Chapter Three

*Tracing scars, cracks and ruptures*
It signifies nothing, and at the same time, because of that negativity, everything.

… the inscribed negative space opens up an abyss of unlimited meaning. Here, absence is the trace, the physical memory of violence, like an enormous scar… a tiny portion of a cut that really runs through the entire globe…

Salcedo allows us to see the unseeable, in order for the scar of the earth to heal…¹

When I visited the Tate Modern Turbine Hall in May 2008, Doris Salcedo’s installation, Shibboleth, 2007-8, had all but disappeared – as she had planned and predicted, “…the piece will be sealed, the piece will remain under the floor and it will be sealed so a permanent scar will always be [in] the Turbine Hall as a memory.” Salcedo anticipated that this trace of her installation would remain as a vague memory – a ghostly continuance of her concept of the cracked floor representing the unacknowledged, continuing divides between people even in the seemingly cohesive societies of first-world countries. The work, formerly a crack in the ground, became just as intriguing and disturbing in its filled in aftermath, as a line and as a scar that will remain. I spent several hours on repeated visits to the Turbine Hall – purely to walk the lengths of the scar, tracing and creating rubbings of its surface in my notebook, sitting in that cavernous space and pondering the poetic enormity of Salcedo’s remnant. It was a moving, deliciously unsettling, encounter. Although the Shibboleth scar was not as immediately visible as the crack must have been, the subtle texture and colour variations in the grey concrete seemed to invite my meandering, almost meditative reflections on trajectories and journeys present and past.

---

Quoting Tate Galleries Director, Nicholas Serota
However, I do not believe that *Shibboleth* remained within the boundaries of Salcedo’s intent – “Shibboleth is a negative space: it addresses the w(hole) in history that marks the bottomless difference that separates whites from non-whites. The w(hole) in history that I am referring to is the history of racism, which runs parallel to the history of modernity, and is its untold dark side.”⁴

Although I sympathise with Salcedo’s agenda, I feel that the Tate curators and most art critics did *Shibboleth* an injustice by containing it within a single interpretation and neglecting the possibilities of additional layered readings. This stance forced the viewer to locate him or herself within strictly demarcated racial black and white zones, causing many to dismiss it out of hand, as they were unable and unwilling to identify themselves personally with these polarising labels, as defined by the work’s title *Shibboleth*.⁵

---


⁵ The original Hebrew meaning of the word ‘shibboleth’ literally meant the part of a plant containing grains – the most valued and nutritious. The contemporary use of the word means any language usage indicative of one’s social or regional origin, or more broadly, any practice that identifies members of a group. The term was first used in this way during an event recorded in the Old Testament’s Book of Judges. The scene is set, aptly for Salcedo’s work, on the precipice banks of the river Jordan, demarcating the borderer between two countries who have been at war. The victorious Gileadites, having defeated the Ephraimites in battle, are using dialect and accent to define their superiority. As with all wars there were thousands of refugees caught up and displaced in the fighting. Although victorious, the Gileadites were concerned that the Ephraimites would reform and attack them again. The Gileadites had trouble identifying the Ephraimites from the other refugees, so each refugee trying to cross this borderer was challenged to pronounce ‘shibboleth’. The Ephraimites, unable to form the ‘sh’ sound, of the victors accent and dialect, pronounced the word ‘sibboleth’ instead and were then immediately executed. This resulted in forty-two thousand people; men, women and children, being killed, the largest single genocide massacre in the Bible.

Salcedo clearly directs the viewer to imagine looking up from the bottom of the crack, conceptually sharing the viewpoint of an immigrant. Stuck at the bottom of a crevice peering up towards the rest of the world, towards people and societies who are avoiding them, making them feel unwelcome and unwanted, left to their own devices to find their own ways out of such fissures. Such an understanding of the work requires the viewer to make an excessive Alice in Wonderland type of imaginative leap. It ignores the viewers’ immediate intriguing tangible experience of looking down into the crack and negotiating their movements around it. The scale of the installation in itself was sufficient and viewers, in their own sense of bodily time and space, were already well equipped to experience and interpret its layered meanings.

“From above, it looks like a bolt of lightning; up close, it reveals a miniature canyon into which you can peer if you so choose (it doesn't, alas, contain any tiny cowboys and Indians engaged in mutual massacre, a la Chapman brothers).”

Only a few reviewers expressed opinions of this seminal artwork that varied from Salcedo’s artist statement. It seems as though the artist and her work were stamped with a label years ago and only a couple of critics have challenged this. Andrew Mead is one, he wrote of her earlier work “you couldn't miss the disquiet (but) you would never have guessed Salcedo's supposed subject – the

Fig. 17. Visitors looking into Doris Salcedo’s Shibboleth installation, 2007

---

7 Cooke, R. (2007). “Is this really all it's cracked up to be? Doris Salcedo makes big claims for her Turbine Hall installation, but it's not as ground-breaking as she thinks”. Observer, London. [author’s brackets]
effects of civil war in Colombia." I agree, to emphasise historical context over the viewer’s profound sense of disquiet when experiencing Salcedo’s work is missing the point. The success of her work is the personal emotional connections that affect the viewer. It is certainly necessary to have a sense of Salcedo’s background, but there is no reason for Colombia necessarily to contain the start and end points of discussion.

One Shibboleth reviewer did take a different direction, suggesting that the rupture in the gallery floor metaphorically foreshadowed the collapse of global financial markets, like a crack of doom; the cleft was a widening chasm into which we would all topple. His socio-economic forecast seems to be increasingly true as we near the end of 2008.

Directing my own feet, I am compelled to edge away from such negativity and instead link the Shibboleth scar to my conceptual threads of connection acting as illuminating guides. As another reviewer suggested quoting Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.” For many viewers the walk along the Shibboleth crack or scar, was a contemplative experience, akin to walking a meditative labyrinth like that of Chartres Cathedral. Focusing on the ground, whilst following Salcedo’s trajectories, one had to take into account the placement of each step. With each connecting footfall, came the

---


12 See Chapter 1, page 20, regarding the medieval paved labyrinth in the floor of Chartres Cathedral.
consideration of a personal, unique relationship with the earth. Just as Salcedo’s trajectory emphasised responsibility for one’s own direction and balance, it drew the viewer’s experience deeper into a personal relationship with history.\(^\text{13}\) To follow the thread-like lines etched into the floor, was to consider connections between one’s present sense of reality and of being part of something more expansive; leading above, below and beyond one’s usual sense of time and space.

My introspective experience of the *Shibboleth* scar, was translated into the more permanent form of photographs and the graphite rubbings in my notebook, *Tracing scars i-ix, 2008*. This frottage texture was similar to my previous installation, *Wall whispers, 2007*. Where I used charcoal to trace directly on the studio wall, revealed various cracks, slight undulations and variations in texture of the recycled over-painted surface. The finished installation seemed almost to describe a journey, permeating through the layers and histories concealed beneath the walls surface.

\(\text{Fig.19. Kath Fries, Wall whispers, 2007, charcoal on wall, 200 x 400 x 160 cm}\)

\(^\text{13}\) The crack afforded viewers an almost archaeological experience, allowing them to peer down into the foundations of the building and metaphorically into history, perhaps to examine how the Tate’s collection was originally built from sugar industry money based in slave labour and colonial exploitation of land. For detailed discussion see Weizman, E. (2007). “Seismic Archaeology”. Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth. D. Salcedo and M. Bal. London, Tate Publishing; 30-39.
Disrupting the gallery’s surfaces and boundaries is a recurring feature in Salcedo’s work. However, cutting through to reveal “what moves behind the layers” in an artwork, was first explored by the Italian Argentinean artist, Lucio Fontana. He created lines or trajectories for the viewer’s gaze to follow, inviting the viewer to journey beyond that which is superficial and immediately apparent. Fontana suggested that the space beyond the surface of the artwork represented the infinite realms of imagination and consciousness. To locate this space he developed the concept of the fourth dimension “the suggestion of passing time”. To access it he would slice through the surface of the canvas, a motion he called taglio, which became his most famous gesture and dominated his work from 1958 onwards. He called these works Concetti spaziali, or spatial concepts.

Fontana’s reductive canvases were “fundamentally preoccupied with pure gesture and infinite space.” His gesture of cutting though the surface offered alternative ways of looking at artwork as the canvas was no longer limited to what it represented instead the “…lacerated canvas indicates the infinite. It makes it manifest.” To contemplate his work is more than just a visual experience, it is deeply personal and emotional as “the

---

14 See documentation of Salcedo’s Neither 2004, installation at White Cube Gallery, London
17 Ibid.
18 Fontana also used various other techniques to disrupt the surface of the artwork, like puncturing multiple small holes though the surface of the canvas.
19 Vetrocq, M. E. (2007). “Fontana’s visible cities: in an exhibition of newly assembled paintings named for Venice and New York, the artist best known for his transgressive gestures and Spatialist manifestos is shown to have had a taste for the decorative, sensuous and kitsch.” Art in America 95(1): 7.
depth and quality, the commitment and passion of the work is readily evident.”

Today, Fontana’s work can be read in the privileged light of history as a substantial fork in the road, a choice of pathways in the labyrinth. It is one I am fascinated to follow.

The cutting into and bending back sections of woven aluminium gauze in my work uncovers a similar sense of freedom. The action of slitting or rupturing the constraints of a flat geometric canvas or strict grid of the wire gauze creates a surprising sense of movement and abandon. Physically and metaphorically, the grid creates a sense of a reliable reference point, like a map. But there seems to be even more inaccessible layers beyond the cut, particularly within the wire gauze. Perhaps it is partly to do with the optical illusion of shimmering movement most visible when the gauze overlaps, insinuating further possibilities and almost magical potentials to be further explored.

A similar relationship between the grid and the cut is also apparent in Fontana’s work, as Richard Tuttle describes “…the back of the slit was covered with black gauze, which curved contrary to the incurring edges of the canvas, so the inspiration seems not at all to have been the slit, but the combination of the slit and the covering gauze… The amazing thing was that seeing ‘backstage’ as it were – was neither undermining, nor contradictory, that in a word, it enhanced your respect.”

Tuttle follows similar fascinating tangents of exploration in his work with lines, grids and

---


expanding pictorial space.

Tuttle’s *Wire Pieces*, sum up the essence of ephemeral stillness and interconnectedness that I strive to capture in my own work. Tuttle threads a length of wire across the wall, then draws one of the shadows cast on the wall by the wire. Then lit from another angle thus creating an additional real shadow. These works seem linked to Fontana’s *taglio* canvases, with the same sense of restraint, but moving beyond the canvas into the wall itself and addressing the space in front, behind and within the wall. They lead the viewer’s gaze along a journey through differing concepts of space and time, alluding to possibilities of infinite viewpoints.

![Image of Tuttle's Wire Piece](image)
References

Cooke, R. (2007). "Is this really all it's cracked up to be? Doris Salcedo makes big claims for her Turbine Hall installation, but it's not as ground-breaking as she thinks". Observer, London.
Vetrocq, M. E. (2007). "Fontana's visible cities: in an exhibition of newly assembled paintings named for Venice and New York, the artist best known for his transgressive gestures and Spatialist manifestos is shown to have had a taste for the decorative, sensuous and kitsch." Art in America 95(1): 7.