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Memories of Europe in the Art From Elsewhere[2]
Memórias da Europa na arte de outros lugares

Abstract

The contemporary arts contain and nurture the social lives of European memory, both in Europe and abroad. But European memory cannot be fortressed. It must include memories of Europe as they circulate elsewhere in the world. The lecture will focus on three contemporary artists (Doris Salcedo, William Kentridge, and Vivan Sundaram) whose work engages with memories of political violence in aesthetic forms imaginatively appropriated and transformed from the legacies of European and Transatlantic modernism.

Keywords

Contemporary art. Politics of memory. Histories of colonial and postcolonial violence.

Resumo

As artes contemporâneas contêm e nutrem a vida social da memória européia, tanto na Europa quanto no exterior. Mas a memória européia não pode ser fortalecida. Deve incluir memórias da Europa, uma vez que circulam em outras partes do mundo. A palestra se concentrará em três artistas contemporâneos (Doris Salcedo, William Kentridge e Vivan Sundaram), cujo trabalho envolve memórias de violência política em formas estéticas imaginativamente apropriadas e transformadas a partir dos legados do modernismo europeu e transatlântico.

Palavras-chave

Arte contemporânea. Política da memória. Histórias de violência colonial e pós-colonial.

At a critical time when the EU and liberal democracies everywhere are threatened by a wave of resurgent nationalisms, racisms, and increasing attacks on gender and sexual rights, it may seem frivolous to focus on the arts in an essay on the social life of memory. As I remain committed to searching for successful mergers of aesthetics and politics in contemporary culture, I would argue that the social life of memory must include a transnational if not planetary affective politics that can be embodied in artistic practices. Why in art rather than in memorials, museums, memory sites? Memorial sites like the ESMA in Buenos Aires or the Topography of Terror in Berlin, museums like the Santiago Museo de memoria y derechos humanos or the 9/11 memorial museum in New York focus exclusively and inevitably on the local dimensions of the events they commemorate. Of course, such sites also include universalizing ethical demands such as Nunca más. But the mediation of local and national memory and a potential planetary dimension of the social life of memory is perhaps best addressed in the work of artists.

In this essay, I want to speak about the work of three artists from beyond the Northern Transatlantic whose memory work is resolutely local, but radiates affectively and aesthetically into and through transnational spheres of reception, not due only to its thematic content, but primarily because of the aesthetic strategies these artists use.

At a time when the boundaries of European citizenship are challenged both from the inside and the outside, those boundaries cannot be equated with the imaginary boundaries of European memory. The boundaries of citizenship must be legally, administratively, and politically defined. But European memory cannot be. It cannot be culturally fortressed. For what is European memory if it does not include memories of Europe's role in the world at large. It must acknowledge reciprocally the memories of Europe as they circulate elsewhere. And now increasingly even on the inside.

Some years ago, conference titles such as Europe and its others abounded— still fundamentally Eurocentric in spirit with its possessive pronoun and the globalizing discourse of othering. Then the language changed, acknowledging the implicit problem and turning to phrases such as Europe in other cultures, a discourse that recognized counter-strategies of writing back to Empire: Europe itself was being othered by 'its' others, or as Dipesh Chakrabarty's called it, provincialized. From my point of view, both views are inadequate today to capture how the imaginary relationship between Europe and non-European parts of the world is structured in the work of contemporary artists. It is particularly the transnational and by now globally extant discourse of political memories of violence, state terror, and ethnic cleansing that has produced artistic memory practices in which the European and the non-European are indissolubly folded into each other. Today neither the discourse of othering nor that of provincializing makes much sense any longer.

Of course, the national has never lost its hold in the social life of memory and its cultural imaginaries. Identitarian thinking is still well and alive. Theodor Adorno, over half a century ago, already gave a succinct analysis when he said: Nationalism today is both obsolete and up-to-date. At a time when we experience

a delusional renationalization of politics not only in Europe, it is all the more important to take account of practices in the arts which can open up an alternative horizon--practices that may teach us to be in the world in a non-identitarian way—to be European and planetary at the same time in our practices of remembrance.

I would like to speak about three contemporary artists whose work originated outside of the Western art world, but has become exceptionally successful within it, both in the US and in Europe: William Kentridge, Doris Salcedo and Vivan Sundaram. All three are exemplary in that they weave together two separate strands of memory: memories of local histories of violence (South Africa, Colombia, and India) and emphatic memories of European modernism which they appropriate and transform in creative ways. Their work tells us a great deal about how memories of Europe are an integral part of the veryv texture of artistic work from elsewhere.

Kentridge, Salcedo, and Sundaram work in multiple media and genres: from gallery sculpture, performance, and public event to black box film, theater, opera, not to speak of painting and drawing. Installation and mise-en-scène are central to their work which is deeply embedded in local histories—South African apartheid in Kentridge, Colombian violencia in Salcedo, British colonialism and Hindu nationalism in Sundaram. But their political memory work is also self-consciously informed by an appropriation in reverse, as one could call it, a transformative appropriation of major moments of European modernism. In Salcedo it is minimalist sculpture, installation art, and hermetic post-45 German poetry (Paul Celan); in Kentridge German expressionism, Soviet avant-gardism and early techniques of stop-motion animation film; in Sundaram installation art and the critical Umfunktionierung of a colonial memorial site. Their relation to a much broadened understanding of modernism is anything but derivative. They prey liberally on Western modernism as global resource/heritage. What makes this work different from much of what goes for contemporary art in the international art markets is that political and aesthetic issues are being worked through without apology at a time when the successful linking of aesthetics and politics seems more like a rumor of the past than a reality in the present. Their work remains resolutely local, but as successful artists from the periphery immersed in transnational trends, they cannot be treated merely as local informants. The work thusposes important questions pertaining to transcultural reception and global effect beyond borders.

Let me begin with Salcedo.

I will not talk here about her signature work from the 1990s that deals in powerful ways with the Colombian violencia, the multi-decade long civil war involving the military, death squads, the FARC guerrillas, and narco gangs. Her sculptural installations of violently disfigured and subtly worked over furniture (image 1) represent a kind of memory art that hovers between abstraction and emotional pull (image 2) that deeply unsettles spectators into uncanny recognition.

Image 1: Doris Salcedo, Casa Viuda, Installation Guggenheim, New York, 2015.

Image 2: Doris Salcedo, Unland: The Orphan's Tunic, 1995-98.

In more recent years, the geographic horizon reflected in Salcedo's work has considerably broadened beyond Colombia toward Turkey, Italy, the UK, the US. Simultaneously her work has moved increasingly from gallery and museum space into public space and site-specific urban installations, both in Colombia and abroad. But the meticulous attention to laborious detail has remained. For instance, the use of empty chairs, symptomatic of disappearances from the private domestic sphere in her early work, is turned toward public urban space in one gorgeous public project entitled November 6 and 7. It commemorates a guerrilla siege of Bogotá's Palace of Justice that was violently ended when the army stormed the building in November 1985. On the 17th anniversary of the siege, some 280 wooden chairs were lowered from the roof of the Palace of Justice, one each for each of the victims. Salcedo remained faithful to the forensic reports and sequenced the chairs according to spatial and temporal coordinates of the siege itself. The images of chairs dangling outside the façade of the government building and casting their shadows for all to see in that central square in Bogotá received major attention and triggered a public debate on a conflict that 17 years after the event was still not resolved.

One year later in 2003, in her contribution to the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Salcedo chose an empty space between two buildings in Istanbul, filling it with approximately 1,550 wooden chairs (image 3) stacked tightly between the two buildings framing the installation on either side. Again site-specificity was key. Once there had been a building here in this formerly Greek and Jewish neighborhood, now rather derelict and spotted with similar empty lots and ruins. Again the empty chairs conjure absence, absence in this case related to migration, displacement, and violent expulsion that took place over many years. But look at the precision with which the chairs are arranged to suggest a flush façade when looked at from the side and a chaotic disorganized jumble if viewed frontally. As in the early work, the human body is absent, present only in the trace. The installation lasted only for three months once the Biennial closed, different from that other missing house installation created in Berlin's Grosse Hamburgerstrasse, center of Eastern Jewish immigration around 1900, by Christian Boltanski, an installation from 1989 still visible today and certainly one of the canonical works of a site specific installation in Germany.

As opposed to Salcedo, Boltanski has left the space of the missing house empty, but in painstaking research he found the names, professions, and dates of birth and death of the Jewish and non-Jewish renters who had lived in the building during the Third Reich before it was destroyed in a bombing attack in 1945.

Image 3: Doris Salcedo, 1550 Chairs, Installation, Istanbul Biennial 2003.

Image 4: Doris Salcedo, Shibboleth, Tate Modern, London 2007.

Image 5: Vivan Sundaram, Memorial (1993).

Image 6: Vivan Sundaram, Memorial (1993).

These names and data were then put on signs fixed to the outside walls of the adjoining buildings at the appropriate level where the renters' apartments would have been. Boltanski and Salcedo: Two very different yet resonating ways of mobilizing absence in urban space to give testimony of its hidden history, its submerged social memories. Istanbul and Berlin: The comparison points to the multidirectionality of artistic memory projects today. Site-specificity also characterizes Shibboleth, a work from 2007, executed in the Tate Modern in London. Overcoming initial opposition by museum officials, Salcedo cut a deep, at points widening, at others bifurcating (image 4) or narrowing crack into the floor of the huge turbine hall, now the entrance space to this vast museum which served formerly as an energy plant. If Gordon Matta-Clark in the 1970s cut and split houses in his anarchitectural experiments, Salcedo split in two one of the major sites of contemporary art in Europe. But the gesture was more than merely architectural. The title gives a clue. Shibboleth is the biblical word from the Book of Judges 12 that cannot be pronounced correctly by foreigners trying to cross the Jordan river into safety. Recognized as "other" by their pronunciation, they are killed on arrival. The theme of immigration as exclusion and denial of rights is articulated in the Tate's Turbine hall. It reverberates not only socially, but, as a mark in the museum, also aesthetically in that it points to a structure of exclusion in the canonization of modern art itself. It conjures up a history of European modernism which until very recently has refused to acknowledge modernisms in Africa, Asia, Latin America. Inserted into the concrete walls of the crevice and only perceptible once you bent over the crack is steel-mesh fence, not the barbed wire of Nazi or Serbian camps, but the steel mesh of today's border fortifications. Concrete walls of course are intended to keep the barbarians outside, whether in Israel or at the Mexican-American border. The pronunciation of a word divides the world into friend and foe with deadly consequence. Biblical past and the contemporary present clash in this work that reflects in powerful visual and architectural language on the continuities between colonialism, racism, and immigration. What better place to do this than that major London museum of contemporary art on the banks of the River Thames? Today the crevices are no longer there. They have been filled with cement. But the outline of the crack is still visible all along the turbine hall. It's like a scar of the wound Salcedo had inflicted on the Tate Modern, a wound, however, that really is a wound in Europe's constitution itself as daily

reports of migrants fleeing Africa or the Middle East remind us. Vivan Sundaram, an Indian bricolage and installation artist endebted to the the traditions of Soviet constructivism combined with a politically turned minimalism can be compared to Salcedo in that he, too, developed western installation art in a non-Western context, like Salcedo inscribing an archival and historical impulse into his projects.

In the 1993, Memorial (image 5) was his first major installation, later reworked and expanded: a complex work dealing imaginatively with the 1992 Gujarat Hindu violence on Muslims in which the current Indian president Narendra Modi played an ignominious role. The spark plug for this installation was a newspaper photograph (image 6) of an anonymous Muslim man, lying slain in a Bombay street in front of a toppled garbage container, clutching a small bundle of his possessions in the hollow of his tortured body. When I first saw it exhibited in Bombay in the 1990s, it felt like an entombment, somewhere between minimalism and arte povera, but uncannily moving. Sundaram had constructed a path for the visitors through the memorial toward a gateway of brown tin trunks resembling many an Indian memorial. The piece was first exhibited in a small gallery in the same neighborhood where the man had become victim of mob violence. The work is different from Salcedo's gallery sculptures in that a real document, the photograph, was central for the installation; but Sundaram did use similar strategies of creating an alternative view on events through remembrance and mourning via found and constructed objects that blended distancing abstraction with immediate affect. Visually most powerful are Sundaram's multiple transformations of the newspaper image which suggest a traumatic impact on the artist. Pierced by nails or covered up by them, the victim's body on the photograph was placed at ground level in small vitrines to be looked at from above. Analogous to Salcedo's work, the violence of the present it conjures up is the result of historical trauma that reaches all the way back here to the Indian partition of 1947, one of the major bloodlettings of the 20th century and still largely repressed.

In the late 1990s, Sundaram expanded the archival dimension of his work with his History Project. He took a monument to British imperialism, the Victoria Memorial Museum in Calcutta (image 7), still a major museum and tourist attraction, and refunctioned it into a counter-monument by inverting its inherent colonial meanings

Image 7: Vivan Sundaram, History Project (Victoria Memorial Museum).

from the position of the post-independence secular Indian state. All this happened with state support at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Indian independence. With a wealth of media and objects he created an open ended archive of Bengali history and its struggles for modernity, focusing on working class and peasant uprisings as well as on classically modern Bengali culture. His strategies involved a railroad track traversing the main hall, a railroad wagon with rubber tires, a trolley loaded with a metal boat, a pile of jute bags, a red plastic chair as a fake throne with an enlarged image of Queen Victoria (image 8), a library

Image 8: Detail from History Project.

of folders representing rebels against colonialism and the struggle for a Bengali modernity up until the chaotic end of colonialism, quotes by classical Bengali writers written into the cupola of the massive building, a xxx printing press, plus cabinets and vitrines, photographs and audio/visual materials. Critical history is powerfully inscribed into this counter-memory project which as a temporary exhibition written over a public building could be compared to Salcedo's work on Bogotá's Palace of Justice. The difference is clear. Archival materials are worked through carefully by Salcedo, but feature only indirectly in the completed work. Salcedo remains tied to the conceptual and minimalist dimension of post-1960s art practices while Sundaram extends the conceptual-constructivist dimension into the explicitly archival. His strategies are closer to Heiner Müller's rhetoric of Überschwemmung, flooding, than to those of Beckett's reduction of dramatic devices. What results is a much stronger narrativization of counter-memory in Sundaram, requiring intense interpretive labor from the spectator. In both cases though, the architecture of an existing building provides the material support for the installation. As in the work of Nalini Malani, an Indian feminist artist who focuses on the violence of the Partition, there is a new and felicitous combining of the aesthetic with the political, nurturing the social life of political memory in India. The History Project demanded a synchronous immersive experience combined with the recognition of lived history as laid out in diachronic narrative of archival objects, scripts, sounds, film footage. In Mieke Bal's words, these works by Salcedo and Sundaram are acts of memory enabling and demanding democratic participation of their visitors. However they may or may not change politics in a narrower sense, they certainly create a significant space for what Amin Ash has called the affective life of politics. In the installations of Salcedo and Sundaram, the institutional critique, so dominant in a critical Western postmodernism of the 1970s, expands beyond gallery and museum toward the institutions of public political life itself which are, as it were, set in motion through bricolage and opened up for critique.

Image 9: William Kentridge, Procession, 1999.

Image 10: William Kentridge, Refusal of Time, 2012.

Colonial and postcolonial violence are also central to William Kentridge's work. At the same time, there is a structure of weaving the local into the transnational or global analogous to Salcedo's work. Of course, significant differences pertain between post-colonialism — and thus the image of Europe — in Africa or Asia vs Latin America. Kentridge addresses the politics of colonial rule much more directly than Salcedo. Central to his work on media of memory is the shadow play as in the Shadow Procession of 1999, (image 9) a three-part stop-motion animation film which evokes apartheid and post-apartheid times in South Africa. Over a decade later, he created another shadow procession in The Refusal of Time, (image 10) a stunning black box installation first shown in a dilapidated former railway building at Documenta 13 in 2012. In this project South African memory politics broadened out into an investigation of modern regimes of time (Greenwich Meridian Conference, Washington, 1884) and of space (Berlin colonial conference of 1884/85) These regimes of time and space still rule our world. Kentridge, on the other hand, inspired by Einstein's special theory of relativity of 1905, evokes the instability and reversibility of time itself. As Einstein argued against earlier physics, there is no universal absolute time, no "universally audible tick-tock" [quoted from Galison in WM, RoT, 315], only a multiplicity of times. This multiplicity, politically theorized by Ernst Bloch as non-synchronicities within modernity, is enacted in RoT and it has far-reaching implications for art and politics in our still very modern age.

Let me backtrack a bit. In a deliberate anti-Platonic move, Kentridge has always challenged his viewers to learn from shadows, from the black that opposes and pervades the white, the darkness that comes with the light. All memories are plagued by shadows and by the insecurity of remembering. They can be fleeting, elusive, subject to metamorphosis; they often border on the invisible and the forgotten. To be articulated in art they will need embodiment in objects and media: visual, verbal, musical. But their embodiment cannot be solid and fixed, nor can it be limited to one medium. Memorized events cannot be represented in a mimetic fashion. They are inherently haunted by the limits of representation. Realism as an effect has to flow from the construction and manipulation of objects, as in Salcedo's sculptures and installations or in Kentridge's shadow plays. But Kentridge works on invisibility even more radically than Salcedo, not just on the invisibility or fading of events to be grieved, but on the invisibility and instability of time itself. That is why The Refusal of Time as an anti-colonial act directed against an imposed European time regime is central to all of his work and why its narrative montage culminates in another shadow procession at its end.

The installation is a black box with projections moving from left to right on three walls. Spectators entering the black box first encounter a huge breathing machine (WK calls it the elephant) in the back of the room. The rhythmically moving machine, made up of moving wooden parts, resembles a pump or a large loom, and it fills the black box with its clanking noises and its ever louder exhalations. It embodies both the breath of the human body [[and, the pneumatic

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pumping of time used in late 19th-century Paris to coordinate time across the city's clocks;]] bellowing like an elephant, it combines the organic and the mechanical dimensions of time regimes and their measurement.

Image 11: William Kentridge, Refusal of Time (Map Room with globe like figure on turn table).

Several image sequences of The Refusal of Time, remind us of Meliès's early film techniques and its visual trickeries which were already explicit in some of K's earlier work. Re-iteration is after all one of his major creative techniques. In clear reference to Meliés's melodramatic shorts, Peter Galison, Kentridge's collaborator, thus called RoT a "metaphysical melodrama about time, reversibility, and fate."[1]

The image sequence begins with a ticking metronome that is then multiplied on the three walls of the black box and increasingly loses its beat, either speeding up or slowing down. The spectator wonders whether the multiple metronomes tick at different speeds, but then recognizes that the film is sped up for some and slowed down for others. The effect, at any rate, is loud chaos and metronomes out of control, a first instance of the refusal of an orderly progressing time. It is film itself as a medium that reveals how time is out of joint. As medium, it makes the relativity of time visible.

Ticking metronomes and clocks of all kinds are projected throughout onto the walls, with clock hands moving chaotically forward or backward representing time at the most palpable and unpredictable level. Then there are several repetitive slapstick-like sketches of a love scene, a man in a globe like vestment Kentridge himself doubled up and messing slapstick-like with reality (image 11). As in early cinema, reverse projection is used to make things run backwards in time — books thrown flying back into the hands of the thrower, the shattering of objects being undone as they are restored to their original wholesome state (the coffee pot). Drawing liberally on late 19th and early 20th-century experiments to discipline, measure and control time, time is revealed not just in its relativity, but in its ability to wreak havoc.

1- William Kentridge, The Refusal of Time (Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, 2012) 311.

And then the politics. Greenwich time and the measurement of the world are presented as European techniques of domination calling forth active resistance. Thus in one of the sequences of the projections that cover three walls of the black box a primitive bomb cocktail is mixed in a laboratory that features various objects known from Kentridge's earlier films. In this visual narrative, the anarchist bombing of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich of 1894 is transposed to colonial Dakar in 1916. But here the home-made bomb blows up the laboratory itself which simultaneously functions as the artist's studio. The revolt against Greenwich time is coded as an anti-colonial refusal of an imposed regime of time and simultaneously as an aesthetic project. The refusal of linearity and one-directionality of time, as they characterized ideologies of progress, has always been a central principle of modern artistic practice, but in Kentridge it is mobilized in direct relation to colonialism and its imposition of a new regime of time and space.

In another sequence Kentridge ironizes the "white man's burden": the film projected onto the wall shows him carrying a black woman on his shoulders. It appears together with African maps interspersed with newspaper headlines such as revolt in Burundi, revolt of the Herreros, etc. pointing to colonial violence and rebellion. And then, as beneficiary of white rule in a self-critical gesture he arranges a sequence of chairs in such a way that an African woman can step comfortably from one to the other while he frantically brings the respectively last chair she stepped on to the front of her march so that she can move on ahead. Female African figures play an important role in this installation as in K's earlier films. One highpoint in the bombing scene right after the explosion is an exuberant dance of an African woman in flying white gowns, a dance that proceeds in reverse motion with white pieces of paper rising around the dancer. This exuberant dance in white offers a life--affirming counter-point to the shadow procession at the end of RoT that culminates with black confetti whirling upwards until they cover the whole screen. Though here the procession consists of real human figures rather than black paper cut-outs as in the film of 1999, they also carry objects of everyday life with them as they trudge on forward. Several musicians leading the procession play an anarchic rhythmic tune on wind instruments — tuba, trumpet, trombone accompanied by drumming as they march to the rhythm in the procession. The use of wind instruments joins the bellowing of the mechanical elephant. Rhythms and sounds come alive in accord with human breath which can never be subjected to a strict metrical regime. And yet, this shadow procession does not end in open-ended surreal anarchy as the shadow procession of 1999, but it ends in the black confetti covering the whole screen until everything has been swallowed up as if by a black hole.

Let me conclude with a clip from Kentridge's Shadow Procession of 1999. In an earlier reading of this work I emphasized the indetermination of this procession which simply breaks off at the end. The viewers don't quite know whether its purpose is mourning, supplication, flight or protest. Indeterminate it was in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. But today, when world-wide refugee flows and migrations have reached unprecedented proportions, who will not think of the

contemporary situation, thus translating the visual track into an image of world wide migration? Taken together with Salcedo's Shibboleth, we confront an art that registers the political man-made earthquakes and enforced dislocations of our time without pointing fingers and apportioning blame. And yet—the questions linger… As well as the need for a post-national civic politics.
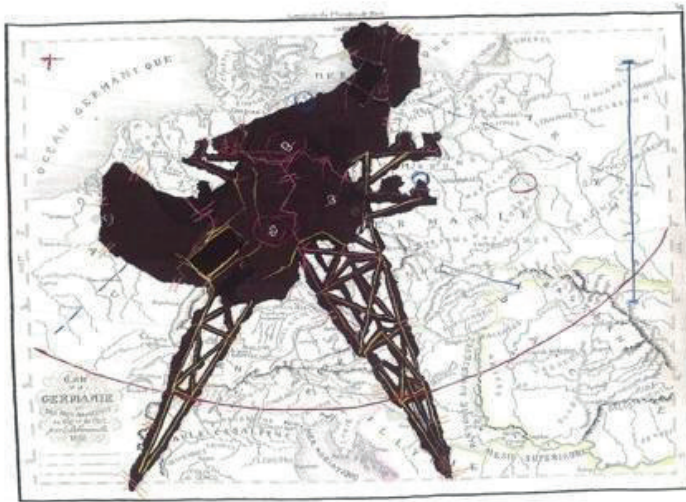

Image 12: William Kentridge, Pylon Lady, 2001.

And then one final image that demonstrates the imbrications of Kentridge's understanding of Africa and Europe as intertwined: (image 12) a black shadowy female figure walking on damaged stilts West to East across a map of Germany with the Latin names of Roman provinces inscribed on the map which is a 19th century map representing Central Europe during the Roman Empire. Radical compression of time and space: the contours of the figure's upper body seem to suggest the contours of the map of South Africa itself: map across map, black across white, an imaginary superimposition with borders deliberately crossed and denied. Kentridge calls her the "Pylon Lady."

Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire once spoke of a boomerang and a choc en retour, as they reflected on the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust. Now there is another boomerang, different but still related to the history of colonialism: as the former colonials amass at the borders of Europe, Europe reacts with pulling up borders, building new walls, and expanding detention centers. But the black is always already part of the white, light never comes without its shadows.

What conclusions can finally be drawn from the preceding juxtapositions? I might suggest the following: Kentridge, Sundaram and Salcedo's practices are no longer modernist in a traditional European sense. Classical modernism and avant--gardism appear in this work as memory, citation, and pointed bricolage. There emerges an alternative memorial art praxis that may strike us as surprising in its self-conscious coupling of aesthetics and politics. If it is avant-garde at all, it is an

2- On this question of medium
aesthetics see the incisive dis-
cussion in Juliane Rebentisch,
Aesthetics of Installation Art
(Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012),
especially the chapter entitled
Medium and Form, 79-140.

avant-gardism quite different in its temporal imagination from that of the histori-
cal avant-garde. Avant-gardism here not as a model of progress or utopia depen-
dent on the experience of shock (as in Benjamin) or on the most advanced, cutting-
-edge state of the artistic material (as in Adorno) or, for that matter, on the disavowal
of realisms (as in much French poststructuralism, Barthes, Lyotard, Derrida, Kris-
teva); avant-gardism rather as a challenge to think politically through spectacular
sensuous installations that create affect both on the local and the global stage.
Avant-gardism not as programmatic destruction of traditional notions of autonomy
and the work, but as insistence on the "differential specificity" (Weber & Krauss) of
aesthetic work. Given its embeddedness in social and political critique, this work is
geared in its aesthetic construction toward disrupting the automatism of allegedly
autonomous vision, transparent knowledge, and public opinion.[2]

Kentridge, Sundaram and Salcedo's work thus reinscribes and marks a boun-
dary between artistic practice and all that is part of a presentist visual culture of quick
consumption and careless forgetting. In fleeting shadow-plays as in densely mate-
rial sculptural installations, the remembrance of historical trauma and contemporary
politics are aesthetically mediated in such a way that deep structures of domination
and social conflict in our world are illuminated for the spectator. In this sense, their
work is political through and through. In its formal and technical strategies, it marks a
refusal of a technological triumphalism that privileges only the digital and the social
media. It is no longer a philosophy of history that anchors this kind of avant-gardism,
but on the contrary a sustained doubt in merely technological progress combined with
a political critique of a failing present that has not redeemed the promises of moder-
nity. This avant-gardism from the 'periphery' offers anintriguing paradox: it implodes
the distinction between tradition and the avant-garde since it transforms the critique
of modernity, which was always already part of European avant-gardism itself, for a
postcolonial globalizing world and its memories of Europe. The social life of memory
cannot only rely on historical pedagogy, museums, and memorials all of which are
inevitably inscribed with dimensions of power that may limit their effect. It must draw
on the power of the arts to embody the dialectic between abstraction and affect.
Only then may social institutions of education and culture be energized by the affective
dimension of memory politics which alone they cannot guarantee.

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