamela Lee notes in regards to the fact that Matta-Clark’s “anarchitecture” is sometimes linked to the postmodern architectural practices of Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and others, “the word ‘deconstruction’ is erroneously linked to his



**FIGURE 2.22**  
Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Splitting 32*, 1975

conventional understandings of home, instead revealing it to be a wounded space of *unheimlich* repression whose very façade of unity and stability masks the violence that is perpetrated both within suburban homes and in the name of Western ideals of domesticity. These concerns are also shared with a more recent generation of contemporary artists, from Doris Salcedo to Emily Jacir and Wafaa Bilal, whose practices are investigated in the following chapters. In the final section of the present chapter, I introduce a few recent art works that resonate strongly with the practices of Rosler and Matta-Clark, but whose divergent sensibilities also chart the changing territories of contemporary art's troping of home in trauma-related art.

### **Domestic tension, then and now**

"It is tempting," writes James Attlee, "to say that if Matta-Clark hadn't existed it would have been necessary to invent him—indeed, some would maintain that this is exactly what writers and critics have been doing, ever since his death."<sup>107</sup> In fact Matta-Clark has experienced something of a renaissance in the past several years, witnessed by his inclusion in a string of international group exhibitions, the mounting of several major solo shows, and the publication of at least three comprehensive texts devoted to his art and writing.<sup>108</sup> In part, this recent bout of popularity can be attributed to the cyclical nature of cultural nostalgia (as the '60s became a phenomenon in the 1990s, so too do the '70s

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work, as if to appeal to literal disassembling of buildings as well as the theoretically acute notion of 'deconstructivist' architecture" (*Object to Be Destroyed*, 215).

<sup>107</sup> James Attlee, "Flame, Time and the Elements," in *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between*, ed. James Attlee and Lisa Le Feuvre (Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press, 2003), 88.

<sup>108</sup> These include a 2007 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the recent *Gordon Matta-Clark* at SMS Contemporanea in Siena, Italy in 2008. See Elizabeth Sussmann, *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Lorenzo Fusi and Marco Pierini, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2008). Recent manuscripts include Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*; Corinne Diserens, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark* (London: Phaidon, 2003); and Gloria Moure, ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Madrid: Museo nacional centro de arte Reina Sofía, 2006).

fascinate the present). The Western world seems, in particular, to be enthralled with the scrappy, energetic do-it-yourself politics of the late '60s and early '70s, and Matta-Clark embodies that impulse (with the aura of a tragic early death thrown in for good measure).<sup>109</sup> The ongoing relevance of the socio-political aspects of his practice; the performative, ephemeral nature of his works; a compelling life story; and his own propensity to be rather chameleon-like in both his practice and his own analysis of that practice—all conspire to render Matta-Clark a convenient cipher, a palimpsest onto whom the social, ideological, and aesthetic impulses of contemporary art can be projected.

Indeed, so prevalent has his unique (but easily reproduced) aesthetic signature become that one might furthermore be tempted to say that the ghost of Matta-Clark has recently taken to haunting the houses of contemporary art—from *Airs de Paris*, a group exhibition in 2007 that saw artists updating or “remixing” art works from the past (with a special emphasis on Matta-Clark),<sup>110</sup> to the 2007 exhibition *Gordon Matta-Clark/Rirkrit Tiravanija*, in which Tiravanija reconstructed Matta-Clark’s *Open House* of 1972.<sup>111</sup> Oblique references to Matta-Clark have also proliferated, in Urs Fischer’s excavations of gallery spaces (such as *You* at the Gavin Brown Enterprise in 2007) and in Richard Wilson’s massive, rotating cut-out section of a warehouse façade in Liverpool (*Turning the Place Over*, 2008). But Matta-Clark’s practice, I propose, acquires additional resonance and relevance when it is channeled through recent practices that enlist the more traumatic aspects of his work, and in the following chapters, we will see how

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<sup>109</sup> Matta-Clark died of cancer in 1978 at the age of 35.

<sup>110</sup> The exhibition included Pierre Huyghe’s *Light Conical Intersect* (1996), which projected Matta-Clark’s video of the Beaubourg cut onto the building that now occupies that space; Carsten Höller’s large hole cut through an interior wall of the exhibition space; and a video of Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s 2004 *In the Belly of Anarchitect*, in which the artists build and eat a *Splitting*-inspired cake. See Christine Macel and Valérie Guillaume, eds., *Airs de Paris* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2007).

<sup>111</sup> See <http://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/132>.

artists like Santiago Sierra and Doris Salcedo intervene physically, viscerally, and ideologically into spaces associated with “home” in order to reveal them as precarious spaces of belonging and memory.

One of the most unsettling recent allusions to Matta-Clark’s practice invokes not a building cut, but instead an archival photograph collected by the artist and exhibited in the Anarchitecture group exhibition organized by Matta-Clark in 1974.<sup>112</sup> Part of a display of found and composed photographs depicting, for instance, a train crash, a collapsed building, and the newly constructed World Trade Center, this particular black-and-white photograph pictures a two-storey house floating serenely on a river barge (fig. 2.23). Consider this image in relation to Paulette Phillips’ video installation *The Floating House* of 2002, a large-scale projection of a five-minute film that follows an uncannily similar two-storey clapboard house as it floats on the ocean off the coast of Nova Scotia (fig. 2.24).<sup>113</sup> Accompanied by four speakers broadcasting both the sounds of the sea and a family gathering with children playing, adults laughing, and dishes clanging, the scene becomes ominous as waves begin to pitch the house, which loses balance and quickly descends into the sea. As it does, the volume increases, and the sound of waves crashing into the house overtakes the sounds of the family, which in the din and roar of the ocean come to resemble cries for help. Furniture begins to escape from the windows, and the last trace of the sinking house is an upended kitchen chair drifting in the rough waters.

The two images—Matta-Clark’s and Phillips’—share, of course, an iconography that unmoors the home from its terrestrial foundations, setting it

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<sup>112</sup> Anarchitecture, a term coined by Matta-Clark to refer to an alternative attitude to buildings, was also the name of a short-lived collective of artists who met periodically to explore these alternatives. In 1974, the group exhibited their ideas at a SoHo studio and in a two-page spread in *Flash Art*. See Attlee, “Towards Anarchitecture,” n.p.

<sup>113</sup> The film was shot on 16-mm film and transferred to DVD. See Tania Buckwell Pos, “Paulette Phillips,” *Canadian Art* 21, no. 3 (fall 2004): 149.



**FIGURE 2.23**  
 Gordon Matta-Clark,  
*Anarchitecture—*  
*Home Moving*, 1974



**FIGURE 2.24**  
 Paulette Phillips,  
*The Floating House*, 2002  
 (video still)

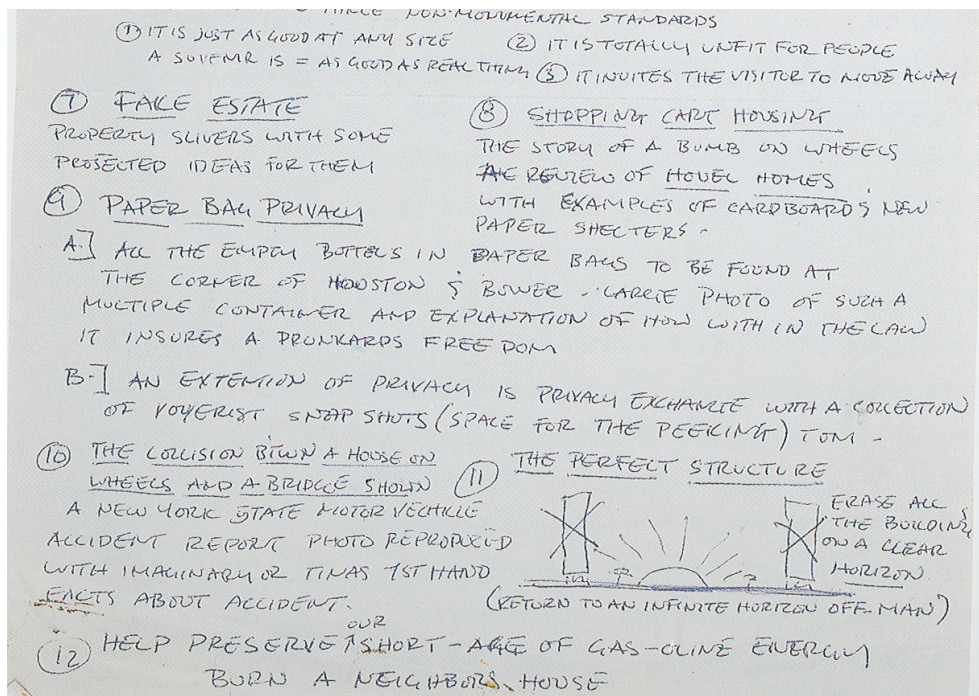


adrift at sea and therefore unsettling its putative role as a site of anchoring and stability. But the differences between the two images are equally, if not more revealing, and point to some of the significant concerns that I see circulating in recent art practices that trope the figure of home in order to convey traumatic experience. For whereas the Matta-Clark image is loaded with ambivalence (the still photograph might evoke a sense of terror, or instead one of freedom and new beginnings), the Phillips film leaves no such room for ambiguity. Intended, according to the artist, to evoke both the continual displacement of Atlantic Canada's fishing communities in the 1950s and '60s (which often entailed moving entire villages on giant barges) and the destruction of Halifax's Africville community in the late 1960s,<sup>114</sup> Phillips' *Floating House* renders home a fragile space of belonging and memory, seemingly solid and impermeable but instead vulnerable to myriad forces of destruction. In this way, Phillips' work conveys one of the central claims made in this dissertation: that the recent past, which has witnessed a global pandemic of homelessness precipitated by war (in the Balkans, for instance, and in Iraq and Afghanistan), civil war (in Sudan and Colombia), ongoing territorial disputes (in Palestine and Israel) and the radically uneven redistribution of wealth in the West and beyond, has compelled contemporary artists to respond with representations of home that register its increasingly uncertain status as a secure locus of stability and belonging.

To clarify the point I am attempting to make here, let us compare two architectural "plans," both for New York City's World Trade Center, and both tongue-in-cheek proposals—what the architectural world might refer to as conceptual designs. The first, by Matta-Clark, appears in an often-reproduced 1973 three-page letter to the Anarchitecture group that is for the most part

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 2.25**  
Gordon Matta-Clark, Letter to Carol Gooden/  
The Meeting, December 1973 (detail)



**FIGURE 2.26**  
Acconci Studio,  
"New World Trade Center  
(Building Full of Holes)," 2002

composed of whimsical ideas for proposals and group projects. In this letter, Matta-Clark draws a crude rendering of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, which had been recently completed and which had radically altered the Manhattan skyline from the perspective of the artist's SoHo studio. In the drawing, the towers have been crossed out and separated by a setting sun, a scene accompanied with the following text: "The Perfect Structure. Erase all the buildings on a clear horizon. Return to an infinite horizon off [sic] man" (fig. 2.25). Blithely destructive, the drawing reflects both Matta-Clark's political critique of the dehumanizing dimensions of modern architecture and his playful attitude toward architectural protocol. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to view this drawing today without seeing it somehow as an ominous prediction. Here, we see how Matta-Clark's practice is both relevant and deeply troubling today, when such a proposal would of course be unthinkable (or at least unsayable). This tension becomes clearer when we compare Matta-Clark's drawing to Vito Acconci's 2002 proposal for reconstruction on the site of the World Trade Center (fig. 2.26). Acconci is best known for video and performance works of the 1970s, but his architectural practice since the late 1980s has proven as incisively critical of architectural convention as Matta-Clark's anarchitectural provocations in the 1970s, and indeed, Acconci's WTC proposal reveals a strong affinity with Matta-Clark's building cuts. The plan calls for a massive structure, encompassing the entire site and rising to one hundred ten storeys—a promise, Acconci suggests, of "more private office space than anybody could possibly need."<sup>115</sup> Thus exaggerating the fulfillment of excessive corporate indulgence, the proposal then proceeds to carve elliptical holes into the space, such that the building resembles an enormous block of Swiss cheese soaring above the skyline. The allusions to

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<sup>115</sup> Vito Acconci, "Beyond Sculpture: Function, Commodity, and Reinvention in Contemporary Art," *ArtLab23* 1, no. 2 (fall 2006), <http://artlab23.net/issue1vol2/contents/acconci.html>.

Matta-Clark's building cuts are clear here—consider the giant hole sliced through the Paris apartments, or, more persuasively still, the complex series of incisions into Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1978 (*Circus*, or *The Caribbean Orange*)—Matta-Clark's final large-scale project, fittingly described by Yve-Alain Bois as a “piece of Swiss cheese full of holes.”<sup>116</sup> But consider also the Acconci proposal's intention, which was to create what he calls a “pre-exploded” building. Acconci explains: “A terrorist flying above might look down and say, ‘Oh, we don't have to bother about this one, it's already been dealt with.’”<sup>117</sup> But besides exposing a playfully iconoclastic streak that certainly further aligns Acconci's practice with that of Matta-Clark, the implications of Acconci's proposal also reveal the radically transformed nature of Western society's traumatized relationship with architecture—a transformation that Acconci registers with a melancholic reminder of our collective precarity. As he suggests, “It's not that we want to make a space that falls apart. But we want people to realize, well, let's not feel as sure of ourselves as all that.”<sup>118</sup> Here, the screen that projects the illusion of domestic security is revealed to be permanently pierced—a revelation that is traced, as I argue throughout this dissertation, in art practices that likewise mobilize what I am calling an unhomely aesthetic to bear witness to the precariousness of human inhabitation.

But the difference between Matta-Clark's articulations of home and those of Paulette Phillips and Vito Acconci also marks the moment at which Matta-Clark's art practice can be productively pulled into the twenty-first century to nuance what might be considered the more nihilistically melancholic inclinations

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<sup>116</sup> Bois, “Threshold,” 191.

<sup>117</sup> Acconci, “Beyond Sculpture,” n.p.

<sup>118</sup> In Bryant Rousseau, “The ArchRecord Interview: Vito Acconci,” *The Architectural Record* (June 2007), <http://archrecord.construction.com/features/interviews/0718Acconci/0718Acconci-1.asp>.

of contemporary art. For while Matta-Clark, as we have seen, surely figures home as a troubled space whose façade of stability screens the contradictions and contestations hidden within, then his mode of shedding light on these repressed aspects of home is as productively ambivalent as the photograph of a house floating down a river or a playful proposal to “erase all the buildings for a clear horizon.” This becomes particularly clear if we reconsider the wounded domestic space of *Splitting* in the context of Sartre’s observation, which opened this chapter, that the house and the body are deeply imbricated modalities of inhabitation. According to this logic, it then becomes useful to read the wound that slices through the Englewood house in line with Petra Kuppers’ evocative notion of the wound, the scar, and the cut as “not simply tragic sites of loss, but also...sites of fleshy (and skinly) productivity, if productivity at a price.”<sup>119</sup> In her analysis of visual representations of medicalized bodies, Kuppers argues provocatively that the wound represents “the knitting together of life and disruption, as not only a spatial site but also a temporal journey that highlights survival”<sup>120</sup>—an argument that applies equally to the cuts made by Matta-Clark into the spaces of home. Uncanny incisions into the domestic realm that brutally reveal its hidden dimensions, Matta-Clark’s cuts nevertheless operate, like the cracks in Leonard Cohen’s famous song, to “let the light in.” In this way, Matta-Clark (and, as I will argue in chapter 5, contemporary artists like Doris Salcedo, Ursula Biemann, and Yto Barrada, whose practices also resonate with those of Matta-Clark) not only reconceptualizes home as a site of contested or lost belonging, but furthermore reformulates a relationship with loss that abjures the catastrophic in favor of an engagement that, to quote David Eng and David

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<sup>119</sup> Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 76.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 2.27**  
 Melanie Friend,  
*Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*,  
 1996 (installation view)



**FIGURE 2.28**  
 Melanie Friend,  
*Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*, 1996 (detail)

Kazanjian, “generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future.”<sup>121</sup> Indeed, one of the ongoing aims of this dissertation will be to chart the generative and intersubjective potential of artists’ engagements with traumatic experience, and the ways in which the figure of home is employed to this end.

Like Matta-Clark, Martha Rosler’s practice has also begun to attain new resonance in the context of contemporary art’s recent investigations of the unsettled nature of home, particularly in the context of war. And once again, attention to both similarities and divergences reveal the changing stakes of these investigations. A salient example is photojournalist Melanie Friend’s *Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*, a 1996 exhibition that paired sixteen colour photographs of pristine, seemingly peaceful houses in Kosovo with audio testimonies revealing these homes as unlikely sites of government-sponsored terror and atrocity during the Milosevic regime leading to the war of 1998-99 (fig. 2.27).<sup>122</sup> Thus, for instance, an innocuous snapshot of a typical Kosovar living room with couches, rugs, potted plants, and framed portraits on the wall (fig. 2.28) is juxtaposed with unsettling oral testimony that marks this home as a site of violent incursion:

They met me in the field outside the house. Right away, one of them grabbed me around the neck, and the other one kicked me, so I fell. About six or seven policemen kicked me continuously. They stopped when they thought it was enough and took me to the garden. There, another ten to fifteen of them beat me up.... When I got to the house, everything was broken, and my sixty-seven-year-old father was beaten almost to death....<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> David Eng, and David Kazanjian, ed., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>122</sup> Friend’s book, *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 2001), documents this project and updates it with post-war portraits of refugees in Macedonia.

<sup>123</sup> See Friend, *No Place Like Home*, 12. The exhibition is documented at <http://www.melaniefriend.com>.

The affinity here with Rosler's project is quite apparent: photography is employed to construct a juxtaposition of war and domesticity, with the project's title (*Homes and Gardens*, again invoking a popular American design magazine) once again being used to evoke the unsettling incongruousness of this juxtaposition. In Friend's series, this incongruousness is produced not through competing visual markers, but instead by a competition of word and image—in this way, Friend's aesthetic strategy also harkens back to Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, using word and image to demonstrate the limited representational capacities of both.

But two significant features of Melanie Friend's photo series distance her project from Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* project. First, it is notable that the domestic scenes recorded in *Homes and Gardens* admit no human presence, which is instead indexed by the traces of lived experience—in family portraits, in the worn condition of the furniture, and in subtle markers like fresh-cut flowers and empty coffee cups. Unlike Rosler, who inserts images of Vietnamese victims of the US aggression into the pristine spaces of the American home in order to shock viewers into new modes of witnessing the havoc of war, Friend's objective is instead to avoid what she terms the "photojournalistic convention that visualizes violence through the body of the 'victim.'"<sup>124</sup> In opting for this aesthetic strategy of non-representation, Friend is contributing to a recent trend in contemporary art to render human presence a gaping absence, performing what Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar refers to as a "lament of the images"<sup>125</sup> in order to preempt visual culture's presumed tendency to spectacularize the suffering other. Indeed, one of the recurring themes of this dissertation will be the

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<sup>124</sup> Melanie Friend, "Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible," *Home Cultures* 4, no. 1 (2007): 97.

<sup>125</sup> See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images: Alfredo Jaar and the Ethics of Representation," *Aperture*, no. 181 (winter 2005).



disavowal of the visual in representations of trauma, and one of my intentions will be to analyze both the productive capacity and the limitations of this strategy as it manifests in the work of Jaar, along with Krzysztof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, Doris Salcedo, and Emily Jacir.

But Melanie Friend's series diverges from Martha Rosler's in another significant way. In Rosler's series, recall, scenes of war abroad are superimposed onto domestic spaces in America with the dual aim of exposing the hidden connections between these two paradigms and, as the title suggests, "bringing the war home"—that is, exposing the American home, relatively untouched by the violence of war, to the devastation wrought in its name. Friend's series, instead, reminds us that in many parts of the world, the presumed (and admittedly superficial) border between the safety of domestic spaces and the destructive spaces of armed conflict is dangerously fluid—a reminder that is also taken up in Doris Salcedo's sculptural renderings of civil war in Colombia, which are addressed fully in the fourth chapter. And if these renderings of home as a space that is always already in danger of being infiltrated by aggression are especially resonant to Western audiences today, it is perhaps because, as Homi K. Bhabha maintains, "our current [post-9/11] situation is much more problematic—or liminal, in a word."<sup>126</sup> In a recent conversation with Beatriz Colomina regarding "domesticity at war" today, Bhabha suggests that Martha Rosler's series does not correspond to the current global situation of fear and uncertainty, where perceived threats from "outside" national boundaries have become "as ubiquitous as the air we breathe"<sup>127</sup>—not only omnipresent, but dangerously viral spores that attack suddenly and stealthily. In Rosler's collages,

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<sup>126</sup> In Tim Griffin, "Domesticity at War: Beatriz Colomina and Homi K. Bhabha in Conversation," *Artforum International* 45, no. 10 (summer 2007): 444-45.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

Bhabha argues, “the outside is brought as close as possible, but there is still an inside and an outside.... There is a curtain that can be opened or closed, and there is the plate-glass window that allows you to see outside but also protects you.”<sup>128</sup> Now, on the contrary, the curtain is no longer capable of screening out the world, and instead we are compelled to recognize the fluidity of national borders and the vulnerabilities of home(land) security.

In a response to Bhabha’s analysis, Martha Rosler challenges his observations regarding the assumptions of safe borders and boundaries in the 1960s and ‘70s. As Rosler observes, fear of the “other” in the Cold War and Vietnam era was, like today, the fear of a spreading virus, and indeed, “the spore as an invader vehicle from inside/outside”<sup>129</sup> was one of the central motifs of the era. The Cold War inspired an entire culture of insecurity, generating rampant fear of foreigners, Communists, Black militants, and marijuana; in countless B-movies of the period, Martians, killer tomatoes, and body snatchers also filled in as ciphers for the threat of alien invasion. But the essence of Bhabha’s comments remains incontrovertible: as terrified as Western citizens might have been in the 1960s by various threats of invasion, this threat was almost invariably a mediated experience, whether via television newscasts or B-movies. Today, it would seem, the threat has become an (admittedly over-embellished) reality, not simply in the West, where the perception is that borders and guards are no longer capable of rendering us safe in our homes (whether because of terrorist threats or the threat of bank foreclosure), but also, and significantly, in the rest of the world. If home has always been a fictional realm of safety, it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain the fiction.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Rosler, “Here and Elsewhere,” 50. Rosler furthermore notes that of twenty photo-collages, only four employ windows as aesthetic devices of distancing—although, as I have already argued, other screens (including picture frames, mirrors, and threshold spaces) proliferate.

It is this shift that is tracked throughout this dissertation, as I analyze artists whose works seek to respond to the traumatic experience of globalized precarity. Interestingly, this paradigmatic shift is also registered in a recent project by Martha Rosler, which updates the *Bringing the War Home* series to respond to the Iraq War launched by the US in 2003. I conclude this chapter with a brief analysis of this recent series, which, I suggest, reflects both the relevance of her early project today, and the changing circumstances which call for a revised set of aesthetic strategies with which to respond to the contemporary global condition of unhomeliness.

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### **Conclusion: *Bringing the War Home* (2.0)**

At the height of the second Iraq War in 2004, Martha Rosler revisited her *Bringing the War Home* series, exhibiting a set of photo-collages that again conveyed the disconnect between the affluence of middle-class America and the devastation being wrought abroad in its name. Juxtaposing markers of Western excess (high-end fashion, high-tech consumerism, and stylish domestic interiors) with scenes of chaos, violence and torture (bombed houses, legless soldiers, and Abu Ghraib prison abuse), Rosler once again tropes Western conceptions of home in order to expose its flawed status as a refuge from the world, and collapses the perceived distances between inside and out in order to reveal, as Heather Diack suggests, that “‘home’ can be a very uncomfortable place.”<sup>130</sup>

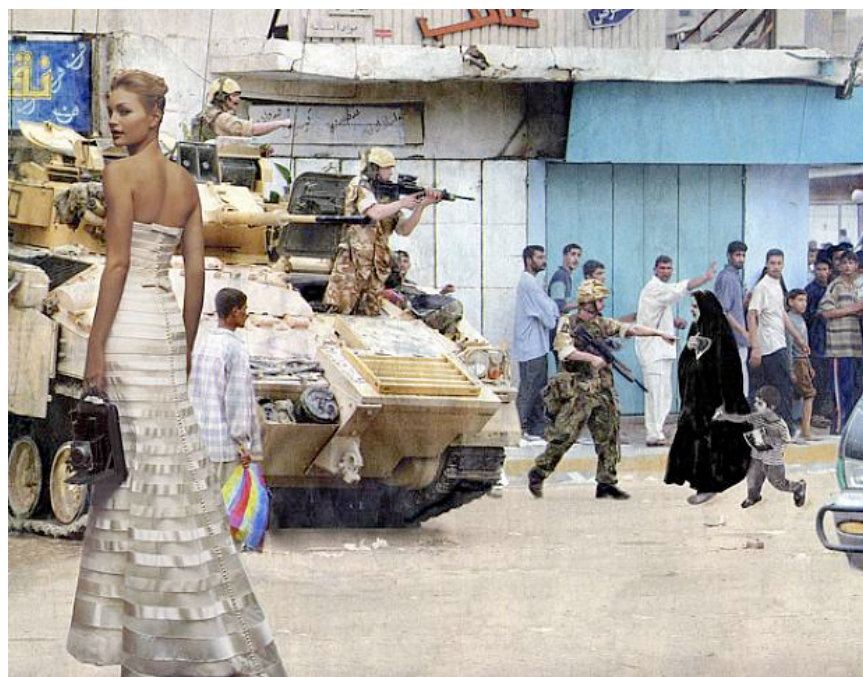
A continuum is therefore established between the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq, both of which are screened in American society by projections of (mythical) comfort and safety (now to be secured, as US President George W.

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<sup>130</sup> Heather Diack, “Too Close to Home: Rethinking Representation in Martha Rosler’s Photomontages of War,” *Prefix Photo* 7, no. 2 (November 2006): 59.



**FIGURE 2.29**  
Martha Rosler, *Photo Op*,  
from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series*, 2004



**FIGURE 2.30**  
Martha Rosler, *Point and Shoot*,  
from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series*, 2004

Bush promised in 2001, by rampant consumer spending),<sup>131</sup> and both of which, when they do enter American homes, do so in a highly mediated way that clearly delineates the “here” and the “there” (as Rosler notes, the war in Iraq has been even less visible than that in Vietnam).<sup>132</sup> However, Rosler’s new series also speaks eloquently to the viral nature of unhomeliness in the twenty-first century, and to the fact that “home,” for the most part, is no longer able to accommodate the myths of refuge and security that it once signified. Indeed, subtle differences can be observed in the new series; whereas war tends to occur outside the main spaces of Rosler’s Vietnam-era homes, the more recent collages blur that distinction between inside and out, with the bodies of war victims splayed on furniture and scantily-clad models occupying the same space as hooded prisoners (fig. 2.29). This is not to suggest, however, that the new series abandons the screen; if anything, it multiplies wildly here, with large-screen televisions, computer screens, cell phones, and picture windows all competing to divert our attention. In this way, the screen is now employed to subtly convey that it is no longer the suburban enclave, but rather the world of high-tech communications technology, to which we now escape from the frightening world outside.

Indeed, a sharply different story emerges from Rosler’s new series. First, no longer do images of war and destruction appear suddenly as violent incursions into an otherwise spotless, idyllic scene of domestic bliss. Instead, the infiltrations seem almost infectious: war does not burst into the home—it encroaches slowly, calmly, like a virus, such that the lines between here and there are blurred to the point of obscurity. As Rosler acknowledges, “‘the here’ and ‘the

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<sup>131</sup> On September 21, 2001, Bush encouraged Americans to “Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.” Cited in Elaine Tyler May, “Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11 at Home,” in *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?*, ed. Mary L. Dudziak (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>132</sup> In Christy Lange, “Bringin’ It All Back Home,” *Frieze*, no. 95 (November-December 2005): 96.

there' are now one place in terms of representation."<sup>133</sup> Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, the new series radically revises conventional understandings of "home" as somehow an inherently American paradigm. Home, in these recent collages, might be a wealthy American home contaminated by bloody corpses, but it might just as easily be a busy Baghdad street full of citizens invaded by American fashion ideals and terrorized by American soldiers (fig. 2.30). As if turning the tables on her earlier *If You Lived Here* project, Rosler infers in these new images that if you lived *here*, your life would be in constant danger.

A comparison between two collages from the two series will clarify the distinction I am drawing. *Cleaning the Drapes*, discussed earlier, and *Gray Drape*, from the 2004 series (fig. 2.31), are uncannily similar images; in both, a suburban housewife looks pleasantly out her window, seemingly unperturbed by the scene of war raging on her lawn. Indeed, we might assume that the later image is intended to recall the first: besides the clearly allusive title, both domestic scenes have been clipped from a 1960s-era *Life* magazine spread extolling suburban femininity. But the differences between the two images are even more revealing. First, while the Vietnam collage presumably intended to juxtapose a familiar image of peaceful domesticity with the horrors of war, the Iraq version presumes no such comforting sense of domestic bliss from which to jar us. As contemporary viewers, we are implicitly interpellated to recognize this glamorous scene as a nostalgic invocation of postwar comfort which we now understand to have been an untenable myth. Somehow, we identify less with the woman inside the house than with the chaos outside. Today, as Bhabha reminds us, we are not so easily screened from the threat of displacement and loss. Even

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<sup>133</sup> In *ibid.*, 96. In part, this can be attributed to Rosler's use of new technology in the 2004 series. The collages themselves are produced by hand (rather than, say, using Photoshop software) but digitally reproduced, giving the images a flattened-out effect. See Martha Rosler, "Martha Rosler," *Photography Quarterly*, no. 96 (2007): 30-33.





**FIGURE 2.31**  
Martha Rosler,  
*Gray Drape*, from *Bringing the War Home:*  
*House Beautiful*, New Series, 2004

more jarring, however, is the presence, in the 2004 image, of an Iraqi woman and child, clearly in distress, positioned precisely in the liminal area of the picture window, the border between here and there. This detail reminds us that the conditions of war require us not only to remain vigilantly aware of the price of our own domestic comforts, but furthermore that these comforts are not afforded to those who live in the midst of war, those who occupy domestic spaces with the provisionality and precariousness that comes with conflict, poverty, or territorial occupation.

In this dissertation, I aspire to understand how artists today are mobilizing the precariousness with which home is occupied in order to create new forms of empathetic understanding of the suffering of the other. Each of these artists are indebted, in one way or another, to the aesthetic strategies laid out by Gordon Matta-Clark and Martha Rosler in the 1970s, and each proposes revised strategies for emerging paradigms of the unhomely in contemporary global society. By aligning the art practices of Rosler and Matta-Clark with contemporary artists, I do not mean to infer that the post-9/11 anxieties identified by Bhabha are actually present in the earlier works. In fact, as I have sought to demonstrate, Rosler and Matta-Clark were both firmly rooted in a specific spatial and temporal context, and their responses to that context, while quite different, were equally rooted in a politics of opposition that left little room for melancholic engagement with trauma and loss. Nevertheless, both Matta-Clark and Rosler require us, with Homi K. Bhabha, to recognize that “the anxiety of belonging encourages us to choose to live in a house whose shifting walls require that stranger and neighbor recognize their side-by-sideness.”<sup>134</sup> And it is this emerging understanding of home as a concept that both reflects our anxieties

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<sup>134</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Halfway House,” *Artforum International* 35, no. 9 (May 1997): 125.



of belonging *and* encourages new models of intersubjective encounter that animates the art practices that the remainder of this dissertation will address.

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### CHAPTER 3

## Not at home: Krzysztof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, and the art of not-belonging

*And just beyond the frontier between “us” and the “outsiders” is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is to where in a primitive time people were banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons.*

Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile”

*The question is whether historiography in its own way may help not speciously to heal but to come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past. Such a coming-to-terms would...involve affect and may empathetically expose the self to an unsettling, if not a secondary trauma, which should not be glorified or fixated upon but addressed in a manner that strives to be cognitively and ethically responsible as well as open to the challenge of utopian aspiration.*

Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*<sup>1</sup>

In his 2001 *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, historian Dominick LaCapra investigates how traumatic experiences mark history, historiography, and critical theory, and how these disciplines in turn shape cultural registrations of trauma. LaCapra is especially interested in how historians—particularly in the context of Holocaust studies<sup>2</sup>—record, translate, or otherwise bear witness to catastrophe. Applying Freud’s psychoanalytic insights into the processing of traumatic memories to the production of history (and, by extension, to other cultural practices of representation), LaCapra identifies two approaches to historiography that correspond to the tendency to either “act out” or “work through” traumatic experience (albeit at a secondary register of witnessing). For Freud, “acting out”

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile” (1984), in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 359; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Writing History, Writing Trauma* is LaCapra’s third book-length study that focuses primarily on Holocaust representation. See also *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), and *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

constitutes the compulsive repetition of repressed memories (a patient “reproduces” a repressed memory “not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it”),<sup>3</sup> whereas “working through” defines the process of recognizing the compulsion and overcoming the repression (in a therapeutic setting, the patient discovers the repressed instincts and overcomes the resistance to recollect them).<sup>4</sup> Transferring Freud’s insights to the realm of historiography, LaCapra uses “working through” to describe the practice of “objectivist” historicism, which seeks to establish critical distance in order to uncover documented, evidentiary truths. “Acting out,” conversely, is a symptom of the radical constructivist approach to history, which eschews objectivity in order to pursue empathetic links to the past. LaCapra is critical of both—the working-through method for providing totalizing, “spiritually uplifting” accounts of traumatic historical experiences that risk premature or facile closure,<sup>5</sup> and the acting-out model for its tendency “to speak in the other’s voice or take the other’s place, for example, as surrogate victim or perpetrator.”<sup>6</sup> The challenge, according to LaCapra, is to develop strategies of “empathetic unsettlement” that will respond ethically to traumatic experience by facilitating empathetic investment in the testimony of the other *and* acknowledging the spatio-temporal gap separating survivors of trauma and the interlocutors to whom stories of trauma are related.<sup>7</sup>

In chapter 4 of this study, I explore contemporary art practices that convey a fractured or failed sense of home in ways that facilitate empathetic

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<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)” (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 150.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-56.

<sup>5</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, n.31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

unsettlement or what Kaja Silverman terms “heteropathic” or non-incorporative identification with the suffering of another.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the present chapter, instead, is to identify the ways in which “working through” and “acting out” have been manifested in recent art practices that endeavour to convey ongoing global contexts of displacement and disenfranchisement and their traumatizing consequences. To do so, I focus on two artists whose work deals with dislocation, displacement, the precarious occupation of space, and the vicissitudes of belonging and unbelonging that are attendant to this precariousness: Polish-American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and Mexico City-based Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. In New York in 2003, Wodiczko exhibited *Dis-Armor*, a high-tech wearable communications instrument equipped with video camera, microphone, speakers, and LCD screens broadcasting stories of alienation and cultural displacement, designed to facilitate public testimony and eventual (re)integration into the social body (fig. 3.1).<sup>9</sup> The same year, Santiago Sierra represented Spain at the 50th Venice Biennale with *Wall Enclosing a Space*, a bricked-in national pavilion accessible only through the back entrance, and only to those who presented a Spanish passport (fig. 3.2).<sup>10</sup> These works reveal several interrelated and recurrent themes addressed by both artists, including alienation and stranger relations, borders and boundaries (whether corporeal, cultural, or national), and

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<sup>8</sup> See Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 4. Silverman’s concept of heteropathic identification is further elaborated in the following chapter.

<sup>9</sup> *Dis-Armor* was first produced for and used by socially alienated adolescents in Hiroshima, Japan, subsequently adapted for the International Center for Photography Triennial exhibition *Strangers* in New York (2003), and then again for the MASS MoCA exhibition *The Interventionists* in North Adams, Massachusetts (2004). See Carol Squiers, ed., *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography and Video* (New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2003); and Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (North Adams: MASS MoCA Publications; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Santiago Sierra, *Santiago Sierra: Pabellón de España, 50a Bienal de Venecia / Spanish Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale* (Madrid: Turner, 2003). This was Sierra’s first time representing Spain at the Biennale; at the 2001 event, he exhibited at the Arsenale with *133 Persons Paid to have their Hair Dyed Blond*.



**FIGURE 3.1**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Dis-Armor*, 2000-2003

the potentials and limitations of art as a vehicle for communicating the pain and suffering that often attend to these conditions. In sum, both artists explore the difficulties associated with attempting to situate oneself (psychically, culturally, and geographically) when “home” becomes a floating signifier of belonging, loss, return and new beginnings.<sup>11</sup> Treating this experience as one of profound alienation and traumatization, Wodiczko and Sierra grapple with the trauma of “unbelonging” by engaging the aesthetic of the uncanny as a vehicle with which to express the socio-political implications of “strangeness,” or more precisely, “estranged-ness.” Both artists employ the “unhomely” as both metonym and metaphor for the traumatic aspects of radical cultural and geographical displacement, in the process intervening productively, if contradictorily, in theorizations of art’s capacity to facilitate ethical practices of witnessing traumatic experience.

As elaborated in the first chapter, I invoke the term “unhomely” not simply as a literal translation of the psycho-aesthetic category of the *unheimlich* as it is theorized by Freud, but also in the geopolitical sense with which it is employed in the writing of postcolonial thinkers like Homi K. Bhabha, who theorizes the unhomely as an experience of liminality that unsettles national borders by highlighting the existence of “the minority, the exilic, the marginal and emergent,” who gather “on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures.”<sup>12</sup> But while one of the objectives of this chapter is to shift the psychoanalytic category of the uncanny into the geopolitical realm of the unhomely, psychoanalytic understandings of traumatic experience do play a central, if troubled, role here,

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<sup>11</sup> Without resorting to—or limiting the artists and their production to—a kind of biographical determinacy, it bears mentioning that both Wodiczko and Sierra (and indeed the majority of artists studied in this dissertation) *live* the complexity of identity and identification to which their work attends. Wodiczko is a Polish émigré to Canada now located in the U.S., and Sierra is a Spanish national living in Mexico.

<sup>12</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 149, 39.



**FIGURE 3.2**  
Santiago  
Sierra, *Wall*  
*Enclosing a*  
*Space*, Venice  
Biennale,  
2003



particularly in regards to the art practice of Krzysztof Wodiczko. Indeed, one of the primary differences between the artists' methodologies lies in Wodiczko's reliance on psychoanalytic discourses associated with trauma theory. Drawing on D.W. Winnicott's notion of the therapist as "good enough mother," psychotherapist Judith Herman's assertion of the critical role that public testimony plays in healing traumatic wounds, and Julia Kristeva's theorization of the uncanny as an intrusion of the foreign into the presumed cohesion of the national body,<sup>13</sup> Wodiczko harnesses an "unhomely" aesthetic as an emphatically therapeutic tool. But Santiago Sierra is equally invested, if not in the discourses surrounding trauma, then in seeking ways to convey the traumatizing experience of radical dislocation. Thus, one task of this chapter is to chart the applicability of the emerging field of trauma theory to contemporary art's current fascination with this experience. My intention here is neither to apply nor further develop an orthodox psychoanalytic position, but to chart how relevant concepts from psychoanalytic trauma theory are articulated in certain art practices. I argue that those strands of trauma studies that question and deconstruct art's presumed role as a mediating party prove to be a useful lens through which to examine the risks and promises of socially-engaged art that seeks to intervene in how traumatic experience is registered or represented.

While Wodiczko and Sierra both employ or evoke the uncanny in their investigations of the traumas associated with exile and estrangement, the *ways* these artists negotiate conditions of alienation and strategies of "unhomely" intervention differ significantly. Wodiczko calls forth the uncanny in order to defuse it through primary testimony, secondary witnessing, and collective

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<sup>13</sup> See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971); Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

healing; his work, to return to LaCapra, seeks a “working through” of traumatic memory, and, ultimately, a reconciliation of self-other relations. Employing Winnicott’s notion of the “transitional object” (intermediary devices that assist the patient’s transition toward psychic independence), Wodiczko’s intention is that instruments like *Dis-Armor* might, he suggests, “provide the ground for greater respect and self-respect, and become an inspiration for crossing the boundary between a stranger and a nonstranger.”<sup>14</sup> But while Wodiczko’s aim is to mourn or “work through” traumatic experience, Santiago Sierra’s strategy on the contrary is to melancholically “act out” traumatic events.<sup>15</sup> Sierra, whose art practice also focuses on relations between self and other, instead creates antagonistic situations haunted by melancholic re-stagings of the traumas wrought by the tensions and conflicts produced by the unhomely experience. In Sierra’s actions and installations, I will argue, the “repressed” returns repetitively, compulsively even, and “home” is exposed as a heavily policed borderline of self-other tension.

The goal of this chapter, then, is twofold: First, I identify in the work of Wodiczko and Sierra a trend in contemporary art to mobilize an “unhomely” aesthetic to respond to traumas associated with social alienation and geopolitical dislocation. Second, in exploring ongoing debates in trauma theory concerning the relative merits of “working through” and “acting out” (and their corollary conditions of mourning and melancholia) as a response to traumatic loss, my underlying thesis is that recourse to either model for conveying the condition of unhomeliness risks foreclosing on the productive potential of the other; thus I

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<sup>14</sup> In “*Alien Staff (Xenobàcul)*” (1992), in Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999), 104.

<sup>15</sup> In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (150-51), LaCapra notes that mourning and melancholia are particular manifestations or variations of working-through and acting-out.

problematize both models as they are enacted in the practices of Wodiczko and Sierra.

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### **I. The art and science of strangers: Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Xenology"**

*Crossing borders, in all senses of the word, is traumatic. Consider the aftermath, with all of the legal issues, hostility, euphoria, and disappointment. The stages of transformation of identity for the immigrant, the internal dialogues and disagreements, create a very stressful complexity. In the process of becoming a new person, an immigrant must imagine, examine, and question all identities—the past, present, and future. Those who are ready to negotiate these psycho-political roles need this equipment, an artifice or prosthesis, to begin this demanding process of fearless speech. I do not propose how all of this should be resolved. I only suggest that artists, who are situated between technology, discourses of democracy, and the lives of people, have unique opportunities to create practical artifacts that assist others in this migratory and transitory world.*

Krzysztof Wodiczko<sup>16</sup>

Since the early 1980s, artist and professor Krzysztof Wodiczko has been designing both artifacts and more ephemeral projects intended to draw attention to and empower immigrants and otherwise disenfranchised individuals, such as the urban homeless. Wodiczko has created over seventy public projections of still and video images,<sup>17</sup> and has also developed a series of vehicles and instruments designed for urban intervention, including the *Homeless Vehicle* (1988-89) and *Poliscar* (1991).<sup>18</sup> Wodiczko began to attend specifically to the migrant experience in 1992, when he launched his ongoing Xenology project with *Alien Staff*, the first of several instruments designed to facilitate communication between immigrants

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in Patricia C. Phillips, "Creating Democracy: A Dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko," *Art Journal* 62, no. 4 (winter 2003): 37, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Still projections have been executed, for example, at the Grand Army Plaza Memorial Arch, Brooklyn (1983), The South African Embassy, London (1985), The Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC (1988), The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1989), The Lenin Monument, Berlin (1990), and Arco de la Victoria, Madrid (1991). Public projections with sound and video began with City Hall Tower, Krakow (1996), and later at the Bunker Hill Monument, Boston (1998), the A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima (1999), the National Gallery, Warsaw (2005), and the Kunstmuseum, Basel, 2006. See the artist's website, <http://architecture.mit.edu/people/profiles/prwodicz.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Documentation of the artist's body of work to 1998 is compiled in Wodiczko's *Critical Vehicles* of 1998.

and non-immigrants (fig. 3.3). Coining “xenology” (from the Greek *xenos*, or alien) as both “the art and science of the stranger” and “the immigrant’s art of survival,”<sup>19</sup> Wodiczko designed the *Alien Staff* to resemble a high-tech Biblical shepherd’s rod, with a small video monitor, loudspeaker, and Plexiglas cylindrical containers for the display of “immigration relics” such as visa applications, photographs, and personal letters.<sup>20</sup> Participants in cities around the world were invited to employ the staff as a conduit for telling stories (both pre-recorded and live) of their immigration experience to passers-by on the street. This project was followed in 1993 with *The Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)*, a piece of equipment that attached to the wearer’s head with a small screen and loudspeakers covering the mouth (fig. 3.4). Inspired by cybernetics founder Norbert Wiener’s advocacy of prosthetics for the improvement of society,<sup>21</sup> the *Mouthpiece*, like the *Alien Staff*, was also intended to operate as a vehicle for Brechtian distancing<sup>22</sup>—a bizarrely prosthetic artificial mouth that would both underline and undermine the strangeness of the speaking subject, and that would ideally “help create new links and affinities between immigrants and nonimmigrants on the basis of the recognition of their common strangeness.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Xenology: Immigrant Instruments” (1996), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> See Wodiczko, “*Alien Staff*,” in *Critical Vehicles*, 105. Wodiczko acknowledges that the staff evokes a clichéd tradition of wanderers, insisting that its use in this context is tactical. In “Dissonant Identities: A Conversation between Krzysztof Wodiczko and Juli Carson,” *Thresholds*, no. 7 (November 1993): 2.

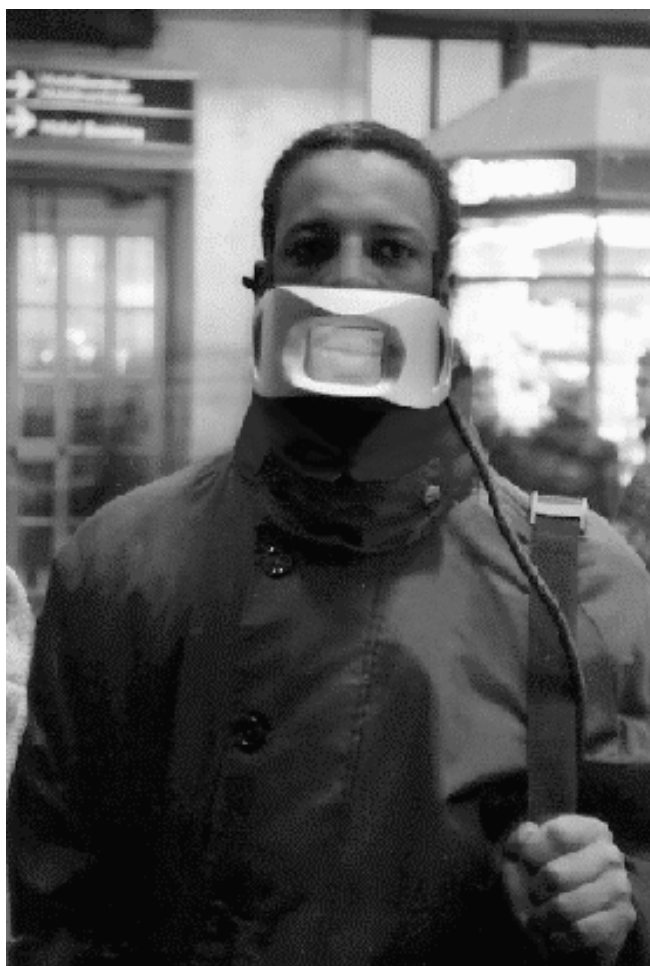
<sup>21</sup> See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965).

<sup>22</sup> Distancing (or *Verfremdungseffekt*, also sometimes referred to as the “alienation effect”) refers to playwright Bertolt Brecht’s technique for preventing audiences from abandoning themselves to the spectacle of narrative content and character identification, in order to reveal underlying social relations and political messages. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, “*The Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)*” (1993), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 119.



**FIGURE 3.3**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Alien Staff*, 1992



**FIGURE 3.4**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*The Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)*, 1993-94

This invocation of an affinity premised on an acknowledgement of shared strangeness alludes to Julia Kristeva's reading of the Freudian uncanny. Indeed Wodiczko's overall methodology is informed by notions of the uncanny, whether he is projecting images of the poor onto civic monuments in order to bring to light that which "ought" to have remained hidden (as in the *Homeless Projection Proposal* of 1986), designing artifices that "double" for the speaking subject (such as the 1998 *Ægis*), or asking us, like Kristeva, to recognize that we are "strangers to ourselves." In her 1991 book of the same title, Kristeva effectively transfers her theory of abjection<sup>24</sup> to the condition of the migrant, who is under constant threat of expulsion by the social body that seeks to maintain its *cordon sanitaire*, and whose ongoing presence is considered a threat to the homogeneity of that body. Drawing an explicit parallel between the uncanny in the psychic realm and xenophobia in the socio-political sphere, Kristeva hypothesizes that non-violent political stability can only be achieved upon recognition (and acceptance) of our irreconcilable *interior* alterity—that is, via recourse to psychoanalysis: Freud, she suggests, "brings us the courage to call ourselves disintegrated not in order to integrate foreigners and even less to hunt them down, but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours."<sup>25</sup>

In his own writing on the subject, Wodiczko conceptualizes the uncanny as both a socio-psychic condition to be overcome—

Our strangeness is a strangely familiar secret, an uncanny condition  
which...can explode against the presence of the actual stranger....  
Between the speechless pain and despair of the actual stranger and the

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<sup>24</sup> Abjection, which refers to the child's revolt against the mother as s/he enters the realm of the (patriarchal) symbolic, is extended by Kristeva to describe all that which threatens the subject's corporeal borders. See *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 192.

repressed fear of one's own strangeness...lies the real frontier to be challenged...<sup>26</sup>

—and an aesthetic tool for overcoming that very challenge:

If, however, there was [*sic*] some kind of strange object between this person and them, they would focus on the strangeness of the object first, somehow putting aside for a moment the presence of the stranger. Perhaps in this intermediate moment, through this intermediate object, they might more easily come to terms with some kind of story or story-telling, some kind of performative experience, some kind of artifice.<sup>27</sup>

This is not necessarily paradoxical—the uncanny as an aesthetic practice for reconciling with the uncanny can be understood as a homeopathic remedy for the fear of strangers, again reminiscent of Brecht's distanciation effect (often translated in English to the "alienation effect") as an antidote to social alienation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as art historian Rosalyn Deutsche observes in her 2002 analysis of Wodiczko's work, Freud himself posited that the frightening nature of the uncanny could be *neutralized* by cultural products such as fairy tales, which exaggerate and thus contain strangeness, rendering it unthreatening.<sup>29</sup> For Deutsche, the Xenology project's effort to neutralize the fear of strangers reaches its apogee with *Ægis: Equipment for a City of Strangers* (1998). And it was with *Ægis* that Wodiczko's projects began to be conceived less as vehicles for drawing attention to the unhomely condition of the societally alienated, and more as instruments that might provide actual therapeutic benefits for both wearer and viewer. It is therefore through analysis of *Ægis* that I will begin to map out some of the questions that Wodiczko's practice raises in relation to trauma, testimony,

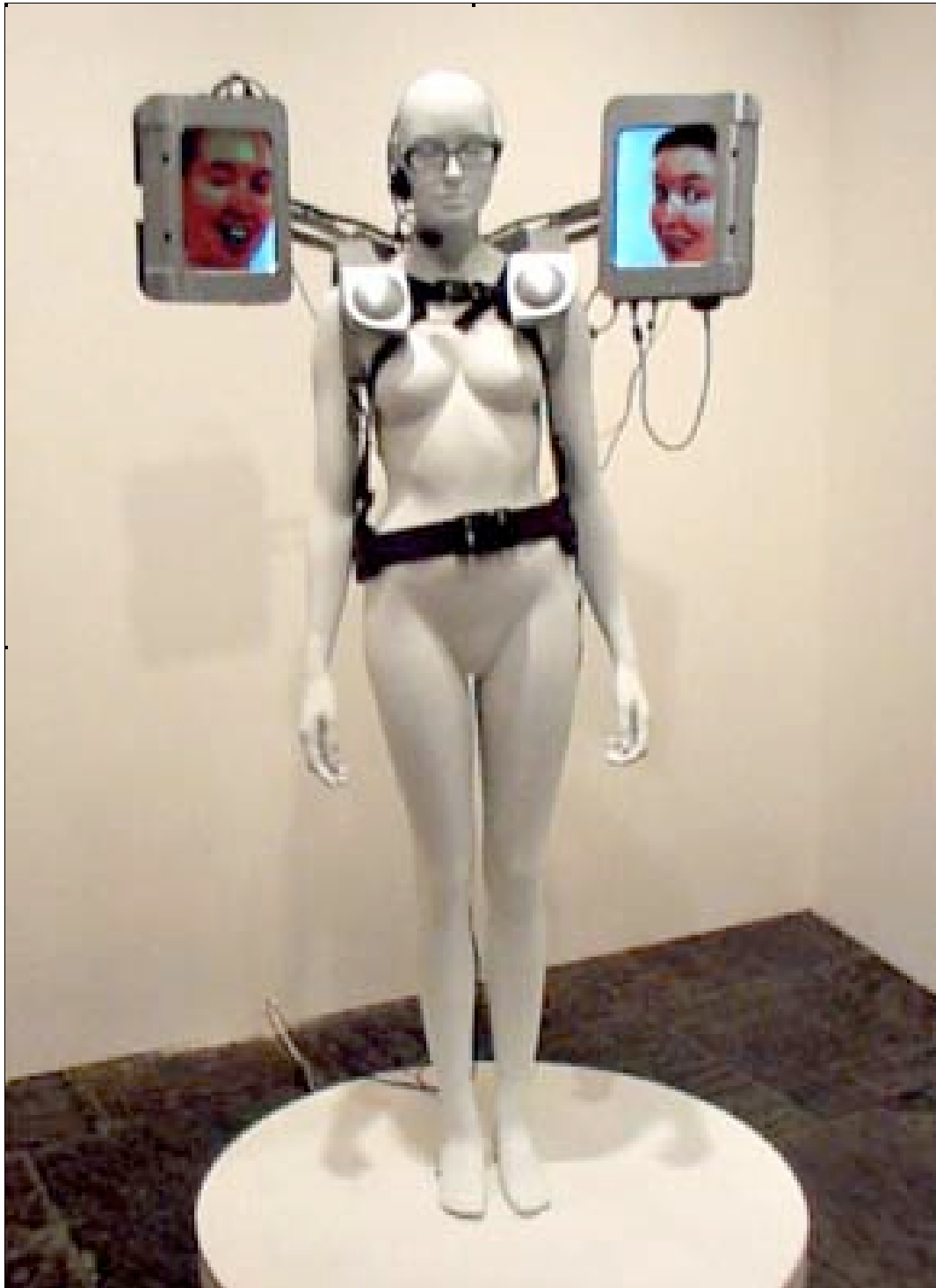
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<sup>26</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Open Transmission," in *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture, and the Everyday*, ed. Alan Read (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> Literary theorist Nicholas Royle observes that while the Freudian uncanny and Brechtian distanciation effect share a motivation to make the familiar strange, Brecht's project was to mobilize the revolutionary (rather than therapeutic) dimensions of this effect. See Royle's *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, "Sharing Strangeness: Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Ægis* and the Question of Hospitality," *Grey Room* no. 6 (winter 2002): 38.



**FIGURE 3.5**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Ægis: Equipment for a  
City of Strangers*, 1998



and the art of social relations.

Like its precursors, *Ægis* is a wearable communications apparatus that facilitates speech via audio-visual proxy (fig. 3.5).<sup>30</sup> Described by Deutsche as “a bizarre object, one that excites the same combination of wonder and fear that often greets strangers,”<sup>31</sup> the instrument is composed of a backpack equipped with two screens that unfold on command and play sequences pre-recorded by the wearer. The wearer’s identity (as signified by the face) is now *doubly* doubled, as if to reflect the “disintegrated” self to whom Kristeva refers. But as Wodiczko notes, the screens are also intended to resemble the wings of an angel, linking their design to the notion that immigrants are the “messengers of a better world to come as well as critics of the unacceptable world in which they live.”<sup>32</sup> To facilitate this reading, Wodiczko created a script for a preliminary video recording that rehearses one of the more alienating conversations an immigrant might be expected to undergo, while layering it with multiple, sometimes conflicting and even multiply confrontational responses to the seemingly benign but often demeaning question, “Where are you from?”:

*Left screen*

Where are you from?  
Where are you from?  
Where are you from?  
Enough!  
I don’t want to hear that anymore!  
Fi-gu-red out!  
I don’t want to be figured out...

*Right screen*

Is that any way to start a conversation?  
Where are you from?  
I’m from here!  
I’m me.  
Just like you.  
You’re yourself.  
With your own first and last name...<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ægis* was first exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 2000 Biennial. The *ægis*, Wodiczko notes, was the cloak of Athena, bearing a Gorgon’s head, which she used to shield herself and others. In “*Ægis: Equipment for a City of Strangers*” (1998), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 133-36.

<sup>31</sup> Deutsche, “Sharing Strangeness,” 27.

<sup>32</sup> Wodiczko, “*Ægis*,” in *Critical Vehicles*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

In this passage, Wodiczko maintains a dialogue with the questioning subject that aligns with what political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe term agonistic pluralism, a principle of radical democracy that hinges on the recognition that consensus actually entails the silencing of dissent, thus insisting on the acknowledgement, even cultivation, of adversarial socio-political relations.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, *Ægis* appears to be aligned less with the earlier Xenology instruments than with Wodiczko's even earlier, arguably more confrontational projects like the 1986 *Homeless Projection Proposal*, which drew damning attention to the burgeoning housing crisis in New York as a result of gentrification, or even the 1988-89 *Homeless Vehicle*, intended to operate like a bandage that "covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence."<sup>35</sup> These projects and proposals, as Deutsche argues in her 1996 *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, were explicitly oppositional. Comparing the *Homeless Vehicle* to a Situationist *détournement*, Deutsche suggests that it "facilitates the seizure of space by homeless subjects rather than containing them in prescribed locations."<sup>36</sup> The *Alien Staff*, by contrast, privileged healing over exposure, dialogue over dissensus—indeed, Wodiczko indicates that its primary function was to "treat" the disease of xenophobia.<sup>37</sup> If the *Homeless Projections* proposed to haunt city streets with the return of the dispossessed, the *Alien Staff* sought instead to resolve the conflicts borne of dispossession. If the *Homeless Vehicle* offered, as Dick Hebdige has suggested, a Swiftian "modest proposal" for

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<sup>34</sup> See, chiefly, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Interrogative Design" (1994), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 105.

<sup>37</sup> See Krzysztof Wodiczko, "An Interview by Jaromir Jedlinksi" (1997), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 217.

the housing crisis in America,<sup>38</sup> the Xenology instruments are instead proffered as “therapeutic devices” that “allow [users] to develop their speech—to help them with this final stage of healing.”<sup>39</sup>

But while Wodiczko re-introduces conflict in his conceptualization of *Ægis*, it is a carefully scripted conflict premised on the assumption of eventual, if not imminent, resolution. The scenario prepared by Wodiczko, excerpted above, concludes on a note of (albeit cautious) reconciliation and empowerment:

<i>Left screen:</i>	<i>Right screen:</i>
...Feeling at home.	...So ask, “just like that,”
No longer thinking of escaping.	About anything else...
Independent,	But don’t ask,
Independent,	“WHERE ARE YOU FROM?”
And again, independent.	Because that question creates an
Reconstructed,	abyss between us
Remodeled,	And it makes me feel
Strong.	As tiny
With faith in oneself	As a dwarf
Because she proved herself	Next to you.
in a foreign country.	And I thought I was grown up.
Is that me?	Do you really
But there’s that tiny nose-tweak.	Want to be
“Where are you from?”	A giant
Is the building already tottering?	Next to me? <sup>40</sup>

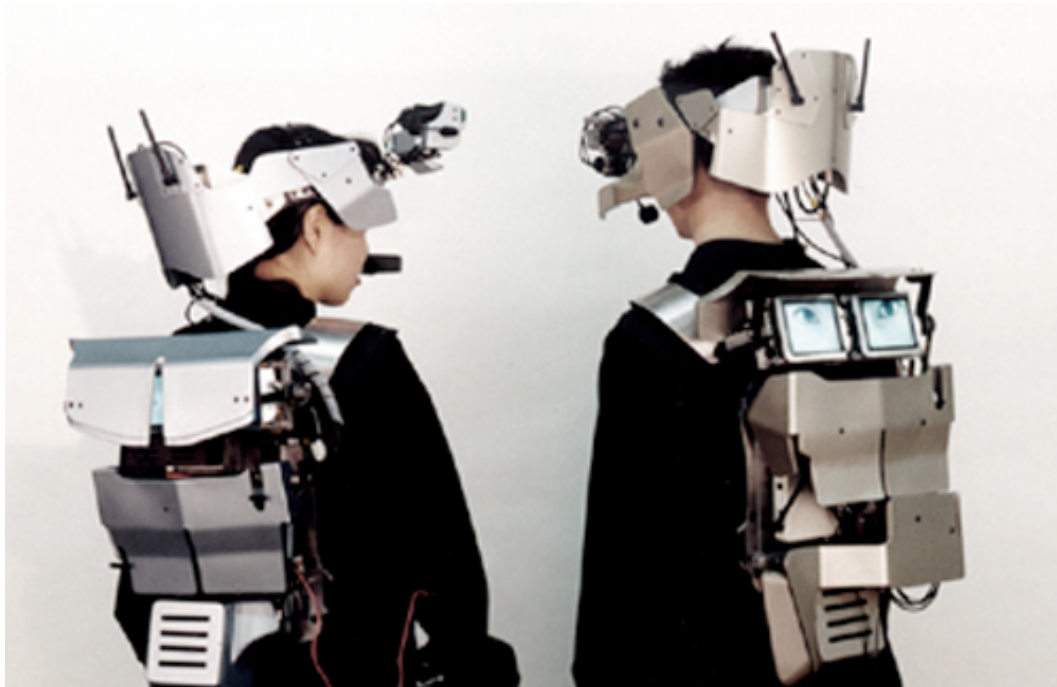
*Ægis*, then, participates in Wodiczko’s wider project to expose conflict in order to defuse it. Being adversarial, he suggests, is not about “escalating hostilities, but is a way to develop the dynamic conditions from which people learn to respect each other.”<sup>41</sup> These conditions, his art production suggests, can be fostered in relation to the concepts of truth, testimony, and reconciliation, and it is therefore neither surprising nor inappropriate that Wodiczko has sought to merge his unhomely aesthetic with the discourses that comprise the relatively new but

<sup>38</sup> Dick Hebdige, “Redeeming Witness: In the Tracks of the Homeless Vehicle Project,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 186.

<sup>39</sup> Wodiczko, in Phillips, “Creating Democracy,” 37, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Wodiczko, “*Ægis*,” in *Critical Vehicles*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Wodiczko, in Phillips, “Creating Democracy,” 35.



**FIGURE 3.6**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Dis-Armor*, 2000-2003



**FIGURE 3.7**  
Krzysztof  
Wodiczko,  
*Dis-Armor*,  
2000-2003  
(video still)

rapidly expanding field of trauma theory. Indeed, while critic Ben Highmore likens Wodiczko's role to that of "artist as uncanny ethnographer," suggesting that his instruments challenge "the various discourses around migration...by the uncanny strangeness of geographical displacement and the possible recognition (for those that stumble across these instruments) to become 'strangers to ourselves,'" <sup>42</sup> I propose instead that Wodiczko is perhaps better understood in the role of "artist as uncanny therapist," taking on the uncanny as both symptom and cure for the experience of unhomedness or unwelcomeness.

Consider *Dis-Armor* (fig. 3.6), a helmet equipped with a microphone and video camera, attached to a backpack with screens that display live images of the wearer's eyes and speakers that amplify her voice. A camera attached to the backpack conversely feeds video to a screen at the wearer's eyelevel. While *Ægis*, Wodiczko stressed, was designed not simply for immigrants but for alienated individuals of all sorts, *Dis-Armor* was the first instrument intended to "treat" purely psychic estrangement, specifically the psychological difficulties and stressful lives of Japanese youth "who have survived overwhelming life events (violence, neglect, and abuse) and who now wish to overcome their false sense of shame, to break their silence, and to communicate their experience in public space."<sup>43</sup> The more recent incarnation of *Dis-Armor*, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, follows an Arab-American woman testifying to the abuses and ostracization she has suffered since 9/11, thereby reintroducing an overtly geopolitical theme. But what connects the two versions, and what connects *Dis-Armor* more broadly to the Xenology project, is its insistence on public testimony (or what Wodiczko, after Michel Foucault, refers to as "fearless

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<sup>42</sup> Ben Highmore, "Ethno-Graphics," *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 135.

<sup>43</sup> In Nancy Princenthal, "Forty Ways of Looking at a Stranger," *Art in America* 91, no. 12 (December 2003): 43.

speech"<sup>44</sup>) and its confidence that public speech has the capacity to heal both psychic and social rifts.

### **Trauma and the art of testimony**

Integral to Wodiczko's overall project is the notion that recovery from traumatic experience requires both the opportunity to testify to one's experience and the presence of an empathetic listener, which he credits to psychoanalyst Judith Lewis Herman. Herman, a key thinker in the field of trauma theory, is the author of the 1992 *Trauma and Recovery*, which posits that "private" traumas (particularly those caused by the deliberate infliction of pain, such as rape and incest) demand public airing, and that trauma recovery depends upon socio-political intervention. For Herman, attention to psychological trauma is an "inherently political enterprise" that "calls attention to the experience of oppressed people."<sup>45</sup> Situations and agents that are able to offer "voice to the disempowered," she suggests, create the conditions for victims to become fully aware of their traumatization, and to begin the process of recovery.<sup>46</sup> Herman's analysis is essentially an extension of trauma theory (from its focus on calamitous events, such as the Holocaust, to domestic, everyday traumatic experiences),<sup>47</sup> which is founded on the Freudian notion that the traumatized subject is unable to integrate the experience into memory without an active interlocutor willing to

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<sup>44</sup> See Phillips, "Creating Democracy," 34-35. "Fearless Speech" is the title given posthumously to a series of lectures that Foucault gave at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983. The theme of the lectures was the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, roughly equivalent to the contemporary idea of speaking truth to power. See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 237.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. For a convincing critique of the correlation between testimony and cure, particularly in non-therapeutic settings (such as fiction), see Kathryn Robson, "Curative Fictions: The 'Narrative Cure' in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Chantal Chawaf's *Le Manteau noir*," *Cultural Values* 5, no. 1 (January 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Laura S. Brown refers to ongoing domestic traumatization as "insidious trauma." In "Not Outside the Range," in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 107.

bear witness, or to bear, more precisely, what photographic historian Marianne Hirsch calls the burden of translating the “untranslatability of the story of trauma.”<sup>48</sup>

In keeping with trauma theory’s insistence that an ethics of witness must acknowledge the incommensurability of experience, Wodiczko concurs that, “To say ‘I understand what you went through’ is the most unacceptable response. The opposite may be more appropriate. ‘I will never understand what you went through’.”<sup>49</sup> However, in likening his role increasingly to that of a psychotherapist, Wodiczko also envisions himself as a conduit through which the patient/user can narrativize and reconcile her traumatic experience, insisting, “Before they can add their voice to the democratic agon, these actors must again develop their shattered abilities to communicate.” Relating this to his own facilitations of public communications, Wodiczko adds, “The process of unlocking their post-traumatic silence requires not only critical, but also clinical, approaches and attention.”<sup>50</sup>

In the interview from which this passage originates, Wodiczko takes pains to dissociate his current attention to testimony and healing in the public sphere from his earlier affinity for the agonistic theories of democracy as proposed by Mouffe and Laclau. In this way, the prosthetic devices that Wodiczko produces and deploys undergo a subtle but significant transformation. As his work becomes less invested in the political visibility of social actors and more in their psychic capacity to speak in public, so do his uncanny devices go from being objects of

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<sup>48</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission,” in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>49</sup> In *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3, Program 9, Episode: Power. DVD, produced by Catherine Tatge (Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> In Elise S. Youn and María J. Prieto, “Interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko: Making Critical Public Space,” *agglutinations.com*, 11 April 2004, <http://agglutinations.com/archives/000035.html>.

distanciation designed to communicate that we are all “strangers to ourselves” to therapeutic devices designed to heal the subject traumatized by the experience of social, geographical, or psychological alienation. More precisely, they become what Freudian psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott advocated as “transitional objects.” For Winnicott, the process of “working through” traumatic loss requires an empathetic interlocutor through whom the suffering person can detach from his melancholic attachment to loss. Certain objects, he adds, might also be required as intermediaries to move the patient from attachment to self-sufficiency, from melancholia to mourning.<sup>51</sup> Wodiczko’s wearable instruments are designed with precisely this function in mind, and interviews with participant-users confirm that the instruments may play an empowering intermediary part in the testimonial act: Nathalie, for example, a participant in Trélazé, France, relates her experience with the *Mouthpiece*: “when you wear the object in the street, people can easily think that it is not your mouth that is on the screen. It’s reassuring, and that feeling takes away some of the responsibility.”<sup>52</sup>

*Dis-Armor* was likewise designed to empower its young Japanese participants unaccustomed to public speaking, its backside screens allowing the user to face away from her intended audience and therefore take shelter in the promise of mediation and partial anonymity (fig. 3.7). A videotaped segment of one such encounter demonstrates the effective, and strangely affective, dimensions of such a design. The video, two minutes long, begins with a young girl donning the apparatus in a small room. She appears to make herself comfortable, then joins a group of girls—friends, presumably—who erupt into

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<sup>51</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3. Winnicott developed his idea of the transitional object by observing that children often rely on objects (blankets, teddy bears and the like) to cope with the dissolution of the mother-child dyad.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Voices of the Mouthpiece” (1994-96), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 128.



peals of laughter at the sight of her. The stage is thus set for a light-hearted performance of cyborg playfulness, but as the girl approaches two men seated in the cafeteria of an office building, a sense of discomfort quickly begins to pervade. The men seem bemused, and even as the girl turns her back to them and begins to recount how her family and world have collapsed since her father left suddenly, they try to cheer her up with good-natured assurances. The girl starts to cry, and the camera operator filming the scene zooms in for a close-up on her distraught face.

It is impossible, of course, to surmise whether this young woman's testimony to strangers had any positive therapeutic effect. No available documentation exists as to whether she, like Nathalie in France, felt reassured or empowered by the instrument, and we are not informed as to whether her life has improved since the encounter. But then, as Wodiczko admits candidly, he is "[neither] a therapist [nor] a healer."<sup>53</sup> At best, his instruments are "interrogative designs,"<sup>54</sup> efforts to imagine how public speech *might* facilitate psychic healing and repair social relations. As a therapeutic project, then, *Dis-Armor's* effectiveness cannot, and perhaps should not, be gauged. But as an art project proposing a methodology for mediating the experience of trauma, questions can and should be raised. For instance, to what extent can a project like *Dis-Armor* escape the spectacle of trauma that reduces its representation to a cathartic, even exploitative, exercise in viewer titillation? And, if the wearable instrument is a "transitional object," then what role does the unacknowledged bird's eye video camera play? Does it facilitate, or instead intervene in, the transitional moment or encounter? Then, does *Dis-Armor* create an empathetic response in the viewer,

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<sup>53</sup> In Dan Cameron, "An Interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko," thespleen.com, 23 October 2000, [http://www.art-omma.org/NEW/past\\_issues/theory/07\\_An%20Interview%20With%20Krzysztof%20Wodiczko.htm](http://www.art-omma.org/NEW/past_issues/theory/07_An%20Interview%20With%20Krzysztof%20Wodiczko.htm).

<sup>54</sup> See Wodiczko, "Interrogative Design," in *Critical Vehicles*, 16-17.

and if so, does this response carry any social, political, or even aesthetic valence? And what of viewers who fail to sympathize with, or are even antipathetic to, the young woman's plight? Does the project assume a pre-constituted audience, and if so, might this preclude the possibility of sustained (agonistic) dialogue on human rights and public speech? Finally, does the project insist on a sense of closure (or "working through") which may or may not be in the best interests of the participants, and which, if rendered prematurely, might foreclose, rather than facilitate, further dialogue and healing? *Dis-Armor*, like most of Wodiczko's projects, raises more questions than it presumes to answer, and this is perhaps its most constructive intervention into the politics and aesthetics of trauma representation. In the next section, I address what I consider to be the productive *and* problematic aspects of Wodiczko's art practice, and I link them to recent debates in both trauma theory and art criticism regarding the role of the artist as mediator of trauma and facilitator of social relations. But first, I introduce a final project, the *Tijuana Projection*, which aptly illustrates the questions raised by Wodiczko's work, and which furthermore, as a project situated both on and in relation to national, cultural, and corporeal borders, is most conceptually relevant for comparison with projects by Santiago Sierra, who is introduced later in this chapter.

### **The therapeutic uncanny**

In a 2005 appearance on the PBS television series "Art 21," Krzysztof Wodiczko speculates on the nature of his work: "I don't know if this is political art. Or is this psychotherapeutic art? Or is this an ethical proposition?"<sup>55</sup> The *Tijuana Projection* of 2000, I suggest, gestures toward filling all three roles. A synthesis of the artist's projections and instruments, the project is perhaps also

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<sup>55</sup> In *Art 21*, DVD.

the most “uncanny” of his works to date, and it epitomizes Wodiczko’s careful attendance to the therapeutic *and* ethical dimensions of public art. In the context of inSITE2000, a binational and biennial contemporary arts exhibition held in San Diego, US, and Tijuana, Mexico, live video footage was projected onto the 60-foot-diameter spherical façade of the Omnimax Theater at the Cultural Center of Tijuana (the Centro Cultural Tijuana, or CECUT) for two nights running.<sup>56</sup> The footage was fed by a specially-designed headset with camera and microphone worn by local women who gave stirring testimony about domestic violence, sexism and misogyny, and the harsh, often dangerous working conditions in the multinational-owned *maquiladora* factories where most young women in northern Mexico’s poverty-ridden border towns eke out a living (fig. 3.8).<sup>57</sup> The participants were members of Factor X, an association of female *maquiladora* workers formed to promote education and workers’ rights, and with whom Wodiczko spent one year preparing for the intervention.

As with previous projections, Wodiczko selected a monumental façade that would function not simply as a site, but also as a subject, of his intervention.<sup>58</sup> Recognizing, with contemporary theorists of monumental art and architecture, that it tends to promulgate narratives of sacrifice, glory and progress that erase discord and naturalize exclusion,<sup>59</sup> Wodiczko’s interventions

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<sup>56</sup> The Tijuana Projection is also known as the CECUT Project after the Centro Cultural Tijuana, whose façade was the site of the projection.

<sup>57</sup> *Maquiladora* is the term used to refer to the approximately 6,000 foreign-owned factories (usually American) operating in free-trade zones on the US-Mexico border. They employ mainly women, and are routinely accused of low wages, forced overtime, and unhealthy working conditions. For an astute analysis of the gendered politics of the *maquiladora* industry, see Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> In 1985, for instance, Wodiczko stealthily projected a swastika onto the façade of the South African embassy in London’s Trafalgar Square to protest that country’s racist apartheid regime.

<sup>59</sup> For elaboration, see Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); and Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, eds., *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).



**FIGURE 3.8**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Tijuana Projection*,  
2000



**FIGURE 3.9**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Border Projection*,  
1988

have been, as Rosalyn Deutsche notes, “projections upon projections”—uncanny exposés of that which is repressed from monumental—usually nationalist and patriotic—history. As Deutsche further observes, “if dominant representations imprint their messages on receivers by inviting immediate identification with images so ‘natural’ they seem uncoded, Wodiczko’s transformed images have the opposite effect [of] impeding both the monuments’ messages and the viewer’s identification with authoritative images.”<sup>60</sup> Take, for example, the *Border Projection* of 1988, a two-part projection on San Diego’s Museum of Man and, again, the Cutural Center of Tijuana. The still image in this case depicted, in stark black and white, the back of a man’s head, hands clasped behind him as though being held under arrest and framed by two large question marks (fig. 3.9). A direct and scathing comment on the tense relationship between Tijuana and San Diego and on the border that divides them, the doubled image exposes the consequences of that tension in a way that recalls Jacques Rancière’s notion of dissensus: inclusive adversarial discourse that acknowledges and exposes the social exclusions in normative discourse.<sup>61</sup> Thus in the *Border Projection*, Tijuana’s CECUT—a monument to progress, modernity, and cultural wealth in Mexico—becomes a screen onto which are projected the very citizens these discourses erase: those who are compelled, by often abject poverty, to flee the country. As Ben Highmore observes, Wodiczko’s practice renders the return of the repressed “both as an ideology critique of urban architecture and as a literal ‘return of the oppressed.’”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); and the forthcoming *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Highmore, “Ethno-Graphics,” 134.

In many respects, the *Tijuana Projection* of 2000 evokes the same concerns. First, public projection itself seems an uncannily disturbing medium, more conducive to Brechtian distancing than to therapeutic mediation. The women's disembodied faces, distorted on the curved structure of the CECUT's Omnimax theater, render the testimony emanating from the speakers even more affectively unsettling. And indeed, it is an unsettling performance. The women's words, ringing out across the border, speak also *about* the border, about how largely and humiliatingly it looms in their lives. One participant, for instance, delivers the following prepared monologue:

...When you tried to cross the border, you were so dignified with your new American girlfriend. Better life, without children. A better job, more money. But, when you arrived at the border the roles were reversed. They handcuffed your wrists, as if you'd committed some kind of crime. You were put on a bus. Your feet handcuffed. You were locked up for three days, for three nights. ... You were stepped on. And that's how you made me feel, each time you yelled at me, with each slight, that I wasn't worth anything, that I was a stupid person, a dummy.<sup>63</sup>

Like the *Homeless Projection Proposal*, then, which used monumental sculpture against itself in a jujitsu-like act that simultaneously reprovved and reversed the naturalization of exclusions upon which myths of progress and achievement are built, the *Tijuana Projection* treats the CECUT as both a signifier of Mexico's failure to reconcile its modernizing economy with its explosion of poverty and emigration (as Wodiczko observes, *maquiladora* workers, who form the bulk of the labor force in Tijuana, are largely excluded from the posh building<sup>64</sup>), and a mass medium with which to broadcast the devastating results of this failure.

Whereas, however, the *Tijuana Projection* arguably revives Wodiczko's interest in using projection to achieve uncanny effects aimed at promoting

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Pomnikoterapia—Memorial Therapy," University of Michigan Copernicus Lecture, 11 April 2000), <http://www.fathom.com/feature/190245/index.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

agonistic public speech, this concern is now folded into the language of therapy, which he suggests, after Herman, has inevitable socio-political resonance and relevance. Wodiczko notes that, “the clinical can be critical in the sense that it detects and investigates symptoms,” and goes so far as to add that, “In the case of my work, the analogy might go even further, from the diagnosis to the actual healing.”<sup>65</sup> As indicated earlier, this is not to suggest that Wodiczko considers himself a “healer”—instead he regards his work as catalytic, although his choice of language sometimes seems to reveal slippage between analogizing and conflating art and clinic. Reflecting on the Tijuana Projection, for instance, Wodiczko suggests that, “The participants...use the project for themselves: they are both doctors and patients, which is the nature of the clinic. It is a kind of public clinic, all of this...”<sup>66</sup>

This clinical, or therapeutic, aspect of Wodiczko’s work extends even to his monumental critique; if the architectural spaces in earlier works were commandeered to serve as palimpsests for the uncanny emergence of alternate histories and counter-normative narratives, they are now more likely to be conceptualized by the artist as equally in need of therapeutic treatment:

In fact, the monuments are not in very healthy condition. They suffer in a state that is similar in many ways to post-traumatic stress, mostly because they are isolated from the events and life of people who very often live on their steps.... They are, in fact, dumb and numb. They suffer through this traumatic speechlessness, and any possibility to be of any use to the living would be a great relief for them.<sup>67</sup>

Wodiczko’s “diagnosis” of public monuments reveals, on one hand, the playfulness with which he often approaches his methodology. His anthropomorphization of monumental architecture and his (presumably tongue-

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<sup>65</sup> Youn and Prieto, “Interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko,” n.p.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Wodiczko, “Pomnikoterapia,” n.p.

in-cheek) concern for its psychic wellbeing, provide a hint that Wodiczko's primary project is not *literally* to heal, but to explore the ways in which artists can respond productively to psychological and collective trauma. But Wodiczko is operating here within a conveniently self-positioned aporia, suggesting simultaneously that artists, when they combine symbolism and interventionism, have the capacity to heal but that art, merely a symbolic system, cannot be held accountable to this promise. Not merely an expedient escape clause, such a proposition can furthermore avert attention from significant issues raised by art practices that seek to communicate, mediate or otherwise convey the experience of trauma.

### **Testimony and the aesthetics of social relations**

As art historian Jill Bennett suggests, there is a "certain hubris" implied when art lays any claim "to salvage damaged experience and thereby redeem life."<sup>68</sup> In her 2005 book *Empathic Vision*, Bennett investigates how artists can intervene in the mediation and reception of traumatic memory in ways that don't presume to cauterize either the originating wound *or* the wounded relations between traumatized subject and secondary witness. But Bennett also attends to the limits, excesses, and challenges of trauma studies, which include debates as to whether psychoanalytically-driven trauma theory facilitates, or instead impoverishes, the ethical imperatives of testimony in contexts where reparation and justice might be jeopardized by a therapeutic approach.<sup>69</sup> This question has also been taken up by Andreas Huyssen, who argues that to favour narratives of personal suffering, recovery, and redemption is to risk minimizing the political dimensions of historical violence and thus the more pressing questions of human

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<sup>68</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>69</sup> See chapter 1 for elaboration of this debate.



rights and restitution. Huyssen's argument, that "the transnational discourse of human rights may give us a better handle on such matters than the transfer of psychoanalysis into the world of politics and history,"<sup>70</sup> points to one of the key questions that have emerged in respect to trauma theory: the extent to which a discourse rooted in personal therapy can be applied to an ethics of bearing witness to structurally inflicted and societally inflected suffering. This question also informs my reading of Krzysztof Wodiczko's Xenology project and its increasingly assertive doctrine of truth, testimony, and reconciliation. The problem this model courts, it seems to me, is that Wodiczko's uncanny prostheses and projections threaten to prematurely, and therefore superficially, reconcile the conflicts that structure stranger relations. An analogous critique can and has been levelled more broadly at Kristeva's leveraging of the uncanny to "detect foreignness in ourselves,"<sup>71</sup> which, as Ewa Ziarek observes, "risks psychologizing or aestheticizing the problem of political violence [while] obfuscat[ing] the specific historical and political genealogy of nationalism and the memory of its victims."<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, when public testimony or "fearless speech" is presumed to heal (or at least facilitate the healing of) personal wounds and social rifts, it appears that borders are miraculously transformed into bridges, and the uncanny too easily become a catalyst for cathartic release.

One of the assumptions that Wodiczko's model relies on (an assumption that has been identified as a lacuna of conventional trauma theory) is that the (often accidental) recipient of traumatic testimony is an always already (or at least an always *ready*) empathetic witness. Wodiczko's projects, which construct a

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<sup>70</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 191.

<sup>72</sup> Ewa Ziarek, "The Uncanny Style of Kristeva's Critique of Nationalism," *Postmodern Culture* 5, no. 2 (1995): par. 6, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v005/5.2ziarek.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v005/5.2ziarek.html).

multi-faceted, even fragmented user-speaker (consider, for instance, the multiple faces of *Ægis*), nevertheless presume a stable, coherent receiver-listener willing, capable of accepting the communication without conflict. Thus whereas Wodiczko has sought to distance himself from a Habermasian model of public communication that privileges a “blind drive for consensus,”<sup>73</sup> his recent methodology for facilitating a relational sphere appears much more aligned with Habermas than, say, with Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière, who advocate agonistic dissensus over blind or coerced consensus in the public sphere. Indeed my own misgivings about Wodiczko’s aesthetico-political efforts to suture both psychic and social wounds mirror the misgivings that followers of Mouffe and Rancière express regarding what is now the hotly debated topic of “relational aesthetics.” While an in-depth analysis of relational aesthetics and its discontents is beyond the purview of this study, it deserves mention, if only because Wodiczko’s own work falls (as does Sierra’s) within the broad umbrella of relational art, loosely defined by key proponent Nicolas Bourriaud as practices that “take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”<sup>74</sup> Like the relational art practices identified and advocated by Bourriaud, which aim to “elude alienation” and “fill in the cracks in the social bond”<sup>75</sup> by operating in the interstices of “these new interactive technologies that are threatening to commodify human relations within ‘spaces of encounter’,”<sup>76</sup> Wodiczko’s interventions function in the interstitial realm of communication

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<sup>73</sup> Wodiczko, cited in Phillips, “Creating Democracy,” 34. Dick Hebdige concurs: “In Wodiczko’s universe there can be no ideal consensus. His hypothetical ‘ideal speech situation’ remains suitably remote” (“Redeeming Witness,” 200-01).

<sup>74</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 113.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, “Berlin Letter About Relational Aesthetics” (2001), in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 44.

technology, disrupting its somewhat paradoxical tendency to impede, rather than facilitate, communication. *Dis-Armor*, for instance, is designed according to the artist “to meet the communicative needs of the alienated, traumatized, and silenced residents of today’s cities” and to counter “the dichotomy of the present explosion in communication technology and rampant cultural miscommunication.”<sup>77</sup>

But to what extent can Wodiczko’s vehicles, projections and prostheses actually elude (or even heal) the wounds of social alienation, and to what extent do they instead appeal to a counter-model of communication that is at best naïve and at worst elides, rather than eludes, the contemporary collapse of communication in the public sphere? These are some of the questions that have been raised regarding the relational art movement, about which Rancière comments: “The loss of the ‘social bond,’ and the duty incumbent on artists to work to repair it, are the words on the agenda. But an acknowledgement of this loss can be more ambitious.”<sup>78</sup> This position is also articulated by Rosalyn Deutsche, who investigates the ways in which art in public places can either reinforce or challenge normative conceptions of a unified public sphere. Deutsche sides with critics of the Habermasian public sphere who argue that its very ideals of accessibility, inclusivity and impartiality function to conceal its inaccessible,

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<sup>77</sup> Wodiczko, in *Art 21*, DVD.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 90. See also Paul Ardenne, who proposes—in opposition to relational aesthetics—that “art’s role should be to disclose the decline of community.” Paul Ardenne, *L’art dans son moment politique: Écrits de circonstance* (Brussels: La lettre volée, 1999), 244-45; cited in Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 139. In her investigation of how contemporary art articulates depression, Ross proposes “l’esthétique depressive” as “the dystopian flip side of [l’esthétique relationnelle’s] utopian belief in community as a being-together,” and concludes with Ardenne that art most productively discloses the decline of consensus, community, and collaboration “paradoxically by reinforcing this very decline” (140).

exclusive, and biased realization.<sup>79</sup> Drawing on political philosopher Claude Lefort's notion that a functioning democracy requires an absence of certainty ("The important point," he writes, "is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy...as to the basis of relations between self and other"),<sup>80</sup> Deutsche proposes that both democracy and its primary site of legitimation, the public sphere, can only exist when it is acknowledged that "conflict, division, and instability...do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence."<sup>81</sup> She concludes that the very promise of a "fully inclusive or fully constituted political community" is actually less a promise than a threat—one that arises when conflict is presumed resolved; for the coherent, conflict-free public sphere is a fantasy that "depends on an image of social space closed by an authoritative ground"—in essence, a fantasy of totalitarianism.<sup>82</sup>

It is this premise that motivates Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," to date perhaps the most strident criticism of Bourriaud's model for relational art and aesthetics. In this 2004 article, which focuses in particular on the "micro-utopian"<sup>83</sup> art production of British artist Liam Gillick (whose work Bishop describes as "the demonstration of a compromise, rather than an articulation of a problem")<sup>84</sup> and New York-based Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija (which "gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and

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<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>80</sup> Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 19; cited in Deutsche, *Evictions*, 273.

<sup>81</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*, 289.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 289, 326.

<sup>83</sup> This is a term used by Bourriaud to describe the environments constructed by practitioners of relational aesthetics such as Rirkrit Tiravanija.

<sup>84</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (fall 2004): 69.

reduces its scope to the pleasures of the people in a private group who identify with each other as gallery goers”),<sup>85</sup> Bishop draws on Rancière, Deutsche, Mouffe and Laclau to advocate a “more disruptive approach to ‘relations’ than that proposed by Bourriaud.”<sup>86</sup> Coining the term “relational antagonism” to articulate such an approach,<sup>87</sup> Bishop looks to Santiago Sierra, best known for actions that involve paying the poor and disenfranchised “as little as possible”<sup>88</sup> to perform mundane, repetitive, meaningless, and often humiliating tasks, as exemplary. Sierra’s performances and installations, argues Bishop, produce relations “marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a ‘microtopia’ and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants, and context.”<sup>89</sup>

But what relevance do relational aesthetics, relational antagonism, and the actions of Santiago Sierra have to trauma, the uncanny, and Krzysztof Wodiczko’s interventions into the conditions of dislocation and unhomedness? Sierra’s confrontational aesthetics, which range from shocking but relatively straightforward institutional critiques such as *Gallery Burned With Gasoline* (1997)

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. This argument is echoed by Julian Stallabrass, who suggests that the political aspirations of relational art are both exaggerated and essentially futile: “what Bourriaud describes is merely another art-world assimilation of the dead or the junked, the representation as aesthetics of what was once social interaction, political discourse, and even ordinary human relations. If democracy is found only in art works, it is in a great deal of trouble.” In *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>86</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 71.

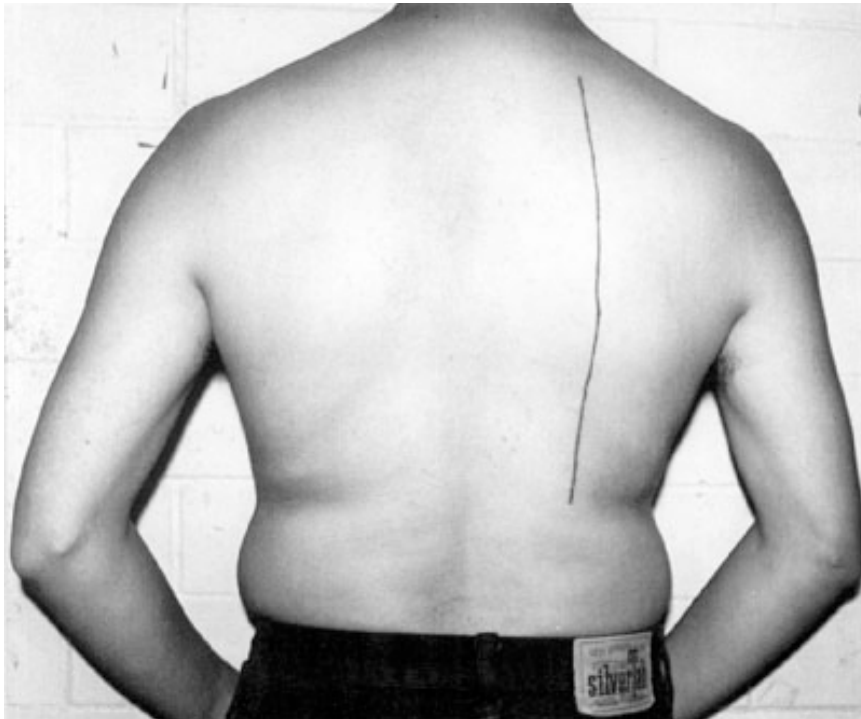
<sup>87</sup> Bishop draws here on the work of Mouffe and Laclau, although she neglects a key distinction they make between agonism and antagonism; according to Mouffe, the work of democratic politics is to “transform *antagonism* [the struggle between enemies] into *agonism* [the struggle between adversaries].” In Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 103.

<sup>88</sup> Santiago Sierra, cited in Martin Herbert, “Material Witness,” *Artforum International* 43, no. 1 (September 2004): 210. Elsewhere, Sierra explains, “Paying more than what they expect, or in a way that suits my conscience, is useless, because...that would suggest that I’m a good guy and that I did my bit toward saving those souls. Ridiculous!” In Rosa Martinez, “Interview to Santiago Sierra,” in *Santiago Sierra: Pabellón de España, 50a Bienal de Venecia / Spanish Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale* (Madrid: Turner, 2003), 207.

<sup>89</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 70. In her essay, Bishop also applies this analysis to the practices of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn.



**FIGURE 3.10**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*Gallery Burned with  
Gasoline*, 1997



**FIGURE 3.11**  
Santiago  
Sierra, *Line of  
30 cm*  
*Tattooed on a  
Remunerated  
Person*, 1998

(fig. 3.10) to “remunerated actions” such as *Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person* (1998) (fig. 3.11), are typically subject to criticism (both positive and vociferously negative)<sup>90</sup> that concentrates on his efforts to draw attention to the hypocrisies of the art world and the economic exploitation of underclass workers. Some, if not most, collapse Sierra’s theme to a core issue of capitalist exploitation—a Marxist metanarrative of post-Fordist labour alienation re-enacted to provoke the discomfort of the bourgeoisie.<sup>91</sup> But this genre of analysis, while not inaccurate, often fails to note, let alone explore the significance of, the geopolitical particularities that frame and nuance each of Sierra’s actions. Indeed, one of Sierra’s most significant objectives is to draw attention to, indeed activate, *specific* forms of alienation that are almost invariably products of national, cultural, and economic borders. As critic Ana Maria Guasch observes, “what is most important is not the remunerated individuals themselves” but instead “the confrontations they posit regarding the geopolitical area that determines their ‘real’ wage and this area’s inherent issues of otherness in terms of its identity and culture.”<sup>92</sup> Sierra, I propose, performs his own xenological experiments, practicing what Guasch refers to as an “ethnography of otherness”<sup>93</sup>—although his “objects” of experimentation, as will become evident, are less “transitional” than “obstructive.” Furthermore, I suggest, Sierra engages implicitly, if not explicitly, in what I have been calling the aesthetic strategy of the “unhomely.”

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<sup>90</sup> In his 2006 response to Claire Bishop’s critique of relational art and aesthetics, for example, Liam Gillick refers to Santiago Sierra’s work as “art that supposedly upsets or disturbs the dominant system, playing on a petitbourgeois hunger for art that either humiliates or taunts its human material.” See “Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop’s ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ [Letters and Responses],” *October*, no. 115 (winter 2006): 90.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, Carlos Jiménez, “Santiago Sierra: Or Art in a Post-Fordist Society,” *Art Nexus* 3, no. 56 (April-June 2005).

<sup>92</sup> Ana Maria Guasch, “Santiago Sierra: A New Mode of Cultural Activism,” in *Otredad y mismidad: arte público / Otherness & Selfness: Public Art*, ed. Aldo Sánchez (Puebla, Mexico: Galería de arte contemporáneo y diseño, 2003), 32.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

Situated uncomfortably on the border between the strangely familiar and the all too familiarly inhumane, Sierra refuses, as Bishop observes, to “offer an experience of human empathy that smoothes over the awkward situation before us,”<sup>94</sup> instead presenting scenes of radical non-identification that privilege friction, awkwardness, and discomfort. As such, Sierra’s projects resonate with a compelling trend in recent trauma scholarship to advocate what Judith Butler refers to as “melancholic agency”<sup>95</sup>—a politics of loss that contests psychoanalysis’s emphasis on “working through” in favour of “acting out” or, as LaCapra phrases it, “resisting narrative closure.”<sup>96</sup>

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## **II. Antagonizing social relations: Santiago Sierra’s dystopian aesthetics**

*I do things because I think they should be included in the art world, but I don’t have grandiose dreams that I’ll actually achieve anyone’s redemption.... When you sell a photograph for \$11,000, you can’t possibly redeem anyone except yourself.*

Santiago Sierra<sup>97</sup>

A Spanish artist based, since 1995, in Mexico City, Santiago Sierra stages actions or interventions that employ sometimes architecture, sometimes humans, and often both as what he calls “performative readymades.”<sup>98</sup> While Sierra is notorious for projects that re-enact oppressive economic relationships, it is works that challenge the naturalization of national borders that illuminate the geopolitical implications of his wider project. More specifically, projects that most evocatively reveal Sierra’s critical commitment to laying bare the traumatic impact of border policing in contemporary global society are those that combine

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<sup>94</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 123.

<sup>95</sup> Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?” in *Loss*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 468.

<sup>96</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

<sup>97</sup> In Teresa Margolles, “Santiago Sierra,” *Bomb*, no. 86 (winter 2003-2004): 65.

<sup>98</sup> Martinez, “Interview to Santiago Sierra,” 23.



border roving with his better known investigations of economic exploitation, all of which, it must be added, are themselves implicit critiques of the limits and excesses of globalization.

In 2002, Sierra produced *3000 Holes of 180 x 50 x 50 cm each* on the Spanish coast facing Morocco. Formally, the project resembled an action by fellow Mexico City-based artist Francis Alÿs of the same year, *When Faith Moves Mountains*. For this project, carried out on a sand dune near Lima, Peru, Alÿs directed a row of five hundred volunteers to move the sand four inches as an “epic response, a ‘beau geste’ at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent,”<sup>99</sup> to the dire situation on the Ventanilla dunes of Peru, where thousands of internally displaced settlers from the countryside live in shanty towns without electricity or running water (fig. 3.12).<sup>100</sup> But whereas Alÿs’s project was staged as a “social allegory” to demonstrate the utopian ideal that “sometimes to make nothing is to make something,”<sup>101</sup> Sierra’s action, on the contrary, displayed a dystopian sense of despair and hopelessness. For the month-long project, Sierra paid undocumented North African workers fifty-four Euros per day (Spain’s mandated salary for foreign day laborers) to dig rectangular holes—each approximately the size of a human grave—into an empty lot facing the Strait of Gibraltar, where the corpses of African men and women, who make the treacherous crossing daily in search of work or asylum, often wash to shore (figs. 3.13 and 3.14).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Francis Alÿs, “A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs Talks About *When Faith Moves Mountains*,” *Artforum International* 40, no. 10 (summer 2002): 147.

<sup>100</sup> *When Faith Moves Mountains* was produced in coordination with the third Bienal Iberoamericana de Lima.

<sup>101</sup> Alÿs, “A Thousand Words,” 147.

<sup>102</sup> According to a 2004 United Nations report, more than 4,000 would-be migrants drowned attempting to cross from Morocco into Spain between 2000 and 2003. See Gabriela Rodríguez Pizarro, *Specific Groups and Individual: Migrant Workers*, Report of the Special Rapporteur, Ms. Gabriela Rodríguez Pizarro, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2003/46, E/CN.4/2004/76, 12 January 2004, Add.3, para 25, <http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/0032d58d2667f0b9c1256e700050f77f?OpenDocument>.



**FIGURE 3.12**  
Francis Alÿs,  
*When Faith*  
*Moves*  
*Mountains,*  
2002



**FIGURE 3.13**  
Santiago Sierra, 3000  
*Holes of 180 x 50 x 50*  
*cm each, 2002*



**FIGURE 3.14**  
Santiago Sierra, 3000  
*Holes of 180 x 50 x 50*  
*cm each, 2002*

Almost as if mocking Alÿs's ephemeral testament to the collective resilience of the human spirit, Sierra's project—which transforms the landscape into a mass graveyard<sup>103</sup> (dug, at least figuratively, by its eventual inhabitants)—bears witness to the agonizing condition of the migrant worker experience. And it is this compulsion to enact or re-enact the traumatic experience of the unwelcome stranger (or what I have been calling the unhomely experience) that sets Sierra's art practice in sharp relief to that of Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose project is to ameliorate, even heal, the unhomely condition. But notwithstanding Sierra's anti-redemptory positioning vis-à-vis the migrant condition (and vis-à-vis the power of the artist to intervene in that condition), and bracketing for a moment the gaping divide that separates his practice from the arguably redemptory practice of Wodiczko, it is worth attending briefly to the fact that Sierra and Wodiczko, to the extent that both artists are concerned with drawing attention to the traumatic deprivations that attach to the unhomely experience, share a methodological framework that sheds significant light on art's unique capacity to register trauma.

**"That which ought to have remained hidden..."**

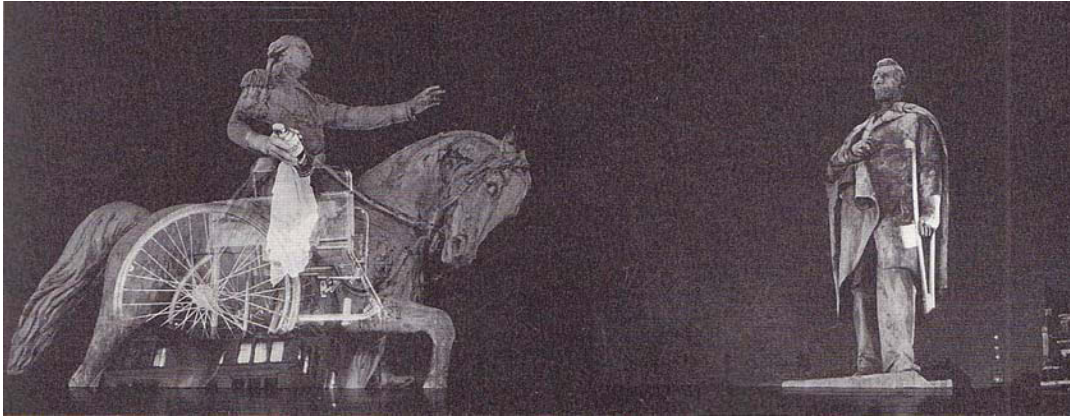
Drawing on F.W.J. Schelling's definition of the *unheimlich* as "everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light,"<sup>104</sup> Freud conceptualized the uncanny as "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."<sup>105</sup> As noted above in reference to Kristeva's mobilization of the

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<sup>103</sup> This observation is also made in Klaus Biesenbach, "Political Minimalism: Narrative Geometry," *Flash Art*, no. 7 (July-September 2004): 89.

<sup>104</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Eric Randolph Miller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [1835] 1966), 649.

<sup>105</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 241.



**FIGURE 3.15**  
Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*The Homeless Projection:*  
*A Proposal for the City*  
*of New York, 1986*

**FIGURE 3.16**  
Santiago  
Sierra, *Lighted*  
*Building,*  
Mexico City,  
2003



**FIGURE 3.17**  
Alfredo Jaar,  
*Lights in the*  
*City,*  
Montreal,  
1999

uncanny as a way to theorize, even mitigate, geopolitical and socioeconomic alienation, this conceptual lever has proven useful for analysis of Krzysztof Wodiczko's art practice, particularly his projections of homeless and destitute men and women onto the statues of civic leaders in the *Homeless Projection* proposal (fig. 3.15), which effected what I have already described as a return of the *dispossessed* in the rapidly gentrifying context of New York City.<sup>106</sup> This categorization also applies to Santiago Sierra's 2003 *Lighted Building, Mexico City*—a project that employed reflectors to light up an earthquake-damaged and abandoned sixteen-storey warehouse in downtown Mexico City now occupied by homeless residents as a makeshift shelter (fig. 3.16).

Like Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* proposal, Sierra's action *literally* brings to light that which "ought" to have remained hidden—a burgeoning inner-city homeless population whose very existence must be repressed in order to maintain the neo-liberal façade of progress and wealth in the late-capitalist economic environment. But whereas Wodiczko's project, as Rosalyn Deutsche observes insightfully, transformed "an evicting architecture" into "an architecture of the evicted,"<sup>107</sup> Sierra instead took advantage of an already existing "architecture of the evicted," turning it into a lighthouse in distress that broadcasts its indictment of indifference across the skyline. In this respect, it is useful to compare Sierra's action with Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar's *Lights in the City* (1999), which involved the installation of dozens of thousand-watt red light bulbs in the cupola of Montreal's Bonsecours Market. The lights were connected to switches at the doorways of three nearby homeless shelters, and lit up the cupola each time a person entering a shelter chose to activate the switch (fig.

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<sup>106</sup> See Krzysztof Wodiczko, "The Homeless Projection: A Proposal for the City of New York" (1986), in Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, 55-56.

<sup>107</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*, 39.

3.17).<sup>108</sup> Jaar reports that shelter residents he interviewed in preparation for the piece “wanted people to acknowledge their presence, through a smile, a hello, but they were over-looked, as a garbage can or a lamppost is ignored.”<sup>109</sup> His response, a cupola that flickered continually for the six weeks of the installation, was conceived as a “distress signal to the city” from marginalized citizens seeking “public recognition of their humanity”<sup>110</sup>—an effort to bear witness to a social condition that often goes neglected, indeed wilfully ignored, in gentrifying urban contexts.

What Wodiczko, Sierra and Jaar share—and what they inherit from Gordon Matta-Clark’s conceptual legacy of (an)architectural intervention—is a deep understanding of the ways in which architectural spaces can be employed (almost always against their discursive intentions) as sites of silent witness to traumatic experience. But this imperative to bear witness to the traumatic impact of social, economic, and political alienation intersects with, and is both complicated and nuanced by, what has now become a common injunction against the spectacularization of suffering in visual culture.<sup>111</sup> In the context of Wodiczko’s practice, Rosalyn Deutsche refers to this attendance to the ethics of looking as an “art of non-indifference”—representational practices that “insist on inadequate vision” as a way to avoid the presumption of visual mastery over the suffering other.<sup>112</sup> This approach to witnessing also resonates with the

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<sup>108</sup> *Lights in the City* was produced for the 1999 Mois de la Photo in Montreal. See Pierre Blache, Marie-Josée Jean, and Anne-Marie Ninacs, eds., *Le mois de la photo à Montréal 1999: Le souci du document* (Montreal: VOX Centre de diffusion de la photographie, 1999).

<sup>109</sup> In Patricia C. Phillips, “The Aesthetics of Witnessing: A Conversation with Alfredo Jaar,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 3 (2005): 22.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Key texts here are Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>112</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “The Art of Non-Indifference,” paper delivered at the Making Public Symposium, Tate Modern, London, 4 March 2005.

representational ethics of Alfredo Jaar, who refers evocatively to his practice as a “lament of the images”—when offered the Bonsecours Market cupola’s windows for an installation of photographs, for instance, Jaar instead chose a representational strategy of “making the homeless visible without pointing at them directly.”<sup>113</sup>

Notwithstanding his own protestations regarding the futility of art’s engagement as political intervention (“An artist is a producer of luxury goods and from this point of view the notion of political commitment is quite unconvincing”<sup>114</sup>), Santiago Sierra’s art practice is likewise concerned with employing the uncanny to political ends, deliberately conflating the return of the repressed with the return of the oppressed while foreclosing on the potential for visual spectacle, catharsis or mastery. Consider two actions, *Workers who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* and *3 People Paid to Lay Still Inside 3 Boxes During a Party*, both from 2000, and both of which involved hiring disenfranchised and socially alienated individuals to conceal themselves in crudely constructed boxes. For *Workers who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* at the Kunst Werke in Berlin, Sierra hired six undocumented Chechen asylum seekers to spend four hours per day for six weeks inside boxes installed in the gallery (fig. 3.18). He describes the work as both a comment on Germany’s treatment of immigrants, and a variation on institutional critique that required the gallery to implicate itself in a wider social critique (thus echoing Martha Rosler’s appropriation of the museum as an

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<sup>113</sup> See Phillips, “The Aesthetics of Witnessing,” 22. Jaar’s *Real Pictures* of 1995 is paradigmatic of his rejection of visual representations of human suffering. Having taken thousands of photographs of the aftermath of the 2004 genocide in Rwanda, Jaar sealed 372 of these images in black linen archival boxes, each with a written description of the image inside. This project, like *Lights in the City*, was propelled by Jaar’s belief that “we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images.” In Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Lament of the Images: Alfredo Jaar and the Ethics of Representation,” *Aperture*, no. 181 (winter 2005): 42.

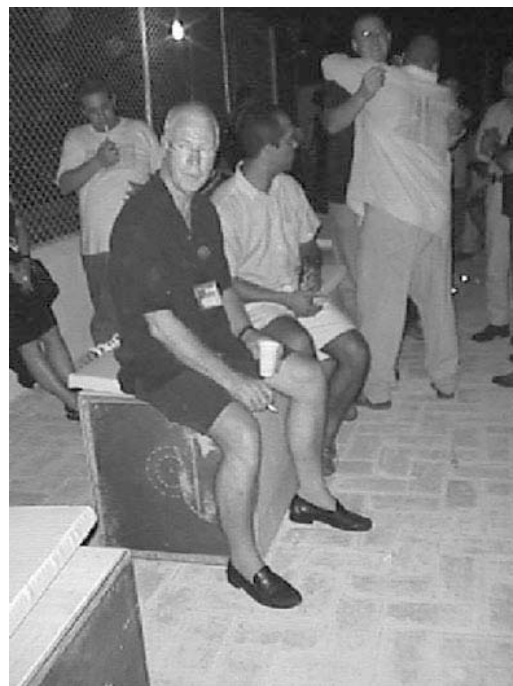
<sup>114</sup> Santiago Sierra, cited in Guasch, “Santiago Sierra,” 34.



**FIGURE 3.18**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*Workers who*  
*Cannot be Paid,*  
*Remunerated to*  
*Remain inside*  
*Cardboard Boxes,*  
Berlin, 2000



**FIGURE 3.19**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*3 People Paid to Lay Still*  
*Inside 3 Boxes During a*  
*Party, Havana, 2000*



**FIGURE 3.20**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*3 People Paid to Lay Still*  
*Inside 3 Boxes During a*  
*Party, Havana, 2000*



oppositional public space):

In the summer of 2000, there was much heated discussion about German policy with respect to political refugees, a debate that reached its climax when neo-Nazis from nearby Leipzig killed an African asylum seeker. At Kunst Werke our project...involved Chechen refugees who were not permitted to work, under threat of repatriation.... Consequently, we could not openly state that we were paying the refugees, and in a sense the institution had become an ally, both to me as the artist and to the refugees.<sup>115</sup>

*3 People Paid to Lay Still Inside 3 Boxes During a Party*, staged at the 2000 Havana Biennial and sometimes referred to as *Santiago Sierra Invites you for a Drink*, involved the concealing of three Havana sex workers in horizontally placed boxes for the duration of a vernissage-cocktail party. International Biennial visitors, unaware of the sex workers' presence, used the boxes as seating benches (figs. 3.19 and 3.20), unwitting actors in Sierra's staged re-enactment of what art critic Julian Stallabrass accurately describes as "the likely relations of power and exploitation between art-tourists and natives."<sup>116</sup>

Sierra has referred to himself as a "Minimalist with a guilt complex,"<sup>117</sup> and indeed his propensity to push the vocabulary of Minimalism to its breaking point has often been observed. Art curator Klaus Biesenbach, for instance, employs the phrase "political minimalism" to describe Sierra's formal preoccupation with but conceptual distinction from Minimalism, characterized by an "obvious contradiction between the meanings of minimalism—the autonomy of the object on the one hand and the ideological and ethical quality of political, humanistic, and societal activity on the other,"<sup>118</sup> while Coco Fusco remarks succinctly that Sierra "recasts a minimalist inquiry into the relation

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<sup>115</sup> Santiago Sierra, "A Thousand Words: Santiago Sierra," *Artforum International* 41, no. 2 (October 2002): 130.

<sup>116</sup> Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 41.

<sup>117</sup> In Martinez, "Interview to Santiago Sierra," 169.

<sup>118</sup> Biesenbach, "Political Minimalism," 87-88.

between the viewer and mass as an investigation into the relation between viewers and ‘the masses.’”<sup>119</sup> More precisely, Claire Bishop observes an Arte Povera-style affinity with Tony Smith’s *Die* of 1962. Invoking Michael Fried’s description of that Minimalist icon as effecting a silent human presence,<sup>120</sup> Bishop suggests that with his inhabited cubes, Sierra literalizes this silent presence<sup>121</sup>—an observation that speaks both to Sierra’s formal resemblance to Minimalism *and* his effective use of concealment as a strategy of anti-redemptive representation. Sierra’s use of Minimalist forms to deny visual access to the humiliation of others—at least in this particular instance—simultaneously draws attention to the already-existing condition of social invisibility while imposing, in place of visual access, an arrangement that implicates his audience as participants in the very context of exploitation. And it is this insistence on creating a scenario that is affectively charged, rather than simply visually accessible, that art historian Jill Bennett, among others, has proposed as the unique contribution that art can make to the conveyance of trauma.<sup>122</sup>

Sierra shares with Wodiczko and Jaar a skepticism regarding the power of images to effect social change and a commitment to mobilizing affective investment in the lives and traumatic experiences of others, but his aesthetic strategy for engaging with trauma renders Sierra’s project significantly different from that of his colleagues. For whereas Wodiczko implicates his audience as always already sympathetic witness, Sierra draws us inevitably into the position of uncomfortably complicit bystander. If Wodiczko’s goal, as I have suggested, is to create therapeutic contexts for personal healing and social reconciliation, and if

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<sup>119</sup> Coco Fusco, “The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA,” in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours, and Other Writings* (London: Routledge, 2001), 67.

<sup>120</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum International*, no. 5 (June 1967): 12-23.

<sup>121</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art*, 120.

<sup>122</sup> The role of affect and affective investment in trauma-related art is elaborated in chapter 1.

Jaar's project is to seek aesthetic strategies that will foreclose the risk of spectacular indifference, Sierra's art practice forecloses visual access in order to retrace and reiterate the borders, exclusions, and injustices that render traumatic the condition of unhomeliness. As he argues,

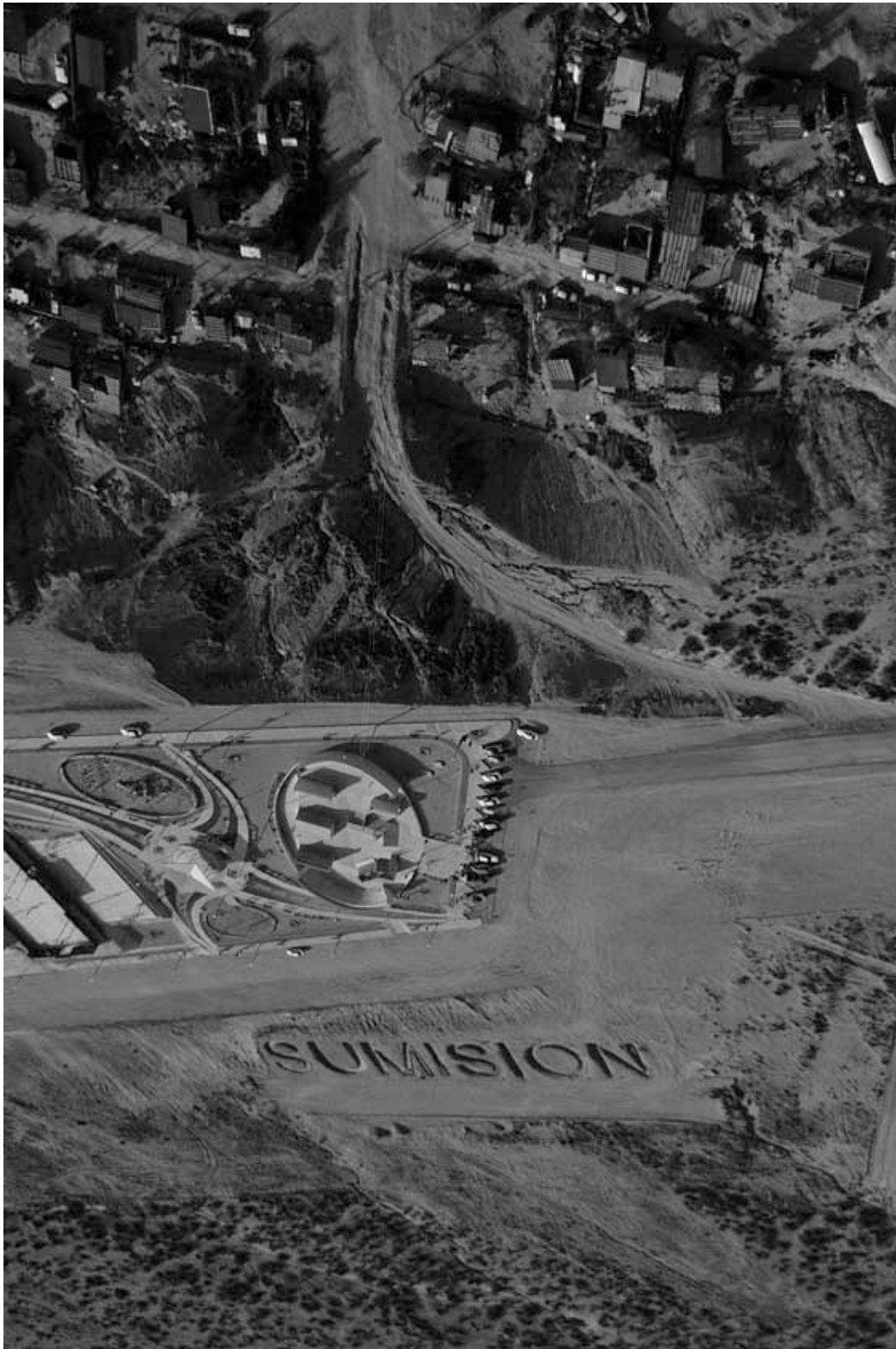
There are determined forces that, in order to create order, generate borders, and this has to do with visibility. Society administers images, and it marks the path of what is visible and what is not. Therefore, the obstructions that I create delimit things that can be done and things that cannot be done. The art spectator can access any site.... It's very strange to be denied entrance to an image, and I insert these wedges that put him on the other side.<sup>123</sup>

For Sierra, these wedges are inserted via re-enactments of the very conditions of alienation and traumatization, and it is this compulsion to repeat, rather than ameliorate, the traumatic conditions of unbelonging and alienation that constitutes a counter-argument to Wodiczko's therapeutic approach to trauma: a counter-argument based on the premise that a melancholic attachment to pain and loss can create a more effective, and affective, context for political agency than the reconciliatory approach favored by Wodiczko.

A salient example is *Submission* (2007), a project near the Mexican border town of Juarez—infamous worldwide as a destination for poverty-stricken southern Mexicans seeking employment in the dozens of foreign-owned *maquiladora* factories that dot the landscape and hoping eventually to cross the Rio Grande into America, and notorious also for its unparalleled rates of poverty and violent crime. Juarez is, for thousands, precisely the place where the American dream goes to die. For the project, Sierra hired local unemployed men to carve the word *SUMISION* (submission) into the land with letters each fifty

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<sup>123</sup> In Margolles, "Santiago Sierra," 69. Although the topic is beyond the scope of this chapter, Sierra's ethos of obstruction also addresses communication barriers and the ways in which they contribute to economic ones, as in the 2001 action *11 People Paid to Learn a Phrase*, in Zinacantán, Mexico, for which eleven Tzotzil Indian women were paid US\$2 to memorize and recite the following phrase in Spanish: "I am being paid to say something, the meaning of which I don't know."



**FIGURE 3.21**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*Submission*,  
Juarez, Mexico,  
2007

feet long (fig. 3.21), a few hundred feet away from the site where a controversial border wall was scheduled to be constructed<sup>124</sup> and currently where dozens of temporarily homeless prospective immigrants live. Local authorities scuttled the original plan, which was to fill the hollowed letters with gasoline and set fire to them, but nevertheless the intervention—which scarred the landscape with a message of defeated acquiescence reminiscent of the grave-like holes dug on the coast of Spain—articulated the artist’s insistence on registering the border as an open wound. Compare this to Wodiczko’s *Tijuana Projection* of 2000. Both projects speak to, from, and about the Mexico-US border as a site of deprivation, humiliation, and alienation. Both employ residents of two of Mexico’s most disquieted border towns—Tijuana and Juarez—to testify to these conditions, and both, implicitly at least, insist on the presence of a “Northern” audience to bear witness to the suffering endured on the Mexican side of the border. For Wodiczko, the position of bearing witness is an ethical one, contingent upon our capacity and willingness to be moved by the women’s testimony and reliant on our adherence to the ancient Quaker dictum that to bear witness to injustice is to bear the responsibility that comes with knowledge. And indeed, as elaborated in the first chapter, it is this belief that guides much current thinking on trauma, testimony, and witness.

Santiago Sierra, on the contrary, demonstrates an acute suspicion regarding the efficacy of testimony as a means of generating empathy and the efficacy of art as a vehicle for galvanizing change. Thus whereas Wodiczko conceptualizes his art practice as a bandage which “covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence,”<sup>125</sup> Sierra’s aesthetic strategy of

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<sup>124</sup> Construction of the US-Mexico barrier, an 18-foot steel-mesh structure, is, as of April 2009, near completion, despite continued opposition from both sides of the border. See Roberto Cintli Rodríguez, “Border Walls: Et tu, Obama?” *La Prensa San Diego*, 24 April 2009, <http://www.laprensa-sandiego.org/current/Border.Walls.042409.htm>.

<sup>125</sup> Wodiczko, “Interrogative Design,” in *Critical Vehicles*, 17.

engagement with traumatic experience and circumstance is, as he puts it, “to press my finger on the sore places,”<sup>126</sup> a position which he elaborates in relation to the discomfort that his work often generates:

You want to stick your finger in the wound and say that the work is definitely torture, that it is indeed a punishment of biblical proportions. And when you put your name on the work it seems that you’re held responsible for the capitalist system itself. Many of the people who make these criticisms have never worked in their lives; if they think it’s a horror to sit hidden in a cardboard box for four hours, they don’t know what work is.<sup>127</sup>

According to this logic, then, borders and boundaries, along with other markers and manifestations of socioeconomic oppression and alienation, are treated as wounds that must be constantly aggravated—if only to confirm and remind us of their existence. But while this strategy does open itself to the critique of being at best a reflection of callous indifference and at worst the exploitation of what Mark Selzer refers to as contemporary “wound culture,”<sup>128</sup> I contend that Sierra enacts exploitation, alienation, and submission in order to critique it from within. And from this claustrophobic space within, the viewer is offered no opportunity for solace, catharsis, or false empathy based on what Kaja Silverman terms “idiopathic identification” with the suffering other. Indeed, Sierra’s “blatant disregard for the niceties that most of us create in order to camouflage our unavoidable participation in a system we may find a little more than distasteful”<sup>129</sup> aligns his work with a relatively recent trend toward reconsidering trauma theory’s insistence on the merits of “working through” traumatic

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<sup>126</sup> Cited in Marc Spiegler, “When Human Beings Are the Canvas,” *ARTnews* 102, no. 6 (June 2003): 97.

<sup>127</sup> In Margolles, “Santiago Sierra,” 65.

<sup>128</sup> Selzer defines wound culture as “the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.” See Selzer’s “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October*, no. 80 (spring 1997): 1.

<sup>129</sup> Pip Day, “Scene of the Crime,” *ArtReview* 1, no. 11 (2003): 76.

memory. For the remainder of this chapter, I examine this reconsideration in the context of Sierra's antagonistic or obstructive aesthetic practice, which, I argue, is employed to "act out" the unhomely experience of unwelcomeness in the contemporary geopolitical context.

### **Mapping melancholia: Acting out on the border**

"Spain means nothing to me—like any other country, it's an ideological construction with political effects," declared Sierra on the eve of the inauguration of the 2003 Venice Biennale, at which he was representing his native country.<sup>130</sup> And it is this contempt for national allegiance that permeates and gives meaning to the artist's installation, *Wall Enclosing a Space*, which saw the Spanish pavilion transformed into a guarded fortress. A brick wall was erected just inside the front entrance, facilitating entry only to the side washrooms, and the pavilion's "España" crest, affixed to the façade, was crudely covered in black plastic (fig. 3.22). The interior was accessible through the back door, but only to those who were able to present a Spanish passport to a hired security guard; those permitted entry found only the remnants of the previous year's exhibition (fig. 3.23). The action was, as one critic noted, "an exemplary embodiment of a profound reflection on the politics and rhetoric of exclusion"<sup>131</sup>—a complex critique of both the arguably outdated national pavilion model of the Venice exhibition<sup>132</sup> and Spain's emerging role as the European Union's southern border guard.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Cited in Spiegler, "When Human Beings Are the Canvas," 96.

<sup>131</sup> Fernando Castro Florez, "Punished: Considerations of Santiago Sierra's Work," *Exit* (Madrid), no. 12 (2003): 57.

<sup>132</sup> This argument is put forward by Thomas McEvelley in "Venice the Menace: The 1993 Venice Biennale," *Artforum International* 32, no. 2 (October 1993).

<sup>133</sup> See Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Customs," in *Santiago Sierra: Pabellón de España, 50a Bienal de Venecia / Spanish Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale* (Madrid: Turner, 2003), 233.



**FIGURE 3.22**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*Wall Enclosing a  
Space and Covered  
Word*, Venice  
Biennale, 2003



**FIGURE 3.23**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*Wall Enclosing a  
Space*, Venice  
Biennale, 2003





**FIGURE 3.24**  
Hans Haacke,  
*Germania*,  
Venice Biennale,  
1993



**FIGURE 3.25**  
Hans Haacke,  
*Freedom is Now  
Simply Going to be  
Sponsored — Out of  
Petty Cash*, Berlin,  
1990

Sierra is not the first to intervene physically in a pavilion in order to critique the Venice Biennial's arguably anachronistic system of national representation as reflective of the politics of arbitrary borders and the often seedy underbelly of nationalistic patriotism. In 1976, Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa built a rubble wall to conceal the Fascist façade of the Italian pavilion, and in 1993, German-American artist Hans Haacke won the Golden Lion (shared with Nam June Paik) for *Germania*, an installation that included the building of a temporary wall at the entrance adorned with a photograph of Adolf Hitler standing in the building's entrance in 1934 and the destruction of the interior marble floors (fig. 3.24). Nevertheless, Sierra's intervention at Venice has been criticized as anachronistic, particularly in its representation of Spain—as critic Jörg Heiser notes, since the inception of the European Union in late 1993 “there is no situation in which only owners of a Spanish passport would be allowed into the country”<sup>134</sup>—but it is exactly this persistent resolve to re-trace Spain's invisible but operational systems of exclusion that render his work an aesthetically and politically relevant intervention into the ethics of representing traumatic unhomeliness. In this way, the work also resonates strongly with Irit Rogoff's analysis of an analogous work by Haacke, the 1990 *Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored—Out of Petty Cash*. While the world celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall, Haacke erected a huge Mercedes-Benz logo atop a former East German guard tower (fig. 3.25), prompting Rogoff to note that, “In the middle of all the euphoria of unification, Haacke has animated the evacuated border and spatialized it as a heterotopia of internal contradictions.” And, in an observation that applies equally to Sierra's 2003 Venice intervention, Rogoff

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<sup>134</sup> Jörg Heiser, “Good Circulation,” *Frieze*, no. 90 (April 2005): 82.

continues: "This work manifests a kind of physical stamping of the terrain, an insistence on a border where everyone else is denying its existence."<sup>135</sup>

Emphasizing borders—whether geographic, social, or economic—that are otherwise invisible is indeed a recurring motif in Sierra's practice, and, as in *Wall Enclosing a Space*, Sierra's means of articulating this motif often involves the literal construction of a barrier; other examples include *68 People Paid to Block a Museum Entrance* (2000) at the Museum Contemporary Art in Pusan, Korea (fig. 3.26) and *Space Closed Off by Corrugated Metal* (2002) at London's Lisson Gallery (fig. 3.27), both of which manifest the artist's conviction that "There are immaterial walls that render unnecessary the other, brick, walls, or those of which the bricks are only the visual materialization, and redundantly so."<sup>136</sup> In 2001, Sierra produced *430 People Remunerated with 30 Soles per Hour* at Galería Pancho Fierro in Lima, Peru (fig. 3.28), an action during which 430 underprivileged local women were paid to occupy the gallery for four hours, leaving an uncomfortably narrow corridor through which visitors were compelled to pass. Creating what art critic Katya García-Antón describes as a "sheer mass of alien presence,"<sup>137</sup> this work—like all of Sierra's obstructions—is perhaps best described as a macabre combination of Richard Serra's steel constructions (the controversial *Tilted Arc* of 1981, for example) and Vanessa Beecroft's *VB* performances, with Beecroft in particular providing a compelling subject of comparison. Like Beecroft, Sierra hires "models" to stage scenes of boredom verging on the painful, and both

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<sup>135</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 122. Haacke's installation was produced in association with *The Finiteness of Freedom*, a post-unification international exhibition organized by the cultural department of the Berlin Senate in 1990. See Giovanni Anselmo, et al., *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit Berlin 1990—Ein Ausstellungsprojekt in Ost und West* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1990).

<sup>136</sup> In Martinez, "Interview to Santiago Sierra," 181.

<sup>137</sup> See Katya García-Antón, "Buying Time," in *Santiago Sierra: Works 2002-1990* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2002), 15.



**FIGURE 3.26**  
 Santiago Sierra, *68 People*  
*Paid to Block a Museum Entrance,*  
 Pusan, Korea, 2000



**FIGURE 3.27**  
 Santiago Sierra,  
*Space Closed Off by Corrugated*  
*Metal, London, 2002*



**FIGURE 3.28**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*430 People Remunerated  
with 30 Soles per Hour,*  
Lima, Peru, 2001



**FIGURE 3.29**  
Vanessa Beecroft,  
*VB 55, Berlin,*  
2005

utilize these performances to discomfort the audience's privileged gaze. But if Beecroft's performances operate, as Christine Ross suggests, as "laboratories of depressed subjectivity" whose criticality lies in the failed effort of the models to perform femininity in a context that exploits the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the gendered spectacles she creates (fig. 3.29),<sup>138</sup> Sierra's performances are more like laboratories of *oppressed* subjectivity that force the audience to acknowledge not its naturalized scopophilia, but rather its blindness to subjects who *already* inhabit institutional spaces—as cleaners, guards, and in other invisible roles. As Sierra reflects, "At the Kunst Werke in Berlin they criticized me because I had people sitting for four hours a day, but they didn't realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a day on his feet."<sup>139</sup>

One of the more controversial instances of Sierra's tactical deployment of obstruction is his 2001 contribution to the Arsenale group exhibition at the 49th Venice Biennale, *133 Persons Paid to have their Hair Dyed Blond*, for which the artist hired local, undocumented, street vendors from northern Africa to have their hair publicly dyed blond (figs. 3.30 and 3.31). Alluding to a police strategy in Mexico of coloring the hair of migrants arrested attempting to enter the country illegally in order to prevent any attempts at blending into the local population,<sup>140</sup> the action forcefully articulates Sierra's imperative to reveal, reiterate, and re-inscribe the alienating, often humiliating, systems of exclusion, both material and immaterial, that contribute to the traumatic experience of migration. In so doing, Sierra again reveals an affiliation with recent efforts to rehabilitate the "acting

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<sup>138</sup> Ross, *Aesthetics of Disengagement*, 63.

<sup>139</sup> In Margolles, "Santiago Sierra," 65. Claire Bishop observes the recurring motif of obstruction in Sierra's work, but attributes it solely to his acknowledgement of antagonisms between the "mutually exclusive" social and aesthetic spheres "after a century of attempts to fuse them" ("Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 78).

<sup>140</sup> García-Antón, "Buying Time," 16-17.



**FIGURE 3.30**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*133 Persons Paid to Have their Hair Dyed Blond*,  
Arsenale, Venice  
Biennale, 2001



**FIGURE 3.31**  
Santiago Sierra,  
*133 Persons Paid to Have their Hair Dyed Blond*,  
Arsenale, Venice  
Biennale, 2001

out” of trauma, or the melancholic attachment to loss, that more conventional models of psychoanalytically-informed trauma theory would seek to resolve.

In her 2005 “Autobiography’s Wounds,” literary theorist Leigh Gilmore draws on Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia to propose a politics of loss that embraces, rather than seeking to transcend, melancholic attachment to a lost object or ideal. Acknowledging that Freud considered melancholia (or “profound mourning”) a pathological inability to resolve grief that he opposed to “normal mourning,” she nevertheless highlights Freud’s eventual admission that melancholia and mourning constitute not a chronological process but rather a simultaneous configuration,<sup>141</sup> and suggests that it is precisely the persistence of melancholic attachment that renders it a useful lever for politicizing, and importantly, depathologizing, responses to trauma:

How can melancholia end when the effects that produce it cannot themselves be said to be sufficiently past? ... For melancholia to end, the forces and processes that structure the melancholic’s narcissism...must, too, in some way, cease to operate. In the absence of that transformation (which might include reparations or other forms of justice), I would want to speak of a *will to melancholia*, of an embrace and extension of melancholia in which melancholia becomes a technique for knowing the relation of the present to the past [and] becomes a kind of testimony.<sup>142</sup>

Gilmore’s evocative proposal for a “will to melancholia” as its own kind of testimony, which quite accurately describes Santiago Sierra’s aesthetic strategy for bearing witness to traumatic experience, also encapsulates what has become a

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<sup>141</sup> Indeed, Freud demonstrates a marked ambivalence toward his own theory of melancholia, observing that, “It is really only because we know so well how to explain [normal mourning] that this attitude does not seem to us pathological” and, further, that “melancholics” have a “keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic.” In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 244, 46.

<sup>142</sup> Leigh Gilmore, “Autobiography’s Wounds,” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 106. Emphasis added.



prevalent impetus to undo trauma theory's insistence on "working through" loss and suffering, which, it is argued, seeks or constructs facile harmonization and premature closure. According to this argument, working through is understood as "a kind of extreme Pollyanna redemptive mode"<sup>143</sup> of response that can best be avoided by deliberately acting out melancholia's sense of loss. If, in other words, "acting out" constitutes a refusal to let go, then this refusal becomes understood as a powerful agent for social and political activism; as David Eng and David Kazanjian suggest, "melancholic attachments to loss might depathologize those attachments, making visible not only their social bases but also their creative, unpredictable, political aspects."<sup>144</sup> I suggest that what renders Santiago Sierra's art practice a critical catalyst for re-conceptualizing the role of art in conveying traumatic experience is precisely this notion of "melancholic agency,"<sup>145</sup> which registers in his work as an attachment to representing borders as sites of xenophobic exclusion and forced containment. Sierra's ongoing, even compulsive, effort to irritate already existing wounds, to situate audiences as complicit in processes of oppression, and to refuse to offer avenues of harmonization and closure, therefore constitutes his practice as a powerful counter-argument to Krzysztof Wodiczko's privileging of testimony and recovery. However, this is not to contend that Sierra's deployment of melancholia in his unhomely aesthetic somehow trumps Wodiczko's, or (ironically) resolves the myriad questions surrounding art's capacity to mediate traumatic experience. Indeed, as I will suggest by way of a conclusion, Sierra's model of "acting out" trauma, while counteracting the tendency of the "working through" model to

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<sup>143</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 151.

<sup>144</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>145</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, Judith Butler conceptualizes melancholic agency as "the persistence of a certain unavowability that haunts the present" ("After Loss, What Then?" 468).

assume or impose premature closure, nevertheless fails to heed LaCapra's warning that re-enacting the traumatic memories of another can, when left unchecked, lead to "quasi-sacrificial processes of victimization and self-victimization."<sup>146</sup> Thus I conclude with a return to LaCapra's methodology of "empathetic unsettlement," which, I suggest, might facilitate the emergence of social relations based on what Kristeva calls a "paradoxical community" constituted by "foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent they recognize themselves as foreigners."<sup>147</sup>

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### **Conclusion: Beyond mourning and melancholia**

In Freudian analysis of trauma, repetition of the traumatic event constitutes a failure to integrate that event into psychic memory. And this failure, I have argued, mobilizes art's capacity to embrace the memory of pain in order to resist premature or facile harmonization. But does Sierra's "repetition compulsion" spell a viable ethical, or even aesthetic, response to the traumatic experience of unhomeliness? Or does such a position risk an equally facile descent into cynical fatalism, reminiscent of the radically nihilistic poetry of Eric Kästner, whose "left-wing melancholy" was, according to Walter Benjamin, simply an outlet for bourgeois "complacency and fatalism"?<sup>148</sup> For LaCapra, the employment of "acting out" as a prevention against closure and harmonization can paradoxically produce "a paralyzing kind of all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either totalization and the closure you resist, or acting out

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<sup>146</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 71.

<sup>147</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 195.

<sup>148</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Left-wing Melancholy" (1931), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 425-26.

the repetition compulsion, with almost no other possibilities.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, while the notion of “melancholic agency” is compelling in its insistence that traumatic experience can become a catalyst for social justice rather than simply reduced to diagnosable pathology (and this constructive rendering of melancholia is one I return to in the following chapter), I suggest that Santiago Sierra’s melancholic position risks becoming simply another kind of closure—indeed, what Sierra seems to be advocating is a kind of melancholic *depletion* of agency. To repeatedly re-open the wound might, in other words, not simply draw attention to, but rather *ensure*, the impossibility of any eventual suture. The exploitative and oppressive exclusions to which his work points so forcefully risk dissolving (rather than resolving) into a spiral of inescapable repetition. Thus, if the personal and public “working through” of traumatic experience can, as I have argued, have the consequence of foreclosing on recompense or social justice by forcing reconciliation via the questionable assumption that testimony equals cure, and by privileging psychic healing over material compensation, then “acting out” trauma in the context of public art (whether by recourse to the “unsayability,” “incommensurability,” sacralization or sublime-ation of trauma, or by the arguably obsessive repetition of the wound, as in Sierra’s work) would seem to be equally indisposed to finding an ethical position from which to speak about the injustices being addressed. Thus the tactic of acting out in Sierra’s practice

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<sup>149</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 145. This position is articulated even more forcefully by Eve Sedgwick, who derides critical anti-redemptory practices for what she identifies as a cynical, “cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness, sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn’t have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions.” In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 144. Sedgwick, whose analysis here of “reparative” versus “paranoid” models of criticism parallels the “working-through” and “acting-out” framework that I have been advancing here, points in particular to the “barely implicit sneer with which Leo Bersani wields the term ‘redemption’ throughout *The Culture of Redemption*” as an example of “paranoid” or anti-redemptive criticism (151, n. 2). See Bersani’s *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

reveals itself to be accurate as an unflinching reflection of injustice, alienation, and exclusion, but of limited use-value as an ethico-aesthetic position.

The complexities and paradoxes of current thinking and practice in trauma-related art remain unresolved, and the two paradigms explored in this chapter—exemplified by Wodiczko's therapeutic approach and Sierra's antagonistic model—isolate some of the terms of that complexity. Wodiczko's practice is a seminal instance of approaches to traumatic alienation that, while problematic in their confidence in art's capacity to facilitate healing, have been lauded by many for challenging art to harness its affective powers for the generation of empathetic relations. Sierra's projects, which on the contrary question at every turn art's capacity, or even intention, to generate an ethics of witnessing in the context of trauma, nevertheless similarly illuminate the stakes of registering the traumatic impact of the unhomely condition. In the following chapter, I return to these stakes as I propose, with LaCapra, an aesthetic strategy for mobilizing a melancholic attachment to loss by operating in suspended tension between working through and acting out. In the art production of Doris Salcedo (among others), I identify the melancholic archive in particular as a productive catalyst for intersubjective engagement based on the principles of empathetic unsettlement.

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## CHAPTER 4

### Giving loss a home: Doris Salcedo's melancholic archives

*What does it mean to be at home in the world? Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth. Home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement; it may represent a desire for accommodation marked by an attitude of deep ambivalence toward one's location. Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival.... It is as if home is territory of both disorientation and relocation, with all the fragility and fecundity implied by such a double take.*

Homi K. Bhabha, "Halfway House"

*It is thus...in domiciliation, in...house arrest, that archives take place.*

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

*Perhaps, like the Library of Alexandria, any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall.*

Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse"<sup>1</sup>

Afghani artist Lida Abdul's performance video *Housewheel* (also titled *Things We Fail to Leave Behind*, 2003) follows the artist as she walks forlornly through the streets of Los Angeles, dragging a doll-sized plaster house behind her with a rope (fig. 4.1). As it is jolted along, the house becomes dented, chipped, and battered; within minutes, it has been reduced to scattered, abandoned remnants. Created during the rule of the fundamentalist Taliban regime while the artist lived in exile, the work is a poignant demonstration of Gaston Bachelard's observation that homes "are in us as much as we are in them."<sup>2</sup> As much as we consider (or long for) home as a space that we occupy, "home" is

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Halfway House," *Artforum International* 35, no. 9 (May 1997): 11; Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2; Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110 (fall 2004): 5, n.8.

<sup>2</sup> "Les images de la maison marchent dans les deux sens: elles sont en nous autant que nous sommes en elles." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xxxvii. Lida Abdul was Afghanistan's first representative at the Venice Biennale in 2005. For a brief introduction to her work, see Candice Hopkins, "Between the Monument and the Ruin: An Interview with Lida Abdul," *C Magazine*, no. 93 (spring 2007): 14-18.



**FIGURE 4.1**  
Lida Abdul,  
*Housewheel*  
(*Things We Fail*  
*to Leave Behind*),  
2003 (video still)



**FIGURE 4.2**  
Doris Salcedo, installation of untitled works,  
1989-95, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg, 1995

also an entity—whether material or phantasmatic; whether ancestral land, childhood residence, or dream house—that occupies *us*, taking up residence in our identifications, our memories, our imaginations, our dreams and sometimes our nightmares. But, as Abdul’s performance demonstrates, this reciprocal occupation can also be a dangerously unstable one, particularly for those vulnerable to contingency—the exile, the migrant, the asylum seeker, the homeless—for whom home exists simultaneously as a site of provisionality,<sup>3</sup> a lost territory of belonging, and a tenuously sustained but tenaciously held memory. And it is the precariousness of this reciprocal occupation—performed by Abdul and theorized by Bhabha (“home is territory of both disorientation and relocation, with all the fragility and fecundity implied by such a double take”) that itself occupies the present chapter.

The notion, or condition, of precarious occupation is one that seems to haunt representations of trauma, and in contemporary art practices in particular, I have identified a propensity to treat the home as a fractured or fragile space—a propensity whose genealogy I trace in chapter 2. In the present chapter, I argue that artists who convey the precariousness of home (as both material space of occupation and psychological site of *preoccupation*) present a viable methodology for building relations based on empathetic responses to the suffering of others. Like Jean-Luc Nancy’s “inoperative community,” which can exist only when any pretense of (totalitarian) coherence and stability is abandoned (we must, according to Nancy, acknowledge community’s lack of fixed or stable essence if we wish to resist the compulsion to assume or impose

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<sup>3</sup> “The exile,” writes Edward Said, “knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional.” In “Reflections on Exile” (1984), in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 365.

commonality with our neighbors),<sup>4</sup> so too do representations of the fragile, provisional, fractured, precarious (in other words, inoperative) nature of home create the possibility for a community built on an ethically grounded acknowledgement of difference. For, as Judith Butler observes, “the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed.”<sup>5</sup>

Butler’s 2004 book *Precarious Life* is a collection of essays that evaluate the US’s militaristic response to the events of September 11, 2001, in which she proposes that the momentary recognition of the universal precariousness of life—occasioned by the perceived “dislocation” of First World privilege and sovereignty following the 9/11 attacks, but thwarted at several turns by processes of dehumanization that render some lives (such as, for instance, civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq) un-recognizable, un-grievable, and thus inhuman—should instead be considered ground zero for a human rights discourse whose task would be “to reconceive the human when it finds that its putative universality does not have universal reach.”<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, I explore how artists articulate what Butler regards as the universal, but differentially distributed, condition of corporeal vulnerability. I suggest that they do so by figuring the space of home as itself a precarious site of belonging, safety, memory, and loss. In this way, I argue, contemporary artists are positioned to register the traumatic experience of the precarious occupation of home in a way

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Lisa Garbus, Peter Connor, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), esp. 1-42.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 91.



that resonates with Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathetic unsettlement"—the effort to facilitate reflection on the suffering of others, but frustrate the inclination to over-identify with that suffering.

In chapter 2, I identified a tendency in contemporary art to seek aesthetic strategies for registering the traumatic experience of being "unhomed" in the world. I observed in these practices two models for such a registration—working through and acting out—both of which, I argued, threaten to foreclose on the formation of ethical empathetic relations; I proposed that LaCapra's notion of empathetic unsettlement disables both the false transcendence of working through and the nihilistic resignation of acting out. In this chapter, I test this methodology against the art practices of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, who, I contend, portrays home's precariousness as a catalyst for ethical intersubjective relations. In the art practices explored in this chapter, the unhomely is mobilized as an aesthetic of inoperativeness, which makes the precariously occupied home a site for the construction of empathetic relations based on what Kaja Silverman theorizes as the heteropathic acknowledgement of our capacity to be "wounded by others' wounds."<sup>7</sup> Neither nostalgic nor fatalistic, I argue, the articulation of the unhomely in Salcedo's work visualizes home as a site of melancholic archivization—a site of contingent, dynamic and tenacious dwelling. At the same time, the archive itself is conceived as a fragile but fecund home for loss.

Doris Salcedo is a Bogotá-based sculptor whose career (spanning 1985 to the present) has primarily involved transforming testimonies of political violence in her home country into abstracted sculptural assemblages that bear witness to suffering and loss. Engaging with both first-hand and archival interviews with torture victims and relatives of the dead and "disappeared" of Colombia's so-

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<sup>7</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 189.

called “Dirty War”<sup>8</sup> as direct sources of inspiration for her work, the artist nevertheless insists, “I do not illustrate testimonies”<sup>9</sup>—and it is precisely the oblique nature of her practice that charges the work with richly associative affective dimensions. Working mainly with discarded domestic furniture fused awkwardly but painstakingly with materials as fragile as lace, silk thread and human hair, and as rigid as nails, concrete and human bones (fig. 4.2), Salcedo’s work captures both the mutilating, dehumanizing nature of political violence and the domestic, deeply intimate consequences of civil strife, while activating, as art historian Jill Bennett suggests, an “affective connection as one senses the traces of human presence in an object.”<sup>10</sup> During the past decade, Salcedo’s work has become increasingly installation-based, employing gallery spaces and site-specific locations to create environments infused with politics and histories that reach beyond the specificity of Colombia to tackle global issues of racism, inequity, suffering, and displacement. But in these later works, Salcedo continues to contemplate the precariousness of home, the politics of belonging, and the artist’s capacity to register the pain of others in ways that will generate empathetically unsettling practices of ethical witnessing.

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<sup>8</sup> Colombia has witnessed a decades-long civil war, which, according to some estimates, sees 3,000 civilian deaths per year. In 2004, Jan Egeland, then United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, named Colombia the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western hemisphere, citing two million people internally displaced in the past fifteen years. See UN News Service, “Colombia Has Biggest Humanitarian Crisis Is Western Hemisphere, UN Says,” 10 May 2004, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=10691&Cr=colombia&Cr1>. By 2008, that number climbed to three million. See UN News Service, “Serious Displacement Crisis Continues in Colombia, UN Official Warns,” 14 November 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49414678c.html>.

<sup>9</sup> In Charles Merewether, “An Interview with Doris Salcedo,” in *Unland: Doris Salcedo: New Work* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67. For elaboration of these issues and themes, see also Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000); and Edlie L. Wong, “Haunting Absences: Witnessing Loss in Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabilarios* and Beyond,” in *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007).

Like the art practices of Santiago Sierra investigated in chapter 2, Doris Salcedo draws attention to and emphasizes traumatic sites of pain, suffering, alienation, and injustice, as if to carry (and pass on) the burden of witness that such attention requires. But in her articulations of radical unsettlement, and specifically in her depictions of the precariousness of human dwelling, Salcedo eschews obsessive reenactments of suffering in favor of aesthetic interventions that enact a constant transgression of the borders that would otherwise seal person from place and impede comprehension of the suffering of the other. In her practice, Salcedo begins to reconceptualize failure—the failure to communicate, the failure to belong, the failure to heal the wounds of injustice—as a source of agency rather than one of futility and immobility, by presenting the precariousness of existence as the grounds for empathetic engagement. Treating empathy itself as a profoundly unsettling entanglement of (mis)understandings, Salcedo conveys the notion that it is precisely our inability to fully comprehend the enormity of the walls separating “self from home”<sup>11</sup> that compels us as viewers into an ethically and affectively charged viewing experience.

The intention of this chapter is not to introduce the work of Salcedo as some kind of dialectical reconciliation of the working-through/acting-out impasse, situated comfortably between the relational aesthetics of Krzysztof Wodiczko (wherein traumatic experience is purportedly resolved via testimony and sympathetic witness) and the antagonistic practices of Santiago Sierra (in which the open wounds of cultural and geographical displacement are poked and prodded in compulsive re-enactment). Instead, I suggest that Salcedo resists the binary logic of working through and acting out, which, as LaCapra points out, results in a “paralyzing” standoff: “either totalization and the closure you

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<sup>11</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 365.

resist, or acting out the repetitive compulsion, with almost no other possibilities.”<sup>12</sup> Cultivating aesthetic strategies that both act out *and* work through trauma, Salcedo’s art production frames an experience for the secondary witness that facilitates empathy but precludes vicarious suffering, therefore resonating with LaCapra’s advocacy of cultural practices that “generate empathetic relations of trust not based on quasi-sacrificial processes of victimization and self-victimization.”<sup>13</sup>

In this chapter and the next, I investigate aesthetic strategies that manifest art’s capacity to transform the condition of unhomeliness into a vehicle for empathetic unsettlement in audience responses to traumatic displacement. In the present chapter, I draw from contemporary theorizations of the archive as a tenuous repository for traces of (often suppressed) histories, with the aim of investigating how the archive can be constructed in such a way as to give loss a material home. I focus in particular on Doris Salcedo’s untitled site-specific installation at the 2003 Istanbul Biennial, which, I argue, radically reconsiders the archive’s putative status as a “home” for memory, while conversely figuring home as an (impossible) archive for memories of loss, terror, and displacement. In the fifth chapter, I revisit questions raised in chapter 3 concerning borders and unbelonging, to investigate how artists articulate belonging as both a provisional and subversive enterprise. Theorizing the border as a space of wounded attachments, I argue that by crossing and recrossing borders and barriers, artists like Salcedo become reluctant nomads who transform these spaces into temporally and spatially liminal sites of transgressive possibility. Through both themes—fragile archives and porous borders—I advance my overriding

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<sup>12</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 145.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



**FIGURE 4.3**  
Doris Salcedo,  
untitled installation  
at the 8th International  
Istanbul Biennial, 2003

argument that contemporary art has the capacity to reveal both the contingency and tenacity of home as both concept and material site: in the art works discussed in these chapters, the desire to reconstruct, remember, or return home is articulated as simultaneously impossible and imperative.

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### An “anarchival” impulse

In the summer of 2003, Doris Salcedo participated in the Eighth International Istanbul Biennial with an untitled installation of 1,550 chairs piled into an empty lot in a working-class residential-commercial neighborhood of the city (fig. 4.3).<sup>14</sup> This jumbled mass of modest wooden kitchen chairs, of varying shapes, sizes, and degrees of wear and tear, was jammed tightly between two neighboring buildings, reaching three stories high and somehow achieving a flush vertical surface that belied its seemingly haphazard instability.<sup>15</sup> According to Salcedo, the intention of the installation was to reproduce what she calls a “topography of war,”

so deeply inscribed in everyday life that, in spite of the fact that it represents an extreme experience, the point where normal conditions of life end and war begins can no longer be clearly discerned. An image where the private and the political collide, producing a complete sense of disorientation [reflecting] the complex and difficult relations that emerge in contested spaces or sites of war.<sup>16</sup>

To reveal the catastrophic consequences of the inevitable collision between the private and the public in times of war and upheaval has been an

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<sup>14</sup> The 8th International Istanbul Biennial was curated by Dan Cameron under the conceptual rubric “Poetic Justice.” See Dan Cameron, ed., *International Istanbul Biennial: Poetic Justice* (Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2003). Salcedo’s installation was located at Yemenciler Caddesi No. 66, Persembepazari, Karaköy.

<sup>15</sup> According to Salcedo’s representatives at Alexander and Bonin Gallery in New York, the chairs were held in place by a metal framework. The artist declined to explain how the flush effect was achieved, although the Istanbul Biennial organization acknowledges that a scaffold was built, and the piece installed by local mountain climbers. The chairs were purchased locally.

<sup>16</sup> Doris Salcedo, “Proposal for a Project for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial,” 2003, reproduced in Doris Salcedo, *Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 99.

ongoing imperative in Salcedo's work, as will become evident as this chapter proceeds. Here, the theme is materialized with a profusion of disorienting collisions, both material and metaphorical. The chairs, to begin, appear caught in a frozen state of perpetual collision, producing an effect of sheer vertiginous tension that is only heightened by the unsettling juxtaposition of the orderly, flush, perfectly enclosed installation with the chaotic jumble of objects contained within. Like a painstakingly assembled house of cards, the structure appears ready at any moment to collapse out of its confines. Furthermore, we are disoriented in our desire to shape meaning from this work. On one hand, it seems to offer a surfeit of detail: the installation, we are clearly informed, laments the chaotic, uncertain inhabitation of contested spaces—a lament that is invested with indexical detail by the chairs, each worn by use, each with a history of belonging, thus subtly transforming 1,550 unique objects into 1,550 traces of absent human presence (fig. 4.4). But this abundance of referentiality clashes with an undeniable dearth of information, leaving questions to hang as awkwardly as the chairs themselves. To what (or to whom) do these chairs bear witness? Do the chairs stand in for lives lost to violence, or do they represent the domestic spaces left vacant by civilians fleeing war? Are we confronting a garbage heap of abandoned chairs, a pile of personal belongings suggesting a pogrom or massacre, or is this meant to invoke a house destroyed by aerial bombardment? There are no certain answers to these questions; not even a title is supplied to provide context—surprisingly, from an artist whose sculptures and installations almost always bear evocative, multilayered titles that add nuance and complex associations.<sup>17</sup> Here, the indexicality of the chairs is as frustratingly elusive as an

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<sup>17</sup>The *Casa Viuda* (*Widowed House*) series and *Shibboleth*, both of which are addressed further below, are two examples. It should be noted, however, that there *are* precedents—including a series of untitled furniture pieces produced in the 1990s—for this untitled work.



**FIGURE 4.4**  
Doris Salcedo,  
untitled installation  
at the 8th International  
Istanbul Biennial, 2003 (detail)



untraceable footprint in the sand: each an anonymous relic of lives lived, together they point us toward a past that cannot be reconstituted with any certainty. As such, these chairs both reflect and challenge what Hal Foster has recently named an “archival impulse” in contemporary art practice. But in order to better comprehend the significance of this challenge, it will be useful to first look briefly at how the archive has itself become a site of challenged authority in recent art and literature.

The archive, as Jacques Derrida observes in his 1996 *Archive Fever*, is an inherently unstable repository for traces of the past. Though it clings resolutely to its putative unmediated objectivity, the archive is inevitably a construction of its makers—as Derrida observes, “archive” derives from *arkhé*, which denotes “origin” but also “authority.”<sup>18</sup> Produced by and in the context of power relations and structures, it is therefore prone to privileging certain historical records over others; archivization, in other words, is as much an act of suppression as it is an act of preservation. But because the archive is perpetually guilty of omission, it is also perpetually open to contestation. And although the archive aspires to be a direct conduit to the past, the origin to which it is etymologically beholden remains inexorably elusive: the archive reaches for, but never manages to grasp, the totality of knowledge that seems to hover tantalizingly just out of its reach.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1. As Derrida notes, “This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*...but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given” (1). Therefore, Derrida concludes, “There is no political power without control of the archive” (4).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. In this reading, Derrida departs from Foucault’s understanding of the archive as a power broker in the production of knowledge to explore how the archive’s meaning is itself produced. See also Paul Ricoeur, who understands the archive as “a repository for the depositing of traces.” In *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

It is this set of irresolvable internal contradictions that makes the archive, according to Derrida, a “feverish” site of knowledge production.<sup>20</sup>

Recent reflections on the fallibility of the archive have tended to lean in one of two directions. Some, like performance theorist Diana Taylor, have sought to contest archival authority by proposing alternative sources of collective knowledge. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Taylor builds a framework for theorizing the unique role played by performance in the transmission of memory by distinguishing between the *archive* and what she terms the *repertoire* (performance, oral storytelling, song, dance, etc.), which enacts the “embodied memory” of “ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” and therefore encompasses all that which cannot be contained within the archive.<sup>21</sup> Resisting the imposition of a binary relationship between what might be simplistically understood as the hegemonic power of the archive and the counterhegemonic challenge of the repertoire (the repertoire, she notes for instance, is also a highly mediated form of transmission, and embodied performances are no less likely to contribute to repressive social systems), Taylor posits that the archive and the repertoire “exist in a constant state of interaction” which, however, is occluded by a tendency “to treat all phenomena as textual”—a tendency that necessarily privileges the archive.<sup>22</sup> But

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<sup>20</sup> Dominick LaCapra prefers to call this archival fetishization: “the archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ of the past which is ‘always already’ lost for the historian.” In *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 92, n. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 20. While a review of the debates surrounding performance as an ephemeral site of non-reproducible knowledge is beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that Taylor is indeed participating in these debates, here both drawing on and reversing Peggy Phelan’s idea that performance *becomes* in its disappearance. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). For a sustained rebuttal of Phelan’s position, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 21, 27. As Taylor acknowledges, her archive/repertoire schema resembles both Pierre Nora’s *milieux/lieux de mémoire* and Michel de Certeau’s tactics/strategies. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,”

while Taylor's reading of the archive as an over-privileged (if contested) storehouse of historical understanding is compelling in its insistence on tracing those sources of knowledge that exceed or resist current practices of archivization, it does not address the possibility that the archive itself, whose authority and privilege are based on inherently unstable underpinnings, is equally susceptible to critique and dismantling from within. In other words, the aporetic condition of the archive—as a site of origins and authority structurally unable to achieve its own mandate—makes it particularly vulnerable to transgression and contestation.

Recently, artists have begun to examine the archive's fraught role as a keeper of collective knowledge. By revisiting and reconstructing the sites and sights of archival memory, these artists seek to dispute archival authority and address the suppression of marginalized histories therein, while radically reconfiguring the archive as a porous, dynamic, even ephemeral cultural institution. This trend, identified by Hal Foster as an "archival impulse"<sup>23</sup> in contemporary art, is linked to what he describes as a recent tendency to treat "information" as "a kind of ultimate readymade,"<sup>24</sup> and is manifested, for instance, in the altars and kiosks of Thomas Hirschhorn and Sam Durant's critical revisions of mid-century modern design principles (figs. 4.5 and 4.6).<sup>25</sup> However,

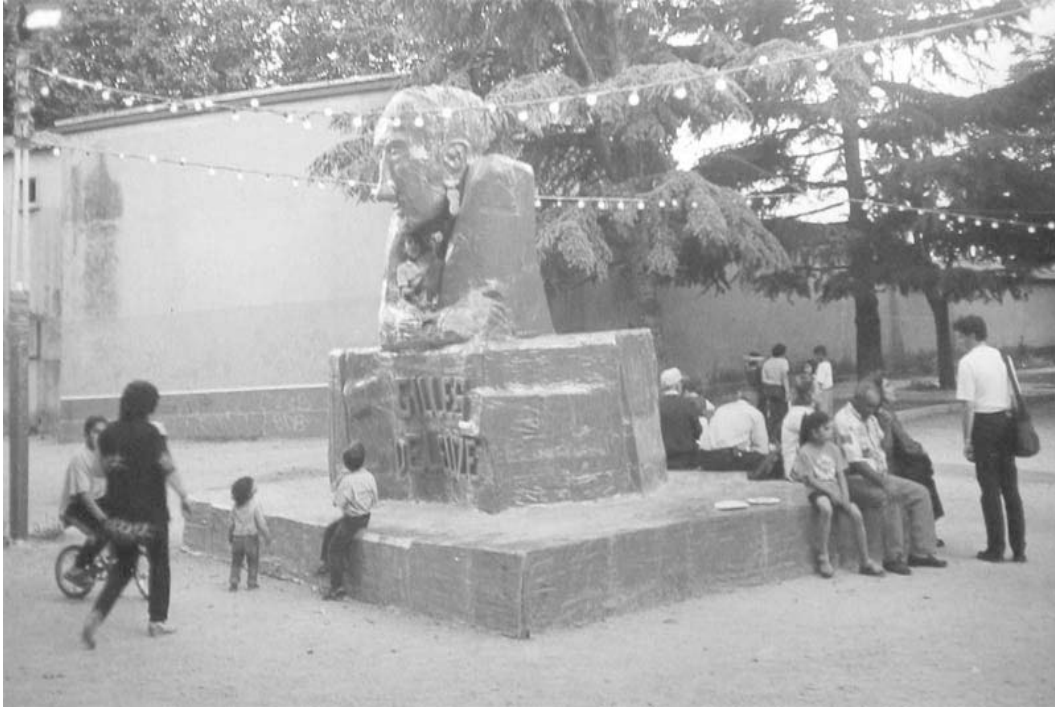
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trans. Marc Rousebush, *Representations*, no. 26 (spring 1989); and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

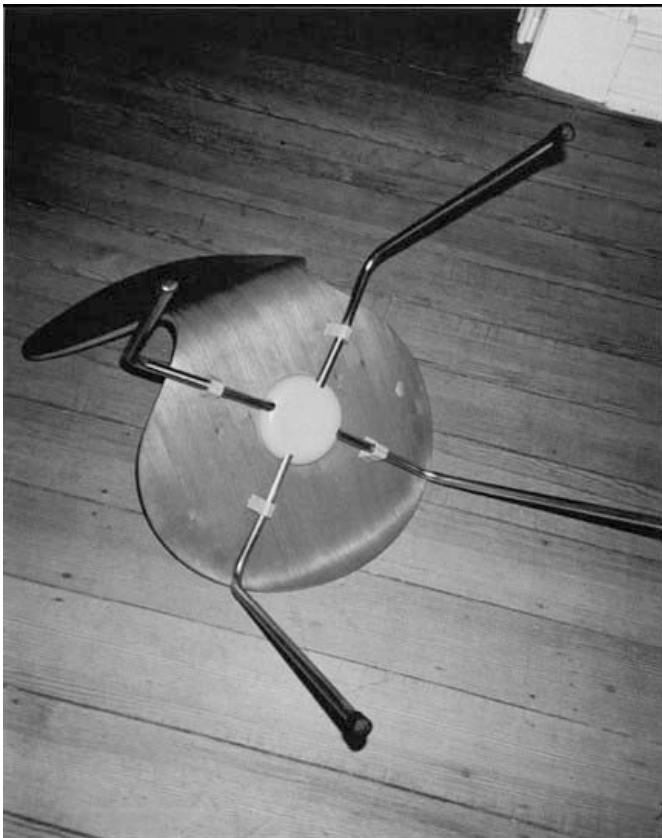
<sup>23</sup> The "archival impulse" in contemporary art practice has been matched enthusiastically in the critical and curatorial realms, as evidenced by two recent major group exhibitions: *Estratos* at Proyecto Arte Contemporáneo in Murcia, Spain (2008), curated by Nicolas Bourriaud and intended as an examination of the intersections between archaeology and contemporary art; and *Archive Fever* at the International Center for Photography in New York, curated by Okwui Enwezor.

<sup>24</sup> Hal Foster, "2003: Archival Aesthetics," in *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster, et al. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 665.

<sup>25</sup> To Foster's list of pertinent artists, which includes Tacita Dean, Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick, Stan Douglas and Renée Green, I would add Walid Ra'ad's Atlas Group Project, Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's Speculative Archive film series, and Christian Boltanski's photo-installations. See Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive: Documents of*



**FIGURE 4.5**  
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Deleuze Monument*, 2000



**FIGURE 4.6**  
Sam Durant,  
*Chair #4*, 1995

these practices are not to be conflated with Nicolas Bourriaud's category of "postproduction" in contemporary art, which describes current practices of editing, cutting, dubbing, and otherwise manipulating existing cultural artifacts and products.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the archival impulse (which Foster also passingly but provocatively refers to as an *an*archival impulse) "is concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces [and] drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects."<sup>27</sup> As such, according to Foster, recent archival practices both *manipulate* and *produce* archives, underscoring "the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private."<sup>28</sup>

For Foster, these artists—who challenge both the parameters and the authority of the archive—assume a critical stance toward public archives that emerges from a shared sense of official cultural memory as a failed project. For instance, Thomas Hirschhorn's monuments to philosophers Spinoza, Bataille, and Deleuze are staged in marginalized urban spaces like the red-light district of Amsterdam and the North African quarter of Avignon in order to reevaluate both *what* is remembered and *who* is charged with the authority of remembering, and therefore temporarily transform the logic of the monument from a "univocal" structure that conceals social and political antagonisms into a "counter-hegemonic archive that might be used to articulate such differences."<sup>29</sup> However, Foster concludes that the production of alternative archives is as much a utopian venture as a critical project, manifesting a collective desire "to recoup

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*Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), for a survey of key artworks and literature on the subject.

<sup>26</sup> The practice of French artist Pierre Huyghe, such as his reconstruction of the 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon* in his two-channel video *The Third Memory* (1999), is considered paradigmatic here. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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

failed visions in art, literature, philosophy and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations.”<sup>30</sup> The archival impulse, he suggests, produces “construction sites” instead of “excavation sites,” and thus represents a shift away from the melancholic cultural practices of the 1990s that treated “the historical as little more than traumatic.”<sup>31</sup>

Here, Foster is intimating a critique, fully elaborated in his 1996 book *The Return of the Real*, of what he regards as the problematic troping of trauma in contemporary art. In that text, Foster argues that trauma has overwhelmed aesthetic practices that insistently and melancholically produce and reproduce the abject or obscene body (as in, for example, the anal fixations of British artists Mike Kelley and John Miller), manifesting little more than an embrace of the Lacanian real as respite from the disembodied discourses of deconstruction.<sup>32</sup> Foster acknowledges that the “return of the real” in contemporary art is also, in large part, fueled by the ravaging effects of war, poverty, AIDS and other phenomena that have arguably conspired to render the twentieth century (and, thus far, the twenty-first) the age of trauma,<sup>33</sup> but warns that when all experience is filtered through the language of trauma, the “politics of alterity” devolves into the apolitical realm of nihilism.<sup>34</sup> And indeed, in accord with Foster, one of the claims made in this dissertation is that the study of trauma and its representations must remain vigilant against the depoliticization of traumatic experience when it is bound to discourses of pathology. But in his resolve to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “[T]here is dissatisfaction with the textualist model of culture as well as the conventionalist view of reality—as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic.” In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 166.

<sup>33</sup> In their introduction to *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw concur that, “If every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma” (2).

<sup>34</sup> Foster, *Return of the Real*, 166.

welcome the “constructive” element of contemporary art’s archival impulse as a respite from the “excavations” of trauma discourse and culture, Foster neglects to acknowledge the rich and potentially transformative effects of negotiating an archival aesthetics within the context of what Leigh Gilmore terms a “will to melancholia” and Judith Butler calls “melancholic agency.”<sup>35</sup> For while melancholia (as I have argued in relation to the practices of Santiago Sierra) does inevitably carry the risk of nihilistic narcissism, when employed as an aesthetic strategy of engagement with the past, it has the capacity to mobilize an “inoperative community” of loss. As Butler suggests,

Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community. And if we say this second truth about the place where belonging is possible, then pathos is not negated, but it turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive.<sup>36</sup>

And it is precisely this mobilization of melancholic agency that, I argue, enables contemporary archival practices to exhibit a uniquely “anarchival” impulse, which excavates buried histories of trauma while at the same time re-imagining Foster’s proposal for “alternative kinds of social relations.”

What I am advancing, then, is a conceptualization of recent art practices as activating what I’d like to call a *melancholic* archive. Charged with bearing witness to the injustices of the past and present, these practices insist on maintaining a melancholic attachment to histories of suffering, an attachment that reconceives the archive not just as a repository, but also as an open wound, in constant need of diligent attention—an archive that challenges its own

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<sup>35</sup> See Leigh Gilmore, “Autobiography’s Wounds,” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 106; and Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?” in *Loss*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 468. Both ideas are pursued earlier in this dissertation.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, “After Loss,” 468.

affirmative mandate, instead recognizing itself to be contingent, fragmented, and ephemeral.<sup>37</sup> In essence, the melancholic archive takes on the task that Michel Foucault assigns to heritage: “[not] an acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies; rather, it is in unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath.”<sup>38</sup> In the practice of Doris Salcedo in particular, I identify melancholic archivization as a process of re-assembling these faults and fissures in order to bear witness to the material losses they trace. In Salcedo’s artwork, I argue, the archive takes on the role of silent, incomplete, and unstable witness to traumatic loss, whose existence nevertheless signals an insistent desire to house our memories, however imperfectly. For if “archive fever,” as Derrida suggests, is a sort of homesickness—an “irrepressible desire to return to the origin”<sup>39</sup>—then Doris Salcedo’s melancholic archives remind us that this home we seek cannot be sustained as a stable source of identification and attachment, instead articulating a relationship to home that is as contingent, embodied and performative as Diana Taylor’s repertoire and as utopian in its efforts to reinvigorate social relations as Hal Foster’s archival impulse. It is in the articulation of the melancholic archive, I suggest, that art begins to build unsettled empathetic relations with trauma.

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<sup>37</sup> The archival practices I am seeking to identify here are therefore well aligned with Okwui Enwezor’s recent observations concerning contemporary artists who “interrogate the self-evidentiary claims of the archive by reading it against the grain.” As Enwezor notes, “This interrogation may take aim at the structural and functional principles underlying the use of the archival document, or it may result in the creation of another archival structure as a means of establishing an archaeological relationship to history, evidence, information, and data.” In *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Photography* (New York: Institute for Contemporary Photography; Gottingen: Steidl, 2008), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books), 81. Contrast this with Foucault’s definition of the archive as a set of discursive practices that circumscribe the “law of what can be said.” In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972), 129.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91.



### Memory, home, and the body

This concept of melancholic archiving animates much of Doris Salcedo's practice, from early sculptural assemblages of domestic furniture to recent large-scale installations such as the Istanbul installation. In her practice, the archive challenges its own ontological certainty, while nevertheless acknowledging a cultural desire to continue building storehouses for our precious, and precarious, memories of loss. In Istanbul, this challenge to how we bear witness to loss and trauma is articulated via a crumpled, chaotic, and precarious home-space that struggles but inevitably fails to accommodate its own memories. In this way, the Istanbul installation functions as a paradigmatic example of my overriding thesis that the fragile figure of home, here manifested as a melancholic archive of ambiguous vectors of memory, can make the archival impulse an ethical lever in the performance and maintenance of *inoperative* relations of empathy. Salcedo's work—driven, as she suggests, “by this need to try and fail, over and over”<sup>40</sup>—reconceptualizes failure as both a ceaseless process of building intersubjective connections and a challenge to the tendency to conflate empathy with identification.

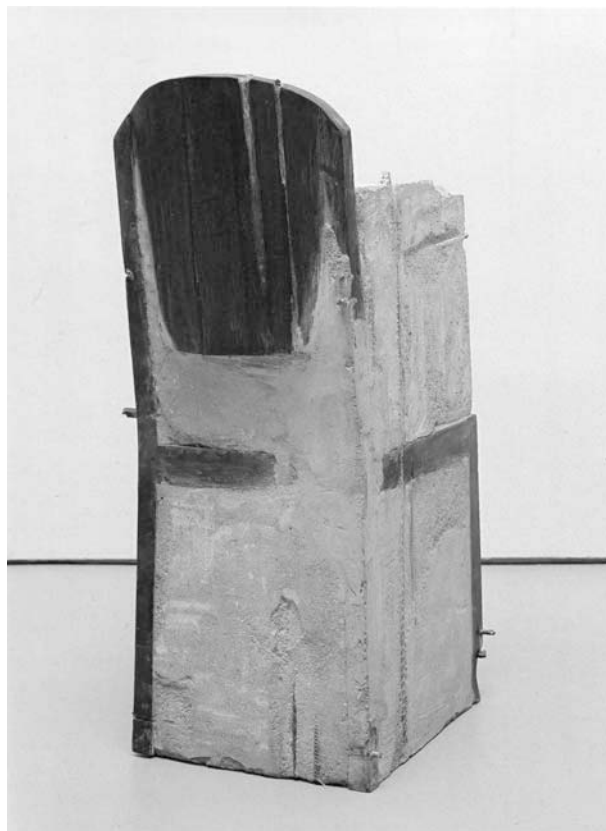
In Salcedo's work, the motif of the wooden chair in particular draws palpable links between the precariousness of occupation, the vulnerability of human existence, and the fallibility of memory, facilitating a rich set of associations between memory, home, and the human body as structures of inhabitation and belonging. As a familiar piece of domestic furniture that so often carries an element of personal belonging (I'm thinking here of my mother's favourite sewing chair, or my own regular seat at the kitchen table), as furniture that bears the wear of intimate human contact, and as an object whose design

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<sup>40</sup> In Marguerite Feitlowitz, “Interview with Doris Salcedo,” *Crimes of War Project Magazine*, August 2001, <http://www.crimesofwar.org/cultural/doris-print.html>.



**FIGURE 4.7**  
 "Field of Empty Chairs,"  
 Oklahoma City National  
 Memorial, 2000



**FIGURE 4.8**  
 Doris Salcedo,  
*Untitled*, 1995

(back, seat, legs) seems even to mimic the human form,<sup>41</sup> conforming to the shape of the body at rest and designed to accommodate human dimensions, the chair (and the empty chair especially) seems unparalleled in its uncanny capacity to evoke the human body. Indeed, so saturated is the chair with references to the body that it has become a fairly standard motif in memorial projects, one salient example of which is the Oklahoma City National Memorial's "Field of Empty Chairs," which comprises 168 chairs, each dedicated to a victim of the 1995 bombing of the A.P. Murray Federal Building (fig. 4.7).<sup>42</sup> In these spaces of mournful commemoration, as in Salcedo's work, chairs occupy a three-prong purpose of rendering the absent body a palpable presence—as metonym, indexical trace,<sup>43</sup> and symbolic reference.<sup>44</sup>

What differentiates Salcedo's practice is that her spaces are not only uncanny, unhomely even, but indeed uninhabitable. Like the chair that floats forlornly in the sea in Paulette Phillips video installation *The Floating House*, (discussed in chapter 2), Salcedo's chairs materialize a series of unincorporable traces that, to quote Walter Benjamin, "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger."<sup>45</sup> As critic Edlie Wong suggests, "Political violence makes

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<sup>41</sup> A similar observation is made in Nancy Princenthal, "Silence Seen," in Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 77.

<sup>42</sup> See Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), esp. 110-16.

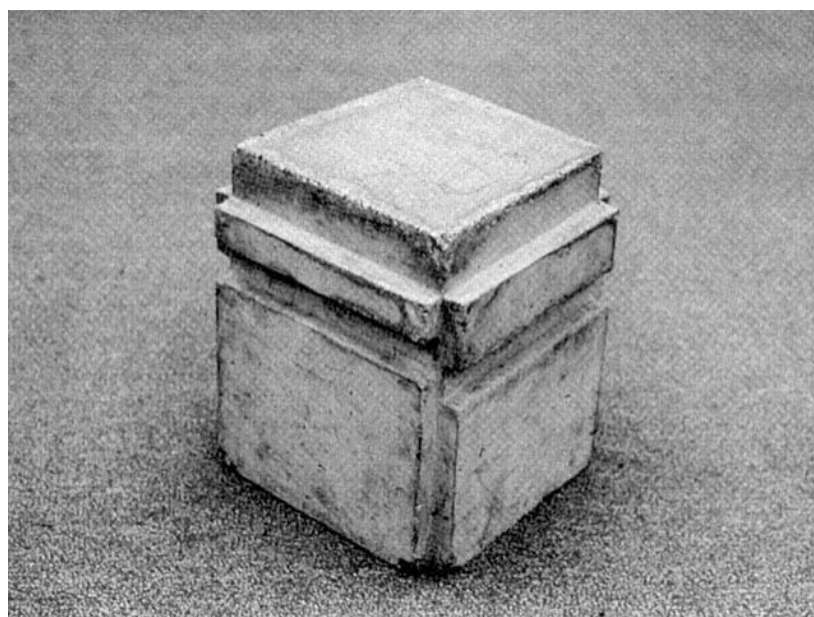
<sup>43</sup> This is not to suggest that worn chairs necessarily *merit* the loaded indexical status or authenticity of experience that attends to them, but simply that this status does adhere, in a way that recalls what Mieke Bal observes as the over-determined indexical effect of worn shoes in Holocaust exhibits (Bal here is writing in the context of an earlier Salcedo work, *Atrabiliarios* of 1992-97, an installation of women's shoes installed in wall niches shrouded in animal skin). In "Earth Aches: The Aesthetics of the Cut," in *Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 46.

<sup>44</sup> One could easily, if so inclined, write an art history of the chair, whose rich set of associations has made it a perennial favorite among contemporary artists, from Joseph Beuys' *Fat Chair* (1964) to Joseph Kosuth's investigation of semiotics in *One and Three Chairs* (1968) and of course Durant's deconstruction of modernist design in *Chair #4* (fig. 3.6).

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.



**FIGURE 4.9**  
Rachel Whiteread,  
*Untitled (One Hundred  
Spaces)*, 1995



**FIGURE 4.10**  
Bruce Nauman,  
*A Cast of the Space  
Under my Chair*,  
1965

the home into an uninhabitable place that can no longer function properly as a refuge or domestic sanctuary"<sup>46</sup>—and it is precisely this phenomenon that Salcedo conveys through her chairs, which likewise refuse to be inhabited as accessible conduits to the suffering of others. Unlike the Oklahoma City Memorial, which invites visitors to occupy the empty chairs and to seek solace in this act of occupation and identification,<sup>47</sup> Salcedo's sculptures and installations offer no consolation, no opportunity to assume the position of the victim, no chance to work through our relationship to loss (especially another's loss) uncritically. A pertinent example is a sculptural work from 1995, part of a series of untitled pieces that saw furniture eerily impaled with rebar and encased in concrete (fig. 4.8). In this particular case, concrete fills a wooden chair and the space surrounding it in a way that inevitably recalls Rachel Whiteread's furniture casts, particularly *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)* (fig. 4.9), also from 1995—an installation of resin casts of the spaces underneath one hundred school chairs that is itself a critical update on Bruce Nauman's influential *A Cast of the Space Under my Chair* (1965) (fig. 4.10).<sup>48</sup> Like Salcedo's concrete-encased chair, Whiteread's installation simultaneously marks and unmarks the memory it conveys; both artists, as Nancy Princenthal has observed, transform "a literal tactile trace—an incontrovertible physical memory—into a figure of deathly deep forgetfulness."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Wong, "Haunting Absences," 177.

<sup>47</sup> Apparently due to grass maintenance difficulties, visitors to the Oklahoma City National Memorial are no longer permitted to sit on the chairs, as was the original intention. Exceptions are made for families of the bombing victims. See Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Storr claims provocatively that Whiteread's installation was simply Nauman's work "multiplied a hundred fold" (in "Remains of the Day," *Art in America* 87, no. 4 [1999]: 106), while Chris Townsend on the contrary argues that Whiteread's work instead constitutes an outright rejection of Nauman's "rather narcissistic conceit" (in "When We Collide: History and Aesthetics, Space and Signs, in the Art of Rachel Whiteread," in *The Art of Rachel Whiteread*, ed. Chris Townsend [London: Thames and Hudson, 2004], 17). See also Rosalind E. Krauss, "X Marks the Spot," in *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), for a critical reading of Whiteread's indebtedness to Nauman and to Minimalism and Post-minimalism generally.

<sup>49</sup> Princenthal, "Silence Seen," 77-78.

As such, both Whiteread and Salcedo are interested in tracing what Chris Townsend calls “the antithesis of archives”<sup>50</sup> (or indeed, *an*archival archives)—the forgotten detritus that accrues in the constant accumulation of archival discourse.<sup>51</sup> In Salcedo’s work, however, these investigations of negative space take on additional melancholic resonance. With a self-described debt to Gordon Matta-Clark, who likewise drew attention to “spaces that are negated, that we can no longer inhabit,”<sup>52</sup> Salcedo treats negative space as a metaphor for the space occupied by subjects whose presence is ignored, denied, or contested—the space of the immigrant, the exile, the displaced, the imprisoned, the disappeared.<sup>53</sup>

Salcedo’s chair, muted and immobilized, furthermore imagines these subjects trapped in scenes of imprisonment, torture and interrogation. As critic Joan Rzedkiewicz suggests, “The work depicts a state of privation of human life and sociability, its reason so arbitrarily withheld and made unspeakable and anonymous.”<sup>54</sup> Far from a space for reflection, comfort, or nostalgia, then, the untitled chair presents a space of silence, even unspeakability; in this way, it resonates with the role of the witness as conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben, who writes: “Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness...knows that he or

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<sup>50</sup> Townsend, “When We Collide,” 23.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault defines the archive as “the accumulated existence of discourse.” See “The Discourse of History” (1967), in *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-1984* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 27; cited in Townsend, “When We Collide,” 23.

<sup>52</sup> In Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Salcedo also links her work to the non-site of Robert Smithson, which resonates even more with her large-scale exhibitions: “I’m using Robert Smithson’s idea of ‘non-site’ in a Third World way, to demonstrate the experience of displaced people—people who have been pushed off their land for political reasons.” In “Doris Salcedo,” *Flash Art*, no. 171 (summer 1993): 97.

<sup>54</sup> Joan Rzedkiewicz, “Early Memory and the Reconditioned Object: Doris Salcedo, Robert Gober, Clay Ketter, Mirosław Balka, Luc Tuymans, *the Unthought Known*,” *Etc. Montreal*, no. 59 (September-November 2002): 62. Referring to the “radical muteness” of Salcedo’s untitled furniture pieces, Nancy Princenthal makes an interesting comparison with Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Mouthpiece* (discussed in the previous chapter); both, she suggests, “force language and silence to occupy the same place” (“Silence Seen,” 78).

she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.”<sup>55</sup> And, I suggest, it is this impossibility of witnessing—precisely, in this work, the impossibility of inhabiting the space of the victim—that renders Salcedo’s work an exercise in unsettling processes of identification.

In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman investigates the conditions according to which we relate to others within the field of vision. For Silverman, certain aesthetic practices have the capacity to facilitate ethical relations that validate otherwise neglected subject positions, but only when these practices foreclose on the tendency to seek “idiopathic identification” (the assimilative assumption of “psychic access to what does not ‘belong to us’”) and insist instead on relations based on “heteropathic recollection”—the introduction of the “‘not me’ into my memory reserve.”<sup>56</sup> The goal of ethical aesthetic enterprises, in other words, must be to encourage identification “according to an exteriorizing, rather than an interiorizing, logic.”<sup>57</sup> Salcedo’s sculptures, which preclude any desire the audience might manifest to occupy the position of the traumatized subject idiopathically, facilitate precisely the heteropathic processes of identification and recollection advocated by Silverman. Presenting domestic spaces torn asunder by acts of violence that render these emptied spaces unhomely, Salcedo creates the conditions for her audience to inhabit not the traumatized spaces of uninhabitability, but perhaps a more nuanced understanding of home’s precarious status as a space of safety and belonging.

The *Casa Viuda* (*Widowed House*) series of 1992-95 (fig. 4.11) illustrates this point. The series—which features narrow, weathered wooden doors, combined with fragments of other furniture and embedded with cloth, zippers, and

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<sup>55</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 34.

<sup>56</sup> Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 185, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

**FIGURE 4.11**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*La Casa Viuda 5* (left) and  
*La Casa Viuda 6* (right),  
from the *Casa Viuda*  
(Widowed House) series,  
1992-95



**FIGURE 4.12**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*La Casa Viuda I*, 1992



**FIGURE 4.13**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*La Casa Viuda I*, 1992  
(detail)



bones—invokes the violent invasion of the political into domestic spaces, insisting that in times of war, the “homely” is perpetually threatened by the intrusion of the “unhomely” (the title, which, as Dan Cameron notes, suggests “a home grieving for its lost occupants,”<sup>58</sup> is evocative in this respect). Itself a melancholic archive of the traumatizing domestic consequences of political violence (inscribed into each piece, according to Salcedo, is a specific testimony from a survivor of the Dirty War), *La Casa Viuda* does not narrate stories of loss and upheaval but instead, as Jill Bennett suggests, conveys “a place transformed by pain.”<sup>59</sup> *La Casa Viuda I*, for example (figs. 4.12 and 4.13), recalls the testimony of a young boy who, after being warned by his parents not to open the front door to strangers, did so—only to have his home invaded by paramilitary troops and his parents assassinated in front of him. As an oblique manifestation of this testimony, the sculpture consists of a free-standing door abutted by a section of a wooden chair partially wrapped in a gauzy lace that appears to cling to, even disappear into, the wood. Here, it is clear that the door, that threshold space between home and not-home designed both to open us out to the world and to protect us from it in times of trouble, has been divested of its putative purpose, standing unbuttressed in the open space of the gallery as if to underscore its own instability as a protective barrier. And while we, as viewers, are left to wonder as to the role of the chair—are we witnessing a last-ditch effort to bar the intruders? a lifeless body slumped against the door?—we are nonetheless confronted with a sense of terror and loss inscribed into the very fabric of the materials.

In a way that recalls Santiago Sierra’s obstructive installations, the doors of *Casa Viuda* exist in the space of the gallery not as passages, but as barriers and blockages; as Edlie Wong observes, “By placing art as an obstacle to movement,

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<sup>58</sup> Dan Cameron, “Doris Salcedo,” *Grand Street* 61, no. 1 (summer 1997): 81.

<sup>59</sup> Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 65.



**FIGURE 4.14**  
Wafaa Bilal,  
*Domestic Tension*,  
2007 (video stills)

perception and cognition, Salcedo challenges the viewer to acknowledge the limits of viewership while attending to that which the work cannot say.”<sup>60</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that Salcedo’s oblique enactments of traumatic experience constitute the kind of melancholic mimicry that characterizes “acting out.” On the contrary, the intimate space of mute silence that forms around sculptures like *Casa Viuda* compels their audience into a relentlessly engaging experience wherein the desire to know, to experience, to feel the pain of another is constantly engaged and just as constantly frustrated. To fully explain the distinction I am making here, it is useful at this point to introduce a recent art project which also sought to explore and convey the visceral, corporeal ways in which war invades and violates the presumed safety of the home. In *Domestic Tension* (2007), Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal spent forty-two days living in Chicago’s FlatFile Galleries. During this period, the artist was under 24-hour live web camera surveillance; visitors to his website were able to watch and converse with him, and to aim and fire yellow paintballs with a remote controlled gun (fig. 4.14). Restaging the experience of constant bombardment on civilian populations and broadcasting the ensuing wreckage in an intimate setting, Bilal’s intention was, like Salcedo’s, to draw attention to the devastation that political friction wreaks on domestic settings. By the conclusion of the performance-installation, Bilal’s room and personal effects had suffered substantial damage inflicted by an eager army of paintball snipers, and the artist himself, eventually reduced to sleepless nights spent crouching behind the bed wearing a crash helmet, showed clear signs of wear. Thus, to the extent that Bilal (like Santiago Sierra) foists his audience into the perpetrator role, he effectively forestalls any inclination to “act out” a position of over-identification with the artist-victim.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Wong, “Haunting Absences,” 176.

<sup>61</sup> Indeed the web log of user comments reveals many participants all too happy to indulge the artist and “shoot an Iraqi” (30,000 paintball bullets were fired during the

What differentiates Salcedo's methodology is her refusal to allow the audience to occupy *any* stable identificatory position. Like Sierra, Bilal can be understood to operationalize a spectacle of suffering in order to expose hidden conditions of deprivation and exploitation (we also see this strategic spectacularization in Martha Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* collages, which in a different but not unrelated way also employed the screen as a vehicle of Brechtian distancing that both reveals and challenges its own alienating effects). Salcedo, instead, expresses a profound mistrust of such aesthetic strategies, stating: "I believe that the major possibilities of art are not in showing the spectacle of violence but instead in hiding it.... I want to be able to convert the audience into witnesses."<sup>62</sup> But bracketing for a moment Salcedo's imperative to refrain from visualizing violence (an issue to which I will return), I propose that the artist succeeds in transforming audience into witness when our desire to inhabit the spaces of traumatic experience is challenged at every turn; indeed the very tension between desire and failure is what enables the ethical empathetic situation described by LaCapra as a "virtual, not vicarious, experience...in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own."<sup>63</sup> In Salcedo's sculptural works, domestic references such as the chair serve to index a body that has been

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installation). Perhaps the most subversive element of this project, and that which aligns it most convincingly with Kaja Silverman's notion of heteropathic identification, is the spontaneously assembled coalition of viewer-participants who took turns keeping the paintball gun aimed *away* from Bilal. Refusing the perpetrator role and denied access to the place of the victim, they transformed their own spectator roles into an opportunity for something akin to conscientious objection. See <http://www.crudeoils.com> for an archive of the event, and Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008) for documentation and reflection.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Santiago Villaveces-Izquierdo, "Art and Media-Tion: Reflections on Violence and Representation," in *Cultural Producers in Perilous States: Editing Events, Documenting Change*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 238.

<sup>63</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 40. For an insightful analysis of the affective dimensions of Salcedo's work, see Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, esp. 46-69.

absented by violence; in essence, these objects—found and distorted—become archives of that which by its very absence simply cannot be represented, and yet demands acknowledgement and remembrance. This insistence is manifested equally in Salcedo's early sculptural works and her later large-scale installations. What changes, I will argue, is that large-scale public works such as the Istanbul installation insist furthermore on public acknowledgement of private suffering. Echoing Ann Cvetkovich's notion that trauma, and the cultural practices that it engenders, can and must be theorized as a politically charged experience that calls for collective response,<sup>64</sup> the Istanbul installation demands entry into the public archives of cultural memory. In so doing, Salcedo's work furthermore asks for a radical revision of our very conception of the archive.

### **Domestic disturbance, public archives**

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich develops an approach to trauma that postulates the productive value of critical trauma cultures—"public cultures that form in and around trauma"<sup>65</sup> and through which new practices and publics are formed. Arguing, in alignment with psychotherapist Judith Herman,<sup>66</sup> that trauma theory tends to devalue private, localized experiences of suffering and loss, Cvetkovich suggests that cultural production—art, literature, performance, and activism—can mobilize an affective investment in and around trauma that will facilitate political (rather than medical or therapeutic) responses. Such practices, which Cvetkovich acknowledges are often as ephemeral as the traumatic experiences that generate them, must nevertheless be integrated into public culture as archival resources, thereby also revealing the need to reinvent

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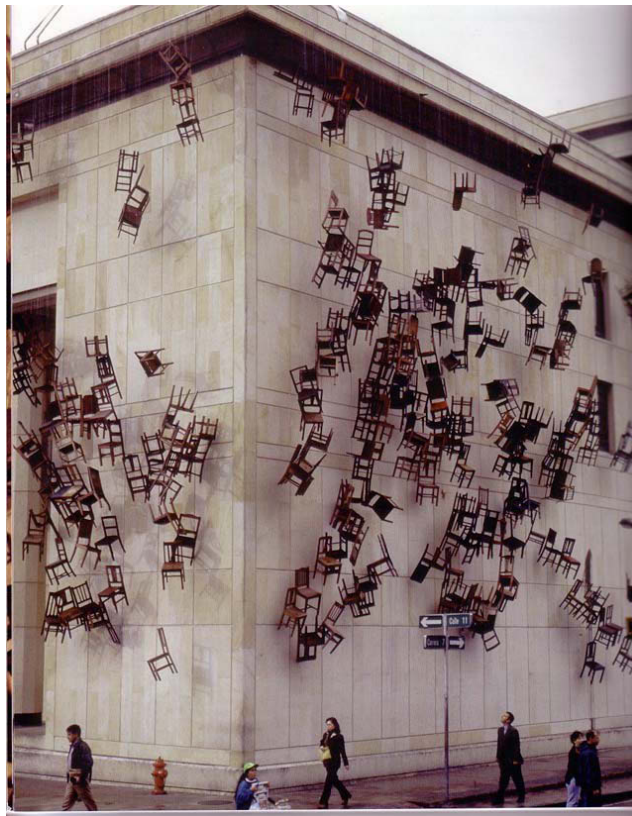
<sup>64</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Herman's approach to the politics of trauma is addressed in chapter 3.



**FIGURE 4.15**  
Doris Salcedo, *Tenebrae: Noviembre 6, 1985, 1999-2000*



**FIGURE 4.16**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*Noviembre 6 y 7,*  
Bogotá, 2002

the archive as “itself a form of mourning.”<sup>67</sup> In recent large-scale projects, Doris Salcedo has exhibited a congruent interest in making private trauma a matter of public archivization. Since 2000, Salcedo’s work has undergone a shift from “memory sculptures” (which, as Andreas Huyssen points out, rejected the public spaces of memorials and monuments for more intimate spaces of reflection<sup>68</sup>) toward large-scale, often site-specific, installations in galleries and public spaces. Two salient examples of this shift, both of which again employ the chair motif to evoke absent human presence, are *Tenebrae: Noviembre 6, 1985*, installed at the Camden Arts Centre, London, in 1999-2000, and *Noviembre 6 y 7*, a performance-installation at the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, Colombia, in 2002, both of which reference the 1985 storming of the Colombian High Court by M-19 guerrillas, and the subsequent siege and battle which left over one hundred people dead, seventeen missing, and the building in flames. The first work, *Tenebrae*, is an installation of thirteen upended lead-cast chairs, barely recognizable because of radically attenuated legs that extend across the expanse of the room, becoming barriers across the entranceway (fig. 4.15). The second, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, was a two-day performance marking the fifty-four hours of battle in 1985, and entailed the glacially slow lowering of hundreds of wooden chairs down the façade of the Palace of Justice (fig. 4.16).

For art historian Jill Bennett, these two works in particular demonstrate not simply a move toward larger installations, but indeed a significant shift in the artist’s perspective from domestic trauma to the traumatizing condition of displacement:

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<sup>67</sup> Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 238.

<sup>68</sup> “[Memory sculpture] is an artistic practice that remains clearly distinct from the monument or the memorial. Its place is in the museum or the gallery rather than in public space. Its addressee is the individual beholder rather than the nation or community.” In *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 110.

Whereas Salcedo's work was formerly concerned with domestic space, it now deals with space as the locus of (dis)placement.... [W]hereas the works of the nineties were about belonging—in the sense that they suggested a process of inhabitation and invited us to inquire about their occupants—the later works give extension to a set of affects that dislocate. Unlike the domestic realm that imbricates memory, the non-site of these works has no human past. The sense of finding oneself in a world made strange, devoid of familiar reference points, is pushed to its limits now that Salcedo no longer incorporates signifiers of former inhabitants.<sup>69</sup>

But while Salcedo's art practice has certainly entered the public domain in an unprecedented way, and while Salcedo's recent projects indeed involve a less intimate treatment of her subject matter in terms of both scale and material (as Bennett notes, lead-cast works such as *Tenebrae* remove all indexical traces of the human, including the artist's hand), does it necessarily follow that the artist's recent works have shifted away from the issue of domestic unsettlement? This is not simply a rhetorical or semantic question, but rather, one with profound implications, for the point to remember is that issues of belonging can never be extricated from those of spatial displacement. Particularly in Colombia (but not exclusively, as witnessed more recently in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories), where for decades, citizens' homes have been battlegrounds in the pursuit of the Dirty War, and where these invasions have led to massive internal displacement,<sup>70</sup> belonging is inevitably (but especially in times of war) a precariously held condition, always in danger of succumbing to displacement. It is indeed this threat of dislocation that lurks in the shadows of the home that Freud characterized as the unhomely, rendering home, as Bhabha suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, a "territory of both disorientation and relocation, with

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<sup>69</sup> Jill Bennett, "*Tenebrae* after September 11: Art, Empathy, and the Global Politics of Belonging," in *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, ed. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 191-92. This position is seconded by Edlie Wong, who suggests that Salcedo's work has "explicitly moved away from representing the intimate spaces of home to dwell upon public sites of state violence" ("*Haunting Absences*," 186).

<sup>70</sup> See note 8, above.



all the fragility and fecundity implied by such a double take.”<sup>71</sup> This double take, or dialectic if you prefer, is insightfully revealed in Salcedo’s early works, which already constitute sustained reflection on displacement and the precarious occupation of space. In an analysis of her own early works, Salcedo has stated recently that *La Casa Viuda* refers to “forced displacement, ... to those millions of human beings who have no space,” noting further that “Humans are spatial beings, we need a place to eat, a place to write, to think, etc.”<sup>72</sup> But, as Salcedo implies, for those whose homes are violated by war, crime, and terror, these seemingly mundane rights are tenuously held. Home, then, is figured in Salcedo’s early sculptures as a fragile, conditional site of belonging, and any efforts to make the home function as a stable, accessible archive for memories of this lost condition of belonging are bound, as these works reveal, to fail. As the title *Casa Viuda* implies, home can do little more than mourn the loss of its inhabitants.

Salcedo’s recent large-scale works likewise render space a precarious entity, inoperative as a stable site of belonging and fragile as an archive (or widow) of human memory. At the same time, the very public nature of these installations reveals Salcedo’s increasingly urgent commitment to the notion that just as violence in the public sphere infiltrates the presumed safe realm of the domestic, so too must the intimately felt consequences of violence be attended to publicly, in such a way that Salcedo’s installations come to function as public archives of loss. In installations such as *Tenebrae* and *Noviembre 6 y 7*, the precarious nature of the archive as a home for loss continues to figure largely, again thanks to the saturated referential quality of the chair, whose capacity to recall the human body (or more precisely, to mark the absence of the body) is

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<sup>71</sup> Bhabha, “Halfway House,” 11.

<sup>72</sup> In Feitlowitz, “Interview with Doris Salcedo,” n.p.

again called upon to convey the body's fragility while haunting us with its absent presence. Thus the steel chairs of *Tenebrae*, prone and extended across the gallery floor, can be understood as metaphors for civilians caught in war's crossfire, attempting to flee but caught dead in their tracks. But at the same time, the extended chairs function quite literally as barriers against any desire we might manifest to inhabit the space of suffering; instead, we are asked to respond empathetically from our own spectatorial positions.

Likewise, the chairs that are slowly lowered down the façade of Bogotá's Palace of Justice in *Noviembre 6 y 7* bear evocative traces of human presence. Whereas Mieke Bal suggests that the chairs in this installation form a sort of second shell, "the façade behind which the dark side of state power hid its terror"<sup>73</sup> that, as they fall, bring this façade "down with them," my own reading of the work (itself haunted by short-lived but searing public images of people falling and jumping from towers on September 11, 2001) can register only human figures, tumbling to the earth in cinematic slow motion as if to escape a burning building. In a way that both recalls Gordon Matta-Clark's cuts and anticipates her own *Shibboleth* of 2007,<sup>74</sup> Salcedo here articulates a deep mistrust of architecture's capacity to shelter and protect that also mobilizes an affective registration of the precariousness with which we occupy these spaces—a sense of precariousness borne out by her own comments on the work:

The empty chairs are statements of absence allowing one to be aware of the fragility of those who were behind those walls seventeen years ago. Exposed and suspended on the stone façade, the empty chair emphasizes the vulnerability, not only of those who worked in the Palace of Justice, but of us all. This piece is vulnerable from within and unprotected on the exterior.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Bal, "Earth Aches," 55.

<sup>74</sup> Salcedo's crack in the floor of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall is addressed in the following chapter.

<sup>75</sup> Doris Salcedo, "Proposal for a Project for the Palace of Justice, Bogotá," 2002, reproduced in *Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth*, 83.

Thus I am arguing for a continuum in Salcedo's practice, in which the precariousness of belonging, memory, and displacement continue to figure largely, though with an even greater sense of urgency, as these issues are now articulated as a violent confrontation between the public and the private. If there is an important conceptual distinction to be made between Salcedo's early sculptures and her recent installations, it is that her recent works, particularly those sited in public places, take this confrontation—which inevitably begins with the violation of the public into private spaces—back to the public domain, where they become melancholic archives that function, and here I am in complete agreement with Mieke Bal, to “redefine monumentality.” Salcedo, continues Bal, “reconstitutes monuments as social spaces where intimacy and politics meet; where the ruptured intimacy of others, affectively experienced, cries out for political action.”<sup>76</sup>

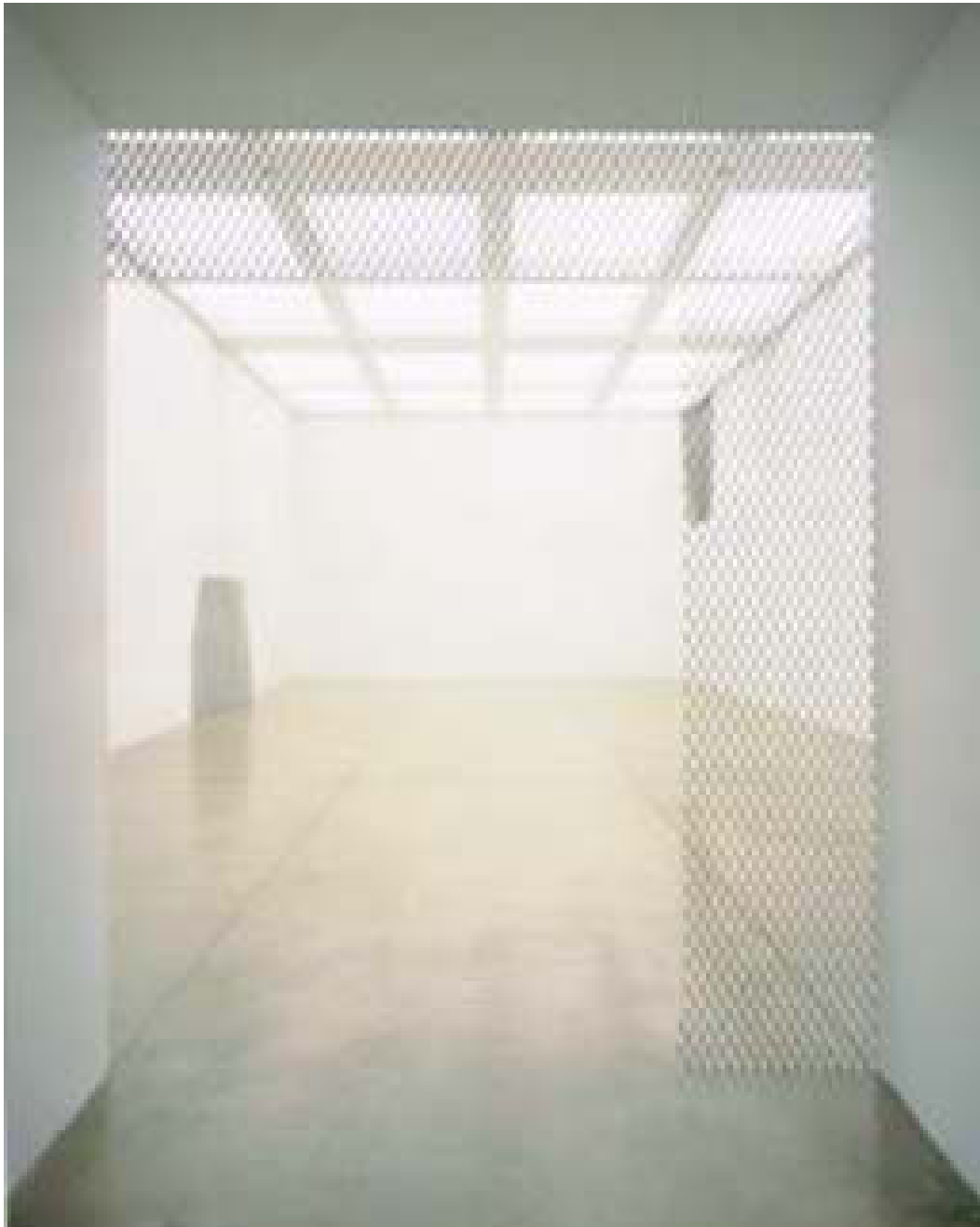
### **(Un)accommodating memory**

The transient nature of Salcedo's public installations further contributes to their capacity to redefine the function of public spaces of memory, and it is this ephemerality that aligns Salcedo's Istanbul installation—which lasted only the duration of the Biennial—with what has been identified as a “countermemorial” impulse in recent monumental practices (Countermemorials, writes James E. Young, aim “not to be everlasting but to disappear; ...not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at [citizens'] feet”).<sup>77</sup> In a related way, the

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<sup>76</sup> Bal, “Earth Aches,” 55.

<sup>77</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 30. Countermemorial practice is exemplified by late twentieth-century Holocaust memorials in Germany and East Europe that endeavour to bear witness to atrocity while avoiding the employment of monumental vocabulary—a vocabulary so intimately connected to the aesthetics of fascist Germany. For a sustained discussion, see Young's *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).



**FIGURE 4.17**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*Neither*,  
2004

installation also emblemizes what I am calling “melancholic archivization”—archival practices that, by contesting the archive’s capacity to own and safeguard history, instead present the past as a Benjaminian flash of traces, which ideally activate both the archive’s relationship with the past *and* the viewer’s relation with the archive in the present.

But what traces flash up to be seized in Salcedo’s Istanbul installation? If we accept, as I have been insisting we must, that chairs in Salcedo’s art practice function primarily as melancholic stand-ins for the absent human body, then this mass of chairs might be understood to connote a sense of confinement. Although there are, somewhat shockingly, no street-side barriers or fencing around the installation, the chairs are so tightly enmeshed and intricately entwined that the flushness of the surface itself suggests the site as a holding tank of sorts, a prison with invisible bars. This reading would be in keeping with Salcedo’s recent efforts to visually articulate the vulnerable occupation of spaces of confinement, a pertinent example of which is *Neither*, a 2004 installation at London’s White Cube Gallery that effected a transformation of the exhibition space into an ambiguous site of expansive incarceration (fig. 4.17).<sup>78</sup> The installation, a room lined with plasterboard into which chain-link fencing has been embedded to produce a ghostly sort of compound, resembles, as one critic suggests, a refugee camp or detention centre<sup>79</sup>—increasingly ubiquitous places where detainees are reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life”<sup>80</sup> and undergo what Judith Butler describes as a process of “desubjectivation” that leaves them unprotected by

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<sup>78</sup> In a recent interview, Salcedo states that one of her ongoing questions is: ““What is it to be in a concentration camp? What is it to lose one’s freedom? This is everywhere; in the camps in Australia and Nauru, where asylum seekers are held; in Guantanamo; for those awaiting deportation from the United States.” In Joshua Mack, “Violent Ends,” *Modern Painters* 17, no. 4 (Dec 2004-Jan 2005): 55.

<sup>79</sup> Wong, “Haunting Absences,” 184.

<sup>80</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), esp. 119-80.

international protocol, unentitled to due legal process, and thus “something less than human...an equivocation of the human.”<sup>81</sup>

But if the Istanbul installation articulates, like *Neither*, a space of abject, even spectacular (to the extent that both installations also convey the condition of overexposure) confinement, its contents—hundreds of haphazardly deposited chairs—suggest an even bleaker set of associations. Given the genealogy that I have traced in which chairs function as multiply referential stand-ins for the human figure, it becomes difficult *not* to encounter this jumble of 1,550 interlocking chairs not simply as a pile of chairs, but instead a pile of human bodies—or, to be terribly precise, the worn, anonymous, emaciated bodies that haunt our collective memory bank of all-too familiar images (both photographic and imagined) of the countless mass graves—from 1945-Poland to 1994-Rwanda—that bear witness to the twentieth century’s penchant for horror.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, given the location of the installation in Istanbul, along with the curious fact that the work remains untitled, one might be compelled to read the installation as a silent witness to the Armenian Genocide of 1915—a massacre that has yet to be acknowledged in much of the world, and which remains unapologetically refuted in Turkey.<sup>83</sup> And it is precisely this unspoken allusion to

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<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 74. The resemblance of Salcedo’s *Neither* to Louise Bourgeois’ “cells” and Mona Hatoum’s caged-in domestic spaces (such as *Homebound*, 2000), which ask viewers to contemplate the ways in which home itself can be perceived as a space of confinement, adds a perhaps unintentional layer of feminist analysis to Salcedo’s project, reminding us that home’s precariousness as a site of safety and belonging must always be considered in relation to how it has historically been experienced by so many women—as a space of banal imprisonment.

<sup>82</sup> Art critic Rod Mengham makes a similar comparison between Salcedo’s piece and what he terms the “intimidating paradox” of the mass grave, in the chilling combination of “human chaos, precision engineering, and the sheer size of the operation.” In “Failing Better: Salcedo’s Trajectory,” White Cube Gallery, London, 2004, <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/salcedo/texts/134/>.

<sup>83</sup> From 1914 to 1918, up to 1.5 million Armenians were killed during deportation from Turkey. For a comprehensive survey of the historical, political, and cultural dimensions of the Genocide and its aftermath, see Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986).

mass graves that mobilizes my reading of Salcedo's Istanbul installation as a melancholic archive, for mass graves can themselves be understood as quintessential melancholic archives. Excruciatingly detailed but shockingly anonymous indexical traces of mass murder or genocide, mass graves are archival sources that fail spectacularly to supply answers to the questions that haunt them: Who? How? And most importantly but perhaps also most futilely, Why? This failure to offer secrets from the grave compels us into a perpetually interrogative mode, as if refusing the closure, or worse, comfort, that would necessarily attend their consignment to the historical record.

As a melancholic archive, Doris Salcedo's Istanbul installation likewise fails to coalesce into a site of closure and redemption. As if exploiting Derrida's observation that "The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed—it opens out to the future,"<sup>84</sup> Salcedo's archive, lodged in and assuming the form of a home-space, cannot stabilize a relationship to the past. It attempt but fails to accommodate its own memories. This melancholization of the archive also animates the recent practice of Palestinian-American artist Emily Jacir, who employs neo-Conceptual strategies to investigate the conditions of displacement faced by Palestinians in Israel, the Occupied Territories, and the diaspora, and whose work echoes and complements Salcedo's own anarchival project. *Where We Come From* (2003) is a multi-media installation that documents Jacir's effort to fulfill requests generated by the question, posed to exiled Palestinians, "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" (figs. 4.18 and 4.19). Armed with an American passport that afforded the artist relative mobility between Israel and the Occupied Territories, Jacir was able to realize most of the requests, which

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<sup>84</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 68.



**FIGURE 4.18**

Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From (Hana)*, 2002-2003

The text reads, "'Go to Haifa and play soccer with the first Palestinian boy you see on the street. I have never been there, unfortunately, but you bet it will be the first place I go to, if and when, I get my American passport. If I go to Israel, and my passport shows that I have been there, it would limit my ability to visit my family in Lebanon which is a must at the moment.' Hana. Born in Beirut, living in Houston, TX. Lebanese Passport. Father and Mother from Haifa (both exiled in 1948)."

**FIGURE 4.19**

Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From (Munir)*, 2002-2003

The text reads, "'Go to my mother's grave in Jerusalem on her birthday and put flowers and pray. I need permission to go to Jerusalem. On the occasion of my mother's birthday, I was denied an entry permit.' Munir. Born in Jerusalem, living in Bethlehem. Palestinian Passport and West Bank I.D. Father and Mother from Jerusalem (both exiled in 1948). Notes: When I reached the grave of his mother, I



was surprised to see a circle of tourists surrounding a grave nearby. It was the grave of Oskar Schindler ... buried next to a woman whose son living a few kilometers away is forbidden paying his respects without a permit. There were many graves that had smashed crosses and sculptures of the Virgin Mary destroyed. The caretaker of the cemetery told me that Jewish extremists had raided the cemetery and desecrated many of the graves. He showed me the ones he fixed."



ranged from the mundane (“Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill”) to the mournful (“Go to my mother’s grave in Jerusalem on her birthday and place flowers and pray”). The recording of these actions (thirty-two mounted photographs, thirty framed texts and a DVD projection) attests to both a poetic longing for home and the everyday frustrations of being barred from it.<sup>85</sup> Itself a carefully assembled archive of loss and disenfranchisement, *Where We Come From*, rather than assuming the position of victim, instead conveys the fundamental experiential gap that separates the exiled or occupied Palestinian from the Western artist and audience, therefore sharing with Salcedo an insistence on bearing witness to traumatic experience in ways that unsettle processes of (over)identification.

An even more salient comparison to Salcedo’s work is offered by Jacir’s 2001 installation entitled *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948* (fig. 4.20). There is, of course, an immediate, jarring, and significant difference between this work and Salcedo’s Istanbul installation: whereas Salcedo offers no title with which to anchor the subject of her work, Jacir’s title conversely offers no room to maneuver *away* from the subject of hers. The piece, which draws explicitly on historian Walid Khalidi’s encyclopedic account of the destruction of Arab villages and the displacement of 700,000 villagers during the 1948 takeover and occupation of land that now makes up parts of Israel,<sup>86</sup> consists of a large assembled burlap tent, similar to those once used to shelter Palestinian refugees.<sup>87</sup> On the tent’s surface, the names of those

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<sup>85</sup> This and other projects are documented in Stella Rollig, curator, *Emily Jacir: Belongings: Arbeiten/Works 1998-2003* (Linz, Austria: O.K Center for Contemporary Art, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

<sup>87</sup> The United Nations Relief and Works Agency used these large tents in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank until 1968, when construction began on more permanent shelters and facilities. The total number of registered Palestinian refugees (defined as Palestinians displaced as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict and their direct descendents) as of 2008 was 4.8 million. See United



**FIGURE 4.20**

Emily Jacir, *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948, 2001*

destroyed villages are stenciled in pencil and stitched in thick black thread, as if warding off the threat that these names will disappear into oblivion as did the towns to which they refer. Thus, like the ceremonies and memorial spaces that use names to commemorate the dead (the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, the Names Project AIDS Quilt, and rituals surrounding the anniversaries of 9/11, for instance), Jacir's project is both a commemoration of what is lost and a preservation of what remains of that loss—in this case, an exactingly detailed list of 418 place-names. And, in this case, the preservation of detail is also an explicitly political project—a refusal to remain silent about a process of geopolitical displacement that has yet to be fully acknowledged in the international community, and a refusal, as well, to permit this memorial to stand in synecdochically for a non-localized, transcultural phenomenon of mobility and deterritorialization—indeed, the precision of the work's title reveals the artist's effort to avoid such quixotic inclinations.<sup>88</sup>

But if Jacir's installation positions itself as an explicit defense against forgetting and in favour of home's critical status as a place of belonging, there is, at the same time, an implicit recognition of the ephemerality of memory and the provisionality of belonging. First, the material conditions of the installation's production (Jacir invited fellow diasporic Palestinians in New York to stitch the village names communally, but the embroidery was not completed by the opening of the work's inaugural exhibition) left the work permanently unfinished: most of the place-names have been stitched in thread, but some exist simply in ink, suggesting that a stable and permanent collective memory of these

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Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Homepage, <http://www.un.org/unrwa/english.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Jacir acknowledges her intention was to forestall such efforts, noting that the exact subject of the work is "unavoidable, it's there in the title." Cited in Chiara Gelardin, "Memories in Exile," *Museo Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 6 (2003), <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/museo/6/jacir/>. The subject of romantic discourses of deterritorialization is fully pursued in the following chapter, where Jacir reappears.

places cannot be guaranteed, and suggesting as well that like this artwork in progress, the condition of Palestinian displacement is also unfinished business. Then, the medium of the refugee tent itself—a home for loss as transient and unstable as Salcedo’s edifice of chairs—speaks both to the inaccessibility of the lost home that exists only in its traces, and to home’s fragile position as a repository of history’s traces. In both works, histories of belonging and dislocation are invoked, but obliquely; in their hauntingly unsettled public archives of loss, both Emily Jacir and Doris Salcedo reveal home to be a fragile site of archivization.

### **Elusive archives**

Like Jacir’s memorial tent, Salcedo’s Istanbul installation is a frustratingly elusive archive, rendered so by Salcedo’s resolute rejection of spectacles of violence and suffering; as Nancy Princenthal observes, “within Salcedo’s realm of reconfigured perceptual experience, it is precisely restrictions on vision that make other, crucial kinds of seeing—of insight—possible.”<sup>89</sup> Thus, to a certain degree it is useful to align Salcedo’s work with recent art practices—Alfredo Jaar’s, for instance—that lament the image’s impotence in the face of catastrophe, a reading that is given credence by Salcedo’s insistence that:

I’m not interested in the visual. I have constructed the work as invisibility, because I regard the non-visual as representing a lack of power. To see is to have power; it’s a way of possessing.... What I’m addressing in the work is something which is actually in the process of vanishing.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, an evocative and highly affective aesthetic strategy in Salcedo’s work is, as I have argued, her use of domestic furniture to stand in metonymically for the suffering body in a way that declines to traffic in direct representation. Compare

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<sup>89</sup> Princenthal, “Silence Seen,” 88.

<sup>90</sup> In Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo*, 26.

this to the recent work of Salcedo's compatriot, Ferdinand Botero, whose painted restagings of abuse photographs at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, while equally unsettling in their cartoon-like ferocity, nevertheless grant full visual access to the suffering body.<sup>91</sup> On the contrary, the human body is never figured in Salcedo's work. As Huyssen suggests, the body is "never forgotten," but it is "just as absent and elusive as it would be in any memory of the past."<sup>92</sup>

But while Salcedo's aesthetic strategy can and has been analyzed in the context of recent skepticism in visual culture regarding the extent to which images—and especially photographs—can generate an engagement with the suffering of others that goes beyond shock, catharsis, and the collective desire to spectacularize pain that is arguably endemic to contemporary "wound culture,"<sup>93</sup> there is something almost disingenuous about visual art's recent disavowal of the visual, invariably accompanied by visual manifestations of this very disavowal. Indeed, Salcedo is deeply invested in pursuing visual art's unique capacity to convey the affective, corporeal implications of traumatic experience. What Salcedo challenges is the spectacular use of imagery—the shock effect—which produces, she fears, at best a fleeting sense of outrage and at worst a premature sense of catharsis, even pleasure. As Jill Bennett observes, "Salcedo does not allow her work to engender a surfeit of affect: The kind of fountain of free-flowing empathy and sentimentality that threatens to overwhelm both spectator and object."<sup>94</sup> Her work cannot, therefore, be considered simply as a facile rejection of imagery as a viable methodology for conveying trauma. To the extent that Salcedo has not rejected visual strategies of representation, I would instead

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<sup>91</sup> See David Ebony, *Botero: Abu Ghraib* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 2006).

<sup>92</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 111.

<sup>93</sup> Mark Selzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October*, no. 80 (spring 1997).

<sup>94</sup> Bennett, "Tenebrae," 189.

align her practice, conditionally at least, with recent *defenses* of imagery in the face of atrocity.

In his 2008 *Images in Spite of All*, for instance, Georges Didi-Huberman engages with the ethics of representation through an examination of four controversial photographs that survived the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland.<sup>95</sup> For Didi-Huberman, the survival of these images *malgré tout* (in spite of all) forces us to acknowledge the necessity of imagining the Holocaust. Capitulation to the discourse of horror's unrepresentability is complicit, he suggests, with the Nazi project of making the tools of the extermination disappear, of "*obliterating every remnant*."<sup>96</sup> According to Didi-Huberman's argument, images are neither deficient simulacra nor transparent documents, but rather traces whose very entry into the archive serve as reminders that "to bear witness is to tell *in spite of all* that which it is *impossible* to tell entirely."<sup>97</sup> Given the experiences that Salcedo seeks to examine in her work—the "bare life" of the camp inmate, the "negative space" of the immigrant, and the ongoing disappearances that are a common facet of a decades-long state of emergency in Colombia, where citizens continue to disappear without a trace—Salcedo's work seems to me to be less about rejecting images than about constructing traces in order to build an archive that, however meager, will constitute some kind of fragile memory bank. Indeed, far from countering the

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<sup>95</sup> These photographs, taken surreptitiously by members of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, depict women being herded toward a gas chamber and gassed bodies being delivered to the crematorium. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. Didi-Huberman's polemic is directed against a group of French scholars, including filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who viewed the exhibition of these photographs at the 2001 exhibition *Mémoire des camps* at Hôtel de Sully in Paris (and indeed all photographic documentation of the Holocaust) as a kind of senseless, scandalous spectacle. See, for instance, Claude Lanzmann, "Le monument contre l'archive?" *Les cahiers de médiologie*, no. 11 (2001), in which he claims that, "archival images are images without imagination. They petrify thought and kill any power of evocation" (274).

threat of spectacularization with an injunction against images, Salcedo instead engages in what Mieke Bal identifies as the construction of “sticky images”: “images that hold the viewer, enforcing...a slowing down as well as an intensification of the experience of time.”<sup>98</sup> According to Bal, it is this slowing down and intensification of the viewing experience in Salcedo’s work that “becomes the major tool for turning the direction of the narrative from third-person, out-there, concerning the other, to second-person, here, to touch the viewer in the most concrete bodily way possible.”<sup>99</sup>

And yet, Salcedo’s practice insists on a melancholic attachment to the past that also *resists* easy entry into the archives of public memory. In this respect, the Istanbul installation can be usefully compared to Christian Boltanski’s *Missing House* of 1990 (fig. 4.21), whose formal similarities to Salcedo’s installation are unmistakable, but whose divergent conceptual strategies underline the stakes and conditions of melancholic archivization. In East Berlin, Boltanski researched the history of an empty lot where a house destroyed during World War II once stood. On the walls of adjacent houses, Boltanski attached plates describing prior occupants of the house, and at a separate location in West Berlin he operated a museum housing documents concerning these residents, some of whom had been deported to concentration camps.<sup>100</sup> John Czaplicka’s insightful description of Boltanski’s installation reinforces its own status as a melancholic archive, whose “combination of physical elements and archival materials serves as an indicator of the unrepresented, the unsaid, and demands that the viewer engage

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<sup>98</sup> Mieke Bal, “Sticky Images: The Foreshortening of Time in an Art of Duration,” in *Time and the Image*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 80.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> The project was part of the *Finitude of Freedom* exhibition of international artists responding to the reunification of East and West Germany (mentioned briefly in the preceding chapter as the exhibition that also hosted Hans Haacke’s *Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored — Out of Petty Cash*).



**FIGURE 4.21** Christian Boltanski, *The Missing House*, Berlin, 1990



**FIGURE 4.22** Doris Salcedo, installation at the International Istanbul Biennial, 2003



his or her imagination, knowledge, and memory in a process of completion”<sup>101</sup> applies equally to Salcedo’s Istanbul installation. Like Salcedo, Boltanski produces a counter-memorial space that employs the trope of home in order to activate it as a source of archival knowledge. But whereas Boltanski’s installation mines existing archives for lost and forgotten evidence, demanding precise and detailed recognition of the histories buried at this site (as Czaplicka observes, Boltanski’s task is to “follow the material presence and archival excerpts to reconstruct the past in the present”),<sup>102</sup> Salcedo instead declines to offer such a direct (if incomplete) conduit to the past. Instead, we are required to make our own meaning, to draw our own conclusions. In Salcedo’s work, home reveals itself as an unsettled space of archivization, just as the archive is revealed as a troubled home for loss.

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### **Conclusion: The future of the melancholic archive**

In his consideration of the future of globalization in a post-9/11 world, Homi K. Bhabha writes:

The times and places in which we live confront our sense of Progress with the image of the Unbuilt. The Unbuilt is not a place you can reach with a ladder.... The rubble and debris that survive carry the memories of other fallen towers, Babel for instance, and lessons of endless ladders that suddenly collapse beneath our feet. We have no choice but to place, in full view of our buildings, the vision of the Unbuilt—the foundation of *possible* buildings...other alternative worlds.<sup>103</sup>

In a visceral way, Doris Salcedo’s Istanbul installation conveys precisely Bhabha’s vision of the Unbuilt—a vision that reveals Western ideals of progress and modernity to be a crumbling empire of fallen towers and collapsed ladders.

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<sup>101</sup> John Czaplicka, “History, Aesthetics, and Contemporary Commemorative Practice in Berlin,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (spring/summer 1995): 168.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Democracy De-Realized,” in *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta11\_Platform1*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 363-4.

Indeed, while I have argued that the installation's hundreds of chairs read as a sort of oblique anthropology of human suffering, the installation in its entirety also recalls something more akin to an archaeological ruin—Salcedo's work, as she suggests, transforms immaterial traces of the past into material relics in the present.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, what this also suggests is that Salcedo is less interested in acting out the moment of catastrophe than in rendering its charged affective repercussions available to those who would bear secondary witness. Jill Bennett's analysis of Salcedo's practice is insightful in this respect, recognizing that her works align us "with the witnesses who live out the reality of loss in a context where pain is not contained in the single moment but is present in everyday life, in all interactions."<sup>105</sup> In this way, Salcedo conceives melancholia not as a failure to escape an unreconciled past, but instead as a carrying of that unsettled past into the present and for the future. Much like Lida Abdul's *Housewheel* which opened this chapter, or Rachel Whiteread's *House* which introduced this dissertation, Salcedo's work resonates strongly with Bhabha's conception of the Unbuilt as the "foundation of *possible* buildings...other alternative worlds." Her melancholic archives, produced out of the ruins of history, demonstrate what is perhaps contemporary art's unique contribution to the future of memory: a capacity to unsettle our collective relationship with the past while imagining a better future.

In this way too, contemporary art is perhaps best equipped to fulfill Derrida's mandate for the archive, which is to conceive of itself as an open question:

[T]he question of the archive is not, I repeat, a question of the past, the question of a concept dealing with the past which already might either be

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<sup>104</sup> Salcedo, "Doris Salcedo," 97.

<sup>105</sup> Jill Bennett, "Art, Affect, and the 'Bad Death': Strategies for Communicating the Sense Memory of Loss," *Signs* 28, no. 1 (autumn 2002): 346.

at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive, but rather a question of the future, the very question of the future, question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know tomorrow.<sup>106</sup>

Salcedo's melancholic archive, to recall Foster's (an)archival aesthetic, is likewise "founded on disaster" and "pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall."<sup>107</sup> But it nevertheless points forward in time. Defying both the pathology of nihilism and the politics of redemption, it requires us to acknowledge both the universality and the materiality of human precariousness in ways that might ideally mobilize heteropathically unsettling responses to the suffering of others. These responses, Kaja Silverman suggests, in turn possess the capacity to "shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present,"<sup>108</sup> and indeed the future.

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<sup>106</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.

<sup>107</sup> Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5, n. 8.

<sup>108</sup> Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 189.



**FIGURE 5.1**  
Doris Salcedo,  
*Shibboleth*,  
Tate Modern,  
London, 2007

## CHAPTER 5

### Reluctant nomads: Biennial culture and its discontents

*It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism which has made so many homeless, which has torn up tongues and peoples by the root, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely...*

George Steiner, *Extraterritorial*

*Unfortunately, the world now seems divided between what Jacques Attali calls the rich and poor nomads: the nomadic elite who travel at will, expanding their world, and the disenfranchised poor who travel because they are desperate to improve their condition. However indigent artists may sometimes be, we in the art world are very distinct from those migratory laborers who cross borders illegally, return again and again, live on the margins, negotiate cultures because there is no other way to earn a living.*

Carol Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism"<sup>1</sup>

In October 2007, Doris Salcedo performed another sort of archaeological dig when she occupied the massive space of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall with *Shibboleth*, a 548-foot fissure that snakes its way along the length of the floor, beginning as a hairline crack and at times gaping to expose what appears to be a bottomless crevasse, lined with concrete and chain link fencing (fig. 5.1). A complex meditation on the experience of immigration that simultaneously evokes the often treacherous experience of crossing borders and the "negative space" occupied by migrants within the increasingly policed borders of the European Union, the work seems determined to implicate the Tate itself in this rendering of gaping chasms and perilous crossings, connecting the building to a colonial history of exclusion and exploitation that underpins the modernism celebrated within.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, and to the extent that Salcedo employs the museum space

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 21; Carol Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (summer 1999): 27.

<sup>2</sup> Salcedo observes: "The museum is the centre, the very heart of high, refined European culture. This culture is what the right-wingers are trying to 'save' and what the

as site, medium, *and* object of critical analysis of embedded social structures of power and injustice, *Shibboleth* can and has been justly identified as an heir to the genre of institutional critique associated with artists like Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke. Indeed, Salcedo's work is deeply reminiscent of Haacke's *Germania* exhibit at the 1993 Venice Biennial, likewise a literal intervention into the fabric of an institutional space that sought to expose the cracks in its artifice of neutrality and universality.<sup>3</sup>

But Salcedo's intervention operates at another level that I aim to tease out in this chapter. By directing her institutional critique toward the cultural, political, and geographical exclusions specific to the dislocating experience of migration, I submit that her work also operates as an intervention into the "romance of nomadism" that arguably pervades the production and circulation of contemporary art—a romance that has only grown more passionate in the decade since art historian Carol Becker identified a tendency within the international art world to embrace an abstracted ideal of transnationalism while failing to attend to its lived realities.<sup>4</sup> In this way, I further suggest, Salcedo's intervention at the Tate Modern is emblematic of a *new* model of institutional critique that has recently surfaced—one that targets not the grounded, venerable cultural institutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but rather the itinerant, situational "non-sites" of art production and reception in the twenty-first, now commonly grouped under the rubric of biennial culture (but which also include such phenomena as "relational" art practices and the de-institutionalization of art). The aim of this chapter is to identify some aesthetic

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immigrants are jeopardizing." In Ossian Ward, "Into the Breach," *Time Out London: Guide to Tate Modern*, 25 October 2007, 4.

<sup>3</sup> As discussed in chapter 3, Haacke's intervention at the German pavilion comprised several elements, including the smashing of the interior marble floors.

<sup>4</sup> Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism," 22-29.

tactics aligned with practices that seek to critique biennial culture from within its nomadic model of art production and reception, and to analyze how this model of critique—which I refer to as “reluctant nomadism”—is harnessed to rethink the terms of contemporary art’s engagement with questions of home and the unhomely in an age of unprecedented migration and mobility.

From the outset, it seems crucial not to confuse this emerging set of critical aesthetic practices with a genre that has been identified as the “new institutionalism” in contemporary art. Epitomized by the relational projects of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Andrea Fraser among others, and characterized by what critic Claire Doherty terms a “rhetoric of temporary/transient encounters, states of flux, and open-endedness,”<sup>5</sup> the new institutionalism, also in line with the institutional critiques of the 1970s and ‘80s, likewise seeks to transform institutional spaces from within.<sup>6</sup> But in privileging flux over stasis and situation over site, these relational practices fall quite naturally into step with the emergence of biennial culture and its almost feverishly ambulatory ways. As Doherty observes, “The biennial bears a resemblance to a circus blowing through town, floating its propensity for transient encounters. It’s a natural home, then, for the new paradigms of artistic practice which have emerged concurrently with these new theorizations of place and engagement.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the artists under consideration in this chapter articulate a self-reflexive discomfort with the artist’s

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Doherty, “The Institution Is Dead! Long Live the Institution!” *Engage Journal*, no. 15 (summer 2004), <http://www.engage.org/publications/ejournalx.aspx?v=15>.

<sup>6</sup> Recently, debate has emerged as to the legitimacy of relational art practices as a new wave of institutional critique, the contours of which are traced in Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum International* 44, no. 1 (September 2005); Isabelle Graw, “Beyond Institutional Critique,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JPR/Ringier, 2006); and Brian Holmes, “Extradisciplinary Investigations: Towards a New Critique of Institutions,” *Transversal*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, Vienna, January 2006, <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/holmes/en>.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Doherty, “The New Situationists,” in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 8.

presumptive status as wandering nomad and the art institution's emerging role as a platform or station along the way. Like Doris Salcedo, for whom the globalized artist's privileged mobility serves as a platform from which to address geopolitical issues of dislocation and displacement,<sup>8</sup> these reluctant nomads—from Alfredo Jaar and Emily Jacir to Ursula Biemann and Yto Barrada—investigate what it means to belong in a world in which the conceptual legitimacy of “home” is increasingly debased, even while home as lived reality is increasingly tenuous to much of the world's citizenry.

In this chapter, I address both biennial culture and its internalized critiques in the context of the ongoing global migration crisis, and suggest that critical practices of reluctant nomadism offer sustained and useful meditations on the concepts and conditions of local and global, centre and periphery, belonging and not belonging, home and the unhomely. I focus in particular on the Second International Seville Biennial of Contemporary Art or BIACS II (2006), entitled *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, an exhibition that sought to investigate what curator Okwui Enwezor terms the “complex nature of adjacency”<sup>9</sup> in contemporary geopolitics but itself inadvertently became a tense but productive point of rupture between the local and the global, wherein global society's “phantom scenes” of unsettled cohabitation were both reflected upon *and* inadvertently reflected. To explore the implications of this rupture, I turn my attention to three video installations featured at BIACS II—Tony Labat's *Day Labor: Mapping the Outside* (Fat Chance Bruce Nauman) (2006), Yto Barrada's *The*

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<sup>8</sup> Salcedo observes that, “Displaced is the most precise word to describe the position of the contemporary artist. Displacement allows us to see the other side of the coin.... It is obviously a position that generates tension and conflict, but I believe that from the position of displacement art derives its most powerful expression.” In Carlos Basualdo, “Interview with Doris Salcedo,” in Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “The Unhomely,” curatorial statement, Foundation for the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville, 2006, [http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site\\_en/about.htm](http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site_en/about.htm).



*Smuggler* (2006), and Ursula Biemann's *Europlex* (2003). Engaging with Mieke Bal's recent theorization of "migratory aesthetics," a concept that is useful for describing art practices that "reflect and contest the unequal power relations that underpin the myriad movements occasioned by globalization,"<sup>10</sup> I identify two tactics—the stalling of time and the breaching of borders—used to operationalize such an aesthetic in these art practices.

Throughout, I argue that the tactical use of migratory aesthetics presents a direct (if subtle) challenge to the romanticization of homelessness that underwrites the biennialization of contemporary art. These works, all of which expose and explore the complex and often dangerous machinations of eking out a living on and across contested borders, also engage in their own "smuggling"<sup>11</sup> activity; as explicit condemnations of the exclusions engendered by global capitalism, they can also, I suggest, be read as implicit critiques of the nomadic tendencies of the biennial culture in which they circulate. My thesis, in essence, is that large-scale international exhibitions, whether deliberately or inadvertently, participate in and promote a nomadic logic of trans-, even post-national circuitry that in the same instance is being challenged by artists who are urgently mapping the human costs of global flow.

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<sup>10</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, "Introduction: Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making*, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Art historian Irit Rogoff has recently advocated "smuggling" as a conceptual hinge for thinking through new, post-binary forms of opposition to dominant culture. One of the aims of this chapter will be to explore relevant points of intersection between smuggling as a subversive cross-border activity and smuggling as an aesthetic practice. See "'Smuggling': A Curatorial Model," in *Under Construction: Perspectives on Institutional Practice*, ed. Vanessa Müller and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Cologne: Walther König, 2006).

### **Biennial culture and its discontents**

Clearly, any definition of “biennial culture” will be as heterogeneous and unruly as the phenomenon itself, whose breadth is global and whose conceptual concerns are largely dependent on the country in which the exhibition is mounted and the intellectual pursuits of the curator chosen to lead it. In addition, biennial, triennial, and other large-scale international exhibitions fall under a wide variety of formats—from the Venice Biennale, which continues (since its inception in 1895) to operate according to a model based on national pavilions, to the Liverpool Biennial, which invites international artists to engage directly with the city.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding these challenges, the term “biennial culture” has come increasingly to stand for recurring large-scale international exhibitions, hosted by cities (often in order to boost international profile) and organized by guest curators around specific themes. However, I do not intend in this chapter to codify one definition of a still-nascent paradigm, but instead to intervene in ongoing debates regarding the ways in which biennial culture tends to position itself in relation to neoliberal models of globalization. Indeed, since the mid-1990s, debates regarding the “biennialization” of contemporary art have focused largely on the role of international exhibitions vis-à-vis multiple facets of globalization, sparked by the increasing frequency with which large-scale exhibitions have “assumed the unique position of both reflecting globalism...and taking up globalization itself as an idea.”<sup>13</sup>

Already in 1989, Jean-Hubert Martin’s *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, a reconsideration of Western art through the lens of postcolonial theory, is understood to have set the stage for the globalization of art

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<sup>12</sup> See La Biennale di Venezia, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/>; and Liverpool Biennial—International Festival of Contemporary Art, <http://biennial.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Griffin, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum International* 52, no. 3 (November 2003): 152.

exhibitions. Arguably, though, it was Okwui Enwezor's 2002 Documenta 11, a sprawling multi-city circuit of lectures, symposia, and exhibitions, that rendered the "deterritorialization" of the international art circuit a global phenomenon, and globalization itself a matter of concern within the international art community; recent examples are copious, including Charles Merewether's Fifteenth Biennale of Sydney, *Zones of Contact* (2006) and Hou Hanrou's Tenth International Istanbul Biennial, *Not Only Possible but Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War* (2007). The terms according to which these two recent exhibitions have intervened in the discourses of globalization have been variously lauded and condemned in a language and logic that reflects the ongoing debates regarding biennialization. On one hand, biennial culture has been praised for finally abandoning modernist myths of universality, instead embracing multiplicity, hybridity, the interstices, the West's peripheries, and so on. At their best, curator Rosa Martinez insists, biennials offer "a glimpse of a transnational utopia,"<sup>14</sup> with Carlos Basualdo adding that by positioning themselves outside the commercial market, biennials are uniquely capable of escaping the commodification of contemporary art.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the rapid proliferation of biennials in all corners of the world has been vigorously disparaged as at best "largely conceptualized around certain curators' jet-set lifestyles"<sup>16</sup> with "little or no lasting impact on the inhabitants or on the cultural life of their host cities,"<sup>17</sup> and at worst propelled by a "colonial logic [that simply]

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<sup>14</sup> In Carlos Basualdo, "Launching Site: Interview with Rosa Martinez," *Artforum International* 37, no. 10 (summer 1999): 39.

<sup>15</sup> Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill and Søren Andreasen (London: Open Editions, 2007), 45-47.

<sup>16</sup> Jen Budney, "Politics in Aspic: Reflections on the Biennale of Sydney and Its Local Effects," *FUSE Magazine* 30, no. 1 (January 2007): 10.

<sup>17</sup> Doherty, "The New Situationists," 8.

underwrites the expansion of the art world's traditional borders, as if the art world itself were gleefully following globalization's imperial mandate."<sup>18</sup>

But the most cogent analysis of both the merits and limits of biennial culture derives from Carol Becker's response to "Trade Routes," Enwezor's Second Biennial in Johannesburg of 1997, perhaps the first effort to assemble an international set of actors (artists, curators and cultural theorists) to consider the socioeconomic consequences of neoliberal globalization. Praising the endeavour for imagining a "longed-for time when national boundaries will be dissolved,"<sup>19</sup> Becker nevertheless chides the curatorial team for neglecting the geopolitical context in which the exhibition was staged. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were in session, and while South Africa was grappling with both the legacy of apartheid and the future of the nation, the decision to host an international exhibition that "positioned itself beyond the concept of nationhood [and] outside the prevailing debate of its geographic context" was, Becker suggests politely, "unfortunate."<sup>20</sup> What Becker is observing here is a perhaps inevitable paradox that adheres to projects seeking to imagine a better world: the actually existing world can have the "unfortunate" effect of making such utopian ventures seem naïve, even counterproductive. But what looked to many like naivety, even negligence,<sup>21</sup> was instead the product of a well defined—

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<sup>18</sup> Pamela M. Lee, "Boundary Issues: The Art World under the Sign of Globalism," *Artforum International* 42, no. 3 (November 2003): 165. Often, however, the expectations surrounding these exhibitions are as unwieldy as the events themselves. In an otherwise positive critique of Documenta 11, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie concedes that the exhibition "did not succeed in disrupting the West's drive for global hegemony"—as the author suggests, a rather "exorbitant" demand. In "Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (spring 2005): 86-89.

<sup>19</sup> Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism," 26.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz, eds., *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press, 1999); and Jen Budney, "Who's It For? The 2nd Johannesburg Biennial," *Third Text*, no. 42 (spring 1998).

and now, a decade later, well rehearsed—reconceptualization of the terms and conditions of site-specificity as a model for artistic engagement, a rethinking that has precipitated something of a rift in contemporary curatorial methodologies. The move away from site-oriented practices also, I suggest, generates a serious challenge to the artist or curator committed to probing the repercussions of globalization.

The battle over site-specificity as a model for socially engaged art has been waged on two fronts, both of which have profoundly affected how biennial culture has developed and, correspondingly, how this culture has responded to the complex set of problems attached to the current global order. First, a perceived tendency among artists associated with community and public art to treat place anthropologically has been widely contested, notably by Hal Foster in his 1996 “The Artist as Ethnographer,” a now pivotal essay that sought to problematize art practices that “engage the locale in the production of their (self-) representation” and that accordingly, in Foster’s opinion, “confirm rather than contest the authority of mapper over site in a way that reduces the desired exchange of dialogical fieldwork.”<sup>22</sup> For Foster, the primary danger of such practices is an inevitable “identitarian reduction” of places and their inhabitants that, he argues, “threatens to collapse new site-specific work into identity politics *tout court*.”<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, as place itself has become an increasingly unstable epistemological category in both theory and practice, site-specific art has come

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<sup>22</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 197.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 198. More recent debates concerning the ethnographic dilemma of site-specific practices are played out in Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (February 2006); Alex Coles, ed., *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and New York: University of California Press, 2004); and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004).

under fire for advancing an outdated methodology that relies on nostalgic, essentializing visions of place and emplacement. Reinforced by the “nomadology” of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari<sup>24</sup> along with conceptualizations of postmodernity’s “non-places,”<sup>25</sup> critics of phenomenologically-oriented site-specificity such as Doherty, James Meyer and Miwon Kwon have advocated a notion of site imagined alternatively as “an intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation,”<sup>26</sup> notably in the practices of artists like Renée Green and Gabriel Orozco—characterized by Meyer as a new breed of “artist-travellers.”<sup>27</sup> Both Meyer and Kwon caution against universalizing valorizations of the nomadic condition; Kwon in particular is wary of the ways in which methodologies privileging instability and impermanence are “called forth to validate, even romanticize, the material and socioeconomic realities of an itinerant lifestyle.”<sup>28</sup> However, both reserve their most emphatic criticism for those site-specific models that “reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity,”<sup>29</sup> and this critique has been carried into curatorial discourse in the form of international exhibitions that, from Documenta 11 to BIACS II, likewise posit

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<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986). The rich and complex theorization of nomadology in the work of Deleuze and Guattari is beyond the scope of this chapter in which I am instead concerned with how philosophical investigations of nomadic subjectivity have been reduced to formulaic visions of the artist-wanderer. For a thorough overview of Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadology, see Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze’s Way: Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007), esp. 113-66.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Miwon Kwon, “The Wrong Place,” in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 30.

<sup>27</sup> James Meyer, “Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art,” in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Kwon, “The Wrong Place,” 31.

<sup>29</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 163. Kwon here is responding directly to Lucy Lippard’s place-based counter-argument to the nomadic model of art practice, in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997).

“place” as a shifting signifier of dislocated identifications that can no longer be accommodated by static visions of site-specificity.

The ongoing debates regarding practices of site-specificity have occasioned two markedly divergent methodologies for curating large-scale international exhibitions. On one hand, there are those manifestations that privilege a concentrated attention to site, leading Claire Doherty to suggest that “the rhetoric of place has become the rallying cry” of many biennial curators.<sup>30</sup> The Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, for example, positions itself as a series of sustained encounters between artists, residents, and the city itself (for the 2006 exhibition, artists were invited to spend a significant period of time in the city, and to produce “context-specific” commissioned works).<sup>31</sup> This biennial in particular, widely understood to have enhanced the city’s fledgling tourist economy since its inception in 2000, has also been widely disparaged by critics who, in accord with Foster’s critique of contemporary art’s ethnographic impulse, remain unconvinced of the exhibition model’s capacity to generate an engagement that is both meaningful and aesthetically rigorous; some critics go so far as to suggest that the Liverpool Biennial’s attention to site is “wide and shallow rather than narrow and deep—sightseeing rather than insight.”<sup>32</sup>

As if in response to a growing chorus of claims that site-sensitive international exhibitions such as the Liverpool Biennial, in their “emphasis on the

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<sup>30</sup> Claire Doherty, “Curating Wrong Places... Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill and Søren Andreasen (London: Open Editions, 2007), 101. According to Doherty, the predominance of place in biennial culture is actually a convergence of three models: large-scale public art projects such as Mary Jane Jacobs’ *Culture in Action* of 1994; research-based public programs such as Artangel in London; and the artist-in-residence tradition. For Doherty, all three models represent “a notion of place that is out-of-date” (103).

<sup>31</sup> See Lewis Biggs, ed., *Liverpool Biennial: International 06* (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Declan McGonagle, cited in Claire Doherty, “Location Location,” *Art Monthly*, no. 281 (November 2004): 9. See also Pryle Behrman, “In Search of the Ideal Biennale,” *Art Monthly*, no. 301 (November 2006); and Thomas Wulffen, “Liverpool Biennale,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 173 (November-December 2004).

city as research subject, interlocutor, social context, and physical site,"<sup>33</sup> are susceptible to overly anthropological, even neo-colonial, approaches to site-specificity, the contrary impulse has been to renounce context altogether, to embrace the itinerancy of both the artist and the biennial context as ideally de-centred positions from which to explore how the interrelated spheres of mobility, migration, and globalization are currently reshaping the world. To a great extent, this shift away from site-specific or site-sensitive biennials has allowed curators like Enwezor to avoid any perceived tendency to anthropologize their host cities.<sup>34</sup> There is also little risk of indulging in an essentialized, outdated notion of site when site itself is taken off the curatorial menu. However, as Carol Becker advises, there are risks associated with jettisoning attention to place, particularly in the context of art exhibitions that purport to address current models of globalism. The danger, as I see it, is that once the decision has been made to un-moor the international exhibition from its grounding in a specific locale, the biennial risks being transformed into precisely the paean to globalization's uneven processes of development and deterritorialization that its detractors fear it has already become.

For Becker, the "theoretical transmigration"<sup>35</sup> so thoroughly endorsed by the culture of international exhibitions smacks of a romanticism that, I would add, is uncannily familiar. Indeed it would appear that biennial culture has supplied contemporary art with a convenient replacement for hackneyed, now

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<sup>33</sup> Doherty, "Location Location," 9.

<sup>34</sup> The neo-colonial charge is perhaps stickier. The trend, advanced largely by Enwezor, to use biennials as a context in which to tap the wealth of the world's art peripheries has been critiqued, as Paul Ardenne notes, as the West's ploy to use "its art biennials as a way of externalizing its art and aesthetics in very much the same way as it does its economic activity, by relocating and turning globalization into profit." In "From Biennale to Banal? Schmooze and Globalization," *Art Press*, no. 291 (June 2003): 43. See also Ogbechie, who in "Ordering the Universe" problematizes the "colonization" of artists from marginalized regions into major exhibitions such as Documenta 11.

<sup>35</sup> Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism," 28.



largely discredited, myths of the artist-sage, artist-madman, and artist-melancholic: artists who ride the biennial circuit are once again idealized as “poets unhoused and wanderers across language.” But whereas George Steiner’s observation reflected a Frankfurt School-inspired sense of unease at the prospect of making art comfortably following the horrors of World War II and its legacy of mass displacement,<sup>36</sup> identifying in the work of Joyce and Nabokov a literary lexicon for this collective unease, the romanticization of nomadism in the arts today speaks less *to* the current global crisis of migration than in oblivious *denial* of it. It is this perceived failure to address the vast gulf separating “rich nomads” from “poor nomads” that has instigated a backlash of sorts, arising especially from postcolonial theory; Edward Said, for instance, stresses that “the difference between earlier exiles and those of our own time is...scale,” adding that today, “exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible.”<sup>37</sup> For Said, ours is the “age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration”—an age that requires us to “map territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself.” We must, he concludes, “first set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies are have been created.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed the limits of nomadology are acknowledged even by one of its most articulate advocates, Rosi Braidotti, who observes that “Being nomadic, homeless, an exile, a refugee, a Bosnian rape-in-war victim, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, is no metaphor,” but instead a devastatingly

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<sup>36</sup> Adorno remarks pointedly: “It is immoral to feel at home in one’s own home.” In “On the Question, ‘What Is German?’” (1965), *New German Critique* (Special issue on *Heimat*), no. 36 (fall 1985): 121.

<sup>37</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 357-8.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 358-9.

specific set of material conditions—"history tattooed on your body. One may be empowered or beautified by it, but most people are not; some just die of it."<sup>39</sup>

The intention of this chapter is not to adjudicate whether the renunciation of site-specificity in biennial culture is, in and of itself, capable of building a productive framework for responding to what Enwezor refers to as globalization's "multiple mutinies."<sup>40</sup> As Miwon Kwon concludes, "it is not a matter of choosing sides—between models of nomadism and sedentariness."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, I would further suggest that to oppose these models in the biennial context is to create something of a false dichotomy, because the multinational exhibition, whether located in Liverpool or Kassel, Istanbul or Berlin, whether composed of twenty artists engaged in year-long context-specific projects or two hundred artists flown in hours before the event, is by definition a peripatetic venture, bound and indebted to the forces of globalization that it so frequently seeks to problematize. As Pryle Behrman observes astutely in his critique of the Liverpool Biennial, the curators and artists who submit themselves to a "studious immersion in the local environment" nevertheless are "creatures of the global art system [who move in the] transnational and nomadic world of the biennale circuit."<sup>42</sup> But if not even the most site-sensitive endeavours are capable of escaping the nomadic paradigm of biennial culture, is there a way instead to

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<sup>39</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 3. Braidotti's feminist appropriation of Deleuzian nomadism is based, in a nutshell, on the notion that "Mobility is one of the aspects of freedom, and as such it is something new and exciting for women: being free to move around, to go where one wants to is a right that women have only just started to gain." In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 256. For a feminist critique of the embrace of mobility in cultural theory, see Janet Wolff, "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism," *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (May 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society," in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* (Seville: Foundation for the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville, 2006), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Behrman, "In Search of the Ideal Biennale," 6.

harness the logic, energy and structural frameworks of nomadism to critique its very foundations? Is there a way, in other words, to imagine a set of aesthetic practices that wear their badge of nomadism reluctantly, with a sharp eye directed at both the romance of nomadism and the conditions of less-than-romantic mobility that it occlude, and if so, what are some of the tactics employed by such practitioners?

### **Reluctant nomads**

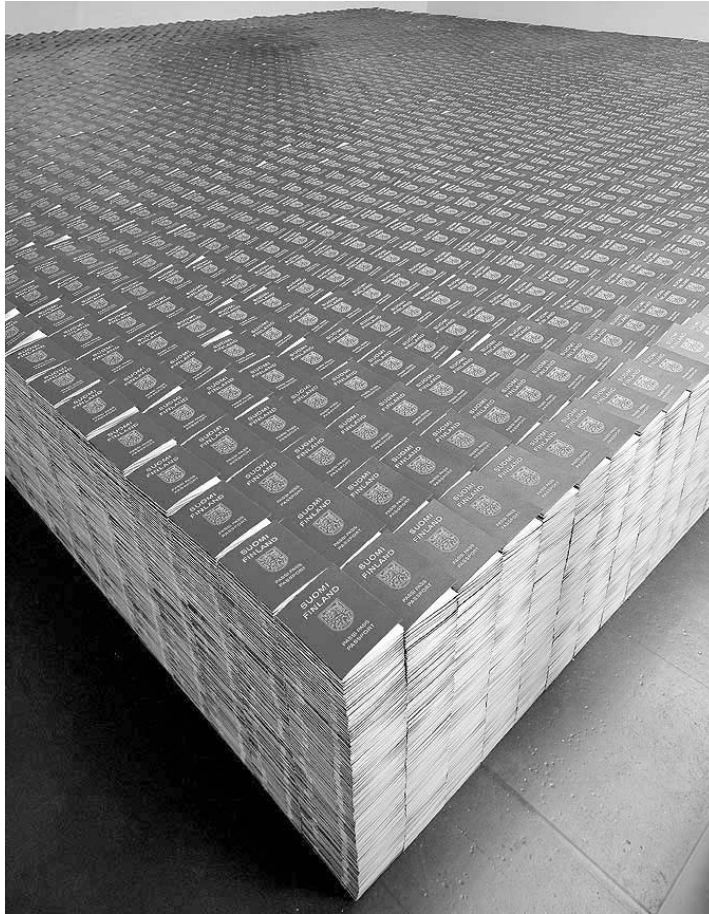
For art critic Julian Stallabrass, there are few if any avenues of criticality to be located within the *modus operandi* of biennial culture, which, he argues, “not only embodies but actively propagandizes [neo-liberal] globalization.”<sup>43</sup> To flesh out his critique of the culture of internationalism that biennial culture both reflects and propels, Stallabrass spotlights Alfredo Jaar’s *One Million Finnish Passports* (fig. 5.2), a 1995 installation of one million passport replicas intended to recall the would-be immigrants who have been turned away at Finland’s strictly guarded borders.<sup>44</sup> For Stallabrass, the work epitomizes biennial culture’s privileging of mobility over national determination and “global capital” over “local concerns.”<sup>45</sup> But even if it is agreed that international art exhibitions tend to perpetuate (while paradoxically condemning) a myth of unfettered mobility that validates, if unwittingly, the more pernicious world-is-flat, end-of-history, free-trade free-for-all underpinnings of the neo-liberal capitalist brand of globalization, to map this critique onto a project such as *One Million Finnish*

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<sup>43</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>44</sup> According to Jaar, one million is the number of migrants that Finland would accept if its immigration policies matched those of its European neighbors. As if acknowledging this fact as a threat, the Finnish government ordered the “passports” closely guarded during their showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki and destroyed shortly thereafter. See <http://www.alfredojaar.net>.

<sup>45</sup> Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 30.



**FIGURE 5.2**  
Alfredo Jaar,  
*One Million  
Finnish Passports*,  
Helsinki, 1995



**FIGURE 5.3**  
Ursula Biemann,  
*Contained Mobility*,  
2004 (video stills)

*Passports* is to reduce the complexity of globalization into an unproductively oppositional paradigm whereby claims for transnational solidarity and entreaties to rich nations to share their bloated slices of the global pie are conflated with the interests of the multinational corporate elite. Far from advancing the cause of global capitalism, Jaar's project instead directly confronts the two-tiered nature of neo-liberal globalization, characterized by an unprecedented and seemingly unrestricted global flow of wealth and goods that has precipitated a global migration crisis, which in turn, in a sort of anti-domino effect, has seen an unprecedented fortification of the borders of America and Europe. Checkpoints, border fences, remote satellite surveillance systems, and regressive immigration standards—these are not the antithesis, but rather the ugly underbelly of free market globalism, and it is precisely this underbelly that Jaar seeks to expose.<sup>46</sup>

Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's video installation, *Contained Mobility* (fig. 5.3), commissioned by the Third Liverpool Biennial in 2004, illustrates both the two-tiered nature of globalization and some of the aesthetic tactics that artists employ to uncover and map these processes. The installation recounts the troubled journey of a Russian asylum seeker named Anatol Zimmerman, whose life is thrown into chaos following a series of unfortunate incidents and who treks across the continent in desperate search of a new and better life. Following Zimmerman through illicit border crossings, police arrest, detention in a camp for asylum seekers and eventually to Liverpool where his future is left uncertain, the video finds a useful trope in the image of the shipping container, which, as Biemann observes, symbolizes globalization's contradictory logic by connoting "a

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<sup>46</sup> For elaboration of the complex relationships between globalization and national sovereignty, see Heather Nicol and Ian Townsend-Gault, eds., *Holding the Line: Borders in a Global World* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005). On what Brian Massumi refers to as late capitalism's "checkpoint" logic, see Mary Zournazi, "Navigating Movements: A Conversation with Brian Massumi," in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 228-31.

quality of confinement and enclosure while implying at the same time a systematized world-wide mobility."<sup>47</sup> Translating these contradictions into the syntax of visual culture, the installation tracks Zimmerman's passage with a synchronized double projection: one screen, an uninterrupted series of fluid video recordings, documents the smooth flow of goods across borders, while the other projects a shaky, disjointing sequence of images representing the uneasy migration of Zimmerman—described by the artist as an "itinerant body [who] moves through non-civil places, waits for status in off-social spaces, and lives in a condition of permanent non-belonging."<sup>48</sup> In this way, *Contained Mobility* constitutes a deliberation on globalization that occludes neither the local context of Liverpool nor the culture of transnationalism in which the biennial is inevitably positioned, but instead engages self-reflexively in a critical appraisal of both the promises and perils of mobility today.

In their complex renderings of what is now often referred to as global apartheid, Alfredo Jaar and Ursula Biemann join a growing number of artists, including Doris Salcedo, Mona Hatoum, Allan Sekula, and the Italian collective Multiplicity (to name just a few), whose meditations on the treacherous paths of transnational migration constitute an undermining from within of biennial culture's ongoing narratives of transience and mobility. To a certain extent, these practices therefore align with James Meyer's conceptualization of the artist-traveller, which he divides into two groups: lyrical and critical nomads. In the practices of "lyrical nomads" such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Gabriel Orozco, mobility is figured as a series of poetic, ephemeral everyday experiences that become fodder for aesthetic contemplation, the upshot being that the material

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<sup>47</sup> Ursula Biemann, "Contained Mobility," 2004, [http://www.geobodies.org/01\\_art\\_and\\_videos/2004\\_contained\\_mobility/](http://www.geobodies.org/01_art_and_videos/2004_contained_mobility/).

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Elisabeth Philips-Slavkoff, "Ursula Biemann—Contained Mobility," 2004, <http://www.elisabethphilips-slavkoff.com/pdf/Bieman%20Contained%20Mobility.pdf>.

conditions of these itinerant encounters are obscured. “Critical nomads,” on the contrary (here, Renée Green is considered paradigmatic), address the discursive, historical, and institutional conditions of travel, and “expose these conditions as the historical ground of the practice itself.”<sup>49</sup> Like Meyer’s “critical nomads,” the artists with whom this chapter (and indeed this dissertation) is concerned are artist-travelers casting a critical gaze upon the material conditions of mobility and non-belonging. But the affinity breaks down in the details. In his examination of Renée Green’s contribution to the 1993 multi-artist *Project Unité* at Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation housing complex in Firminy, France,<sup>50</sup> Meyer explains that Green installed and slept in a tent inside the apartment she was assigned for the duration of the exhibition, alluding to “the nomad artist’s plight of never having a home.”<sup>51</sup> For Meyer, Green’s project represents an important intervention into the lyrical tendencies of the culture of nomadism, since “to be a working producer today is to be constantly on the move [and] working conditions are hardly optimum.”<sup>52</sup> But without casting doubt on the accuracy of this observation, I am compelled to question the extent to which it (or Green’s installation) critically intervenes in the romantic lyricism of nomadism, and conversely the extent to which it simply imbues the romance with a dose of melancholy. Indeed, I submit that a truly critical nomadic practice would need to expose not only the conditions that hinder the freedom and comfort of the artist-traveller, but also and importantly the conditions and hierarchies that *facilitate* the artist’s mobility in an era of tightly controlled transnational movement. And, I propose, it is precisely this genre of criticality that informs what I am calling reluctant nomadism.

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<sup>49</sup> Meyer, “Nomads,” 17.

<sup>50</sup> See chapter 2, n. 45.

<sup>51</sup> Meyer, “Nomads,” 23.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Reluctant nomads convey the risk that in our rush to embrace the language and logic of nomadism, we forget or elide the very real dangers that attend to the geopolitical conditions of the migrant, the exile, the undocumented worker, the asylum seeker, and all those global citizens for whom deterritorialization is not neither a trope for the fragmentation of the postmodern subject nor an opportunity to expand one's sphere of influence and marketability, but instead an intensely corporeal state of impoverished marginalization. Recognizing, with Jacques Attali, an important distinction between rich nomads who "experience the world vicariously and safely" and poor nomads "seeking to escape from the destitute periphery,"<sup>53</sup> these artists insist on mapping, not transcending, the cultural, political and geographical borders that define and confine our subjectivities. In their work, borders are underlined as dynamic social spaces—sites of both repression and transgression. And when this work is carried out, as it so often is, under the umbrella of large-scale international exhibitions, they have the capacity to radically confront the romance of nomadism that biennial culture would seem to promote.

I will not be first to suggest that artists are taking on the task of casting a critical gaze toward the excesses and contradictions of neo-liberal globalization, even from within biennial culture. Critic Marcus Verhagen, for instance, observes that artists who frequent the international exhibition circuit are increasingly challenging that system's embrace of, or at least collusion with, the logic of global markets. Noting that the most acclaimed works are often those that "put forward a critical appraisal of the biennial or pointedly detach themselves from it" (he mentions, for example, Santiago Sierra's intervention into the Spanish pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, discussed in chapter 3),<sup>54</sup> Verhagen nevertheless argues

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<sup>53</sup> Jacques Attali, *Millennium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World Order*, trans. Leila Conners and Nathan Gardels (New York: Random House, 1991), 105, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Marcus Verhagen, "Biennale Inc.," *Art Monthly*, no. 287 (June 2005): 2.



that these projects are too easily absorbed, disarmed, and recuperated by their institutional framework—an argument reminiscent of debates surrounding institutional critique in the 1980s.<sup>55</sup> But there is a fatalism attached to Verhagen's critique that, I suggest, obstructs the potential for critical efficacy in projects such as Sierra's. For while it is arguably true that "The biennial as a whole can't aspire to a cogent assessment of globalization because it is itself wholly shaped by global pressures,"<sup>56</sup> then surely artists within this system do possess the capacity, however limited, to challenge the romantic notions according to which biennial culture is able to elide these same global pressures. The artists whose work I align with the notion of reluctant nomadism are surely deeply embedded in the deterritorializing logic of such events. But while it would be convenient to proffer these practices, which takes place in and around borders, checkpoints, and other contested sites of globalization, as further manifestations of biennial culture's imperial enterprise, I suggest instead that artists like Salcedo, Jaar, and Biemann operate both within and against the biennial system, employing what Mieke Bal terms a migratory aesthetic to critique—if complicitly—the celebratory nomadism of biennial culture.

### **Phantom scenes in an *Unhomely* exhibition**

The problematics that attend to modelling a transnational framework for the circulation of contemporary art, and the extent to which this framework can be understood to both reflect globalization's excesses *and* challenge its exclusions,

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<sup>55</sup> In a parallel discourse, contrary to Andrea Fraser's 1995 conclusion that artists can *never* escape the institution, Brian Holmes identifies what he terms a "third phase" of institutional critique constituting "projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside [the institution], but rather, extend elsewhere." I find this argument compelling, but the implied assumption that artists can entirely escape the ever-expanding global art system seems increasingly untenable. Consider one of his primary examples, Ursula Biemann, whose work, if not always produced for and within the biennial system, then certainly circulates within it, as we will see. See Holmes, "Extradisciplinary Investigations," n.p.

<sup>56</sup> Verhagen, "Biennale Inc.," 3.

find an ideal case study in the Second International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville (BIACS II), curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2006. Like Enwezor's previous large-scale exhibitions—Johannesburg in 1997 and Documenta 11 in 2002—this exhibition paid sustained and thoughtful critical attention to both the existence and transgressions of geographic, cultural, and political borders in the rapidly globalizing spheres of art, economics, and politics. Titled *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, the exhibition invited ninety-one artists from thirty-five countries to examine how the turmoils that seem to define the contemporary world—war, poverty, famine, and multiple refugee crises, to name a few—have transformed conventional modes of recognition—proximity, neighborliness, and intimacy, for example—into defamiliarizing “forms of *non-recognition*”—self-containment, xenophobia, and incarceration.<sup>57</sup> The curatorial program, in other words, was to trace how and to what extent the vectors of contact that have materialized the long-awaited global village quickly fashioned that village into a place of fear, discrimination, and alienation, where the phantasmagoric nature of the international order is itself haunted with “phantom scenes” of conflict and confrontation that threaten our collective sense of safety and stability while radically reconfiguring the very nature of home.<sup>58</sup>

This exploration of the ways in which the emergent global order has destabilized both the conceptual framework and material realities of home actually has its roots in Enwezor's 1997 Johannesburg Biennial, which likewise investigated the idea that “‘Home’ as a sign of stability is no longer easily sustainable.”<sup>59</sup> A decade after Enwezor's observation that “Our cities and lives

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<sup>57</sup> Enwezor, “The Unhomely,” 14. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Consider, for example, how the machinations of the US “war on terror” transformed “homeland” into a term laden with connotations of security, defense, and suspicion.

<sup>59</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Trade Routes,” in *Trade Routes: History and Geography. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale 1997*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Johannesburg: Thorold's Africana Books, 1997), 8.

have been transformed by the ever changing direction of the compass as populations drift and masses of people are submitted to the most horrific methods of genocide, starvation, and cruelty,”<sup>60</sup> the stakes appear to have multiplied. Ongoing conflict in the Middle East, unprecedented levels of police surveillance in cities and on borders around the world, sharply increasing rates of incarceration and detention, and refugee crises from Sudan to Afghanistan to Iraq constitute what Enwezor, borrowing a term from postcolonial theorist David Scott, calls the “problem-spaces” in which the “multiple mutinies and upheavals that currently beset global society” are localized.<sup>61</sup> And indeed, the art works represented at BIACS II—from Thomas Ruff’s uncannily pixellated photographs of war zones to Harun Farocki’s painstaking reconstruction of abuse in a California state prison using surveillance camera footage, and from Andreas Slominski’s threateningly human-scaled animal traps to Lamia Joreige’s intimate interviews with survivors of conflict in Lebanon (figs. 5.4 to 5.7)—captured, in various ways, the “problem-spaces” that render our times and spaces unhomely.

Insofar as BIACS II sought to address the increasingly antagonistic modes of expressing belonging and unbelonging in the twenty-first century, it might be argued that the exhibition itself undertook its assignment as a roving nomadic circus with reluctance. Indeed, one of the problem-spaces identified within the curatorial framework was the current debate over art’s proximity to society, and one of the exhibition’s chief concerns to contest the recuperation of “the romantic illusion of pure distance and total autonomy” in contemporary art, instead presenting a case for art’s crucial role of articulating and intervening in contemporary conditions of upheaval by facilitating innovative modes of

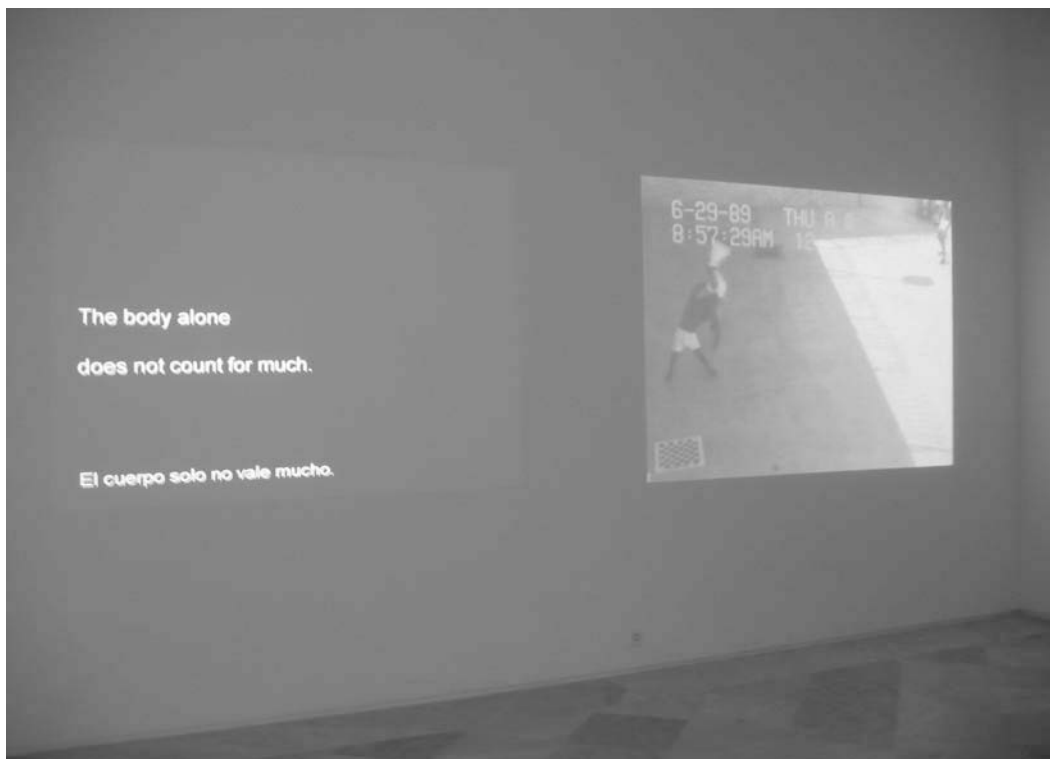
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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Enwezor, “The Unhomely,” 12-13. See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), whose concept of “problem-spaces” is elaborated below.



**FIGURE 5.4**  
Thomas Ruff,  
*jpeg wi01 (war  
Iraq)*  
2004



**FIGURE 5.5**  
Harun Farocki, *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, 2000



**FIGURE 5.6**  
Andreas Slominski,  
*Dog Trap*, 1999



**FIGURE 5.7**  
Lamia Joreige,  
*Objects of War*,  
1999-2006  
(video still)

affiliation. Thus positioning art practices as integral, rather than peripheral, to global society's challenges, Enwezor successfully evaded the construction of a curatorial rhetoric that valorizes the romanticism of the "eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely" itinerant artist.<sup>62</sup> But while promoting a rhetoric of proximity and neighborliness, BIACS II, in almost programmatic form, itself became a problem-space whose own sense of neighborliness was quickly called into question.

For Enwezor, it was important that BIACS II look "beyond the metaphor of the city"<sup>63</sup> toward a more global reflection on the complexities that define contemporary models and counter-models of adjacency; in this way Enwezor hoped to circumvent the perceived tendency of location-specific biennials to "colonize" their host cities.<sup>64</sup> Thus, with a few modest exceptions (Yan Pei Ming's *Pirate Flags*, for example, silkscreened flags bearing images of children, skulls, and US dollars, were installed on a footbridge that crosses the city's Guadalquivir River, in order to create a visual "bridge" between the biennial's two main exhibition spaces, located on opposite sides of the river), the artists selected for the exhibition refrained from any critical or sustained engagement with the local context.<sup>65</sup> But in an exhibition so attentive to questions of intimacy, proximity,

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<sup>62</sup> Steiner, *Extraterritorial*, 21. In his reading of the exhibition, however, Jacques Rancière observes correctly that the art projects which approach politics from the least oblique angles—notably Oliver Ressler's multi-channel documentary video installation *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* (2003-2)—tended, ironically, to be most marginalized within the space of the exhibition. See Rancière, "Misadventures of Universality," paper presented at the Symposium on Philosophy, 2nd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, 17-18 November 2006, [http://2nd.moscowbiennale.ru/en/sassen\\_report/](http://2nd.moscowbiennale.ru/en/sassen_report/).

<sup>63</sup> In Paul Achiaga, "Okwui Enwezor [Interview]," *El Cultural* (Madrid), October 2006, [http://www.elcultural.es/historico\\_articulo.asp?c=18937](http://www.elcultural.es/historico_articulo.asp?c=18937).

<sup>64</sup> Luis Sánchez-Moliní, "La BIACS que viene," *e-sevilla.org*, 9 September 2006, <http://e-sevilla.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=832>.

<sup>65</sup> Nor was the exhibition contextualized within its own internal history. No continuity was attempted or established with Harold Szeman's First Seville Biennial in 2004—a trend that continues in 2008 with Peter Weibel's third installment, an exhibition of international new media art.

and neighborliness, the marked absence of attention to the city of Seville rendered the exhibition itself something of an unhomely presence. Indeed, Enwezor's insistence on transcending site-specificity left the exhibition vulnerable to censure, including a complaint among critics—a familiar refrain of late—that the biennial could have been held anywhere.<sup>66</sup> The seemingly deliberate alienation of the exhibition from its immediate context also prompted a lively local opposition that, with the rallying cry "BIACS, NO!", advertised its resistance to the parachute-in/parachute-out paradigm of international exhibitions with graffiti, postcards, YouTube videos celebrating the vibrancy of local culture, and even a well-publicized media event at Seville's most famous tourist attraction, the Giralda Tower (figs. 5.8 and 5.9).<sup>67</sup>

Thomas Hirschhorn's contribution to the Seville biennial, *Re* (fig. 5.10), illuminates some of the stakes at play in Enwezor's decision to eschew site-specificity. A sprawling installation of bookshelves, seating, video screens, and DIY signage, all covered in packing tape, *Re* served as part-documentation and part-recreation of the artist's 2004 *Musée Précaire Albinet*—a temporary outdoor gallery, performance space, education complex, reading room and cafeteria in an ethnically diverse working-class suburb of Paris built collaboratively with locals and displaying major works from the collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou (fig. 5.11). On the streets of Paris, Hirschhorn's exhibit explored whether art can have a viable political impact and whether it can contribute to dismantling the

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Martin Herbert, "2nd Seville Biennial," *Frieze*, no. 104 (January-February 2007): 103. The same critique is made by Claire Bishop in her review of the 2007 10<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Biennial, and by Jen Budney reviewing the 2006 15<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennial. See Bishop, "10th International Istanbul Biennial," *Artforum International* 46, no. 3 (November 2007); and Budney, "Politics in Aspic."

<sup>67</sup> The Giralda Tower demonstration can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jtGVHpi4bc>. The Sydney Biennial of the same year, *Zones of Contact*, witnessed a similar protest from local artists concerned about the lack of contact between the biennial and the city, and who, in an effort to counter the effects of what they perceived as a parasitic alien presence, organized a counter-biennial, "Cones of Zontact." See Budney, "Politics in Aspic," 13.



**FIGURE 5.8**  
 “BIACS NO—ARTE TODOS LOS DIAS” [BIACS No—art every day], postcard distributed locally during BIACS II, Seville, 2006-7

## ¡otra biacs! ¿será posible?!

Cuando las instituciones culturales de carácter público patrocinan a la Fundación Biacs (Bienal de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla), formada por empresarios ajenos a la prácticas culturales, la PRPC interpela a las Instituciones y les recuerda su obligación de apoyar a los agentes de la cultura y fomentar la creación de estructuras permanentes.

Cuando la biacs oculta sus cuentas y disfraza sus números la PRPC exige transparencia en el gasto del dinero público.

Donde la biacs plantea *Lo desacogedor* y vende su miseria la PRPC habita lo desacogedor e intenta transformarlo.

Donde la biacs realiza políticas espectaculares la PRPC plantea políticas estructurales.

Donde la biacs plantea entretenimiento para atraer turistas cada dos años la PRPC plantea crear tejido cultural permanente.

Donde la biacs propone una cultura al servicio del ocio empresarial la PRPC plantea una cultura democrática y pública.

Donde la biacs propone la cultura como una celebración excepcional la PRPC denuncia el estado de excepción cultural.

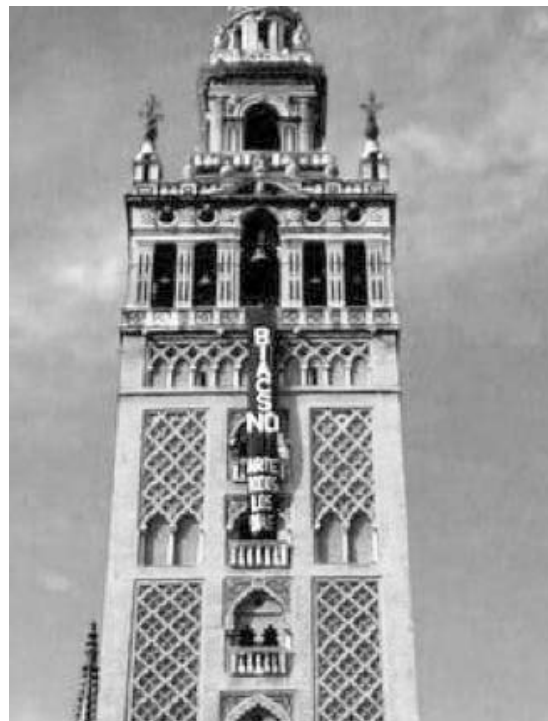
Donde la biacs plantea modernizar la decoración de la ciudad la PRPC denuncia la conversión de la ciudad en decorado.

Cuando la biacs quiere secuestrar el imaginario artístico de la ciudad y aparecer como su representante la PRPC lucha por devolver la cultura a los agentes que la trabajan.

Donde la biacs dice voluntariado cultural la PRPC dice explotación laboral.



**PRPC**  
 Plataforma de Reflexión sobre Políticas Culturales  
 Sevilla [www.e-sevilla.org](http://www.e-sevilla.org)



**FIGURE 5.9**  
 “BIACS NO—ARTE TODOS LOS DIAS,” banner hung from Giralda Tower, Seville, 2006



**FIGURE 5.10**  
Thomas Hirschhorn,  
*Re*, Seville,  
2006



**FIGURE 5.11**  
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albinet*, Paris, 2000

artificial but seemingly intransigent borders of class and race. Reconstructed for BIACS II, the project—itself literally a phantom scene—seemed to abandon even the pretence of such an attempt.

Phantoms also stalked the exhibition venues themselves. The biennial was staged in two locations, both of which invite, indeed demand, analysis of Spain's principal role in the historical trajectory of globalization. The first, the Andalusian Centre for Contemporary Art located at the local Carthusian Monastery, was a favorite retreat of fifteenth-century explorer Christopher Columbus and, for several years after his death, the site of his remains. A statue to Columbus is prominently displayed on the gallery's grounds. The second biennial location, selected by Enwezor, was the recently refurbished Royal Shipyards—coincidentally, where many of the ships used to “discover” the Americas were built and launched. Given these historically loaded settings, the exhibition's lack of deliberation on the disastrous consequences of the Western world's (and in this particular context, Spain's) propensity to test the limits of neighborliness, proximity, and intimacy in the conquering and colonization of the “new world” seemed to haunt the exhibition with its own barely repressed unhomely memories.

The absence of curatorial reflection on Seville's geographical position in the increasingly troubled southern region of Spain was likewise conspicuous. Spain's southern border has in recent years become a deadly battleground in Europe's war against undocumented migration; each year 300,000 to 500,000 hopeful migrants swim, hire inflatable rafts, or otherwise attempt to cross the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco into Spain. Since the turn of the century, thousands of people have been rescued and several thousand more are believed to have drowned, leading refugee aid organizations to refer to the Strait as the

“largest mass grave of post-war Europe;”<sup>68</sup> those who do manage to make the treacherous crossing are likely to be captured by the sophisticated surveillance system that now blankets the entire coast. Curiously, BIACS II did acknowledge the proximity of North Africa with the organization of a film festival at Cinémathèque de Tanger in Morocco’s second-largest city; the program, *Among the Moderns*, was intended to problematize the stereotypes that now plague representations of the Arab world while highlighting film and video production in the Maghreb region of North Africa. But this moment of transnational neighborliness and collaboration only underscores biennial culture’s arguable tendency to trumpet its broadened boundaries of art production and reception while failing to acknowledge that the borders crossed so effortlessly by the presumably Western (and white) biennial artist and audience are relentlessly patrolled against passage from the south, making it difficult to imagine that North African art audiences were offered equivalent access to the Seville exhibition. To wit, since the European Union enacted the Schengen Agreement in 1995, Moroccan citizens must now present a passport, a Schengen visitor visa, and a compelling justification to cross into Spain. As French-Moroccan artist Yto Barrada, represented at the Seville Biennial and the Director of the Cinémathèque de Tanger, observes, the right to cross the Strait of Gibraltar has “become unilateral across what is now legally a one-way strait.”<sup>69</sup> The Seville Biennial’s cross-border logic seems to verify an ongoing suspicion regarding the opening of contemporary art to a post-colonial rhetoric that nevertheless operates according to neo-colonial circuits. For while BIACS II clearly advanced Enwezor’s

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<sup>68</sup> Helmut Dietrich, “Das Mittelmeer Als Neuer Raum Der Abschreckung: Flüchtlinge Und Migrantinnen an Der Südlichen Eu-Außengrenze,” Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration e.V., Berlin, 24 April 2007, <http://www ffm-berlin.de/mittelmeer.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Yto Barrada, *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (London: Autograph ABP, 2005), 57. The Schengen Agreement abolished “internal” borders between participating EU nations and harmonized external border controls.

pioneering dedication to showcasing an international roster of artists (of ninety-two, thirty-eight participants were born in and/or live in Asia, Africa or South America), the exhibition's logistics revealed the presumption of an English-speaking Western audience, able to travel freely between Spain and Morocco<sup>70</sup>—suggesting that twelve years on, Gerardo Mosquera's critique of globalized art circulation, that "the world is practically divided between curating cultures and curated cultures,"<sup>71</sup> still rings true.

In a critical review of Hou Honrou's Tenth International Istanbul Biennial, *Not Only Possible but Necessary* (2007), Claire Bishop articulates many of the misgivings regarding biennial culture that have been raised in this chapter:

Ninety-six artists, from thirty-five countries—to what end? In skimming around the world, gathering token scraps to reassemble in a compromising and illegible installation, Hou willfully ignores the reality (expressed by some of the artists in the show) that such mobile visions are the terrain of the privileged few. The result is an internally disconnected exhibition that could happen anywhere and nowhere, divorced from the material realities of Istanbul or indeed any other context in a virtual, ungrounded, and blithely global future.<sup>72</sup>

With Bishop's comments, which are as salient to this analysis of BIACS II as they presumably are to the 2007 Istanbul Biennial or, for that matter, to the 2006 Sydney Biennial (which triggered an analogous series of questions and concerns),<sup>73</sup> we can begin to identify a growing sense of unease with biennial culture's perceived failure to address, interpret, and respond to the repercussions of globalization in an appropriately self-reflexive manner. But while the

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<sup>70</sup> The question of language is telling here. All text at the exhibition was provided in Spanish and English, rather than languages spoken by neighbours in Portugal, Italy, or Morocco. Also interestingly, films and videos in languages other than Spanish or English were invariably translated into English only.

<sup>71</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," trans. Jaime Flórez, in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press and The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 135.

<sup>72</sup> Bishop, "10th International Istanbul Biennial," 361.

<sup>73</sup> See Budney, "Politics in Aspic"; and Natalie King, "15th Biennale of Sydney: Zones of Contact," *Art Monthly*, no. 298 (July-August 2006): 24-25.

questions raised in the context of this unease are valid, indeed urgently needed, the answers are not necessarily as straightforward as, say, inviting more participation from local artists, hosting only interactive community art projects, or abandoning the system altogether in favour of a return to nineteenth-century exhibition models.

One of Enwezor's curatorial mandates for BIACS II was to treat the relationship between North Africa and Europe as one of many "problem-spaces" associated with the current global order, and indeed two of the artists whose work will be discussed further—Ursula Biemann and Yto Barrada—investigate the Gibraltar region, a flashpoint in this relationship, in precisely this way. What I want to suggest is that the staging of BIACS II itself functioned productively as a problem-space, defined by David Scott as "an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs."<sup>74</sup> For if the curatorial outlook of the Seville Biennial seemed disinclined to reflect more than cursorily on either the complex (even "unhomely") nature of Spain's southern border or the politics of belonging as they pertained to the exhibition's position within its socio-geographical context, it did create a space for reflection in its choice of artists, and it was precisely this slippage—between the curatorial message and artistic practices that I've identified under the rubric of reluctant nomadism—which revealed the exhibition to be a productive site of negotiation. Simultaneously enacting and challenging the romance of nomadism that pervades biennial culture and renders it relevant to debates over globalization's "phantom scenes," BIACS II demonstrated that large-scale international exhibitions, for all their apparent sins of neocolonial geotouristic ambition, are perhaps uniquely positioned to unravel

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<sup>74</sup> Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 4.



**FIGURE 5.12**  
Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From (Mahmoud)*, 2003

The text reads, “‘Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill. I live in Area C, so my phone service is Israeli. In order to pay my phone bill, I must go to an Israeli post office, which does not exist in my Area C. I am forbidden from going to Jerusalem, so I am always looking for someone to go and pay my phone bill.’ –Mahmoud. Born in Fowar Refugee Camp, Hebron. Living in Kufar Aqab. Palestinian Passport with West Bank I.D. Father and Mother from Iraq al-Manshiya (both exiled in 1948).”



**FIGURE 5.13**  
Emily Jacir,  
*From Texas, with Love*,  
2002

the intricately tangled relations between nations and nomads, borders and utopias, the West and its peripheries.

### **Migratory aesthetics I: Mobility and melanchronia**

"[T]here is no such thing as site specificity for exiles," writes art historian and critic T.J. Demos, who draws on two key threads in contemporary political theory—Edward Said's notion that home is always a provisional entity for the exiled subject<sup>75</sup> and Giorgio Agamben's argument that the refugee constitutes the central figure of contemporary geopolitics<sup>76</sup>—in a close reading of the diasporic art practices of Emily Jacir, which, according to Demos, privilege mobility over the "plausibility of sitedness."<sup>77</sup> Particularly salient to Demos's claim is Jacir's 2003 *Where We Come From* (discussed briefly in the previous chapter), which found the artist traversing Israel and the Occupied Territories to fulfil the wishes of Palestinians who, for various reasons, were barred from returning home (fig. 5.12). Responding to Lebanese critic Rasha Salti's accusation that the art world tends to recruit Jacir's work as representative of the universality of exile in a way that wilfully ignores the specifically Palestinian context to which her art responds,<sup>78</sup> Demos instead makes the case that *Where We Come From* reconceives

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<sup>75</sup> "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional." Said, "Reflections on Exile," 365.

<sup>76</sup> "Only in a world in which the spaces of State have been perforated and topographically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is—only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable." Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" (1993), in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 165.

<sup>77</sup> T. J. Demos, "Life Full of Holes," *Grey Room*, no. 24 (summer 2006): 82.

<sup>78</sup> Salti argues that Jacir has become wrongly labeled as "a paradigmatic 'exilic' artist, whose art is 'deterritorialized,' challenging 'site-specificity,' obsessively consumed with 'dislocation,' [such that] they dislocate Emily Jacir from the localized context of Palestinian artistic expression and practice to the universal worldliness of an emerging trend of 'diasporic artists,' perpetually tortured by permanent exile..." In "Emily Jacir: She Lends Her Body to Others to Resurrect an Absent Reality," *Za'waya* (Beirut), no. 13 (fall 2004-winter 2005); cited in Demos, "Life Full of Holes," 79.

exile as a “corrosive force *against* the determination of nationality,” belying the “retrograde resurrection of a nationalist framework to determine the meaning and significance of her art.”<sup>79</sup> But let us consider an earlier work, *From Texas, with Love* (fig. 5.13). For this 2002 video, Jacir also posed a question, this time asking Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories to help her build a music playlist for an American road trip: “If you had the freedom to get in a car and drive for one hour without being stopped (imagine no Israeli military occupation; no Israeli soldiers, no Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks, no ‘bypass’ roads), what song would you listen to?”<sup>80</sup> Thus outfitted with musical accompaniment, Jacir drove through rural Texas for one hour without stopping—a journey that was feasible on the wide-open roads of the US south, but which would be unimaginable in the geographically restricted, closely policed and heavily barricaded Occupied Territories. But while this work, and *Where We Come From*, must certainly be understood as critiques of the forced immobility and deterritorialization endured by most Palestinians, it does not follow that Jacir’s work proposes, as Demos suggests, “a *postnational* basis of collective identification, one based upon the construction of a fluid culture of belonging.”<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, Jacir’s project, far from problematizing the “plausibility of sitedness,” instead challenges the very un-siting of collective identity in the practice and theorization of diasporic art with which T.J. Demos aligns Jacir’s work—a challenge that Jacir herself articulates in relation to *From Texas, with Love*: “The ability to actually experience such a freedom in other countries is a painful marker and reminder of the impossibility of experiencing such a basic

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<sup>79</sup> T.J. Demos, “Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir,” *Art Journal* 62, no. 4 (winter 2003): 79. Emphasis added.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Demos, “Desire in Diaspora,” 76.

<sup>81</sup> Demos, “Life Full of Holes,” 80. Emphasis added.



human right in Palestine.”<sup>82</sup> Jacir’s work, in other words, which juxtaposes her own privileged mobility with the imposed deterritorialization of exiled or occupied Palestinians, resonates with the practice of self-reflexive, reluctant nomadism with which this chapter is concerned.

Jacir’s practice also resonates with Mieke Bal’s recent thoughts on the aesthetics of site-specificity, which provide a useful rejoinder to Demos’s analysis. “Globalized art?” she asks, “What would such a term mean? This is not an art from nowhere, for such an art, I contend, does not exist. Since art making is a material practice, there is no such thing as site-unspecific art.”<sup>83</sup> With this observation, Bal identifies two important facets of contemporary art practice: first, that art today is inextricably linked to the logic of the global marketplace; second, that the globalization (or, in the context of this chapter, the biennialization) of art cannot and should not obscure the geopolitical nuances of its production, distribution, and reception. To respond to this apparent stalemate, Bal proposes “migratory aesthetics” as a way to conceptualize the “aesthetic encounter [that] takes place in the space of, on the basis of, and on the interface with, the *mobility* of people as a given, as central, and as at the heart of what matters in the contemporary, that is, ‘globalized,’ world.”<sup>84</sup> Like Emily Jacir, several artists represented at the 2006 Seville Biennial elaborated a reluctant position vis-à-vis the itinerant culture of biennials, posing subtle but significant challenges to the exhibition’s oblique self-narrative of post-national utopianism. What connects these artists—notably Cuban-American neo-Conceptual artist Tony Labat, French-Moroccan photographer and video artist Yto Barrada, and

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<sup>82</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>83</sup> Mieke Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,” in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making*, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 25.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.



**FIGURE 5.14**  
 Tony Labat, *Day Labor: Mapping the Outside* (Fat Chance Bruce Nauman), 2006



**FIGURE 5.15**  
 Bruce Nauman, *Mapping the Studio I* (Fat Chance John Cage), 2001

Labat's piece confirms in several interrelated ways Mieke Bal's contention regarding video's "eminent suitability" to the migrant experience. The use of video surveillance technology, for instance, reminds us (in a manner congruent with Biemann's *Contained Mobility*, discussed earlier) that the migrant's life is under constant surveillance.<sup>87</sup> It also conforms, at least in part, to Mieke Bal's observation that video's most significant contribution to migratory aesthetics is its capacity to express "temporal discrepancies and disturbed rhythms," particularly via techniques of cutting and distortion.<sup>88</sup> As Bal suggests, such discrepancies and disturbances are expressly felt by migratory subjects, "permanently on the move," who experience "[t]he time of haste and waiting, the time of movement and stagnation; the time of memory and of an unsettling, provisional present, with its pleasures and its violence."<sup>89</sup> And certainly, Labat's installation both documents and rehearses this experience of multitemporality, or what Bal terms heterochrony, the multiple screens competing for our sensory attention to the various states of boredom, anticipation, and panic that measure the temporary worker's day.

But what emerges most urgently from the installation is a sense of temporality stalled. For notwithstanding sporadic episodes of relative hyperactivity (for instance the arrival of a police cruiser on the scene), what the installation documents overwhelmingly is endless time spent waiting—playing cards, drinking coffee, napping, reading the paper, listening to music, leaning against concrete walls with toes tapping. In fact the life of the migrant worker

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<sup>87</sup> The investigation (and use) of surveillance technology in art practices pertaining to migration and transnational movement is pervasive, other key figures being Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Ergin Cavusoglu. A comprehensive text on surveillance in contemporary art and culture is Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel, eds., *Ctrl [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM Center for Art and Media; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>88</sup> Bal, "Heterochrony in the Act," 210.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

appears, from this footage, to be marked less by a heterochronic experience of time than an experience that I'd like to describe as *melanchronic*. In this way, a traumatic element is introduced that resonates with Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or belated action.<sup>90</sup> Like the stalled temporality experienced by the patient who is unable to integrate or "claim" a traumatic experience and is therefore bound perpetually to that traumatizing moment,<sup>91</sup> time stands still for the migrant (consider again Ursula Biemann's asylum seeker Anatol Zimmermann, suspended in a temporal realm of imprisoned mobility), for whom days turn into months waiting for papers or for work, waiting in refugee camps or at border checkpoints, waiting in detention centres to be sent back to a home that is unsustainable, only to begin the entire process anew.<sup>92</sup>

Interestingly, Labat piggybacks this investigation of the melanchronic experience of migration onto video art's own history of investigating delayed temporality. The installation's subtitle, *Mapping the Outside (Fat Chance Bruce Nauman)*, is an explicit reference to Nauman's 2001 *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)*, also a large-scale video installation of surveillance video recorded, in this case, *inside* the artist's studio (fig. 5.15). Nauman's work, which

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<sup>90</sup> Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* elaborates the idea that a traumatic event becomes fixed in memory, a process that affords it its power over the subject. In "Project for a Scientific Psychology I" (1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1974), 353-54.

<sup>91</sup> For elaboration, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Michael S. Roth, "Hysterical Remembering," *Modernism/Modernity*, no. 3 (May 1996): 4-5.

<sup>92</sup> The idea that time stands still for the "poor nomad" is also evoked by Homi K. Bhabha, who details its mundane intricacies: "Large containerized cargo-ships today travel no faster than in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Immigrant and refugee smuggling transports take months to deliver their contraband cargo.... Immigration and asylum applications can take years to decide.... Separated or unaccompanied minors who seek asylum as refugees can be held in detention in the US and other parts of the world, without recourse to their families, for anything between six months to a year while their leave to stay is decided...." Homi K. Bhabha, "Democracy De-Realized," in *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta11\_Platform1*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, et al. (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 354.

Swiss video artist and curator Ursula Biemann—is that each both enriches, and is enriched by, interaction with the concept of migratory aesthetics, the tenets of which are particularly suited to the task of unpacking and testing biennial culture's romantic attachment to nomadism.

In her elaboration of migratory aesthetics, Bal suggests that video art, which since its inception has been deeply invested in explorations of temporality, is uniquely apposite to explorations of migration's spatio-temporal complexities:

Video is the medium of our time, available to many, and put to many uses. It is also the medium *of* time; of time contrived, manipulated, and offered in different, multi-layered ways. It offers images moving in time—slow or fast, interrupting and integrating. Migration is the situation of our time. But it is also an experience of time; as multiple, heterogeneous. Video is, arguably, eminently suitable to understand what this means—to feel it in our bodies.<sup>85</sup>

It is therefore neither coincidental nor insignificant that one of the threads connecting the practices of Labat, Barrada and Biemann is their privileging of video as a medium through which to explore mobility and migration. Consider Tony Labat's 2006 video installation *Day Labor: Mapping the Outside (Fat Chance Bruce Nauman)* (fig. 5.14). For this work, Labat installed four surveillance cameras in the window of his San Francisco studio, which overlooks a parking lot where migrant laborers regularly convene, hoping to be called upon for temporary work. The installation at Seville consists of two large projections—a four-split screening of edited footage from the surveillance cameras taken over several months, and a projection of video shot intermittently from a fifth, handheld camera.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Mieke Bal, "Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time," paper presented at the Encuentro II: Migratory Politics/Politics of the Migratory workshop, ASCA, Amsterdam, 19-21 September 2007, <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/page3.html>.

<sup>86</sup> In three months of shooting, Labat recorded 672 hours of surveillance footage and twelve hours with the handheld camera. See "BIACS II Artists Guide," Foundation for the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville, 2006, [http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site\\_en/index.htm](http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site_en/index.htm).

documents nocturnal activities in his studio (an eerily calm environment except for the occasional appearance of a cat or mouse), is likewise a meditation on duration and ennui, and as such constitutes a revisiting of concerns that make Nauman a key figure in the early history of video art's temporal possibilities. Indeed, while the multitemporal dimensions of video are certainly key to its criticality in art and culture, it is video's capacity to express the banality of time that has enchanted artists since its inception in the late 1960s.<sup>93</sup> Tony Labat's intervention into this discourse, I suggest, is twofold. First, the work employs video art's relentlessly narcissistic gaze to cross-purposes, wresting the camera's lens away from self and towards the other in a move that renders the terms of video art's engagement with melanchronia decidedly relational.<sup>94</sup> But secondly, and more pertinently, like early video—which sought, as Christine Ross observes, to “disrupt dominant conventionalities of time, notably acceleration and temporal linearity”<sup>95</sup>—Labat's installation challenges the narratives of speed and acceleration that buttress contemporary culture's embrace of itinerancy as lifestyle. In so doing, he aptly conveys Alan Sekula's insightful observation that “[a] society of accelerated flows is also in certain key aspects a society of deliberately slow movements.”<sup>96</sup> And it is in this way that Labat's aesthetic enunciation of melanchronia constitutes an oblique challenge to biennial culture's

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<sup>93</sup> See Christine Ross, “The Temporalities of Video: Extendedness Revisited,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (fall 2006): 83.

<sup>94</sup> On the narcissistic gaze of early video art, see Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October*, no. 1 (1976).

<sup>95</sup> See Ross, “Temporalities of Video,” and her *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), esp. 148-53, for elaboration of how the “time of depression” is enacted in contemporary video art.

<sup>96</sup> Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, [1995] 2002), 50. *Fish Story*, both a book and a photographic series, documents the geopolitical and socioeconomic implications of the global shipping trade.

postmodern embrace of what David Harvey famously terms “space-time compression.”<sup>97</sup>

To flesh out the implications of this challenge, let us consider another example. Yto Barrada is a photographer and video artist based in Tangier, Morocco, whose practice constitutes a radical take on what Enwezor calls the “complex nature of adjacency,” in the process demanding a rethinking of the ethics and aesthetics of nomadism in a world increasingly delineated by closed and contested borders. Like Tony Labat, Barrada employs a migratory aesthetic to convey the challenges of living between worlds. *The Smuggler* (2006) (fig. 5.16) is a silent eight-minute video consisting of a slow, methodical step-by-step demonstration of the process by which an elder Moroccan woman, identified only as T.M., prepares to smuggle textiles out of the Spanish town of Ceuta (an enclave inside the territory of Morocco that Ursula Biemann has described evocatively as an “incision in a complex fabric that is defined by border relations between Europe and Africa”).<sup>98</sup> The woman prepares for her daily trek according to the time-honoured tradition of wrapping layer after layer around her body, securing them with rope, then concealing them under her *djellaba* robe, as if illustrating Biemann’s observation that “[t]he economic logic of the border inscribes itself onto every layer of the transforming, mobile female body.”<sup>99</sup> On one hand, the smuggler’s demeanour and facial expressions evince an unmistakable pride in demonstrating the proper techniques for her trade. At another level, however, is revealed the mundane daily struggle of fashioning a living in the Gibraltar region; the woman’s diminutive frame seems to groan with

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<sup>97</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>98</sup> In *Europlex*, videocassette, directed by Ursula Biemann (New York: Women Make Movies, 2003).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 5.16**  
Yto Barrada,  
*The Smuggler*,  
2006 (video stills)



every layer added, and at one point a young girl is dispatched from offstage to assist with the wrapping.

In *The Smuggler*, the melanchronic aspects of the migratory life are conveyed in ways that both echo and diverge from Tony Labat's work. Again, the video records a daily process that reveals the border to be a *temporally* liminal site of mundane, repetitive acts. But rather than exploiting video's capacity for lengthy recording, Barrada instead employs the loop to reiterate the repetitive nature of the woman's livelihood; here, eight minutes of drudgery become literally eternal. This again is resonant with the temporality of trauma, wherein time stands still in perpetual repetition, and indeed, time seems to stand still for the smuggler in multiple ways. The woman is filmed in front of a black backdrop, which adds a sense of timelessness to her performance; one quickly develops the impression that T.M. has been smuggling fabrics across the Spanish border, and will continue doing so, in perpetuity. The fleeting presence of the camera-shy young girl disrupts this temporal deadlock to a certain extent, but it also signals another mode of timelessness, for the viewer is obliged to consider the possibility that the training is for her benefit, that she will one day carry on the burden (literally) of this borderline existence.

But as a critical strategy, this melanchronic restaging of migrant experience also conveys a spirit of subversive potential. Cultural theorist Jenny Edkins conceptualizes "trauma time" as a halted, disruptive temporality that interrupts the "smooth [i.e. linear] time" of hegemonic cultural narratives. Investigating the ways in which trauma impacts history, memory, and politics, Edkins suggests that trauma, "which refuses to take its place in history as done and finished with," has the capacity to "challenge sovereign power at its very

roots”<sup>100</sup> by insisting on bearing witness to that which cannot be integrated into national myths and narratives. Thus in all its despondent, repetitive temporality, trauma can also be conceived more productively as a Barthesian *punctum* that both pricks the conscience of history and rewrites its future.<sup>101</sup> In the practices of both Tony Labat and Yto Barrada, I see melanchronia operating in a parallel fashion, wherein traumatic temporality interrupts the ongoing narratives of unfettered mobility, uninterrupted speed, and infinitely crossable borders that circulate in, and indeed facilitate the existence of, international exhibition practices.

### **Migratory aesthetics II: The spatial politics of smuggling**

Challenging normative narratives of smooth, rapid experiences of temporality, Yto Barrada’s practice also challenges spatial borders. Troubling, if only implicitly, her own status as a bi-national, indeed international artist whose art world credentials grant her relatively easy border passage—and troubling, by association, the privileged status of the Western art tourist whose access to Spain is likewise unimpeded—Barrada methodically outlines the borders that are otherwise elided in and by the context of the transnational exhibition. In this way, Barrada’s practice can be usefully juxtaposed with Santiago Sierra’s articulations of the Spanish-Moroccan border, discussed in chapter 3 according to Irit Rogoff’s observation that critical art practices can function to manifest “a kind of physical stamping of the terrain, an insistence on a border where everyone else

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<sup>100</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59, 230.

<sup>101</sup> In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster considers Barthes’ *punctum* and Lacan’s *tuché* as analogous expressions of trauma’s missed encounter with the Real (132). On Barthes’ concept of the *punctum* as the unintended detail in a photograph that “pierces” the viewer, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

is denying its existence.”<sup>102</sup> Recall, in that chapter, the discussion of Sierra’s *3000 holes of 180 x 50 x 50 cm each* (2002), for which the artist hired North African labourers to dig coffin-sized holes on the Spanish coast facing Morocco. To a certain extent, Yto Barrada shares Sierra’s insistence on tracing the existence of these otherwise elided borders. As art critic Nico Israel observes, Barrada’s work “is often concerned with stasis and unbridgeable divides. Holes, ditches, and impassable roads permeate Barrada’s photographs.”<sup>103</sup> And yet these holes and obstructions, like those of Matta-Clark discussed in chapter 2, also have a liberating dimension, by revealing the materiality of the border in a way that also challenges its structural integrity (to return to Krzysztof Wodiczko’s bandage analogy, eventually the wound must be exposed in order for a scar to form). Barrada’s ancient smuggler defiantly crosses and recrosses the contested Spanish-Moroccan border, each passage underlining and undermining its power to shape her movements and livelihood. In so doing, she performs an “empathetic unsettlement” of the border that refuses both the myth of transcendence and the nihilism of the unbridgeable divide. As Israel further acknowledges, “What at first appears absolutely impossible—overcoming a difference, bridging a treacherous strait—seems possible, if only for a fleeting instant, through art.”<sup>104</sup>

Fortuitously, *The Smuggler* also resonates with Rogoff’s recent theorization of a “smuggling aesthetic,” according to which “the notion of journey does not follow the logic of crossing barriers, borders, bodies of water but rather of sidling along with them seeking the opportune moment, the

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<sup>102</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 122.

<sup>103</sup> Nico Israel, “Border Crossings,” *Artforum International* 45, no. 2 (October 2006): 246. Israel is referring in particular to Barrada’s *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (1998–2004), a series of photographs taken between 1998 and 2003.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

opportune breach in which to move to the other side.”<sup>105</sup> For Rogoff, smuggling is a useful paradigm for critical art and curatorial practices because it privileges subversion over opposition:

We have in recent years spoken much and often of not wanting to set up conflictual and binary engagements, of not wanting to have a fight with the art academy in the name of a progressive or revolutionary practice...or to waste time on battles between what is sanctioned ‘inside’ the art institution versus what takes place more organically ‘outside’ within the public sphere. Instead we have opted for a ‘looking away’ or a ‘looking aside’ or a spatial appropriation, which lets us get on with what we need to do or to imagine without reiterating that which we oppose. In theoretical terms we have moved from Criticism to critique to criticality to the actual inhabitation of a condition in which we are deeply embedded as well as being critically conscious. ‘Smuggling’ exists in precisely such an illegitimate relation to a main event or a dominant economy without producing a direct critical response to it.<sup>106</sup>

This concept of smuggling as an “illegitimate” activity in relation to a main event is particularly compelling in its twofold applicability to the thesis we are considering in this chapter: Besides animating the border with her documentation of (literal) smuggling activities, Barrada also “smuggles” into the biennial context a subtle critique of the presumption of open borders that underwrites and even legitimizes its artistic offerings.

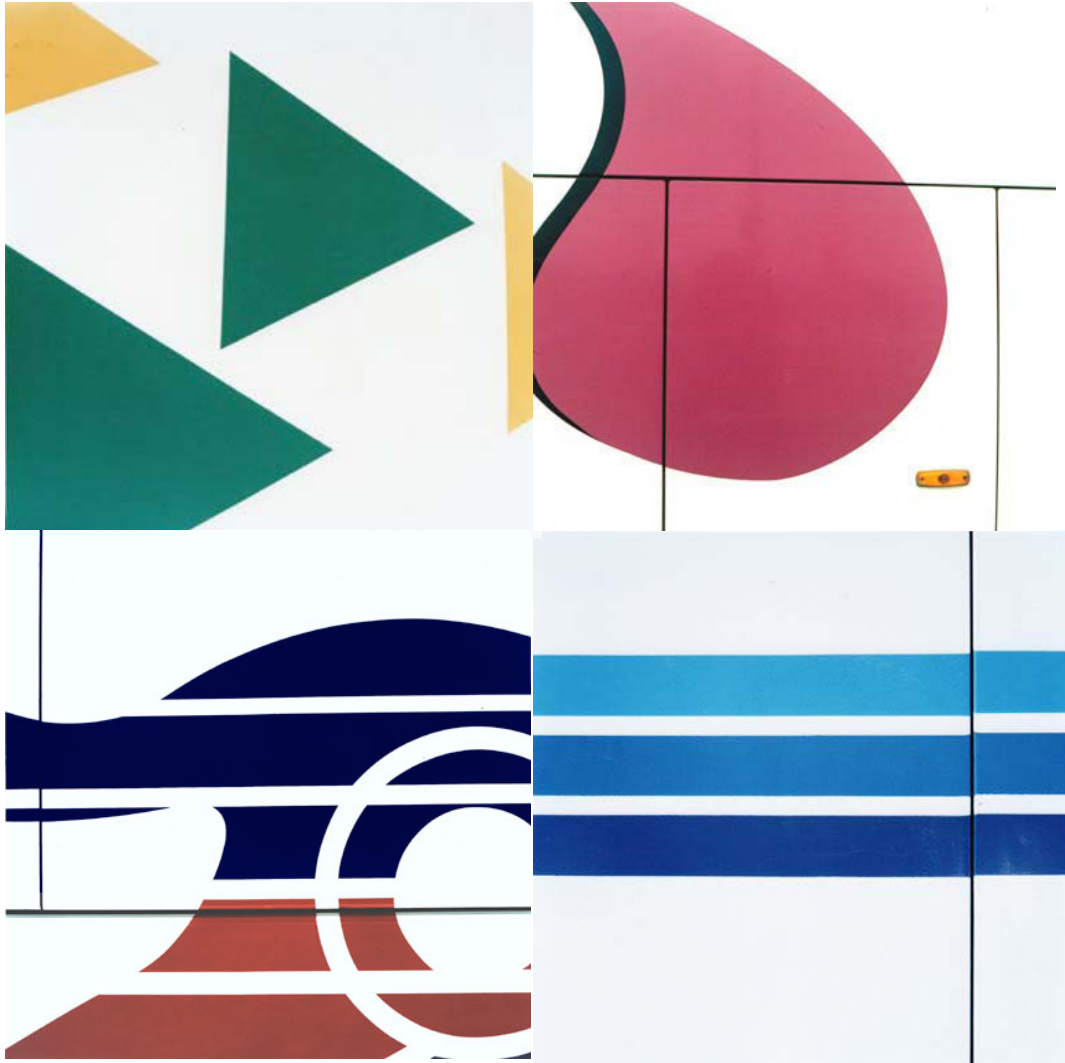
For Rogoff, the smuggling paradigm acknowledges the partiality of visibility by resisting the impulse to face dominant institutions and economies directly. Rogoff’s insistence on “looking away” as a strategy for inhabiting a position of “partial knowledge”<sup>107</sup> is particularly relevant to Yto Barrada’s *Serie Autocar* (2004), a restrained, even elusive, series of four photographs that appear to be colourful geometric abstractions (fig. 5.17). In fact, the photographs depict logos painted on the backsides of tour buses that shuttle European tourists to and from North Africa. These logos, we learn, also function inadvertently as a series

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<sup>105</sup> Rogoff, “Smuggling,” 134.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 135.



**FIGURE 5.17**  
Yto Barrada,  
*Serie Autocar*,  
2004

of coded messages, surreptitiously alerting teens and children as to the conditions according to which a particular company will unwittingly accommodate contraband passage across the Strait. One logo, for example, purportedly carries the following information: "Bus parks in front of the port near the ticket booth. 4 AM arrival in Tangier, 6 PM departure. Bring biscuits and dates, and plastic bag for shoes. They notice in Spain right away if your shoes are not clean. Bus goes onto Bismillah ferry, room for three small people under the bus," while another logo indicates that there is "One guard, but since he's in charge of the whole area, he can't check everything all the time. Climb in the middle of the planchas. Those who have papers go inside the bus."<sup>108</sup>

Like *The Smuggler*, *Serie Autocar* operates as an insistent reminder of the perils of crossing borders: one needs no graphics to visualize three small bodies crammed underneath a tour bus. But by demonstrating an instance in which the iconography of unobstructed global tourism is subversively transformed into a counter-iconography of illicit passage, the photographs indicate as well the (slim, costly, and dangerous) possibility of transgression. Thus, while Barrada's practice uncovers the troubled Gibraltar region as a complex site of economic hardship, physical struggle, and monotonous survival, what ultimately emerges in her work is a sense of borders breached. Like Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar and Tony Labat, Yto Barrada is clearly not seduced by what art historian Nikos Papastergiadis terms the contemporary "fantasy of unrestricted mobility" (whether spatial *or* temporal) that both operationalizes and obscures "the violence of penetrating boundaries."<sup>109</sup> But in Barrada's aesthetic rendering of these moments of penetration, the contested Gibraltar Strait becomes imaginable

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<sup>108</sup> See "Yto Barrada," Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, <http://www.sfeir-semler.de/sites/barrada/barrada.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, "Art in the Age of Siege," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* (Helsinki), no. 5 (July 2006): 36.

as an interstitial site of both control and resistance, checkpoints and blindspots, borders and breaches. In the same instance, biennial culture under these terms becomes imaginable as a space where nomads and smugglers might ideally meet to negotiate and debate the conditions for a reconceived future of globalization.

In an insightful analysis of Emily Jacir's art production along and against the Israeli-Palestinian border, Homi K. Bhabha suggests that her work "interposes the space and time of the body as a bridge across...artificial islands and borders."<sup>110</sup> In similar fashion, what I am suggesting here is that Yto Barrada's work reveals the existence of borders in order to propose their susceptibility to subversion. This is also the proposition offered by Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, whose 2003 experimental ethnographic video essay *Europlex* (fig. 5.18), a collaboration with anthropologist Angela Sanders, is likewise concerned with the material and social realities of the Spanish-Moroccan border zone. A twenty-minute documentation of various activities that animate the border, *Europlex* articulates Biemann's Lefebvrian understanding of territorialization: "Territories," she suggests, "do not exist prior to contact and traffic. They are sustained through them. Appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things: this is how space is made."<sup>111</sup> The video is actually composed of three separately composed films, or "border logs," each of which focuses on a specific intersection of economy, geography, and gender. Border Log I, titled "smuggling: a cartography of struggle," details how women (like Yto Barrada's T.M.) "transform their bodies into vehicles of commerce"<sup>112</sup> by concealing goods and fabrics under their dresses. Border Log II, "domesticas

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<sup>110</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Another Country," in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 33.

<sup>111</sup> In *Europlex*, videocassette. On Henri Lefebvre's understanding of space as neither inert nor neutral but rather always a product of social relations, see his *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>112</sup> "BIACS II Artists Guide."



**FIGURE 5.18**  
Ursula Biemann (with Angela Sanders),  
*Europlex*, 2003 (video stills)



living in a time lapse,” documents the movements of Moroccan women who cross the border as domestic workers, while Border Log III, “the transnational zone,” tracks factory workers, mostly female, who produce goods destined for European and Asian markets. Like Yto Barrada, Biemann understands the Spain-Morocco border as a space of both repression and transgression, struggle and survival. And, like Barrada, Biemann works to expose the material, embodied dimensions of the global market, which, as Imre Szeman observes, are “still too often passed over in discussions that focus on the spectrality of new communications technologies, the disembodied circulation of finance capital, and so on.”<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, what renders *Europlex* such an apt example of migratory aesthetics is the way in which Biemann challenges the rhetoric of disembodiment that attaches to both economic and cultural discourses of globalization by tracking and charting the movement of bodies back and forth across the border; her own smuggling tactics once again reveal the border as both a temporally and spatially liminal space. Border Log II, for instance, examines the curious fact that the domestic workers who live in the Moroccan town of Tétuan but work in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta cross not only a border, but also a time zone (with a two-hour lag) each day. To convey the complex spatio-temporal dimensions that characterize the lives of these “permanent time travellers,”<sup>114</sup> the video employs advanced digital editing techniques that allow for a dense layering of video and audio tracks. The technical complexity of the work fulfils two functions: first, video’s non-linear, non-logical dimensions are exploited to emphasize what Mieke Bal calls “the anti-narrative thrust of heterochrony” of migratory

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<sup>113</sup> Imre Szeman, “Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann,” *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1/2 (2002): 93.

<sup>114</sup> In *Europlex*, videocassette.

experience.<sup>115</sup> But the video's complexity—stacked moving and still images, running text, and elaborate soundtrack—also signals Biemann's intention to underscore what she identifies as migrant women's high-tech competence as dynamic participants in the cross-border micro-economies of Gibraltar. As she observes, "many of them use the same state-of-the-art technologies of transportation and communication as high-tech businessmen do, in order to get to where they are."<sup>116</sup>

This last point is particularly relevant in understanding Biemann's migratory aesthetic. For Biemann, as for Barrada, the border represents both tightly controlled movement and the daily potential for subversion. Expressing impatience with representations of migrant women "in images of need, poverty, and helplessness, placed in humanitarian and development discourses, or in scenarios of exploitation,"<sup>117</sup> Biemann instead populates her video essay with images of women—smugglers, *domesticas*, and factory workers alike—who animate the border area in a way that resonates with Michel de Certeau's notion of the itinerary: the unstructured and unauthorized mode of travel that subverts both the logic and authority of the official map.<sup>118</sup> The smugglers of Border Log I in particular, followed by a handheld video camera as they create a kind of geopolitical network of desire paths<sup>119</sup> from Morocco into the "grey trade" zone outside Ceuta, develop itineraries that both define and challenge the space of the border. And in the exploration of this network of desire paths, neither designed nor authorized but rather worn away gradually by people finding the most

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<sup>115</sup> Bal, "Heterochrony in the Act," 215. In this essay, Bal considers Biemann's video essay *Remote Sensing* (2001), which explores the trafficking of women for sex work.

<sup>116</sup> In Szeman, "Remote Sensing," 93.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>119</sup> "Desire path" is the term used in landscape architecture to refer to the paths that pedestrians create as short cuts linking roads and sidewalks.

expedient distance between two points, Biemann's migratory aesthetic offers a model for site sensitivity that is neither anthropological nor indifferent, neither transcendent nor nihilistic, neither nostalgically sedentary nor romantically nomadic.

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### **Conclusion: Transgressive mobility, radical relations**

In different ways, the artists in this chapter each reveal the embodied materiality of border spaces only to trace how bodies circulate within and against the logic of these spaces, compelling them to admit a certain mobility. To this extent, these artists agree with Okwui Enwezor's characterization of borders as "problem-spaces" of generative tension. Somewhat more provocatively, however, the borders in these works can furthermore be understood as traumatized spaces. For consider Jenny Edkins' proposal that trauma, rather than being understood as injury, might be productively conceived as *itself* a form of border crossing, "something to do with the crossing of distinctions we take for granted, the distinctions between psyche and body, body and environment, for example."<sup>120</sup> For Edkins, trauma understood in this light becomes a way to imagine the possibility of "radical relationality," which she conceptualizes in a way that cuts to the heart of this dissertation's concern with the unhomely as an aesthetic hinge for ethical practices:

We prefer to think of buildings as solid, of home as a place of safety, of ourselves as separate from our neighbours, and of our bodies as made of living flesh not inorganic atoms. A traumatic event demonstrates how untenable, or how insecure, these distinctions and these assumptions are. It calls for nothing more or less than the recognition of the radical relationality of existence.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Jenny Edkins, "Remembering Relationality: Trauma Time and Politics," in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics*, ed. Duncan Bell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 110.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-11.



**FIGURE 5.19**  
Mobile clubbing, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2007

Trauma, in other words, undermines the presumed impermeability of self-other borders in the same way that the smugglers and temporary workers documented in recent video projects destabilize the presumed infallibility of national borders. Resonating also with Kristeva's understanding of the foreigner as a "scar" that tears across the presumption of a coherent relationship between human and citizen, troubling conventions of home and homeland and demanding new models of relationality,<sup>122</sup> the reluctant nomads of contemporary art treat the troubled borders of global society as wounded spaces that also, subversively, suggest the potential for suture.

Consider, for instance, the fate of Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*. On an October evening in 2007, hundreds or perhaps thousands of Londoners, young and old, convened in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall to participate in the popular contemporary ritual of mobile clubbing.<sup>123</sup> At precisely 7:01 PM, this motley assembly of perfect strangers, each wearing a personal music player with earphones, turned on their music of choice and began dancing on and around Salcedo's *Shibboleth* in utter, joyous silence (fig. 5.19). I began this chapter by describing the fissure that Salcedo tore into the Turbine Hall, and suggested that the work, which sought to bear witness to the enormous pressures and barriers that confront the modern-day immigrant, offered a way to begin thinking of a new model for institutional critique—one that counters the romance of nomadism in the transnational circulation of contemporary art with a sustained deliberation on the often traumatic aspects of mobility and migration. I conclude with this work as well, because I believe it also provides, if somewhat

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<sup>122</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 97-98.

<sup>123</sup> "Mobile clubbing," associated with the "flash mob" phenomenon, was conceived in 2003 by London-based artists Ben Cummins and Emma Davis as events during which participants gather to dance in public places, each listening to personal music players to give the effect of a "silent disco" (an alternate term for the activity). See <http://www.mobile-clubbing.com>.

inadvertently, a way to begin thinking how art can become a vehicle for forging itineraries out of maps, desire out of despair, and hope out of catastrophe. Of all the art practices that have been discussed in this dissertation, *Shibboleth* is perhaps the most literal manifestation of a wounded space of stranger relations. Much like the artists who challenged the elision of borders underwriting the Seville Biennial, Salcedo likewise undermines the art world's insistent proffering of a "glimpse of a transnational utopia"<sup>124</sup> that, in order to function, must remain blind to its less than utopian context and conditions of production and circulation. Salcedo's crack in the floor of the Tate Modern has since been cemented over, but it still exists under the surface: the point is not to perform a kind of cosmetic surgery that will repair this wounded borderspace so as to imagine that the wound never existed, but instead to remain ever vigilant to its vulnerability. But it is also significant that of all the art practices discussed in this dissertation, *Shibboleth* is perhaps the most formally related to Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts. And, like Matta-Clark's cuts, Salcedo's crack manages to let the light in. For consider *how* Salcedo reconfigured Turbine Hall. Rather than building an imposing fence or otherwise insuperable barrier to act out the difficult crossing of borders, Salcedo's negative space instead offers an infinitely transgressible border zone. Indeed, it seems to invite violation. Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, in other words, creates the opportunity to transform a wounded space into a site for the performance of "radical relationality"—an opportunity that was seized by London's mobile clubbers.

Reluctant nomads, to re-invoke Hal Foster's critique of site-specificity, privilege neither "mapper" nor "site." Engaging a migratory aesthetic to both convey and perform instances of mobilized subjectivity, these artists occupy a

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<sup>124</sup> Basualdo, "Launching Site," 39.

position that indulges in neither an uncritical romanticization of itinerancy nor a nostalgic attachment to static notions of place. Instead, they draw attention to the mobile subjects whose activities and itineraries are constantly activating spaces of belonging and unbelonging, transforming them into zones of subversive economics and radical relations. In the process, these artists produce nuanced contemplations on the global politics of borders, belonging, and the unhomely nature of the migrant experience that, at the same time, initiate a subtle but much needed critique of the elided connections between the nomadic tendencies of biennial culture and the barriers and exclusions engendered by global capitalism.

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## CONCLUSION

### Mobile homes

*...questions of home, identity, belonging are always open to negotiation, to be posed again from elsewhere, to become iterative, interrogative processes rather than imperative, identitarian designations.*

Homi K. Bhabha, "Halfway House"<sup>1</sup>

Picture two steel barricades, the kind you might expect to see blocking access to a street or public area during a festive parade or a tense standoff. The barricades are placed approximately twenty feet apart, and strung between them are two rows of twelve strings, one row at calf height and the other about four feet off the ground. Your first inclination might be to imagine an oversized institutional cot whose frame and mattress have ominously disappeared, except that the strings are festooned like clotheslines with everyday objects connoting both sedentary domesticity (dish towels, a rug, a stuffed bunny) and a more itinerant lifestyle (battered suitcases, a bedroll, an inflatable globe, and a kitchen table set for one with camp dishes). The environment in its entirety also seems caught between the sedentary and the itinerant. The strings are attached to a motorized pulley system that slowly transports the objects from barrier to barrier and back again, and thus, while the assembled objects appear permanently trapped in this manufactured cobweb, their constant state of flux renders their position inherently unstable; as the table, for instance, makes its way across the room, the cup and bowl atop it teeter precariously, seeming ready to topple at any moment. This juxtaposition also creates a disorienting experience for the viewer: the movement of the objects, so slow as to be almost imperceptible, creates the perception that the ground is moving under you. An unsettling and

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Halfway House," *Artforum International* 35, no. 9 (May 1997): 125.



ambiguous evocation of home that alludes to both the grinding repetition and confinement of domesticity and the precariousness of the nomadic condition, Mona Hatoum's 2005 installation *Mobile Home* (fig. 6.1) encapsulates many of the aesthetic devices and ethical intentions that I have identified and analyzed in this dissertation. Indeed, much of Hatoum's art production has sought to convey the unhomely nature of contemporary global society and its traumatizing consequences. Born in Beirut to Palestinian refugees and later exiled in London during the Lebanese Civil War, Hatoum's own life bears witness to the precarious occupation of home, and much of her practice speaks specifically, if obliquely, to the plight of the Palestinian diaspora. But themes of exile and displacement emerge in her practice less as autobiographical signposts than as perspectives from which to challenge the concept of home as a sanctuary from a troubled world. Home, in Hatoum's work, emerges as a place freighted with violent loss, fragile memory, and impossible return.

In this conclusion, I analyze Hatoum's practice in relation to my key argument: namely, that contemporary art provides unique ways to respond to the complex questions of belonging and unbelonging in a world increasingly beset by harrowing conditions of geopolitical displacement, facilitating ethical models of witness by activating a melancholic attachment to loss via what I have termed an "unhomely" aesthetic. In this dissertation, I have identified a diverse selection of artists whose practices are united by a common insistence on acknowledging the material conditions of traumatic loss, and I have observed and analyzed several strategies that artists employ in their enactments of an unhomely aesthetic. In the practice of Krzysztof Wodiczko, the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis are mobilized in order to neutralize, even heal, the wounds associated with exile and immigration—a strategy that contrasts with Santiago Sierra's inclination to compulsively re-enact the traumatizing scene of

alienation. Alfredo Jaar's practice is associated with an insistence on preempting the potential for visual mastery over the suffering other by blocking access to scenes of trauma, a tendency that also characterizes the art works of Doris Salcedo. Salcedo's practice, however, also troubles this perspective. Her work, along with that of Emily Jacir, proposes what I term a melancholic archivization of loss that employs the trope of home in order to insist on both the impossibility of full access to the past and the necessity of tracing its fragile remains. Salcedo's practice furthermore manifests a reluctant nomadism in contemporary art, a sensibility that challenges the romantic itinerancy of the globalizing art world. Salcedo, along with Tony Labat, Yto Barrada and Ursula Biemann, deploy what Mieke Bal terms a "migratory aesthetic" to convey the unhomely nature of lives lived on the margins of global society. In the practices of Labat and Barrada this migratory aesthetic is conveyed by "melanchronic" renderings of time that link the temporality of the migratory experience to that of traumatic memory, while the works of Salcedo, Biemann and Barrada furthermore manifest what Irit Rogoff calls a "smuggling aesthetic," in which borders, both geographical and intersubjective, are treated as both wounded spaces and scenes of potential transgression. Above all, by manifesting home as a precariously occupied space whose comforting associations as a refuge from the world are no longer plausible, contemporary artists enact a melancholic attachment to loss that facilitates a new ethics of witnessing trauma. Engaging the trope of the fractured, vulnerable or otherwise unsettled home, these artists propose an art of witness that both catalyzes and unsettles audience responses to the suffering of others, in the process transforming the fragile figure of home into a space for intersubjective encounters based on the empathetically unsettling acknowledgement of humanity's shared vulnerability *and* the uneven distribution of this vulnerability in the material world.

In chapter 2, I argued that the twentieth century witnessed an uneasy relationship between domesticity and modern art, whose practitioners sought to remove themselves, both figuratively and literally, from the realm of home—associated first with femininity and unworldliness, and increasingly with fascist invocations of homeland and the dislocating experiences of war and occupation. The Surrealist movement in particular manifests some of the complexities with which home was treated during the modern period; in Surrealist art, we witness an early effort to represent home as an uncanny space where fantasy and nightmare commingle. With a clear nod to the Surrealist legacy, an uncanny aesthetic also animates Mona Hatoum's *Mobile Home*, in which domestic objects appear to come to life. In Hatoum's sculptural works as well—such as *No Way II* of 1996, a colander whose holes are filled with metal bolts to take on the appearance of a land mine (fig. 6.2), and *La Grande Broyeuse (Mouli-Julienne x 17)* of 1999, an eighteen-foot tall food grinder whose size and biomorphic qualities give it a menacing animism (fig. 6.3)—familiar domestic objects normally and comfortingly associated with the domestic kitchen become disquietingly unfamiliar. But like Gordon Matta-Clark, Hatoum both employs and challenges the Surrealist trope of the uncanny home; rather than harnessing the uncanny to explore the irrational possibilities of the domestic realm, both artists instead seek to expose the home as a space that is at once a center of, and a mythical shelter from, socio-political conflict. For Hatoum, this exposure takes the form of a feminist critique of the home—a critique that also aligns her work with the practice of Martha Rosler. Like Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, discussed in chapter 2 as a video that transformed the home into a war zone by subtly repurposing everyday utensils as menacing weapons in order to reveal the domestic sphere as a discomfiting space of mindless drudgery and potential transgression, Hatoum's uncanny domestic objects and environments likewise

reveal the home as a heavily contested space of imprisonment and repetition (as in *Mobile Home*) in which everyday objects might either become weapons of escape (such as *No Way II*) or tools that threaten to turn against their users (as in *La Grande Broyeuse*). Indeed, Hatoum's practice is heavily indebted to feminist investigations of the home in the 1970s, her works likewise figuring the domestic sphere as an uncanny space of repression and oppression. As she says, her aim is to "shatter notions of the wholesomeness of the home environment," explaining:

Having always had an ambiguous relationship with notions of home, family, and the nurturing that is expected out of this situation, I often like to introduce a physical or psychological disturbance to contradict those expectations.... Being raised in a culture where women have to be taught the art of cooking as part of the process of being primed for marriage, I had an antagonistic attitude towards all of that.<sup>2</sup>

The feminist concerns in Hatoum's practice first emerged in her early performance and video work focusing on the body. A pivotal piece from that period is *Measures of Distance* (1988), a video work that projects nude black-and-white photographs of the artist's mother partially obscured by a running Arabic script of letters, written from mother to daughter, that cut across her body like barbed wire; the soundtrack features the two women speaking spiritedly over coffee, overlaid by Hatoum's voice translating her mother's letters (fig. 6.4). A work that figures the female body as an inscribed site of discourse and experience, *Measures of Distance* also conveys the richness and complexity of mother-daughter relationships—relationships that tend to be under-represented in patriarchal culture.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the video reflects Hatoum's ongoing concern to "measure the distances" that separate families torn apart by war and

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<sup>2</sup> In Jo Glencross, "Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Jo Glencross," in *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance*, ed. Laura Steward Heon (North Adams: MASS MoCA; Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2001), 68, 65.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Renee Baert, "Desiring Daughters," *Screen* 34, no. 2 (summer 1993); and Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).



**FIGURE 6.4**  
Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988 (video still)



**FIGURE 6.5**  
Mona Hatoum, *Changing Parts*, 1983 (video still)

exile, in this way revealing an ambiguity regarding home that both reflects and challenges Western feminism. In *Measures of Distance*, as in *Mobile Home*, home is a complex site of longing and belonging, a “fractured dream,” as she suggests,<sup>4</sup> that can be both a prison *and* an impossible destination.

In the second chapter, I argued that feminist investigations of the domestic realm as a site of banal imprisonment are complicated in contemporary art practices that instead acknowledge home’s increasingly vulnerable status as a refuge from the public realm. In Hatoum’s practice, this shift can be seen as early as 1983, with *Changing Parts*—a video that also usefully illustrates both the significant influence of, and at the same time a paradigmatic shift away from, the art practices of Martha Rosler in the 1960s and ‘70s. Again using a series of black-and-white still photographs, here Hatoum portrays her parents’ bathroom in Beirut as a pristine, orderly, and calm sanctuary, dwelling especially on door and window frames, as if spotlighting these liminal spaces as proof of the domestic sphere’s imperviousness. But this surface effect of peaceful tranquility belies its darker context. Gradually, these images are disrupted by scenes from the artist’s 1982 performance *Under Siege*, an homage to the victims of Lebanon’s Civil War in which a naked Hatoum struggles to escape a clear plastic container filled with wet clay; the bathroom’s serenity is furthermore infiltrated by a soundtrack emitting the cacophony of journalists reporting from scenes of urban warfare (fig. 6.5). Resonating with Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* photo-collages of 1967-72, Hatoum’s video juxtaposes the presumed peacefulness of the domestic realm with the chaos of war—literally, to quote Rosler, de-segregating “representations of clean spaces and dirty spaces” of human existence in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Charles Merewether, “Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a Time to Come,” in *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 2006), 49.



reveal these seemingly incongruous spaces as in fact deeply imbricated.<sup>5</sup> But, in a way that echoes Melanie Friend's representations of Kosovar homes under siege in the early 1990s, also discussed in chapter 2, Hatoum's video does not, indeed cannot, "bring the war home," for in a state of ongoing strife, war is *always* just outside the door, and the fiction of domestic sanctuary is *already* impossible to sustain.

I concluded the second chapter with the observation that contemporary artists, like Mona Hatoum in 1980s Lebanon, Melanie Friend in 1990s Kosovo, and indeed Martha Rosler in post-9/11 America, mark the border between home and world as a dangerously liminal space of conflict and negotiation, and employ this recognition in order to refigure home as a concept that simultaneously reflects and records the precariousness of occupation *and* encourages emerging practices of ethical witnessing. In chapter 3, I introduced two contradictory modes of engaging an "unhomely" aesthetic to facilitate such practices, and two artists whose practices seek to draw attention to the traumatizing condition of un-belonging that attends to experiences of migration, poverty, oppression, and social alienation. In the art practice of Krzysztof Wodiczko, I identified an alliance with the psychoanalytical tradition of trauma treatment. Wodickzo's claim for art's capacity to act as an intermediary for public testimony and the healing of social relations corresponds to what Dominick LaCapra refers to as a tendency among interlocutors of traumatic experience to seek a premature "working through" of traumatic memory—a tendency that produces harmonizing narratives of closure that threaten to preempt questions of justice and redress. In the practice of Santiago Sierra, on the contrary, I observed a propensity to "act out" experiences of trauma,

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<sup>5</sup> In Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Vienna: Generali Foundation; Cambridge and London: MIT Press), 50.

compulsively re-opening the wounded borders of human relations and melancholically re-enacting scenes of oppression and marginalization in a way that divests art of any potential to facilitate ethical engagement with the suffering other. One of the most significant differences in the two practices relates to the artists' positioning of the audience. Wodiczko seeks unfailingly to encourage practices of witnessing that enable the spectator to identify with the position of the victim; by encouraging us to incorporate a sense of our own foreignness into our empathetic relations with the foreigner, Wodiczko facilitates an identification with the suffering other that is, to recall the vocabulary of Kaja Silverman, "idiopathic" (i.e. interiorizing, assimilative, even annihilating). Sierra, on the other hand, constructs scenes in which the audience is positioned as a colluding participant in the perpetration of suffering—a position that leaves little space for intersubjective relations and that ultimately reduces melancholia to a condition of nihilistic despair at best and bourgeois titillation at worst. Introducing LaCapra's methodology for enabling "empathetically unsettling" relations that eschew both the false harmonization of "working through" and the paralyzing logic of "acting out," I set the stage for chapter 4's investigation of aesthetic practices that catalyze contexts of intersubjective engagement to produce new models for ethical witnessing. A brief look at Mona Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger* (1994) will illustrate how LaCapra's model can be usefully applied to art practices that facilitate ethically unsettling stranger relations by challenging the assumption of *any* stable relationship between the viewing subject and the suffering other.

In *Corps étranger* (literally "foreign body"), a video that follows an endoscopic camera into the artist's body is projected onto the floor in a small cylindrical viewing space, accompanied by the sounds of Hatoum's beating heart (fig. 6.6). Foreignness takes on multiple meanings in this work—referring at once



**FIGURE 6.6**  
Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, 1994

to the invasive camera, the invasiveness of the medical profession generally, the unfamiliarity of the body itself, and the viewers who are permitted unparalleled visual access into the inner recesses of an other. In this way, as art historian Tamar Tembeck has proposed, Hatoum's piece aligns itself with the "xenology" of Krzysztof Wodiczko—an "art and science of the stranger" that reveals the uncanny strangeness within us all.<sup>6</sup> What differentiates Hatoum's work, however, is the way in which it complicates and unsettles the processes of identification proposed by Wodiczko's xenology. Located in an enclosing space and required to cast his or her eyes downward, the spectator is placed in a position that simultaneously suggests visual mastery and, as Frances Morris suggests, "the classic pose of victim"<sup>7</sup>—a dual position that compels audiences into a state of re-evaluation vis-à-vis intersubjective relations. As Hatoum explains, her intention is to create a viewing experience in which the spectator is compelled to ask, "Am I the jailed or the jailer? The oppressed or the oppressor? Or both? I want the work to complicate these positions and offer an ambiguity and ambivalence rather than concrete and sure answers."<sup>8</sup> In this way, Hatoum's installation demonstrates contemporary art's capacity to encourage ethical practices of witnessing by facilitating experiences of empathetic unsettlement.

In both the third and fourth chapters, I identified a resistance against visualizing suffering as one such aesthetic strategy for facilitating empathetically unsettling experiences. This strategy is associated in particular with the art practices of Alfredo Jaar, whose "lament of the images" suggests a profound skepticism regarding visual culture's capacity to generate spectatorial positions

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<sup>6</sup> Tamar Tembeck, "Mona Hatoum's Corporeal Xenology," *Thresholds*, no. 29 (2005): 59.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Morris, "Mona Hatoum," in *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1995), 103.

<sup>8</sup> In Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum Interviewed by Janine Antoni," in *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance*, ed. Laura Steward Heon (North Adams: MASS MoCA; Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2001), 24.

that can subvert or transcend responses of shock, catharsis, and spectacularization. In the practices of Doris Salcedo and Emily Jacir, this disavowal of the visual is complicated by a recognition of visual art's unique capacity to convey the corporeal implications of traumatic experience, and by the equally significant recognition that trauma is most adequately marked by attending to loss's remains. Like Salcedo, Mona Hatoum rejects the spectacularization of the suffering body (indeed, she acknowledges that she has been "criticized for not showing the 'spectacle of horror'").<sup>9</sup> But she also resists the troubling logic of invisibility, instead tracing, revealing, and preserving the fragile relics that connect us to home, to the past, and ideally to each other. And, like Salcedo, Hatoum traces these remains by recourse to the fraught iconography of domestic objects and furniture, which stand in for both the vulnerability of the human body, the precariousness with which we occupy domestic spaces, and the fragility with which home sustains, and is sustained in, human memory. In the context of Salcedo's practice, I identified this employment of home and its trappings as a "melancholic archivization" of the past—an archive that recognizes home as a fragile but fecund repository for the traces of history. Likewise, in installations like *Mobile Home*, Hatoum animates the past by offering prosaic fragments of human inhabitation as "sites of projection for our experiences and unconscious fears, desires, and memories,"<sup>10</sup> in this way marking the materiality of human precariousness in order to mobilize empathetically unsettling practices of witnessing.

Above all, Mona Hatoum's practice has reflected the reluctant nomadism that necessarily characterizes the contemporary condition of exile. For the exile,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>10</sup> Mona Hatoum, in Michela Arfiero, "Measure the Distances: A Conversation with Mona Hatoum," *Sculpture* 25, no. 9 (November 2006): 31.

as Edward Said observes, “knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional.”<sup>11</sup> In chapter 5, I identified a group of artists—including Doris Salcedo, Emily Jacir, Ursula Biemann, Yto Barrada, and Tony Labat—whose art practices epitomize a sensibility of reluctant nomadism—a recognition that the international art world, particularly in the guise of the rapidly proliferating culture of biennialism, is increasingly informed by a utopian understanding of transnational mobility that tends to disregard the lived experiences of exile, migration, and forced relocation that constitute most of the world’s transnational movement. Undermining from within biennial culture’s troubling romanticization of global itinerancy, these artists offer profound meditations on the dangerous paths that are crossed by the world’s unhomed citizens, compelling us to recognize that for millions of people, home, far from a place of refuge or confinement, is instead a site of loss and longing. Likewise, Mona Hatoum’s art practice evokes a deeply uneasy relationship with the possibility of being at home in the world.<sup>12</sup> As Said observes, strangely familiar traces of the past cling tenuously to her representations of the domestic realm:

In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, [Hatoum’s sculptures] are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably, marked forever by changes in everyday materials and objects that permit no return or real repatriation, yet unwilling to let go of the past that they carry along with them like some silent catastrophe.<sup>13</sup>

In the fifth chapter, I identified two tactics with which artists seek both to convey what Said identifies as the “radically inhospitable” nature of

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<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 365.

<sup>12</sup> *Mobile Home* was exhibited in 2006 at the Sydney Biennale, *Zones of Contact*, discussed in chapter 5 as an exhibition that was critiqued for a superficial engagement with questions of contact and engagement.

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Said, “The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum’s Logic of Irreconcilables,” in *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), 17.

contemporary global society<sup>14</sup> and to propose, in response, what Mieke Bal terms a migratory aesthetic. In the practices of Tony Labat and Yto Barrada in particular, I theorized a “melanchronic” enactment of time that expresses the traumatic temporality of the migrant experience, so often characterized by the painfully slow movement of bodies across intransigent borders. Likewise, Mona Hatoum’s *Mobile Home* can be understood as an interruption of conventional understandings of unfettered speed and mobility. In this small constructed world, home itself becomes an itinerant space of constant flux, but this flux is characterized by slow, monotonous, repetitive movements that, like the motions of Yto Barrada’s smuggler and Tony Labat’s day laborers, suggest that time stands still for the migrant in waiting. However, this melanchronic enactment of the migrant experience also enables a subversive potential that recognizes “trauma time” as a disruptive force in the establishment of hegemonic cultural narratives, including biennial culture’s ongoing fiction of uninterrupted mobility in a borderless world.

*Mobile Home* also reflects on the unsettling juxtaposition of mobility and containment in the life of the exile. In this way, Hatoum’s installation furthermore illustrates the subversive potential of the migratory aesthetic as expressed in the spatial configurations of ‘unhomely’ contemporary art practices. The practices of Yto Barrada and Ursula Biemann are characterized by aesthetic strategies that both underline and undermine the multiple borders belying contemporary claims for a global village. As in Hatoum’s *Mobile Home*, the migrant experience in these practices is exposed as one of both coerced mobility and forced containment, but it is also an experience with infinite possibilities for subtle transgression—for what Irit Rogoff terms a smuggling

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

aesthetic. Thus Yto Barrada's smugglers transform borders into radically interstitial spaces of contravention, while Ursula Biemann's *domesticas* travel through time and space like intrepid astronauts. In the installations of Mona Hatoum, instead, the borders transgressed are decidedly intersubjective. In works as diverse as *Corps étranger* and *Mobile Home*, the viewer is phenomenologically interpellated in such a way that boundaries between self and other are constantly challenged.

It is this challenge that constitutes what I have argued is contemporary art's unique capacity to generate an ethics of witnessing that can adequately respond to the questions of home and belonging in an increasingly unhomely world. Melancholically attending to the losses associated with an age defined by mass displacement and migration, the artists surveyed in this study remind us of home's tenuous capacity to shelter its occupants from the terrors of the world and its equally uncertain capacity to accommodate the memories of human occupation. At the same time, these artists endeavor to trouble the borders between self and other, creating empathetically unsettling art works that compel us to recognize both our own precarious conditions of occupation and the limits of our facility to bear witness to the traumatic experiences of others. In the process, our ways of identifying with home and with each other ideally become "always open to negotiation, to be posed again from elsewhere.... iterative, interrogative processes rather than imperative, identitarian designations."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bhabha, "Halfway House," 125.



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