

# DR. EDWARD BACAL • CURRICULUM VITAE

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## EDUCATION

### PhD

2012 – 2018

University of Toronto, Department of History of Art.

- Dissertation: *Bodies Withdrawn: The Ethics of Abstraction in Contemporary Post-Minimal Art*.
- Committee: Dr. John Paul Ricco (supervisor), Dr. Elizabeth Legge, Dr. Eva-Lynn Jagoe.

### MA (Distinction)

2011 – 2012

University College London, Department of the History of Art.

- Student Academic Representative on behalf of 2011/2012 M.A. class.

### BA Hons (High distinction)

2006 – 2011

University of Toronto

- Awarded Dean's List honours for multiple years.

## RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

### Primary interests

- Art and visual culture since 1900.
- Abstract and conceptual art since 1960.
- Continental philosophy and critical theory.

### Secondary Interests

- Art and visual culture, 1750-1900.
- Film history and theory.
- Modern architecture and design.

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

### University of Toronto

2017

Pekka K. Sinervo Scholarship

- \$3,000 in recognition of academic distinction, leadership, and contribution to university life.

### Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

2014 – 2017

SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship.

- \$20,000 per annum, for three years.

### University of Toronto, School of Graduate Studies

2012

University of Toronto Fellowship.

- \$15,000 plus tuition per annum for five years

### Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto

2010 – 2011

Undergraduate Fellowship.

- Year-long residency, including \$1000 scholarship and \$500 for research travel.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**University of Toronto Scarborough, Department of Arts, Media, and Culture: 2020 –**  
Sessional Lecturer.

- VPHC45: Seminar in Modern & Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Politics Since 1968 (winter 2020): Course design and administration, lecturing, and marking; delivery of online classes and evaluations.

**University of Toronto, Department of History of Art: 2012 –2018**  
Course Instructor.

- FAH102: *Art & Ideas: Bodies and Embodiment* (summer 2018): Curriculum design and administration, lecturing, and marking.
- FAH245: *Modernism and Anti-Modernism: 1750–1900* (summer 2016): Course design and administration, lecturing, and marking.

Teaching Assistant.

- FAH102: *Art and Ideas* (winter 2018): Grading and brief lecturing for Dr. Joseph Clarke.
- FAH102: *Art and Ideas* (summer 2017): Leading tutorials and grading for Dr. Jacquelyn Clements.
- FAH246: *Art Since 1900* (winter 2016): Grading and student liaison for Dr. Nikolina Kurtovic.
- FAH101: *Monuments of Art History* (fall 2015): Grading for Dr. Christy Anderson.
- FAH245 *Modernism and Anti-Modernism 1750–1900* (fall 2012 and 2014): Grading and student liaison for Dr. Jordan Bear.
- FAH246: *Art Since 1900* (winter 2014): Grading, leading review sessions, and student liaison for Dr. Mark Cheetham.
- FAH289: *Art Since 1945* (winter 2013): Leading tutorials, grading, and student liaison for Dr. John Paul Ricco.

### Guest lectures and presentations

- “East Asian Art in the Global Contemporary and the Contemporary Global.” Lecture, FAH262 *Art and Visual Experience in Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, University of Toronto, April 3, 2018.
- “Whose Streets? Contemporary Art, Urbanism, and the Use of the City.” Lecture, FAH102H1: *Art and Ideas*, University of Toronto, March 29, 2018.
- “¿Mexicanidad?: Experiences and Representations of Mexico in Contemporary Art.” Lecture, SPA 2425H: *21st Century Latin American Culture*, University of Toronto, March 19, 2018.
- Undergraduate exam preparation workshop, University of Toronto, March 28, 2017.
- Undergraduate exam preparation workshop, University of Toronto, October, 2016.
- *Sunday Scene* presenter for *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art* at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, June 23, 2013.
- “Minimalism and its Expanded History.” Lecture, FAH245H1: *Art Since 1900*, University of Toronto, February 11, 2014.

## PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

### **Juno College of Technology**

**2020**

Web Development Immersive Bootcamp certificate.

- Completion of a full-time professional course in front-end web development.

### **Centre for Community Partnerships, University of Toronto**

**2017 – 2018**

- Completion of the “Community Engaged Learning Seminar for Doctoral Students,” an advanced, semester long seminar, including cooperative project with the organization, The Leap.

### **Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, University of Toronto**

**2018**

Advanced University Teaching Preparation Certification.

Completion of the following workshops:

- “Microteaching I: Presentation Skills Builder,” November 9, 2017.
- “Microteaching II: Effective Lesson Planning and Delivery,” November 1, 2017.
- “Creative Pedagogical Uses of Media,” June 21, 2017.
- “Big Ideas on a Small Scale: Adapting Concepts and Trends in Teaching and Learning for your Classroom,” February 10, 2017.
- “Demystifying Library Research for Your Students,” Oct 20, 2016.
- “Fostering Academic Integrity,” Oct 5, 2016.
- “Course Administration for First Time CUPE 3902 Unit 1 Course Instructors,” April 26, 2016.
- “Making Your Syllabus Work for You and Your Students: Effective Course Syllabus Design,” April 26, 2016.
- “Assessment Design: How to Bring the Best Out of Your Students,” April 26, 2016.
- “Promoting Pedagogical Accessibility through Universal Instructional Design,” March 22, 2016.
- “Active Learning in Discussion-based Classrooms,” March 15, 2016.
- “Statement of Teaching Philosophy Clinic,” March 9, 2016.
- “Accessibility 101: An Introduction to Accessible Teaching and Learning at the University of Toronto,” March 1, 2016.
- “Preparing Your Teaching Dossier,” February 23, 2016.
- “Where Did I Lose Marks? Changing the Conversation on Grading and Feedback,” February 5, 2016.

### **Graduate Professional Skills Program, University of Toronto**

**2018**

- Completion of a certificate program consisting of 20 workshop credits.

### **Woodsworth College, University of Toronto**

**2017**

- Completion of *Teaching in Higher Education 500*, an advanced, semester long course.

### **MITACS Step Program**

**2016–2017**

Attendance at the following workshops:

- “Career Professionalism,” October 3, 2017.
- “Skills of Communication,” March 14, 2016.

**University of Toronto, Department of History of Art****2016 – 2017**

Attendance of the following workshops:

- “History of Art Teaching Workshop” (2017),
- “Teaching Tuesdays: What Use is the Survey?” (2016).
- “History of Art Sessional Instructor Workshop” (2016).

**English Language and Writing Support, University of Toronto****2016**

Completion of the following term-length seminars:

- “Becoming a Better Editor of your own Writing” (fall 2016).
- “Oral Presentation Skills” (winter 2016) .

**PUBLICATIONS****Peer reviewed articles**

- “Pervasive Death: Teresa Margolles and the Space of the Corpse.” *Human Remains and Violence* 4:1 (2018).
- “The Concrete and the Abstract: On Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles, and Santiago Sierra's Tenuous Bodies.” *Parallax* 76 (2015).
- “Art Work: Santiago Sierra and Socio-Aesthetics of Production.” *Shift* 6 (2013).

**Non-peer reviewed articles**

- “Toronto Biennial: The Shoreline Dilemma.” (Review) *ASAP/J*, December 17, 2019.
- “Muscled Rose at Scrap Metal Gallery.” (Review) *Canadian Art*, August 14, 2019.
- “Up, Down, Left, Right: Some Thoughts on the Inverse, Reverse, and Double.” *FrameWork* 4/16 (2016).
- “Capitalism and Contemporaneity: On Jeremy Deller's The Battle of Orgreave.” *Kapsula* (2014).
- “Sharon Lockhart and Steve McQueen: Inside the Frame of Structural Film.” *CineAction* 91 (2013).
- “Bodies Being-Together: AIDS Activism and the Aesthetics of Community.” *Trans-Scripts* 3 (2013).
- “Narcissism, Masculinity, and the Art of Power.” *Humanitas* 2 (2012).
- “On the Obama-ization of Will Smith.” *CineAction* 77 (2009).
- “Game Plan: Alighiero Boetti.” (Review) [www.artface.co.uk](http://www.artface.co.uk), March 6, 2012.

**ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS****Scholarly papers**

- “Sexuality in the Expanded Field: Space, Real Estate, Sex.” Paper presented at *Sexuality in the Field of Encounter: The Aesthetic Topographies of Eros* panel at the Association for Art History Annual Conference, Brighton, April 5, 2019.
- “To Create a Work of Art: Santiago Sierra and the Performance of Production.” Workshop, University of Toronto, Centre for Ethics, February 28, 2018.
- “Dispossessing Form: Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Aesthetics of Logistics.” Paper presented at *Object - Event - Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity Since the 1960s*, panel at the 106th annual College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, February 22, 2018.
- “Bodies Withdrawn: The Ethics of Abstraction in Contemporary Post-Minimal Art.” PhD colloquium, University of Toronto, Department of History of Art, January 17, 2018.

- “Death without End(s): Teresa Margoles and the Unlimiting of the Dead Body.” Paper presented at *Endings*, University of Toronto Graduate English Conference, April 27, 2017.
- “By the Hand: The Auto-erotics of Creation.” Paper presented at *Show & Tell*, Graduate Union of Students of Art panel, University of Toronto, April 11, 2017.
- “Portraits without Subjects: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and the Ethics of Singular-Plurality.” Paper presented at *Subject and Subjectivization in Art (History) and Philosophy. A Definition of the Problem*, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, December 2-3, 2016.
- “All Men are Dogs: The Civil Ontology of Animals in the Scene of Protest.” Paper presented at *Animal Encounters: Human-Animal Contacts in the Arts, Literature, Culture, and the Sciences*, Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Department for German and Comparative Studies, November 25-27, 2016.
- “Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetic After-Life of Corpses.” Paper presented at *Dead or Alive! Tracing the Animation of Matter in Art and Visual Culture*, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, in collaboration with the National Gallery of Denmark and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, November 10 - 11, 2016.
- “Abstract Materialities: The Anonymous Corpse in the Work of Teresa Margolles.” Paper presented at *Bodily Matters: Human Biomatter in Art: Materials / Aesthetics / Ethics*, Institute for Advanced Studies, University College London, July 7-8, 2016.
- “Measuring the Body’s Durational Value in the Work of Santiago Sierra.” Paper presented at *Out of Time: Temporal Slippage in Performance and Visual Arts*, Graduate School of Arts and Humanities, University of Manchester, June 17, 2016.
- “The Body in and as its Abstraction: Virtuality and Corporeality in the Work of Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra.” Paper presented at *[Image Here]*, Film and Visual Studies Conference and Exhibition, Harvard University, April 7-9, 2016.
- “Intimate Exteriorities: Doris Salcedo and the Ethics of Public Domestics.” Paper presented at *The Aesthetics of Invitation: Art at the Threshold of Hospitality*, panel at the 41st annual Association of Art Historian’s Conference, University of East Anglia, April 10, 2015.
- “Santiago Sierra: Wage Labour and the Material Conditions of Aesthetic Production.” Paper presented at *Performing Money: The Problematic of Performance Art and the Art Market*, 3rd Annual Art History Graduate Conference, University of Essex, June 6, 2014.
- “On the Politics of Corporeal Materiality in the Films of Steve McQueen.” Paper presented at *Bodies in Between: Corporeality and Visuality from Historical Avant-garde to Social Media*, Department of Cinematography and Media, Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babes-Bolyai University, May 29-31, 2014.
- “Imprisonment and the Political Production of Bodies in the Work of Doris Salcedo, Alfredo Jaar, and Santiago Sierra.” Paper presented at *Legal Bodies: Corpus / Persona / Communitas*, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden University, May 14-15, 2014.
- “Capitalism and Contemporaneity: Jeremy Deller’s Battle of Orgreave.” Paper presented at *Fail Again, Fake Better*, Art History Graduate Student Association, York University, March 14, 2014.
- “Post-Minimalist Prisons: Alfredo Jaar, Doris Salcedo, and Carceral Space.” Paper presented at *Access / Restriction*, Art History Graduate Students’ Society, Carleton University, March 8, 2014.
- “Mapping Abstractions: Francis Alÿs’ Green Line and the Limits of Israeli-Palestinian Borders.” Paper presented at *Spatial Encounters*, Graduate Union of the Students of Art, University of Toronto, January 25, 2013.
- “Narcissism, Masculinity, and the Art of Power.” Paper presented at *Psychoanalysis, Society and Culture*, Dept. of Psychoanalysis, Middlesex University, July 9, 2012.

- “Repetition, Return, and Representation: Alain Resnais and the Traumatic Temporality of Mechanical Reproduction.” Paper presented at *Photography and the Unrepresentable*, School of Philosophy and Art History, University of Essex, May 15, 2012.

### Conference posters

- “What Conditions are Necessary to Become an Image....” Poster presented at *Topographies of Mass Violence*, 11th annual Max and Iris Stern International Symposium, Musée d’Art Contemporain, Montreal, March 31–April 1, 2017.
- “The Image as Index of its own Limits: Santiago Sierra and the Documentation of Abstraction: Poster for a Rejected Presentation.” Poster presented at *Image as Vortex: An Interdisciplinary Conference on the Question of what an Image is by Examining what it does*, University of Oxford, June 18, 2016.

## PROFESSIONAL AND CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY

### Association for Art History

2019

- Chair of “Sexuality in the field of encounter: the aesthetic topographies of eros” panel at Association for Art History Annual Conference, University of Brighton, April 5, 2019.

### Graduate Union of the Students of Art, University of Toronto

2014—2018

- President (2014–2016)
- Co-President, with Samantha Chang (2016–2017).
- Treasurer (2016—2018)
- Co-Chair, with Paul Gheorghide, of *Art Work: Art’s Productive Economies*, the Inaugural Wollesen Memorial Graduate Symposium, March 20, 2014.
- Symposium Committee member for *Objects and Affects*, the Second Annual Wollesen Memorial Graduate Symposium, January 22, 2015.
- Canadian Union of Public Employees local 3902 Steward (2016–2017).

Organizer of the following panels and lectures:

- Edward Bacal, Rachel Dewan, and Madeleine Leisk, Show and Tell graduate panel, April 11, 2017.
- Madeliene Kattman, John Koenig, and Gary Wang, Show and Tell graduate panel, March 27, 2017.
- Jill Caskey, Yi Gu, and Kajri Jain, *Aesthetics as Politics: Art, Society, Culture*, faculty panel, February 27, 2017.
- Christy Anderson, Mark Cheetham, and Seungjung Kim, *Aesthetic Spatialities: Space, Place, Spacing*, faculty panel. November 29, 2016.
- Emily Doucet, “From Earth to Air: Photography and Geography,” Show and Tell lecture, March 9, 2016.
- Sara Angel. “The Max Stern Recoveries: Redefining the Rules of Nazi-Era Art Restitution,” Show and Tell lecture, January 21, 2016
- Evonne Levy, “The Wölfflin Project: The Global Reception of Art History’s Most Read Book (1915–2015),” Brown Bag Series lecture, November 11, 2015.
- Michaela Rife, “Radioactive Images: Confronting Resource Extraction in the Navajo Nation,” Show and Tell lecture, November 3, 2015
- Margaret English, “Sounding Off: The Art Library’s Sound Art Collection and its Place in Academe,” Brown Bag Series lecture, October 21, 2015.
- Amy Wallace, “Asher B. Durand and the Studio of Nature,” Show and Tell lecture, September 22, 2015.

- Sophie Hackett, “Photography and Queer Visibility.” Lecture, April 3, 2014 (Co-organized with Katie Adelman-Frankel).

### **The Leap**

**2017-2018**

Cooperative Project Partner.

- Developing, researching, and writing articles for the organization’s “Stories” series.

### **Centre for Ethics, University of Toronto**

**2017-2018**

Graduate Associate.

- Participant in annual activity on the theme “Globalization and Its Critics in the 21st Century.”

### **Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal**

**2017**

- Participant in “Topographies of Mass Violence,” a pair of study days and a symposium, for which I contributed an academic poster and served as a respondent

### **Universities Art Association of Canada**

**2016**

- Chair of “Perverse Polymorphology: On the Aesthetics of Indistinction,” panel at Universities Art Association of Canada Annual Conference, Université du Québec à Montréal, October 28, 2016.

### **University of Toronto, Department of History of Art**

**2015 – 2017**

- Participant in the Grad School Talk for undergraduate art history students.
- Participant in the job search committee for modern architecture candidates (2016).
- Participant in the graduate student panel for the department's external review (2015).

### **Hart House (University of Toronto)**

**2014**

Artist of “Quarter Fort,” winning submission of Hart House's 2014 installation project.

### **The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery**

**2013**

Curatorial Intern.

### **University College London**

**2011-2012**

Research Assistant.

- Assisting Dr. T.J. Demos with the publication of a monograph.

Student Academic Representative.

- I liaised with department administration on behalf of the History of Art MA cohort.

### **University of Toronto Art Centre**

**2011**

Research Assistant (internship).

- Assisting the director, Niamh O’Laoghaire, with the publication of a museum catalogue.

## **GRANTS**

### **Doctoral and Early Career Research Network**

**2019**

DECR Annual Conference Bursary

<b>Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institut</b>	<b>2016</b>
• \$637 travel reimbursement for a conference presentation.	
<b>University of Manchester</b>	<b>2016</b>
• £35 travel reimbursement for a conference presentation.	
<b>University of Toronto Mississauga, Department of Visual Studies</b>	<b>2014 – 2016</b>
Graduate Expansion Fund.	
• \$2000 for research and conference travel (2016).	
• \$2000 for research and conference travel (2014).	
<b>University of Toronto, Department of History of Art</b>	<b>2014 – 2016</b>
Department of Art Conference Travel Grant.	
• \$1300 for conference travel (2016).	
• \$737.50 for conference travel (2015).	
• \$500 for conference travel (2015).	
• \$500 for conference travel (2014).	
<b>University of Toronto, School of Graduate Studies</b>	<b>2013 – 2014</b>
SGS Conference Grant.	
• \$320 for conference travel (2014).	
• \$500 in support of the Inaugural Wollesen Memorial Graduate Symposium (2013).	
<b>University of Toronto, Graduate Students Union</b>	<b>2013</b>
Conference and Academic Event Grant.	
• \$600 in support of the Inaugural Wollesen Memorial Graduate Symposium.	





# The Concrete and the Abstract: On Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra's Tenuous Bodies

Edward Bacal

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## The Concrete and the Abstract: On Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra's Tenuous Bodies

Edward Bacal

In both colloquial and theoretical language, the notions of 'abstract' and 'concrete' have conventionally worked in opposition, if not in dialectical or mutually contingent terms. In the relation between the abstract (broadly signifying the non-representational and non-figural, the virtual, nebulous, indeterminate, conceptual) and the concrete (the real, solid, worldly, evident), the application of these respective terms encompasses their corresponding implications. To ask what it is to be or become abstract or concrete is to ask how and why something does or does not embody either state, if not both simultaneously, or the movement in between them. Furthermore, it is to ask what the alternate abstractness and/or concreteness of a given object, being, idea or practice suggests about that thing, as well as the attendant forms and functions that constitute it. For instance, when, following Marx, one speaks of abstract and concrete labour in order to qualify certain forms of value production, how does one thereby also qualify the forms and functions of the bodies, subjectivities, actions and events that produce, and are no less produced by, these instrumental processes? In other words, how is the apparent abstractness or concreteness of a thing, state, quality or process implicated in the other statuses (social, political, ethical, material, aesthetic) that constitute them?

Given these guiding questions, I will consider their relevance by analysing artworks by Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra, each of which embodies both the concrete and the abstract. This is evident in the plainly literal sense that these works conspicuously employ concrete in their formal composition, foregrounding its materiality as an integral element therein. Likewise, they are literally abstract in their appearance as non-representational, non-figurative sculptures, in line with the aesthetics of 1960s minimal sculpture (itself a cornerstone of modern abstraction). Less prosaically, these artists specifically use concrete to depict what I will call 'abstract bodies': absent, invisible or otherwise virtual bodies which have disappeared from the scene of the work but nevertheless leave their impression upon it. That is to say, these are bodies that register not a concrete presence but the non-figurative index of their embodied materiality. These include the bodies of *desaparecidos* [disappeared persons] abducted and executed amid Colombian political conflict, anonymous corpses from Mexico City's morgues and

itinerant workers whose marginal labour furthers their social invisibility. To reiterate, these are absent, marginal and anonymous bodies that do not present the *logos* of a body that appears in and of itself, but that leaves traces of its disappearance: its withdrawal from any such figural presence or identifiable appearance. As such, these bodies are effectively ‘abstract’ in the etymological sense of *abstrahere*, ‘to withdraw’, for it is in and as this withdrawal that they imbue such works.<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract Bodies

The various figures Salcedo, Margolles and Sierra confront, embody a condition of tenuous materiality, one in which the body itself ceases to socially exist as a discrete, concrete entity and instead becomes an abstraction: a site of indeterminacy where both the material quality of flesh and bone, and the clean and proper borders of the subject cede to a kind of perceptual indistinction. In this respect, these are bodies whose liminality denotes the precarious socio-political status of bodies that fail to properly *matter*, recalling the double entendre Judith Butler expounds in *Bodies that Matter*.<sup>2</sup> For Butler, describing how the materiality of bodies remains contingent on their socio-political status, the recognition of socio-political relevance distinguishes the subject ‘that matters’ (i.e. that is relevant) from the domain of improper life – abject, formless and indeterminate life, which remains below the threshold of perception as such. At the same time, this distinction reflexively performs the materiality of the proper body (it ‘matters’ the body, to use ‘matter’ as an active verb), qualifying and iterating its legibility *qua* socio-political subject. In sum, this distinction materializes the body as a legible and legitimate figure, indicating that the contours that figure the body are not given, but come to appear as an effect of power that confers the concreteness of the figure itself.

Alternately, Brian Massumi has described the body in similar terms, albeit in the largely different sense of his Deleuzian/Bergsonian theorization of the ontogenetic becoming, or movement, of phenomena. Following Deleuze’s notion of the ‘real-but-abstract’, he defines the abstract as what is ‘never present in position, only ever in passing... an abstractness pertaining to the transitional immediacy of a real relation – that of a body to its own indeterminacy (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)’.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Massumi conceives the body in its irreducibility to any fixed identity or form (the static *is* of being) and as its pure movement (the constant passage between its occurring and its anticipatory potential). While I am not necessarily dedicated to Massumi’s temporal schema, this description is particularly useful for articulating the body’s essential non-identity and virtuality, which is to say, the abstractness of a body that is constantly moving beyond its corporeal, sensory and ontological limits. As Massumi continues:

The charge of indeterminacy carried by a body is inseparable from it. It strictly coincides with it, to the extent that the body is in passage or in process (to the extent that it is dynamic and alive). But the charge is not itself corporeal. Far from regaining a concreteness, to think the

body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct.<sup>4</sup>

As such, apprehending the body is less a matter of depicting its visible figure than of tracing its movement, which for Massumi renders any absolute distinction between the abstract and the concrete dubious: 'The body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete; its activity and expressivity extend, as on their underside, into an incorporeal, yet perfectly real, dimension of pressing potential'.<sup>5</sup> The real, tangible body is, for Massumi, equally its virtuality and incorporeality; its concreteness is its abstractness and *vice versa*.

Accepting that the body is never purely abstract or concrete, I want to suggest that it oscillates between these states. In navigating the social, political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions that constitute it, the body's forms and functions relate to its movement toward its varying abstractness and concreteness, and hence its appearance (or disappearance) as such. In this respect, Salcedo, Margolles and Sierra each limn the movement of bodies between the concrete and the abstract, registering the tension between art's physical presence and the withdrawal of the body therein. To this end, these artists employ concrete's formal rawness and imposing physical gravity to fix (or to beg the question, to concretize) the spectral remains of absent bodies. Of course, this is not to simply play with given semantic associations between physical concrete, 'the concrete', abstract art and theoretical abstractions, but to explore the aesthetic function of particular materials in relation to the materiality of particular bodies. Here, the impulse to concretize what lacks form and identity – to fix the trace of what is disappearing (much as one fixes a photograph to retain the indexical impression of a past moment) – concerns critical aesthetic strategies for invoking the tenuous corporeality of liminal bodies. As such, these artists employ abstraction not as a refusal of vision (as if to affirm a prohibition on representation), but as the image of a withdrawal, the *dis-appearance* of bodies that appear only as abstract traces embedded in concrete. As such, this use of concrete highlights the salient features of its application, as is here evident in a particular set of strategies among a relatively similar set of practices (similar aesthetically and politically as well as geographically, for these artists are all working in specifically Latin American contexts). No less, concrete's aesthetic qualities, social histories and cultural meanings present further implications for how it enables such applications, and what functions and meanings the latter then hold. Thus, while my own emphasis on the 'concreteness' of concrete, as the 'abstractness' of abstract art, perhaps errs on the side of meagre semantic play, its interpretation by these artists bespeaks the potential potency of concrete's aesthetic functions and effects.

### Concrete Artworks

This use of concrete is variously evident throughout each of these artists' oeuvres. For Salcedo, it is a recurring element in the sculptural assemblages she constructs from disused domestic furniture which largely comprise her work of the 1990s.

In response to the loss and violence that has afflicted Colombia since the late 1940s, these sculptures serve both as metaphors for those abducted and executed by military and guerrilla forces and as metonyms for their disappearance. As Salcedo explains: 'What I'm addressing in the work is something that is actually in the process of vanishing ... a half-present reality. You never manage to perceive it as something concrete; you never manage to grasp it'.<sup>6</sup> As such, the material quality of these sculptures is crucial, for it is within their alternate fragility and formidability, lightness and weight, and immateriality and physicality that they form their ethico-political expression. That is to say, through an affective contact with specific materials, Salcedo conjures the spectral presence of disappearance and with it the social, political and ethical burden of state violence. At the same time, these works demonstrate the way that the experience of loss qualitatively transforms the most mundane matter, expressing the sense of abandonment by which inanimate objects remain in place of the bodies and homes to which they once belonged.<sup>7</sup> Marking the absence of such people and places, the visible traces of physical use embedded within these materials index their intimate yet anonymous contact to past users. Hence, in exposing the condition of anonymity and indeterminacy implied in the relation between disappeared persons and discarded objects, these items do not then represent specific bodies and identities but stand in for their abstraction as such. That is, these works reveal the condition by which they remain unknown and inaccessible beyond the anonymous fragments that fill the void of their continuing disappearance.

To create these assemblages, Salcedo takes apart found items like old chairs, desks, wardrobes, bed frames and tables, which she then recomposes into new, abstract configurations. From here, she regularly augments these structures by appending items with pieces of other, typically more organic material (e.g. cloth, hair and bone) and ensconcing them in poured concrete. In this dis- and re-assembly of furniture, concrete serves as a volumetric substance that allows Salcedo to solidify the given form of individual items or to combine several pieces within the same overall mass. By embedding chairs in blocks of reinforced concrete, or by filling the cavities of wardrobes, dressers, and beds with it, she transforms these items into solid forms, divorced from their erstwhile function as household objects. This technique is best evident in the series of untitled sculptures she presented at the 1999 Liverpool Biennial (Figure 1), in which she filled various wardrobes and dressers with concrete, in most cases placing smaller items like chairs and clothing within them, or alternately conjoining them with each other or with separate items. Here, concrete not only adds great physical mass to these items but permits otherwise impossible compositions to hold shape. In a formal contradiction, concrete dissolves the physical impenetrability of these solid shapes, fixing large volumes together while allowing them to bisect and penetrate without destroying each other. In other words, it permits tenuous constructions to remain in place, giving them the structural strength to maintain extreme states – to push at the physical borders of objects and materials – and to thereby retain a sense of precariousness within its structural resilience.

Furthermore, Salcedo's use of concrete, often raw and exposed with visible casting marks and protruding reinforcement bars, gives her work both an imposing



Figure 1. Doris Salcedo, *Trace*, 1999 (Anglican Cathedral, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art 1999). Installation. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York.

physicality and a docile stillness. Between the sheer weight and corresponding volume and immobility it imparts upon her sculptures, concrete works to the opposite effect of the other, more organic or ‘personal’ materials she uses. Whereas the latter foreground a delicacy that is frail and often flesh-like, these concrete surfaces appear impersonal, cold and synthetic. To be sure, Salcedo makes no effort to hide this character, for one of the main effects of her use of concrete is to accentuate the material quality of her works. This effect is particularly significant *vis-à-vis* the implied presence of the body in these sculptures, but as removed from physical matter, leaving only the immaterial trace of a disappearance. Indeed, concrete lends tangibility and weight to objects that, in dredging the traces of disappeared bodies, embody a certain immateriality. As if to demonstrate the affective weight that objects take on when invested with the burden of grief – the weight of the loss of the body – this use of concrete affords these sculptures a certain monumentality; or in other words, it imbues objects with a physicality that stands in distinction to their liminality, not least in terms of the liminal non-presence of the disappeared. Again, it ‘fixes’ the tenuous residual traces that Salcedo’s objects retain, literally cementing them into tangible forms whose recalcitrant presence arises in response to the precarious state of disappearance.

Similarly, Teresa Margolles’ work in concrete relates to her broader practice of creating sculptures and installations that, composed with the residue of corpses, bring their socio-politically fraught materiality into relief. Having established her career alongside the art collective she headed in the 1990s, SEMEFO (an acronym that translates to ‘forensic medical services’), her work draws upon her training in both art

and forensic science. In particular, her experience working in morgues has afforded her a privileged perspective in viewing Mexico's dead, namely one that has placed her in view of the many anonymous corpses subject to the country's hostile climate. Given increasing violence between those in the country's drug trade and the military apparatus tasked with managing it by force, the resulting proliferation of casualties and forced disappearances finds expression in this perspective. Likewise, additional violence and abject social conditions among the nation's underclass and marginal sectors has further contributed to a vast number of unacknowledged and unmourned corpses. Like Salcedo, then, Margolles confronts the death and disappearance of anonymous figures. However, whereas Salcedo focuses on abandoned objects that remain in place of absent bodies, Margolles faces bodies directly, in plain view of what is physically there but nevertheless fails to signify a proper embodied identity. Indeed, flesh and bone is present, but the qualitative matter of the body – emptied of the conventional markers of socio-politically relevant life (identity, personhood, subjectivity) – remains indeterminate. In this respect, as Gabriella Jauregui writes, Margolles' 'art is defined by the tension between thingness and nothingness', and as such explores the zone of indeterminacy in which the body moves between those poles: from proper socio-political life (the discrete figures of legible subjects and beings) to the formlessness of bare-life (of bodies that materialize as indistinct, abject matter – neither subject nor object, thing nor nothing).<sup>8</sup>

Between the abstract and concrete, Margolles maps the body's indistinction by accounting for the material conditions of its embodiment. Whereas Salcedo discerns the traces of anonymous bodies from analogous objects, Margolles, seeking to explore these tenuous material conditions, inversely creates objects by inserting corporeal traces therein. To this end, she has applied morgue water used to clean corpses in several of her works, including concrete benches that she composes by mixing this water with cement. For example, her series of six benches installed upon the north lawn of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Untitled, 2010) invite viewers to recline upon (that is, to directly touch) these post-minimalist blocks. Assuming casket-like forms, these benches (roughly the size of a reclining human figure) give public burial to the victims of gang- and drug-related deaths whose corporeal traces rest inside them. More provocatively, *Entierro* ('Burial', 1999) (Figure 2) comprises a single concrete block (15.5 × 66 × 43 cm in size) that contains a stillborn human foetus embedded within it. Utterly plain and flat in texture, colour and shape, the block does nothing to suggest its contents, preferring instead the ostensible neutrality of a pure, unadorned abstraction. Because the child's mother was unable to afford a proper burial, Margolles employs this unassuming form as a monument *cum* tomb to this unknown, unseen body. In this sense, the work functions as an inversion of the proverbial tomb of the unknown soldier, which likewise performs mourning rites upon the anonymous body, but only to reassert its proper subjectivity in relation to the state and military identity it emblemizes. Whereas the latter mourns the body through the hegemonic identity ascribed to it, and so serves to aggrandize that identity against its socio-political injury (the death of national soldiers), Margolles refuses any such figure of identification. Here, identity is not written upon the body *post-facto*, but is taken in its anonymity and, more pointedly, in the inability to identify with it as the manifestation of any such identity or



Figure 2. Teresa Margolles, *Entierro*, 1999. Foetus in a block of cement, 15.5 × 66 × 43 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann.

subjectivity).<sup>9</sup> Here, the body does not signify or operate as a subject proper to itself, but as the damning effect of socio-political conditions that render it such. Where, as Klaus Görner and Udo Kittelmann note, this body is not considered a corpse but medical waste, it exemplifies the abject to the letter: it is neither subject nor object but quasi-human matter fit only to be jettisoned.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore within this concrete block, which gives it form at the same time that it absolutely conceals it, that Margolles presents this body within the public realm, as both a body and its abstraction as such.

Finally, Santiago Sierra's work combines the forms and strategies of post-minimalist, performance and conceptual art to explore the ethical and political dynamics of social relations, particularly with respect to hired labour. By paying unskilled and migrant labours (thereby implicating another kind of movement of bodies) to perform useless, non-productive work, he self-reflexively addresses the systems of power that undergird social and cultural production in the globalized world. In so doing, he has often used concrete for its obdurate mass, as its weight adds a certain measure of tangibility to inanimate objects and a certain material effort to the act of moving them. This is the case in *24 Blocks of Concrete, Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Paid Workers* (ACE Gallery L.A., Los Angeles, July 1999), which the artist summarizes as follows:

Using mechanical methods, 24 cement [*sic*] blocks were placed in four rooms and a hallway of this gallery. They were modular units commonly employed in breakwaters, weighing [*sic*] two tons each and measuring approximately 250 × 150 × 100 cm. Once the blocks were brought in, ten workers of Mexican or Central-American origin were hired, of the type that usually offer to work in public places in Los Angeles. They were asked to proceed, during the day's work,



to continually move the 24 pieces along the spaces of the gallery, while disregarding any resulting damage and only using metal bars as handles. The exposed result consisted of the marks left behind by their work in the form of damage to the floor and walls of the gallery, together with the tools and materials employed by the workers, the remains of food and drink and the concrete blocks.<sup>11</sup>

At the most basic level, works such as this illustrate the structural disparity in value production that divides these workers, paid (likely minimum wage) for labour that produces nothing, and the inflated value of the artwork Sierra produces in the same instance. In this differential between abstract and concrete labour (the exaggerated distinction between use and exchange value and between the artist's immaterial managerial work and his employees' heavy lifting), Sierra conflates artistic creation with the production of surplus value, as determined relative to labour time. Consequently, the bodies that perform these tasks come to exist as the socially invisible matter of labour power: identity and subjectivity are likewise reduced to the body's productive function, essentially quantifiable in the relative terms of time and money. As such, this quantification of bodies in terms of formulas of value (in essence, economic abstractions) finds its corollary in the qualitative determination of the body as abstract matter. Here, in other words, flesh is measured in its contact with concrete and in the work it exerts upon it (understanding 'work' in the senses of both labour and physics, the latter denoting the physical effort required to produce movement). That is to say, in its useless expenditure and its abstraction via formulas of general equivalence, the body here materializes as its productive physical potential; *viz.* its capacity to manifest the movement of concrete.

Historically, such effects resonate with what Adrian Forty describes in terms of concrete's ramifications for labour in the development of capitalism. As he notes, the proliferation of concrete beginning in the late nineteenth century is part and parcel of the effectiveness by which unskilled workers could produce it; a fact galvanized by contemporaneous Taylorist theories for the scientific management of labour. As Forty writes: 'For [Frederick] Taylor and [Sanford] Thompson, labour was an abstraction, a unit of cost, absorbed imperceptibly into the finished product. Concrete lent itself particularly well to this kind of analysis, for with concrete each individual workman's labour dissolves into the continuum of the whole, leaving no trace'.<sup>12</sup> The consequent separation of mental-managerial and manual labour that concrete has allowed, alongside the facility by which it has allowed contractors to eschew traditionally craft-based unions, thus roots concrete in the history of precarious labour Sierra's work inherits.<sup>13</sup> Therein, the relation between productivity and corporeality that concrete entails finds expression in the mobilization of the productive body vis-à-vis its corresponding abstraction – its measurement in terms of labour potential and its dissolution into an anonymous whole. What *24 Blocks* in turn depicts is that abstraction *cum* withdrawal of the body, for what the labourers' non-productive expenditure in fact produces is their disappearance, as evident in their absence from the work itself. That is, these labourers produce their own abstraction via their labour, inasmuch as it reflexively

performs their status as itinerant, dispensable workers and hence forecloses their social visibility and corporeality as identifiable figures.

However, this abstraction does not occur ‘without a trace’, as Forty states, for it is precisely the traces of this abstraction that constitute the work (‘The exposed result consisted of the marks left behind ... together with the tools and materials employed by the workers, the remains of food and drink and the concrete blocks’).<sup>14</sup> What this installation depicts, then, is not the physical matter of working bodies (*contra* the conventional social-realist iconography of heroic workers, for example) but the withdrawal by which they remain absent from the scene. Henceforth, what this withdrawal evidences are the tangible excesses of their disappearance, in the form of the marks of their physical work and the residue of their physical consumption of food and drink. Thus, while the individuals that enacted this labour remain unknown and imperceptible, we can nevertheless glimpse the material quality of their abstraction, as indexed in their contact with concrete. Or in other words, what is again evident is the trace of an immaterial presence, manifest as its material remnants. Recalling Massumi, then, the abstract body is equally evident in its concreteness, indeed, is evident in concrete, which serves as the material benchmark against which its physicality is here defined. And to be sure, in the contemporary order of immaterial labour (wherein virtual economies and intangible services increasingly rival traditional forms of material exchange), the body remains evident in both its concreteness and abstraction – particularly with the biopolitical transformation of embodiment into a means of socio-economic production. Thus, as Antonio Negri writes:

To speak today of ‘immaterial labour’ no longer means speaking of abstraction, but, on the contrary, of a real plunge into the concrete, into matter. So what we are dealing with here is no longer spirituality and vision from afar, but an immersion amidst bodies, in other words an expression of flesh ... Therefore we are dealing here with an immateriality which is very full of flesh, very mobile and very flexible: an ensemble of bodies.<sup>15</sup>

In this immateriality full of flesh, the underlying materiality of bodies hence remains one of the principal constitutive factors of not only social production, but the political, ethical and aesthetic conditions by which bodies socially exist.

### Conclusion: Why Concrete?

Given the conditions of concreteness and abstractness the socio-political constitution of bodies entails, these works illustrate the wide ranging implications and ramifications of the body’s material forms and functions. To this end, Salcedo, Margolles and Sierra employ concrete to explore such conditions within the material’s palpable tangibility, solidity and weight *vis-à-vis* flesh. Given, then, their shared affinity for concrete in these terms, we may finally ask what makes

this particular material significant: Why, more than masonry or metal or wood, is concrete appealing or effective for these artists and their particular interests? And what of the social and political qualities of concrete that attend its aesthetics? Following Forty's social history of concrete, their shared Latin American context offers one possible explanation, to the extent that '[i]n Latin-America making concrete is integrated into domestic life', given its adoption by unskilled workers as a cheap and easy building material (hence the proliferation of concrete buildings in the region).<sup>16</sup> This at least rings somewhat true for Sierra, whose focus on cheap, unskilled labour across Latin America maps onto this material history. Likewise, Forty's description of the regularity of incomplete concrete structures in Latin America, complete with exposed reinforcement bars, suggests iconic similarities with Salcedo's work.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, such explanations seem mostly specious and, worse, likely reduce these different practices to a broad regionalism that condenses Latin America into a single emblem of exotic poverty. Alternately, I am not interested in suggesting that the ostensible aesthetic roughness of concrete (i.e. its associations as a depressing, poor, and inherently ugly material – a decidedly brute emblem of failed twentieth-century socialism, for instance) somehow finds its corollary in grim works about poverty and violence. Thus, this vernacular history of concrete may bolster, but hardly explains, its adoption by these artists; likewise, such iconographic assessments do not quite satisfy this question, for these works, despite their resounding similarities, approach concrete in relatively different ways – whether in formal dialogue with Salcedo's furniture; as unassuming, standalone structures for Margolles; or as quasi-industrial, utilitarian objects for Sierra.

As a final note I will briefly consider the elephant in this room: the explicit post-minimalist aesthetic these artists all engage. While on the one hand the initial generation of 1960s minimal artists rarely, if ever, used concrete and, on the other, the latter's post-minimalist successors have occasionally incorporated it in pushing the possibilities for the application and constitution of sculptural forms (including, most notably, Richard Serra's grandiose industrial sculptures and Rachel Whiteread's castings of, for instance, an abandoned London house), there is little to suggest the material's art historical significance here. What makes (post-) minimalism relevant, however, is its particular emphasis on the relation of physical, abstract forms to the body, encompassing both the abstract and concrete therein. Whether in the phenomenological ethos of many of minimalism's initial figureheads or among subsequent artists investigating the social conditions of embodiment, minimal art reinvests attention upon the material quality of abstract objects *vis-à-vis* the overall conditions they create for embodied viewers. While this effect is not exclusively unique to minimalism *per se*, and certainly not to concrete sculpture, this non-figurative, sensory relation between embodied beings and aesthetic forms is certainly fortuitous. But, again, why concrete? Why does it lend itself to this relation? While I am ultimately sceptical that a medium specificity for concrete art ultimately exists, concrete nevertheless commands a certain sense of physicality that, more than simply signifying its tangible weight, carries the affective sense of its embodied use (certainly, one can readily imagine the sensation of touching and lifting it, or of walking upon it and living inside it). Moreover, its capacity to assume different forms – to present its solid mass or to fill negative space; to cover, embed, or

stand adjacent to, objects; and to retain the shapes and textures of other materials it contacts – makes it both malleable and formidable. Its formal qualities thus make concrete an apt medium for presenting the material indices of bodies while maintaining an abstract idiom, imbuing the immaterial, invisible and liminal with physicality and mass. The forms these works take, stripped down to their basic relations between non-figural geometric structures and their perceiving bodies, hence bring out the affective qualities of concrete in striking ways. Among the discussed works the almost elemental quality of concrete comes to the fore, asserting itself in the self-evidence of its form and materiality. Through this careful formal treatment of concrete, these artists have tapped into the possibilities of its critical artistic potential.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lind, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>2</sup> See Butler, "Bodies that Matter."

<sup>3</sup> Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 5.

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

<sup>6</sup> Basualdo and Salcedo, "Conversation with Doris Salcedo," 26.

<sup>7</sup> As Jill Bennett states, Salcedo 'registers the way things change when loss is experienced'. *Empathic Vision*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Jauregui, "Necropolis," 177.

<sup>9</sup> On mourning, identification and identity, see Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics."

<sup>10</sup> Görner and Kittelmann, "Muerte Sin Fin," 43.

<sup>11</sup> "24 Blocks of Concrete."

<sup>12</sup> Forty, *Concrete and Culture*, 240.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 232, 227.

<sup>14</sup> "24 Blocks of Concrete."

<sup>15</sup> Negri, *Art and Multitude*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Forty, *Concrete and Culture*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 30.

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REVIEWS / AUGUST 14, 2019

## Muscled Rose

Scrap Metal Gallery, Toronto, June 27 to August 24, 2019



Divya Mehra, *There are Greater Tragedies*, 2014. Courtesy the artist/Georgia Scherman Projects/Scrap Metal.

by **Edward Bacal**

Hanging above Scrap Metal's entrance, Divya Mehra's 2014 flag piece, *There are Greater Tragedies*, greets visitors with less welcome than warning: "MY ARRIVAL IS YOUR UNDOING" it reads, confronting one's own arrival to the gallery in ways that feel vaguely threatening. The flag invokes the history of conquest and desire for domination that flag-raising symbolizes—think of the Battle of Iwo Jima or the aftermath of colonial arrivals. Without indicating who "my" or "your" are, it suggests only an uncertain relation between



a “me” and “you” that may have one wondering which side they fall on, and why this relation is antagonistic. That uncertainty is what makes Mehra’s flag compelling: it underscores the inherent risk of simply existing in a world with others, where any meeting of persons is a potential conflict.

*There are Greater Tragedies* sets the tone for “Muscled Rose,” a group show, curated by Rui Mateus Amaral, that explores the uncertain dynamics of encounter. In addition to this flag, the exhibition includes sculptures by Julia Dault, David Altmejd and Michelle Bellemare; photographs by Chris Curreri; an On Kawara telegram; a video by Ragnar Kjartansson; and a Martha Graham video piece. These works are fairly different, but their canny grouping generates resonant connections; namely, they explore the multivalent affects of personal interactions. The strength of “Muscled Rose” is that it demonstrates how experiences of intimacy and violence can overlap and even be inextricable.



David Altmejd, *Untitled 3 (Puddles)*, 2013. Courtesy Scrap Metal, Toronto.

In Altmejd’s *Untitled 3 (Puddles)* (2013), a mirror is pierced by what look like bullet holes, conjuring a violent attack. Up close, however, the punctures reveal another mirror behind the damaged surface. Here, as viewers glimpse themselves reflected inside the sculpture, marks of aggression open onto an intimate perspective. Nearby, Bellemare’s *Everlast* conjoins a pair of boxing gloves into a gesture of supplication—or prayer. The artist disarms an instrument of combat to expose something delicate. More explicitly, it’s hard not to see a vulva in the gloves’ mirrored folds. The gloves directly face Curreri’s close-up photos of bearded faces kissing (*Kiss Portfolio*, 2016), in which semi-abstract jumbles of tongues, lips and occasional fingers appear as similarly vulva-esque compositions. These transformations of loaded signs and symbols—of aggression, intimacy and eroticism (the bullet hole, the boxing glove, the kiss, the vagina)—upset our conventional ways of interpreting interpersonal relations. The intense kisses mimic a violent fight, even as they suggest tenderness, just as boxing’s macho posturing gives way to vulnerability when one exposes

oneself, in public view, to another's fist. It's impossible to escape the sound of Kjartansson's refrain, "Oh why must I keep hurting you" (*Mercy*, 2004), which comes from the gallery's far corner and resonates throughout the space. A homage to Johnny Cash, this insistent line frames the experience of love in terms of our capacity to inflict and to receive pain.

Taken together, these works challenge the tendency to reduce conflict to Manichean tropes of aggressor and victim by calling forth a complex ambivalence that, like Mehra's flag, undoes you. In that regard, "undoing" might not connote an act of violence or disenfranchisement but rather something more ethical. Perhaps it describes an encounter with an "other" that cannot be reduced to a "me" and "you" relation, an experience that confounds our identities but, in doing so, might allow us to renegotiate the terms of our coexistence.



Michelle Bellemare, *Everlast*. Courtesy the artist/Scrap Metal.

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