Human Hair in Artworks by Sheela Gowda and Doris Salcedo: Engaging with Materiality and Memory

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the use of human hair in sculptural installations by Indian artist Sheela Gowda (b. 1957) and Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), focusing on questions of materiality and memory. In Gowda's *Behold* (2009), car bumpers are suspended from the ceiling by a continuous, four-kilometer hair rope made of rewoven traditional amulets, while in Salcedo's *Unland* (1995-98), many individual strands of hair are stitched through the wood of disfigured tables. Despite the cultural distance between the two artists, their artworks have circulated internationally, and there is a striking commonality to how the artists explore the unusual and unique qualities of human hair as an artistic material. This thesis deploys new materialist and phenomenological methodologies, drawing on Jane Bennett's concepts of "vibrant materiality" and "assemblage" to address Gowda's *Behold,* and Sara Ahmed's notion of "queer phenomenology" to address Salcedo's *Unland.* These approaches illuminate how Gowda and Salcedo engage with their materials, and help to explain the complex impact those materials have on viewers. The thesis closes with a discussion of memory, examining the artists' use of materials, and hair in particular, as monument-like ways of addressing collective memory.

Keywords

Contemporary art, Installation, Sculpture, Found objects, Hair, Sheela Gowda, Doris Salcedo, New materialism, Phenomenology, Memory, India, Colombia, Counter-monument

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Introduction

I began to see materials differently on a much-anticipated visit to the Athenian Acropolis. What was responsible for this profound change in my world view was not the Acropolis itself, but a rock near the top of the entrance stairs that I slipped on, almost falling. As I looked at that rock, I realized that the reason it was polished smooth enough to be slippery was because of the millions, perhaps billions of feet that had stepped on its surface. I suddenly thought of all the thousands of years and events that stone had been a part of. The enormity of what that stone had historically been part of overwhelmed me, a feeling somehow made more potent by the knowledge that had I not slipped, I probably would not have considered any of it. From that moment I have looked at materials and objects in a new way, and this insight has subsequently impacted my view of artworks, particularly altering how I perceive sculpture.

I was first interested in Sheela Gowda and Doris Salcedo's work because of their use of material, and the emotional weight and meaning their artworks convey. I was further intrigued to discover that both artists had produced artworks—Gowda's *Behold* and Salcedo's *Unland*—that combined found objects and human hair. The two artists come from entirely different cultural and geographical contexts, Gowda from Southern India and Salcedo from Colombia. Despite significant cultural differences, both women studied in Western institutions, in England and the United States respectively, and are now artists of international renown. Gowda and Salcedo's artworks have been exhibited internationally, with both included in multiple biennales, and their artworks are held in museum collections around the globe. It was in this international museum context that I (a white Canadian woman) first encountered these artworks. Their particular methods of incorporating human hair with man-made found objects drew me to study *Behold* and *Unland*, alongside each other.

The use of found objects is not new in the history of art, with Cubist artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque being among the first to incorporate unconventional objects and materials into their works in the early 1900s.[1] The Cubists' innovative experimentation with space, form, and material drew them to include scraps of unusual materials, such as newsprint or photographs, in two-dimensional works in a practice known as *papier collé* or collage.[2] The unorthodox materials artists included in these artworks were increasingly adventurous, and quickly ventured into breaking the picture-plane with sculptural elements. Other artistic movements in the 20th century embraced the move toward including unconventional materials, with dadaism, futurism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, arte povera and pop-art, all experimenting with unusual materials in new, exciting ways. Although the practice existed long before, the term "assemblage" to describe sculpture made from found objects became fully adopted by the art field in 1961 after an exhibition titled *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[3] In the contemporary era (post-1960s to present day), the use of unconventional materials and found objects in artwork has become ubiquitous, no longer confined to a specific art movement, and continues to be a generative artistic device. The 1960s arte povera movement approach to assemblage is of particular interest, however, because of the characteristic use of ephemeral and unconventional materials, which was foundational to Joseph Beuys' artistic response to the violence and trauma of the Second World War.[4] Doris Salcedo has expressed that Beuys' selection of materials and found objects for their political impact influenced her own artistic practice.[5] The approach to materiality in both Sheela Gowda and Doris Salcedo's large

[1] Diane Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 16.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 244.
[4] Ibid., 291.
[5] Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen, *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 10.

installation-style works is indeed politically informed, like that of Joseph Beuys. Engaging with the Western canon, they expand upon those traditions based on each of their particular, non-Western cultural contexts.

New materialist philosophy and contemporary phenomenology are well suited to examining the materiality of artworks that include unconventional materials and found objects. In what follows, I focus on philosophers working in the Western tradition, such as Ian Bogost, Jane Bennett, and Sara Ahmed. My engagement with new materialism and phenomenology is an attempt to view artists' uses of material and objects from a fresh perspective, and gain deeper insight into the role that material can play in artwork. I would like to acknowledge that ideas about non-human agency and a non-anthropocentric view of matter are not unique to Western philosophy, and have been an integral part of the world view of many Indigenous cultures.[6] This way of seeing matter and objects as vibrant and dynamic challenges the hierarchy of rationalist thought that ranks beings and matter according to how similar their lives and agencies are to supposedly superior human life.

Sheela Gowda is an internationally renowned artist living and working in Bangalore. Gowda's large-scale sculptural installation *Behold*, 2009, is composed of many curved, smooth steel car bumpers that are suspended at various intervals on the walls of the gallery space by a continuous 4-kilometer length of rope made from human hair (Fig.1). The hair rope wraps around the ends of the car bumpers, holding them parallel to the floor, giving the bumpers a methodical order, whereas the hair rope loops, piles, and tangles around the room in a more

[6] Indigenous scholars such as Glen Coulthard, Leanne Simpson, Vine Deloria, Brian Martin, Zoe Todd, and Vanessa Watts have also discussed matter as capable of agency and promoted a non-anthropocentric view of matter. See Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott L Pratt, "The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3-4 (2020): 332, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830135.

organic, disorderly fashion. The astounding length of hair rope in the artwork is made of approximately one thousand shorter lengths of roped hair, which are commonly used in Southern India as protective amulets against the "evil eye" and tied to the front of vehicles. The hair used to make the amulets likely came from individuals shaving or tonsuring their hair at Hindu temples, so by reweaving shorter ropes into a single massive rope, Sheela Gowda creates an object that contains the unique DNA of thousands of unknown individuals. In reworking existing talismanic hair ropes into one continuous length, Gowda is also dramatically enhancing the scale of the object, while allowing it to dominate the space. Gowda's use of hair invites viewers to consider this mundane material in a new way.

The fact that the hair rope is made up of strands of hair from very real people makes it difficult to categorize the strands as mere objects. I approach hair as a singular material, part-object and part-subject, and is therefore a liminal material. Using Igor Kopytoff's concept that objects have biographies, I introduce the idea that objects are more than inert props for dynamic human lives.[7] Objects have vibrancy and dynamism of their own, and furthermore that human hair is as close to being human as a material can be, as it carries the unique DNA of an individual. In considering the "biography" of hair, I investigate the "lives" that strands of hair have after departing from the individual that grew them.

To explore these ideas further, I draw on ideas from new materialist philosophers Bogost and Bennett, who state that materials not only have biographies, but also have agency.[8] I use Bogost's framework of "flat ontology" and Bennett's concept of "assemblage" to analyze how matter can be viewed as "vibrant," and specifically, how Sheela Gowda's use of materials in

[7] Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[8] Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Behold are more dynamic and powerful than they might seem at first. From a new materialist perspective, I investigate how Gowda's artistic process is influenced by the materials themselves, so that they are a significant, active part of the creation of this artwork. Using new materialist theory enlivens the way materials and therefore artworks are seen in society, and offers new ways of conceptualizing artworks. I also turn to the cultural context of Sheela Gowda's work, considering how the social realities of Southern India, and the role hair rope talismans have in society, contribute to *Behold* becoming a complex assemblage with layers of meaning.

My other case-study is the *Unland* series of sculptures titled *The Orphan's Tunic, Irreversible Witness,* and *Audible in the Mouth,* 1995-1998, by Doris Salcedo (Fig.2). The three sculptures are each made from old wood tables that have been truncated in some way and then recombined into a semblance of a whole table. The table ends are visibly incongruent, sitting at variable heights and constructed of different types or colours of wood. They have numerous scratches and gouges in their surfaces. Thin textile covers areas of the mutilated table surfaces, and strands of human hair are woven through thousands of miniscule holes drilled through the tables. *Irreversible Witness* also has a crib-like structure fixed into the table's surface, with the join covered by textile and strands of hair. Materiality is of foremost concern for Salcedo, and she selects many materials because of their associations with individuals impacted by the ongoing, violent conflict in Colombia that has claimed almost two million lives, and affected over nine million people since 1985.[9] I analyze how Salcedo's choice and treatment of materials conveys the devastation exacted by the violent conflict in Colombia, even without foreknowledge of the context behind the sculptures.

[9] Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 94; "Víctimas Conflicto Armado," Unidad Para Las Víctimas, Gov.Co, last modified December 31, 2022, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394. The numbers included in this report are likely underestimates, because of the difficulty of reporting on such a volatile situation.

I use Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* as a strong contemporary phenomenological lens through which to view *Unland*.[10] Phenomenology considers how mundane objects and materials can have significant influence on the affect and mind of an individual, and how that translates to each person's lived experience of their surroundings. Phenomenology thus grants agency to objects and materials in a way that mirrors the agency ascribed to objects by new materialist philosophers. Through the repetitive engagement with objects, individuals create what Ahmed terms a "normative directionality" in relation to their physical surroundings, whereas unusual or out-of-place objects are "queerly" oriented. According to Ahmed, encounters with objects of queer orientation destabilize and disorient a person on both mental and physical levels. I explore how Doris Salcedo's *Unland* sculptures become just such queer objects: their phenomenological capacity to disorient viewers is what makes them so affectively impactful. The queer and disorienting qualities of the specific materials compound the destabilization inflicted upon viewers.

From this perspective, the tables stand in for human bodies, in the sense that their surfaces are so scarred and gouged that it can be perceived as a form of mutilation. The fabric included in the sculptures, particularly that in *The Orphan's Tunic*, suggests an intimate connection between unknown children caught in the violent conflict in Colombia and the clothing they would have worn. Similarly, the DNA of countless individuals in the strands of hair through the tables tangibly represent the bodies of those people. These phenomenological connections orient viewers of the *Unland* sculptures in an embodied way toward the real individuals caught in the armed conflict, and convey strong emotional weight. It is largely the

[10] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

materiality and manipulation of materials, then, that makes these sculptures so effective across international viewers, and allows Salcedo to address the devastation of the Colombian civil war.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of how *Behold* and the *Unland* series engage with individual and collective memory, focusing on the artworks' monumental qualities. I consider the ways conventional monuments represent memory, introducing James E. Young's concept of the "counter-monument." I explore how Sheela Gowda and Doris Salcedo's artworks engage with public memory through their material and ephemerality, even if they are in a gallery space rather than in an explicitly public sphere. Additionally, I consider how both artists memorialize the lives and labour of women, and discuss how the artworks' unconventional ways of commemorating people are complex and effective on many levels. Returning to the new materialist and phenomenological approaches introduced earlier, I argue that material is capable of holding and conveying memory, and that *Behold* and *Unland* thereby evoke numerous, unseen layers of memory. The memorial and affective strength of these artworks is largely due to the complex, vibrant nature of materials, and the way their artists thoughtfully engage with human hair in the making of the artworks.

Case Study 1: Sheela Gowda, *Behold*

Sheela Gowda was born in 1957 in Bhadravati, India.[11] She first studied painting in Bangalore at the Ken School of Art, and later completed a diploma of painting at the Visva-Bharati University in 1982.[12] Gowda continued her education at the Royal College of Art in London, and received her MA in painting in 1986.[13] After her graduation Gowda moved back to

[11] "Sheela Gowda CV," Gallery Ske, accessed January 23, 2023, http://galleryske.com/SheelaGowda/cv.html.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

Bangalore where she continues to live and work as an artist. Her practice consists of sculpture and installation works, often including found objects or organic materials. The materiality of Gowda's artworks is integral to both the process and final articulation of her artworks.

The material importance of Sheela Gowda's practice is particularly evident in *Behold*, 2009, a large-scale sculptural installation artwork that can expand or contract to fit any gallery space, and is currently on exhibition at the Tate Modern in London (Fig.3). Continuous lengths of dark rope drip down walls, pool on floors, cling net-like in corners, and snarl themselves into knots (Fig.4). The ropes loop around bright, shiny silver curves of metal with rounded edges, suspending them horizontally. The dark ropes hold their numerous metallic burdens around the room at different heights and spacings. A closer look reveals that these metal objects are the bumpers of cars. Instead of appearing onerous, the suspension of the bumpers appears effortless as the ropes curve, loop, tangle, and entwine the metal parts with a life of their own. There is no discernible beginning or end to the rope, and it seems to coil and weave around the room infinitely. Against the cold metal of the car bumpers, the rope looks organic and alive, leaping around the room. Examining the rope closely, it becomes obvious that it has a braided texture, but is not smooth like commercially produced rope (Fig.5). Countless fine wisps of material escape from the sinuous length of the rope, unmistakable as the strands and breakages of human hair. With that realization, it becomes evident that the entirety of the seemingly endless rope is made of human hair. The weight of the car bumpers seems magnified against the delicate strands that support them, and the labour required to weave the immense length of rope from countless individual strands of hair is difficult to imagine. Awareness of the materials used in the artwork deepens and adds complexity to the initial aesthetic impact of the installation, and invites viewers to consider the mundane materials in new ways.

The juxtaposition between the organic, woven texture of the hair rope and the metallic, slick surface of the car bumpers is jarring, and calls attention to the materiality of each component. The stark aesthetic contrast invites viewers to consider the implications of the material relationship between the two, and to see the materials in a new light. As previously discussed, the inclusion of ordinary found objects and materials into artwork is not a new process, but artists like Gowda continue to transform the way individuals think of everyday materials. Most people would not look at a car bumper attached to a vehicle on the street and marvel at its aesthetic qualities, but by placing that object in the context of an artwork exhibited at an art gallery, the artist invites the viewer to revaluate their perspective and see the object in a new light. Not only that, but the artist changes the "biography" of these objects. Igor Kopytoff proposes that "things," meaning objects, can be thought to have biographies in a way that is comparable to humans. He asks:

> "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?"[14]

If the "career" of an object refers to its purpose and movement through the world, the "ideal career" can be thought of as the normative path that a given object might take through the world. A car bumper will be made from metal ore, or repurposed scrap metal, that is melted and then moulded into its shape. From there, the bumper's "ideal career" would be to be affixed to a vehicle, becoming part of the whole. The vehicle and associated bumper would be shipped from

[14] Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66-67.

the factory to be purchased in a given country. As the outermost point of any vehicle, the car bumper would assume the riskiest position and be the first part of the vehicle to acquire scrapes and damage from collisions or driving mishaps. The bumper would quickly become dirty, and would receive less cleaning and attention than a windshield would. The vehicle and bumper might pass through several owners, each with their own driving habits and level of care for the vehicle. Eventually, the vehicle would reach the end of its life, either because of a collision or because of everyday wear, and would be recycled or trashed. After years of being a unified whole, each component of the vehicle would be separated and repurposed or melted down to be made into something new.

The biography of hair is more complex and more culturally informed. It does not so easily fit into Kopytoff's biography of an object as does a car bumper, because each individual will treat their hair differently; whether because of styling, dyeing, cutting or covering the hair, the biography of each head of hair will be unique. Despite the diverse biographies of hair, it is worthwhile to imagine what an "ideal career" for hair might be, before examining the distinctive biography of hair included in Sheela Gowda's *Behold*. The fine hair of a baby creates a soft fuzz on their new head, the colour and texture defined by the genetics of the parents. An "ideal career" for a head of hair might be one that augments personal appearance, demonstrates religious belief, or advertises personal values according to the individual's wishes. As the individual grows up, they will likely define the periods of their own hair, perhaps demonstrating their rebellion from their parents by dyeing their hair for the first time, or getting a daring haircut. Each time their hair is trimmed or cut, pieces of their hair will leave the individual and become waste, and each day an average of fifty to a hundred hairs will naturally be lost.[15] For

[15] Emma Tarlo *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 215.

women especially, generally significant events in an individual's life, such as festivities or parties, will be marked by special attention to the appearance of their hair, perhaps styling it in a special way, braiding in flowers, or adding scent to it. As the individual ages, their hair may turn grey or white, and become thinner and finer, until the end of the individual's life marks the end of new hair growth. This might outline the biography of a full head of hair, but each strand's biography will look different and will not end with the death of the individual who grew the strands.

The idea that our hair may have a longer lifespan than us is an unsettling thought, but hair is indeed a fiber that is produced by humans, while having a separate "life" from that person. If a human naturally loses an average of 50 to 100 strands of hair each day, it equates to 18,250 to 36,500 strands each year, or 1,277,500 to 2,555,000 strands by the time they reach 70 years old. The strands that are lost and the pieces that are cut off each time hair is trimmed all become waste, but their subsequent biographies are different depending on the country the individual lives in. In most Western communities, waste hair most frequently ends up in the trash can and will eventually make its way to a landfill; however, in many non-Western countries waste hair is a commodity that has value even after it has departed the head that produced it. To understand the biography of hair included in Sheela Gowda's *Behold,* it is necessary to consider what happens to the hair after it leaves the safe and expected location of an individual's head, and specifically how the biography of hair in India is distinct from the rest of the world.

In her book *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair,* Tarlo illuminates the immense global market for human hair destined to become wigs, extensions and weaves, discussing where marketable hair originates, where it is processed, who processes it, how it is processed, how it is valued, and the extensive labour involved in the entire economic system. Much of the book

discusses India, as it is the foremost exporter of hair for the global market, as well as the place where an enormous amount of the labour to prepare the hair for the market is done, mainly by women at low wages.[16] The majority of the population of India adheres to Hinduism, and the practice of tonsure at Hindu temples is ubiquitous. Men, women and children will undertake pilgrimages to the temples to have their heads completely shaven as a "means of purification, an initiation rite, an act of sacrifice and a gesture of humility."[17] The longest bunches from tonsured women are sold to traders or companies, who sort and clean the hair (Fig.6). The hair is then shipped to Europe or North America to be chemically treated and dyed according to the demands of the wig and hair extension market. The treated hair then crosses the ocean again to be made into wigs or hair extensions in China. The finished products cross the globe a final time to be sold to consumers in Europe and North America.

Tarlo explains that in India, the shorter tonsured pieces of hair also have value. After being sorted according to length, short pieces of hair about two or three centimeters long are woven into ropes of hair around three meters long that are then used as protective talismans or amulets.[18] This hair rope amulet (*kampiḷi kayiṟu*) is associated with the Tamil Nadu region of India, which borders Bangalore where Sheela Gowda works.[19] These hair ropes are offered for sale from market stalls, motorized bikes, and independent sellers. These are the ropes that Sheela Gowda's *Behold* is made of. The amulets are believed to ward against negative effects of Drishti, or the "evil eye," and are attached to homes, shops, and vehicles, quickly becoming difficult to

[16] Emma Tarlo, *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 226.
[17] Ibid., 65.
[18] Eva Huttenlauch and Matthias Mühling, eds. *It.. Matters* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2020), 3. The distinction between "talismans" and "amulets" are unclear, however both terms are used to refer to objects that protect against some kind of negative or harmful force. Although Emma Tarlo uses the term "talisman" in her work, I will instead be using "amulet," because it is more frequently used in anthropological and sociocultural research.
[19] Melanie Dean, "From 'Evil Eye' Anxiety to the Desirability of Envy: Status, Consumption and the Politics of Visibility in Urban South India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2013): 201, https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966713482999.

recognize because of adhering grease and dust (Fig. 7 and 8).[20] Academic or web-based source material in English on the hair ropes, their uses, and their production is almost nonexistent, but photographs taken by Tarlo show the hair rope amulets for sale in Southern India (Fig.9 and 10). The identity of the laborers who created the ropes is not clear, but other labour-intensive work in the hair industry, like the untangling of matted balls of waste hair in India, is done almost exclusively by women in impoverished situations.[21] It is likely that the same demographic of workers is behind the unseen, but substantial labour involved in creating the ropes of hair.

To make the single hair rope in *Behold,* Sheela Gowda joined together approximately one thousand of these three-meter hair ropes, likely purchased from local market stalls, to create the uninterrupted four-kilometer length of the rope (Fig. 11 and 12).[22] This conjoined hair rope doubtlessly contains hair from thousands of individuals, creating an object whose component strands represent a wide variety of individuals, genders, beliefs, struggles, and identities. Individuals whose hair has ended up in rope might be completely unaware that their DNA is included either in a talisman against harm or in an internationally renowned work of art. The rope may include hair from individuals who have since passed away and been cremated according to Hindu custom.

While a hair rope is an object, this classification becomes more complicated when the origin and materiality of the component strands is considered. Each strand carries the unique DNA of an individual, and has a unique biography and history. The hair rope represents an unknowable cross-section of the human population with different histories, experiences, and lives. To refer to the hair rope as simply an "object" obscures the diversity of lives woven

[20] Emma Tarlo, *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 345-346.
[21] Ibid., 232.
[22] Tate Modern, "Sheela Gowda - Art Is About How You Look at Things," June 24, 2016, in *TateShots* produced by the Tate Modern, London, 4:40, https://youtu.be/AA28QmJTap0.

together in the rope, and raises the question of whether hair can or should be classified as an object. Hair presents significant challenges to any methodology seeking to classify it as either object or subject, as it occupies a liminal position between the two categories. If hair itself hovers between subject and object, likewise the rope itself cannot be considered either subject or object. The hair rope is also a liminal thing that exists between these categories.

Kopytoff's methodology is designed to establish the biography of an object, but does not consider the difficulty of establishing the biography of something that is not easily classified as an object, such as hair. As demonstrated above, human hair has an extremely rich and interesting biography, from the head that produced it, to the lives it lives after leaving its person, but the scope of the biography is limited by thinking of hair as an object. The rigid categorization imposed by humans, dividing things into object or subject, animate or inanimate, can obscure a deeper awareness of the lives of materials.

The agency of objects and matter has been addressed by a movement in contemporary philosophy called "new materialism." New materialists reject the idea that everything in the world should be placed in a hierarchical system, with humans on top. Instead, they assert that all things – whether human-made object, natural phenomena, organic matter, or microbe – have agency and exert impact upon the other things around them. New materialist philosophers Ian Bogost and Jane Bennett present compelling ideas that can radically transform the way that mundane objects are perceived. Bogost's notion of "flat ontology" and Bennett's use of the term "assemblage" provide a theoretical framework through which to analyze the vibrancy and significance of Gowda's materials.

The influence that objects and matter exert on human lives has been underestimated and overlooked because of the normative, hierarchical way matter was historically thought of in

Western society. In his book *Alien Phenomenology: What it's Like to be a Thing*, Ian Bogost states that rationalism and Immanuel Kant's "transcendental idealism" are largely responsible for hierarchical views of matter that place humans in an uppermost position.[23] Lowest in the hierarchy are things considered "inanimate," such as tools, furniture, or so-called raw materials. Bogost, like other new materialists, criticizes this world view, arguing that the fundamentally human-centric paradigm devalues and overlooks the importance of the matter that surrounds us and makes our lives possible. Bogost refers to Levi Bryant's concept of "flat ontology" as a way of thinking that does not make distinctions between living organisms and the object-world.[24] Ontological questions address subjects like reality, being, and existence, and consider the way entities are categorized. Bogost explains that "flat ontology can unite the two worlds, synthesizing the human and the nonhuman into a common collective. An ontology is flat if it makes no distinction between the types of things that exist but treats all equally."[25] In place of an anthropocentric, hierarchical ontology in which "animate" entities are capable of agency, and "inanimate" ones are not, a flat ontology asserts that every entity in the world has a presence, a value, and is capable of agency, even if those things manifest in different ways than they do for a human. By dispensing with categories that dictate what a certain type of thing is or is not capable of, a flat ontology allows matter and objects to be considered in their own right, without preconceptions. In this way, adopting a flat ontology is the first step toward framing objects and matter as the vibrant, influential things that they are. The objective then, is to consider matter more deeply, and attempt to understand the different ways in which things exert influence and

[23] Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 3-4.
[24] Ibid., 12.
[25] Ibid., 17.

agency. Adopting a flat ontology as Bogost suggests allows for a dramatic paradigm shift that transforms the way that all things in the universe are conceptualized.

Jane Bennett's text *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* explores many of the themes that Ian Bogost discusses, but expands and illuminates them in different ways. She too argues for the validity of new materialist thinking to eliminate hierarchy, and instead frame all matter as "vibrant" and capable of agency. One way that Bennett articulates how things and materials have presence and existence, is by pointing out the sensation of surprise that supposedly mundane or inanimate things can have on humans. She describes seeing a strange grouping of objects clumped together in a storm drain: a men's plastic work glove, matted oak pollen, an unblemished dead rat, a white plastic bottle cap, and a smooth wood stick.[26] Her attention was captivated by this strange collective of things, and she describes how her affective response fluctuated as she thought about each object; Bennett was "repelled" by the rat, and "dismayed" by the litter, but was moreover struck by "a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap."[27] She states that "the items on the ground that day were vibratory – at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, the live wire."[28] Importantly for Bennett is the fact that the things were grouped together in what she terms an "assemblage." One of those things alone would not have had the same effect on Bennett, so, while things have individual agency and presence, they assume a different type of existence when grouped together.

[26] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 4.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 5.

Although Jane Bennett's "assemblage" shares terminology with the art historical "assemblage," they are used differently. The art historical assemblage is an artwork that incorporates materials, or "found objects," that are not traditionally viewed as artistic media. In the new materialist philosophy Jane Bennett explains that "assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within."[29] She adds that an assemblage should be considered an "open-ended collective" that materials might join or depart at any time, and for that reason an assemblage might disperse at any point.[30] Bennett's "assemblage" allows the impact and agency of individual things and materials to change and shift as they become part of a larger group. The individual items do not gain or lose agency by being part of a collective assemblage; rather, their individuality is lent to and swirled amongst other influences, not unlike the way an individual person's attitude, behaviour, and mood often change when they become part of a group of people. A new materialist assemblage can occur when things follow their expected trajectories through social space, or depart on their own unexpected paths, like the objects in Bennett's storm drain.

Drawing on these ideas from Ian Bogost and Jane Bennett, Sheela Gowda's *Behold* can be considered an assemblage of items that have equal value, that are vibrant, and capable of agency. A flat ontology challenges the assumption that the artist occupies a privileged position as the intentional, guiding force behind the creation of any work of art, as many art historians traditionally believe. All things being equal in a flat ontology, the artist becomes just another,

[29] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 24.
[30] Ibid.

equally important actant who forms an assemblage with their materials.[31] The artist might be arranging or manipulating objects, but these items also dictate how the artist interacts with them, and what forms or manipulations are possible. This bidirectional, reciprocal process of creation behind an assemblage called a work of art has been acknowledged by Sheela Gowda herself. She states that "all of the materials I have used have a kind of life before I use them. They have a context that is different from the way I use them, the context I give them here. And I work on that. I don't want to erase that context. I don't want to erase that history. But I look at them and feel them so intensely that they become something else in a way."[32] By valuing and accepting the context and "life" her materials had before she decided to bring them into a new context, and attempting to preserve that history, Gowda's process and artwork is influenced by the materials themselves.

Just as the artist becomes an equally valuable part of the assemblage that is her artwork, the physical gallery space that houses the artwork also becomes part of the assemblage. Each time *Behold* is installed in a new gallery space, the artwork's composition is different. The car bumpers are always suspended by the hair rope at semi-regular intervals, and in the areas where the hair rope is not required to support the weight of the car bumpers, it is free to tangle and web in a wild distribution. However, the shape and size of the gallery space dictate the exact spacing and layout of the artwork. As Jane Bennett suggests, assemblages are not static, but capable of flux and change while still being an assemblage. In the case of *Behold*, because the room that houses the artwork contributes to the form of the materials, it is also necessarily part of the

[31] The term "actant" was coined by Bruno Latour in an attempt to neutralize the language used to discuss objects, as much of it implies value and judgement on the items surrounding humans. Many other new materialist philosophers, such as Jane Bennett and Ian Bogost, have also attempted to address the implied material hierarchy inherent in language by introducing or reframing terminology.
[32] Friedrich Rackwitz and Stephan Vorbrugg, "Shedding Light – A Portrait of the artist Sheela Gowda," Lenbachhaus Munchen, March 29, 2020, 0:55-1:24, https://youtu.be/epCgZ7M8lsc.

assemblage. Although the primary materials included in the artwork remain the same, it is constantly evolving and transforming, as it travels into new gallery spaces and occupies the space in different compositions.

Similarly, visitors to the gallery who come to view *Behold* also become part of the assemblage as they pass through the gallery space housing the artwork. The attitudes and behaviours of the visitors will mingle with the assemblage, and impact other viewer's experiences of the artwork. Whether the gallery space is crowded or empty, full of the energy of a group of school children or of a couple holding hands quietly, the experience of the space and artwork will be affected. Visitors might even unintentionally introduce new materials into the assemblage; whether a discarded museum guide or a dropped tissue, those objects also enter the assemblage that is *Behold*, and impact the experience of the artwork. A new materialist perspective leads to an art historical lens that sees an artwork as a continually evolving assemblage that influences its surroundings and visitors as much as the surroundings and visitors influence the artwork in turn.

Behold replicates an assemblage of materials that already exists in daily life in Southern India: the numerous vehicles that have hair rope woven into them as amulets. Gowda magnifies the scale of the original assemblage though, by creating a rope over a thousand times longer than those woven into vehicle bumpers in India. By separating the bumpers from the rest of the vehicle and suspending many of them with the rope, Gowda changes viewers' relationships with the mundane objects. In India, the assemblage of hair ropes on car bumpers are just a small material relationship amongst the larger social context that includes a myriad of objects, people, and animals. By contrast, the enhanced scale of *Behold* draws viewers' attention to the material assemblage of hair rope and car bumpers that could easily be overlooked in the chaos of

vehicles, animals, vendors, and people thronging the streets of India. Gowda's assemblage exposes gallery visitors across the globe to a tangible, cultural link to India through the materiality of its constituent items. The 4-kilometer hair rope is particularly striking, and exacts an intense affective response, whether it be amazement at the labour required to create it, disgust at the vast number of hairs included, or curiosity about the meaning or origins of the rope.

The amuletic function of the hair ropes is interesting to consider through a new materialist lens. Amulets are used by many cultures and are made of a variety of materials, but are always objects that are believed to have special powers that protect the human owner from harm, or bring good fortune.[33] In the case of the hair rope amulets affixed to car bumpers, they are believed to ward off negative effects of Drishti, or the "evil eye" that people might otherwise be vulnerable to.[34] Melanie Dean notes it is the visible attention from neighbours as much as a supernatural force known as the "evil eye," and that amulets in Tamil Nadu are used to "neutralize, contain, and divert" the negative forces.[35] In other words, amulets have the power and ability to protect a person from forces they could not protect themselves from. The hair ropes used by Sheela Gowda originated in short fragments of hair from countless unknown individuals that were then braided into amulets believed to be imbued with protective powers beyond the abilities of humans.[36] The ascription of agency and power to an amulet is not dissimilar to new materialist thought, and can demonstrate how other mundane objects can also have agency.

By using hair ropes that had previous lives as amulets, Sheela Gowda does not erase the rope's biographies, but rather adds new layers of meaning to the already established significance

[33] "Amulet," Decorative Art, Britannica, accessed January 23, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/amulet.
[34] Emma Tarlo *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 345-346.
[35] Melanie Dean, "From 'Evil Eye' Anxiety to the Desirability of Envy: Status, Consumption and the Politics of Visibility in Urban South India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2013): 186-188, https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966713482999.
[36] Eva Huttenlauch and Matthias Mühling, eds. *It.. Matters* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2020), 3.

of the hair ropes as amulets. If the protective quality of the hair ropes is part of their biographies and imbued into their materiality, then by reweaving approximately a thousand of the amulets Sheela Gowda creates a single length of hair rope that carries enormous power and significance. The hair rope amulets woven into the bumpers of vehicles on the roads of India encase the vehicle and the people inside with its protective powers, but Sheela Gowda's hair rope is freed from the confines of a vehicle to instead occupy the walls and floor of a gallery space. As viewers enter and exit the gallery space, they enter and exit the new sphere of protection offered by *Behold*. By bringing the former amulets into a publicly accessible space, Gowda invites viewers to reflect on the protection offered by rope made from the hair of countless unknown people, and the power that supposedly mundane materials can hold. By repurposing the hair rope amulets into her artwork, Sheela Gowda invites viewers to rethink the power and significance of materials, and how they transform over time.

Case Study 2: Doris Salcedo, *Unland*

Doris Salcedo is an artist living and working in Colombia. Much of her work is produced in response to the ongoing violent civil war in Colombia, which as of 2022 has resulted in an estimated 9,395,274 individuals affected, and 1,932,574 deaths.[37] The vast majority of victims are civilian rather than military, with Indigenous Colombians being disproportionately impacted.[38] The assassination of liberal political leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 is often cited as the catalyst for the current conflict, but the true root of the conflict is arguably much older and complex, tied to the racial prejudice and seizure of land introduced by Spanish

[37] "Víctimas Conflicto Armado," Unidad Para Las Víctimas, Gov.Co, last modified December 31, 2022, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394.
[38] Ibid.

colonization of Colombia in the 1500s. The colonial desire to control land, resources, and political power introduced by the Spanish remain central issues in the current violent conflict in Colombia. Laura Rodríguez Castro explains that "the concentration of property in the hands of large landowners and the militarisation of the national territory (guerrillas, paramilitary, national armed forces and drug trafficking groups) has resulted in systemic violence, dispossession and forced displacement."[39] Rodríguez Castro goes on to state that resource extraction industries have benefited significantly from the forced displacement of the almost eight million people, and that "the consequences of this conflict are seen today as Colombian territorial control is highly fragmented and not state-regulated, but rather controlled by drug traffickers and paramilitary groups."[40] Additionally, military intervention by the United States of America in the 1960s Cold War era, purportedly to help contain the violent conflict in Colombia actually served to exacerbate the hostilities.[41] More likely, America's involvement in Colombia was motivated by a desire to assert American hegemony and combat perceived threats of Communism in Latin America; as a consequence, the intervention was not successful in calming the conflict, and simply contributed greater weaponry and financial support that exacerbated the situation.[42] Awareness of the complexity of the conflict is essential when considering the impact of art created in this context, particularly that of Doris Salcedo because her work is often a direct response to violent political events in the country.

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[39] Laura Rodríguez Castro, *Decolonial Feminisms, Power and Place: Sentipensando with Rural Women in Colombia* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) 18.
[40] Ibid.
[41] An American perspective on the details of this US military intervention is given in Charles H. Briscoe, "Plan Lazo: Evaluation and Execution," *Veritas* 2, no.4 (2006), 38-46, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_plan_lazo_page_1.html.
[42] Luis L. Schenoni and Scott Mainwaring, "US Hegemony and Regime Change in Latin America," *Democratization* 26, no. 2 (2019): 272. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1516754.

Salcedo was born in 1958 in Bogotá, Colombia, and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and performance from the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University of Bogotá in 1980.[43] She went on to complete a Master's in Fine Art, specializing in sculpture at New York University in 1984. While in New York, Salcedo was influenced by the work of Joseph Beuys, and the way he used materiality to address social and political issues.[44] Salcedo states that Beuys' work made her aware of the rich potential in material properties. After completing her studies, Salcedo returned to Colombia and worked for several years in teaching and administration at various universities, before reverting to focus entirely on her own artistic practice. In her studio in Bogotá, Salcedo is supported in her work by 15 studio assistants, who contribute to the often-laborious projects Salcedo undertakes (Fig. 13 and 14).[45] Using found objects such as furniture, clothing, and organic materials such as hair and bone, Salcedo addresses and represents the losses and violence that numerous Colombians have experienced. Despite much of her work being informed by violence, Salcedo rarely comments directly on the perpetrators of violence or the groups responsible, instead focusing on the victims and the painful outcomes of war. Salcedo's work is often based on extensive research and interviews from individuals who have experienced trauma and loss, and frequently includes materials given to her by those individuals.[46] Through her interviews and research, Salcedo forms deep connections with objects and materials, and through her transformation of the materials, changes and shapes viewers' experiences of them.

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[43] Kristin G. Congdon and Kara Kelley Hallmark. *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002) 241.
[44] Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huysson. *Doris Salcedo* (London: Paidon Press, 2000) 10.
[45] Doris Salcedo, "Artist Doris Salcedo on Bogotá: 'The Forces at Work here Are Brutal,'" Guardian Culture, July 26, 2016, 1:56, https://youtu.be/y7xF2HyPIQw.
[46] Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 94.

Salcedo's series *Unland* includes three sculptures titled *The Orphan's Tunic, Irreversible Witness,* and *Audible in the Mouth* created between 1995 and 1998.[47] In each sculpture, two differently sized table halves have been joined together, with no effort to hide the awkward discrepancies in height or overlap between them. At first glance, *Audible in the Mouth* appears the least remarkable of the three, with the two severed table ends joined together in a manner that appears simultaneously flawless and grotesque (Fig. 15 and 16). One of the table halves appears older and more damaged than the other, with numerous gouges, pits, scars, and scratches interrupting the surface. Three long marks score the face of the table lengthwise, becoming displaced and disrupted but continuing on the other conjoined tabletop. What initially appears to be a blurred sheen or patina of age reveals itself to be a delicate network of threads that pierce and twine through the wood. Peering even closer, the material of the thread is discovered to be silk filaments, and strands of human hair. The hair was obtained by Doris Salcedo from salons in Colombia, and the long strands of hair represent hundreds of now unnamed Colombian women.[48]

In *The Orphan's Tunic*, the division between the two conjoined table halves is made more obvious because the shorter half is densely shrouded in silk which stands in pale contrast with the dark wood of the opposing table half (Fig. 17, 18, 19). The silk fibers completely cover every inch of the shorter half, clinging skin-tight to the top, sides, and legs of the table. The silk extends several inches across the join between the table halves, appearing to darken as it nears the wood of the opposing table half. Upon closer inspection, the encroaching darkness is made

[47] The *Unland* series borrows its title poetry by Romanian-born poet Paul Celan. Celan's poetry is heavily influenced by his experiences in the labour camps during the Holocaust, and is notable for the way that he invented and hybridized words when he found existing verbiage insufficient. *Unland* suggests a loss and dislocation from place and identity, that landlessness does not.

[48] Elizabeth Manchester, "Doris Salcedo – Unland: Audible in the Mouth 1998 Summary," The Tate Modern, last modified December 2007, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-unland-audible-in-the-mouth-t07523.

up of a densely woven band of strands of dark hair that emerge from tiny pores piercing the wood table.

Irreversible Witness has the most pronounced difference in heights between the two conjoined table halves, with one face resting several inches below the other (Fig. 20 and 21. In the taller of the two tables, it is clear to see where the lost legs have been removed, leaving an uneven stump behind. The entirety of both tables is covered in a close-fitting layer of silk that hugs every dent in the surface so as to almost be invisible (Fig. 22). On the surface of the lower tabletop, strands of evenly dispersed hair are woven into the silk and wood of the table, but become more numerous toward the end of the table where a metal, crib-shaped structure is sewn onto the surface. Grooves have been cut into the surface of the table to perfectly fit the bars of the crib, adding to the sense that connection between the objects is continuous and meticulous. Strands of hair and silk cover the join between table and crib, and extend to wrap all of the other bars individually, enveloping the entire crib-like structure (Fig. 23 and 24).

To capture the multifaceted nature of the works is difficult, while the impact of these sculptures, and what they mean, is necessarily a complex question. Salcedo herself has said that these sculptures were stimulated by the experiences of children who have witnessed violence and have been orphaned. I will return to this statement, but I want to suggest that *Unland* is not reliant on this narrative to impact the viewer. Even without knowing the stories of violence, *Unland* is extremely effective at making the onlookers feel sadness and deep empathy, and develop a new awareness of the thoughtless violence. I argue that the materiality of the artworks is what allows such nuanced experiences. *Unland* speaks to viewers directly, on a visceral level. The materiality of the sculptures achieves a deep level of communication that is not possible with words.

In considering the material import of *Unland* in greater detail, the methodological framework of phenomenology offers itself as a valuable tool through which to examine Salcedo's work. Emerging in response to Descartes' dualism and Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism, philosophies that maintain a clear distinction between physical and intellectual existence, phenomenology emphasizes the connection between mind and body. Phenomenology considers the experience of perception as one that is active and reactive, in which both the mind and body are impacted by physical surroundings. The philosophical study of consciousness, experience, and the sensation of being, phenomenology necessarily considers how an individual's bodily experience in the world draws upon and exerts influence on the materials and consciousnesses that they encounter, such that each person is subject to the materiality surrounding their physical body. This framework maintains that matter and material can shape and influence one's experience of the world, suggesting that matter of all types has an agency and power beyond that ascribed to it according to rationalist thought.

Contemporary British-Australian feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explores the relationality between objects and subjects through a phenomenological lens, creating a methodology she terms "queer phenomenology." Ahmed begins by grounding her research in relation to previous phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Ahmed argues that if consciousness is directed or "oriented" toward objects, it takes on an earthly embodied aspect. Since consciousness is embodied, perception is dependent on the physical act of being "oriented" toward surroundings; that is, being physically turned so that one can see and perceive the surroundings in question.[49] But this is not merely physical. Ahmed notes that in turning toward an object, one is necessarily turning away from other objects, and in doing so, curating one's

[49] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 27.

experience and perception of the world. In order to prove her point, Ahmed addresses the circumstances under which Husserl himself would have worked. Household activities and child-care go almost completely unremarked upon by Husserl, despite the fact that the unseen labour of his wife was an essential factor in allowing him to solely focus on his work. Ahmed thus emphasizes that, in turning toward his own work, Husserl "orients" himself toward his writing and away from household activities.

Ahmed maintains that each act of orientation toward or away from something necessarily influences the overall orientation of a space and the objects within it. In this way, the objects surrounding us are constantly engaged with all persons and things around them, creating a complex network of action and reaction. All objects and people are potentially influenced and influential upon all other objects and beings. Ahmed states that:

> "The nonopposition between the bodies that move around objects, and objects around which bodies move, shows us how orientations involve at least a two-way 'approach,' or the 'more than one' of an encounter. Orientations are tactile and they involve more than one skin surface: we, in approaching this or that table, are also approached by the table, which touches us as we touch it……Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the co-habitation or sharing of space."[50]

Within this dynamic system of orientation, reorientation, and directionality, Ahmed maintains that bodies and objects acquire a sustained directional orientation through repetition.[51] Individuals gravitate toward interacting with certain objects more than others, repeatedly orienting toward those objects and away from others, and leading them to follow a sustained orientation in space over time. Within a population, many individuals falling into patterns of repeated orientation results in an overall orientation of society or "normative dimensionality."[52]

[50] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 54.
[51] Ibid., 58.
[52] Ibid., 66.

For Ahmed, "normative dimensionality" can be thought of as the process of numerous objects being repeatedly placed in reach of the body many times by many different individuals, which results in a "lining up" of objects on a particular axis. An example of this is the way that in a brief period of about twenty years, cell phones have become ubiquitous objects that are almost always in reach of their owners. Because of the way that millions of people around the globe repetitively interact with their phones and engrain them into their lives, millions of cell phones are "lined up," achieving a normative dimensionality within society. This linear patterning of objects and subjects in "straight" lines within society means that objects or subjects that do not follow the central pattern of orientation are situated "out of line" or "queer." Ahmed explains that "[i]mportantly, when one thing is 'out of line,' then it is not just that thing that appears oblique but the world itself might appear on a slant, which disorientates the picture and even unseats the body."[53]

According to Ahmed, then, the "queerness" of objects and individuals operating outside normative dimensionality not only appear "out of line" in their own right, but also have the capability to destabilize and disorient others' specific orientations by "unseating" the body. Ahmed goes on to apply this queer phenomenology to sexual orientation, but in a more general sense, Ahmed's theory offers a framework to examine disorienting experiences of objects or spaces. The discomfort and disorientation that Ahmed ascribes to the inability to "extend" a person's body through surrounding objects or locations because they are "out of line" with a person's body is a sensation that many experience in daily life. The inkling that you are out of place, disconnected from people and objects, that you do not belong, can all be examined through Ahmed's queer phenomenology. Ahmed's theories invite viewers not to shy away from

[53] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 67.

discomfort and unfamiliarity, but instead consider the complex relationships between individuals and objects unfolding in a physical space.

Discomfort and unfamiliarity are sensations often conveyed by Doris Salcedo's artwork, and so I will examine the ways that Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology can be used to understand the affective response elicited by Salcedo's series of the *Unland* sculptures (1995-8). *Audible in the Mouth, The Orphan's Tunic,* and *Irreversible Witness* are emotionally charged objects that are made of materials that are imbued with history. Each sculpture is made of materials and objects that are commonplace, such as tables, fabric, and hair, but together, they compose an object that is unfamiliar and disorienting. The treatment of each material contributes and expands in different dimensions to the disorientating quality of the works. For this reason, I will discuss each material separately, and then the materiality of the works as a whole as seen through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, focusing on the ways that *Unland*'s materials achieve a queer, disorienting relationality for viewers, whether or not they are familiar with Colombian violence.

Since Edmund Husserl began considering phenomenology, the table has become a central object of consideration as the most immediate point of "unfolding" of experience for a philosopher writing at their desk or table. Sara Ahmed continues that tradition, emphasizing the rich tapestry of connotations that a table can assume. In speaking of a family dinner around a table, Ahmed states that the table acts as a tangible object that mediates interactions between individuals.[54] She states that "we could even say that the table becomes a relative. The loss of the table would be the loss of a 'tangible' connection."[55] Although we do not know what activities took place at the tables used in Salcedo's sculptures, the marks and scars on the tables imply that

[54] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 81.
[55] Ibid.

they were part of many activities and human lives, and have rich, unique histories. The two table sides with their distinct pasts, and having had legs or sections amputated are joined together to create a new object whose component parts are recognizable as tables, but also reject traditional notions of what a table is. The knowledge that two table sections that are strangers to each other have been conjoined to create an abnormal structure is unsettling.

In considering the characteristics of a table, Ahmed draws on Heidegger's analysis of a table, and concludes that "doing things 'at' the table is what makes the table what it is and not some other thing."[56] According to Heidegger and Ahmed then, a table that is not used as a table is no longer a table. This is certainly the case for the *Unland* series, because even though the viewer naturally identifies them as tables, they are no longer used as such. They have assumed a very different identity as art objects that are rarely, if ever, touched by bare human hands. Ahmed argues that when an object that can no longer fulfil the work for which it was intended, whether because of the object's physical traits or because of an individual's capabilities, it is because "the body cannot extend itself through the object in the way that was intended."[57] Ahmed maintains that the inability of the body to extend itself through interaction with an object is not because of a failure of the individual or object, but rather is a matter of the individual and object not facing each other "in the right way."[58] In terms of *Unland*, the tables have been separated from their original usage by being manipulated, reconfigured, and contextualized as an artwork in a museum. In this way, they resist attempts that individuals might make to interact with them in a manner typical of a table. The inherent orientation of Salcedo's sculptures away from the expected orientation of a table into an art object immediately places them "out of line"

[56] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 45.
[57] Ibid., 49.
[58] Ibid., 51.

from the normative directionality that most tables occupy. The "queer," disorienting quality of the sculpture's materials challenges and destabilizes the viewer's experience of the world. On the most fundamental, formal level, *Unland* shifts perception to an "oblique" slant and even "unseats" the body. This shift is accomplished without awareness of the context or intention of the artist behind the sculptures. In other words, *Unland* elicits a sensation of discomfort, wrongness, destabilization, and disorientation through its most basic materiality and construction. The materiality of the tables can create complex affective response in viewers without prior knowledge of an artist's intentions, inspiration, or context.

The disorienting power of the sculptures is made more apparent as viewers become aware of the strands of hair woven through the wood of the tables. The hair used in *Unland* disturbs normative directionality on two levels: through the treatment of the hair and its interaction with the tables, and through the inherent material properties of the hair. I will begin with the way that the treatment and application of the strands of hair to the tables serves to magnify the disorientation conveyed by the tables, and will then discuss how the inherent liminality of hair compounds the effectiveness of *Unland*. Thousands of strands of hair emerge from tiny "pores" drilled through the surfaces of the tables.[59] The strands, so fragile and delicately clinging to the tables' surfaces, appear to have grown organically from the tables. This observation brings the viewers to again question the positionality of the tables – are they the recognizable, "inanimate" structures that everyone is familiar with, or do they have vibrant histories, lives, and traits? The presence of the strands of hair moves the sculptures even further out of alignment with normative

[59] In 2010 the then deputy head of conservation at the SFMoMA, Michelle Barger, commented that she counted 200 holes drilled in a square inch of the *Unland* sculpture titled *Irreversible Witness* that is held in the collection there. "75 Reasons to Live: Michelle Barger on Doris Salcedo's *Unland: Irreversible Witness"* SFMoMA, accessed January 23, 2023, https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/75-reasons-to-live-michelle-barger-on-doris-salcedos-unland-irreversible-witness/.

directionality, and forces viewers to relate to the sculptures at an oblique slant. Furthermore, the delicacy of the woven hair would prevent any normal interaction that an individual might have with a table, as any thoughtless action could snag and break the strands of hair. The presence of the hair inherently changes the way an individual would approach the object, and demands that care and gentleness be part of any interaction with the tables. So, the fragile strands of hair, in their presence and application, have the capacity to change the way that an individual would "orient" themselves toward the sculptures. Through this material manipulation, Salcedo further separates the tables from their original "purpose" and continues to force viewers off balance, struggling to orient themselves to the sculptures in a way that makes sense. Without even knowing where the hair is from or why Salcedo chose to include it in the sculpture, the fragile strands of hair exert an enormous affective influence.

The phenomenological impact of the hair included in *Unland* becomes even more apparent when the basic materiality of the hair is considered. As discussed in relation to Sheela Gowda's *Behold*, human hair is an inherently liminal and, in Sara Ahmed's terminology, "disorienting" material. When on our heads, hair is a source of pride, self-expression, identity, and beauty, but when separated from the individual, strands of hair can elicit a sense of uncleanliness, disgust, and otherness. This extreme shift in reception is dependant only on the hair's direct affiliation, or lack there of, with a human body.

Throughout her text, Ahmed discusses "objects" and "subjects," generally referring to so-called inanimate objects and human subjects respectively. This dichotomy has yielded valuable insights into the ways that humans interact and react to surroundings, as has been shown through my analysis of Salcedo's tables; however, the dichotomy does not provide room for those things that are not quite "object" and not quite "subject," as is the case for hair. Although human hair is

no longer "living" or growing once separated from its human counterpart, it also cannot be considered just an "object" because that strand of hair is composed of the unique DNA of an individual and is an indexical trace of that person. A strand of hair is not a "subject" in the same way we consider a human subject, as a strand of hair does not have thoughts and feelings in the way that a human does, as far as we know. According to Sara Ahmed, the way that we orient ourselves toward an object is dependent on what that object is, but if something is neither object nor subject, it is difficult to know how to orient oneself toward it. If the relationship between an object and subject is brokered by the two entities being positioned "in line" with each other, as Ahmed suggests, then a thing not fitting neatly into either category is immediately positioned "out of line" with everything else, relating to the world and everyone in it at an "oblique slant." Through Ahmed's framework, hair can be thought of as an especially disorienting material because it cannot be comfortably thought of as either a subject or an object. This means that hair is potentially a "queer" material that has the capacity to destabilize and disorient any given individual simply by virtue of its material reality. The materiality of the sculptures thus keeps viewers continually off-balance and disoriented.

Returning to Sara Ahmed's assertion that a table becomes an active, integral part of the social relationships that it facilitates, Doris Salcedo's manipulation of the tables amplifies the discomfort inflicted on the viewers.[60] The tables that could be considered relatives in Ahmed's framework have been amputated, scarred, and maimed. The treatment of the tables conveys a palpable sense of violence and harm, without depicting physical harm to a human body. As previously noted, Doris Salcedo's work often responds to the violence, trauma, and grief experienced by Colombians during the lengthy civil war. In *Unland*, Salcedo's use of tables

[60] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 81.

addresses the conflict in two ways. On the one hand, the truncated, maimed tables with their scars and gouges are reminders of the tables around which Colombian families would previously have come together. The appearance of the mutilated tables draws viewers' minds to wonder about the fates of the couples, families, and children that would have gathered around those tables: were their lives dismantled and scarred as these tables have been? Where are they living now; have they too been reassembled into only semblances of their former selves? In this way, the tables of *Unland* stand in for the absent bodies of unnamed Colombians whose fates are embroiled in the violence in Colombia. On the other hand, if families gather around tables, governing bodies also assemble at tables to shape society through policies, laws, and infrastructure. In such scenarios, the table becomes an object of immense power, with very real consequences for the over five million citizens of Colombia. From this perspective, Doris Salcedo's tables can be read as a visual representation of the damaged and dysfunctional status of the government in Colombia that has been in a tense civil war struggle for decades. The truncated sides of two separate tables that have been mashed together, with their uneven surfaces and unlikely connection mirror the far-left guerrilla forces and far-right paramilitary groups that struggle for control of the country, the gouges and scars in the wood representing the countless innocent casualties left in the wake of the struggle. The long, straight strands of hair sewn through the wood were collected from a local hair salon in Bogota, and evoke the way that Colombian citizens are enmeshed and surrounded by political conflict, too often caught in the crossfire. [61]

By "queering" an object steeped in normality and daily life, Doris Salcedo concretizes the abstracted, unknown thousands of victims of violence and trauma. The physical trauma that has

[61] Elizabeth Manchester, "Doris Salcedo – Unland: Audible in the Mouth 1998 Summary," The Tate Modern, last modified December 2007, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-unland-audible-in-the-mouth-t07523.

resulted in such damaged tables evokes both the physical and emotional trauma of the citizens of Colombia, and that of the country as a whole. Salcedo effectively takes a mundane household object that is central to social interactions throughout the globe, and manages to share the particular trauma and pain of Colombia and its citizens, communicating those sentiments in a way that transcends this cultural specificity. By transforming interviews with survivors of violence into artwork, Salcedo's *Unland* acts as a materially-mediated account of the violence, trauma, and grief that are gripping the country.

Doris Salcedo does not always explain the specific details of stories that inspired her sculptures, but has made an exception for the *Unland* sculpture titled *The Orphan's Tunic*. In an interview Salcedo stated that the work was based on the story of a girl that she met at an orphanage who, at six years old, witnessed the murder of her mother.[62] Ever since that traumatic experience the little girl wore the same dress each day, one that was made for her by her mother.[63] Salcedo has not directly stated if the fabric included in *The Orphan's Tunic* was given to her after interviewing the girl in the orphanage, but the title of the work, as well as Salcedo's well known practice of including materials given to her by victims, suggests that the textile could have been the dress belonging to the little girl.[64] As part of the sculpture, the fabric of the dress clings tightly to all surfaces of the table, including the legs and sides, defying the natural drape of textile. The fabric bridges the uneven gap between the two table ends, as if striving to heal the table, and bring back its unity. The remarkably close, skin-like contact between fabric and

[62] Doris Salcedo and Ben Luke, "A Brush With… Doris Salcedo," produced by Julia Michalska, David Clack, and Aimee Dawson, April 7, 2021, The Art Newspaper Podcast, 37:10-38:05, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/04/07/a-brush-with-doris-salcedo.
[63] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003) 116.
[64] Whether or not the dress used in *Orphan's Tunic* belonged to the girl interviewed by Doris Salcedo, the possibility that it might have belonged to her invites interesting phenomenological connections, and introduces new dimensions of analysis. Therefore, I will consider the possible ramifications of the dress having belonged to the girl, despite the origin of the textile not being verified.

tabletop transforms the sculpture into a surrogate body, that might stand in for the body of the little girl, her lost mother, or any of the other countless victims of the Colombian civil war. The fabric even hugs each groove and crack in the tabletop, as if the "skin" of the sculpture had been cut along with the underlying muscle and bone of the table, but had then healed over the wound. The sculpture takes on an undeniable corporeality, despite being made of household objects and strands of hair, lending further weight to Sara Ahmed's claim that objects can become so involved in daily life as to transform into "living" family members that have emotional bonds with those around them.

Working with the assumption that the textile did belong to the girl, and Sara Ahmed's argument that, "bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other," the phenomenological "shape" that the little girl's dress had was acquired through contact with the girl's body, but also through contact with her mother who created the dress for her.[65] The dress then bears an indexical trace of both the little girl and her deceased mother, making it an object that is much more than a simple piece of fabric. Salcedo's intervention means the familiar dress of a little girl ceases to be a normative object; it no longer has a "straight," directionality and instead is disoriented, placed at an "oblique slant." Even though the dress has been re-purposed into *Unland*, the previous phenomenological orientation of the dress does not vanish. The physical body of the girl and the labour of her mother are forever part of that piece of fabric, and the way that Salcedo cuts and reshapes the garment into a non-normative object reflects the disorientation that the murder of the mother will have exacted on the girl's life. Though it could be argued that Salcedo's choice to include an object that has such immense, personal affective weight is macabre or inappropriate, it is the history the object carries that makes the artwork so

[65] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003) 116.

impactful. The phenomenological "shape" of the garment, combined with Salcedo's treatment of the dress, results in an artwork that is complex and affective without depicting any graphic violence or trauma directly.

Ahmed's assertion that an individual's body can be "extended" by interacting with surrounding objects can be applied to the artist's interaction with the textile in *The Orphan's Tunic*. Again, assuming the textile Salcedo used was the dress of the young girl, the garment would also become an extension of Doris Salcedo's body as she worked with the dress to transform it into a work of art. Salcedo's interventions would fundamentally alter the shape of the dress, making it unwearable and challenging the initial "function" of the textile as a garment. In Ahmed's words, "the body cannot extend itself through the object in a way that was intended."[66] In order for viewers to likewise "extend" their bodies through the textile, and the sculpture in general, they must change their own positionality. In this case, extending one's body through an artwork does not mean wearing it or touching it, but rather engaging with it intellectually and empathetically. The artwork forces the viewers to change their "orientation," making them experience an ordinary object from a new and disorienting perspective. Thus, the textile phenomenologically connects countless physical bodies that were "extended" through the garment, despite the fact that those bodies might not actually be present at the time. The mother created the garment, giving it to the girl, who gave it to Doris Salcedo, who transformed it into a work of art, which brought it into contact with thousands of individuals. All those people extended their bodies and consciousnesses through that dress, and share a phenomenological connection crosses boundaries of culture, time, and space.

[66] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 49.

Materiality of Memory and Conclusion

Doris Salcedo and Sheela Gowda live in, and make work about, countries and cultural contexts that are very different from each other. While the use of human hair is an obvious commonality in their artworks, I also want to explore how both artists engage with memory through their artwork. As Doris Salcedo bases much of her artwork on memories from individuals embroiled in the violent conflict in Colombia, she absorbs and processes their memories through her own consciousness and perspective, creating an artwork that mingles their memories with hers. However, the artwork is also a product of the sociopolitical climate of Colombia, and joins many other memories and accounts of loss, trauma, and grief surrounding the civil war. Sheela Gowda's *Behold* is similarly produced by her own individual experience and memories, but embeds cultural and spiritual memory of Southern India in hair rope talismans made from the hair of thousands of tonsured pilgrims. In this way, both Salcedo and Gowda's artworks represent both individual memory and collective memory. One way to examine how *Behold* and the *Unland* series both engage with memory is to address how these artworks relate to other large-scale artistic commemorations of culturally significant events: monuments.

It is worth addressing monuments in relation to Gowda and Salcedo's work because the monument as a cultural, artistic genre engages with notions of individual memory, collective memory, historic narrative, and governmental agendas. Both artists draw on their personal memories and experiences to create their artworks; however, as many scholars have pointed out, individual memory and experience do not exist in a vacuum, but instead intersect and merge with the people and communities that surround that individual.[67] It is not always possible to pinpoint

[67] Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007) 28.

the point at which individual memory merges with family memory, local memory, or national memory. Public or collective memory is made up of the memories of individuals belonging to a given public, so a work of art in principle bears memories of the context and community within which it was created.

A conventional monument epitomizes a dominant narrative of memory in a particular society. These monuments are typically large, imposing public structures that occupy physical as well as intellectual space within a society. They are physical reminders of events that a country or city-state is proud of, or that reflect positively upon a government; most frequently, monuments are erected in the wake of wars or conflict, attesting to the noble sacrifices of soldiers, triumph over enemies, and the might of the given country. James E. Young states that "traditionally, state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election."[68] He goes on to suggest that monuments serve as a kind of advertisement of the permanence and infallibility of a nation-state, and are designed to quell disobedience on the part of its citizens.[69] A frequently critiqued aspect of the traditional monument is that it represents an idealized or utopic version of events that in actual fact resulted in great suffering, death, tragedy and loss. Without those painful but honest parts of the story, the monument becomes a callous, blindly idealized reminder of a historic event, and is antithetical to the mourning of the citizens.

Young is very critical of conventional monuments, arguing that they can displace the onus of remembrance from the public, allowing the burden of memory to be removed from the public's daily lives.[70] In this way, a monument counterintuitively promotes forgetfulness and

[68] James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no.2 (Winter 1992): 270, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343784.
[69] Ibid., 270.
[70] Ibid., 273.

detachment from the exact thing it commemorates. The permanence of materials used in a traditional monument, such as stone or bronze, is also problematic, in that these defy the natural progression of time and flux of ideas in a society; the static nature of a conventional monument runs the risk of falling out of touch with the constantly evolving human minds around it, making it obsolete as a marker of memory. In a 1998 interview, Salcedo expresses similar disenchantment with the traditional monument as a symbol and agitator of memory, arguing that they signal the "very failure of memory," rather than serving as the powerful embodiments of memory they are intended to be.[71]

Some artists have considered the problematic nature of the monument and created what James E. Young has termed "counter-monuments."[72] The term was coined for the way German artists, such as Jochen and Esther Gerz, created large, unsightly monument-like structures in response to the Holocaust.[73] These sculptures were intended as reminders of the terrible event, but attest to the trauma, loss, and immense grief surrounding the state's murder of innocent civilians, in contrast to the false narrative of noble sacrifice promoted by conventional monuments. These counter-monuments attempted to embrace the messiness and pain of horrible events, rather than idealizing and shaping these into palatable, triumphant narratives. Young states that counter-monuments are not designed "to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passerby but to demand interaction; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet."[74] *Behold* by Sheela Gowda and the *Unland* series by Doris Salcedo have both

[71] Doris Salcedo, *Displacements*, Interview on video tape, 1998, Toronto, Canada: Art Gallery of Ontario.
[72] James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no.2 (Winter 1992): 271, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343784.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 277.

monumental and counter-monumental qualities, without being easily categorized as either. The sculptures share the imposing scale of both monuments and counter-monuments; but, like counter-monuments, the two artworks are reminders of painful realities, they memorialize women living through war and poverty who would not be acknowledged in a conventional monument, and they are not designed to be permanent. However, *Behold* and *Unland* differ from both monuments and counter-monuments in that the artworks are not commissioned by an organization or the state for that purpose, and the artworks are designed to be exhibited in a gallery space rather than an outdoor public space.

Salcedo and Gowda's works are art with memorial capacity, rather than having been created with the sole utilitarian purpose of memorializing a specific person or event as both monuments and counter-monuments are. The sculptures do resemble counter-monuments, by using primarily organic materials rather than the stone and metal of traditional monumental structures. The use of organic materials means that the degradation and ephemerality of the artworks will occur naturally, as did Esther and Jochen Gerz's *Monument Against Fascism* that gradually sank into the earth and disappeared.[75] Using certain elements of monuments and counter-monuments while defying others, Doris Salcedo and Sheela Gowda succeed in creating powerful artworks born from individual and collective memory that resist being relegated to a rigid category.

Behold and the *Unland* sculptures all commemorate individuals who would not be represented in a conventional monument. Both artworks memorialize the lives and labour of women, and moreover, women who are likely disenfranchised or living in poverty. Thus, it can be argued that *Behold* memorializes the prayers and hopes of unknown thousands of tonsured

[75] Esther Shalev-Gerz, "The Monument Against Fascism," Portfolio, accessed January 23, 2023, https://www.shalev-gerz.net/portfolio/monument-against-fascism/.

pilgrims, as well as the underpaid women who sort hair for a living, and who laboured to create the rope-like talismans for sale. The colossal size of the artwork memorializes the unacknowledged millions of women living in poverty, whose labour supports much of the industry and economy in India and across the globe. Likewise, the hair included by Salcedo, collected from salons in Bogotá, represents the innumerable women who have faced violence from the ongoing civil war, even if their stories are not high-profile and would not typically be the subject of a monument.

It can thus be said that these labour-intensive artworks commemorate the labour of women. The visible, extensive evidence of labour challenges visitors' ability to remain emotionally distant from an object's manufacture, as it is difficult not to marvel at the commitment and dedication that went into the making. Labour becomes a means to relate more personally with viewers because of the connection of work to daily life. The staggering amount of work put into sewing thousands of hair strands through minute holes in the surface of a table, or re-weaving thousands of lengths of hair rope into one continuous four-kilometer hair rope, invites empathy and awe from visitors. To empathize is to share the thoughts and emotions of another, which in the case of these artworks, means that viewers are invited to share the lived experience of not just the artist, but all the individuals represented by the artworks. In this way, viewers can more personally engage with the individual and collective memories in the artworks.

Salcedo painstakingly stitches individual strands through the surface of her tables, and Gowda reweaves thousands of lengths of hair rope into one continuous piece.[76] Insofar as Salcedo's art involves a kind of "stitching," and Gowda's art involves a kind of "weaving," they both evoke the labour involved with textile production. Stitching and weaving done by women

[76] Doris Salcedo does have a team of studio assistants who help her create the artworks she envisions, whereas Sheela Gowda works alone, but the labour required for the artworks is still significant.

has historically not been considered an important artistic practice.[77] By undertaking these techniques on an enormous scale, Salcedo and Gowda highlight the magnitude of what "women's work" is capable of accomplishing. This revelation also serves to convey the magnitude of what women themselves are capable of through immense perseverance, strength, patience, and diligence. The two female artists stitch and weave their artworks using actual strands of hair from women in their respective communities, creating objects that can be read as powerful statements of feminist solidarity.

Many counter-monuments were created to naturally degrade, diminish, or even disappear over time, thereby avoiding the pitfall of monuments becoming unaligned to public opinion or as a way to shift the burden of remembering. *Behold* and the *Unland* series are both ephemeral, and were not made to be permanent. The organic hair, wood, and silk fabric included in the works will have finite lifespans, even if carefully cared for in climate-controlled museum storage. Twenty years after their creation, the *Unland* sculptures show unavoidable wear as their constituent fine silk fabrics and strands of hair fray and tear at points of greatest tension (Fig.25).[78] The hair rope in *Behold* will also fray, with individual hairs breaking and teasing free, the weight of the car bumpers slowly wearing the strength of the hair down. The artworks will naturally age and degrade, just as will the bodies they were designed to commemorate. Rather than being tragic or morbid, this quality means that the artworks avoid the worse fate of becoming obsolete and out of step with the world they inhabit.

The fact that the artworks have lifespans of their own makes them resemble the vibrant assemblages described by Ian Bogost, Jane Bennett, and Sara Ahmed. I have already discussed

[77] Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009) 2.
[78] I was able to witness this firsthand when I travelled San Francisco to view and research *Irreversible Witness* of the *Unland* series by Doris Salcedo in San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

how both artists use their own memories, individual testimonies, and collective memory in their artworks, but the "biography" of the materials (as described by Kopytoff) are also part of the artworks. These memories and histories may not be known or understood by visitors, but they are nevertheless part of any assemblage the materials inhabit. In this way, *Behold* and *Unland* effectively mingle human memory with the memories of materials, resulting in artworks that are rich with layers of memory. The inclusion of human hair is especially significant when considering the memory held in these artworks. Each strand of hair carries the unique DNA of a single person, and each of those strands will have had unique experiences and memories both attached to the individual, and as strands separated and traveling through the world. It is impossible to match the exact memories to the individual strands of hair, but they undoubtedly represent a wealth of human and material memory. Salcedo and Gowda's artworks evoke unseen layers of memory: first, they venerate women who usually go unseen; secondly, they immortalize countless unknown individuals whose hair is included in the artworks; thirdly, they represent numerous unknown people who interacted with the materials before they reached the artists; and finally, the artworks are imbued with the unknown memories of the materials themselves. The inability to know all of the memories and individuals represented in the artworks adds to the sense that the artworks contain a compelling sense of mystery.

The memory embedded in the hair and other materials in *Behold* and *Unland* challenges viewers to see the objects in the artworks as bits and pieces of countless lives, both human and material. The carefully selected materials with their associated memories are transformed by the artists, imbued with new individual and collective memories, to become vibrant assemblages that hold countless memories and lives. The materiality, memory, meaning, affect, and presence in Sheela Gowda's *Behold* and Doris Salcedo's *Unland* sculptures, *Irreversible Witness, Audible in*

the Mouth, and Orphan's Tunic, all mingle and influence each other, resulting in artworks that are at times paradoxical, compelling, and deeply moving. The artists' choice of hair in particular, is foundational to the complex way the artworks become more than static objects, but rather living holders of memory.

Figures

Figure 1: Sheela Gowda, *Behold*, 2009. Metal and hair. Tate Modern London, United Kingdom. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gowda-behold-t14118.

Figure 2: Doris Salcedo, *Unland*, 1995-1998. Wood, metal, fabric, and hair. Photograph by Herbert Lotz. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_6.html.

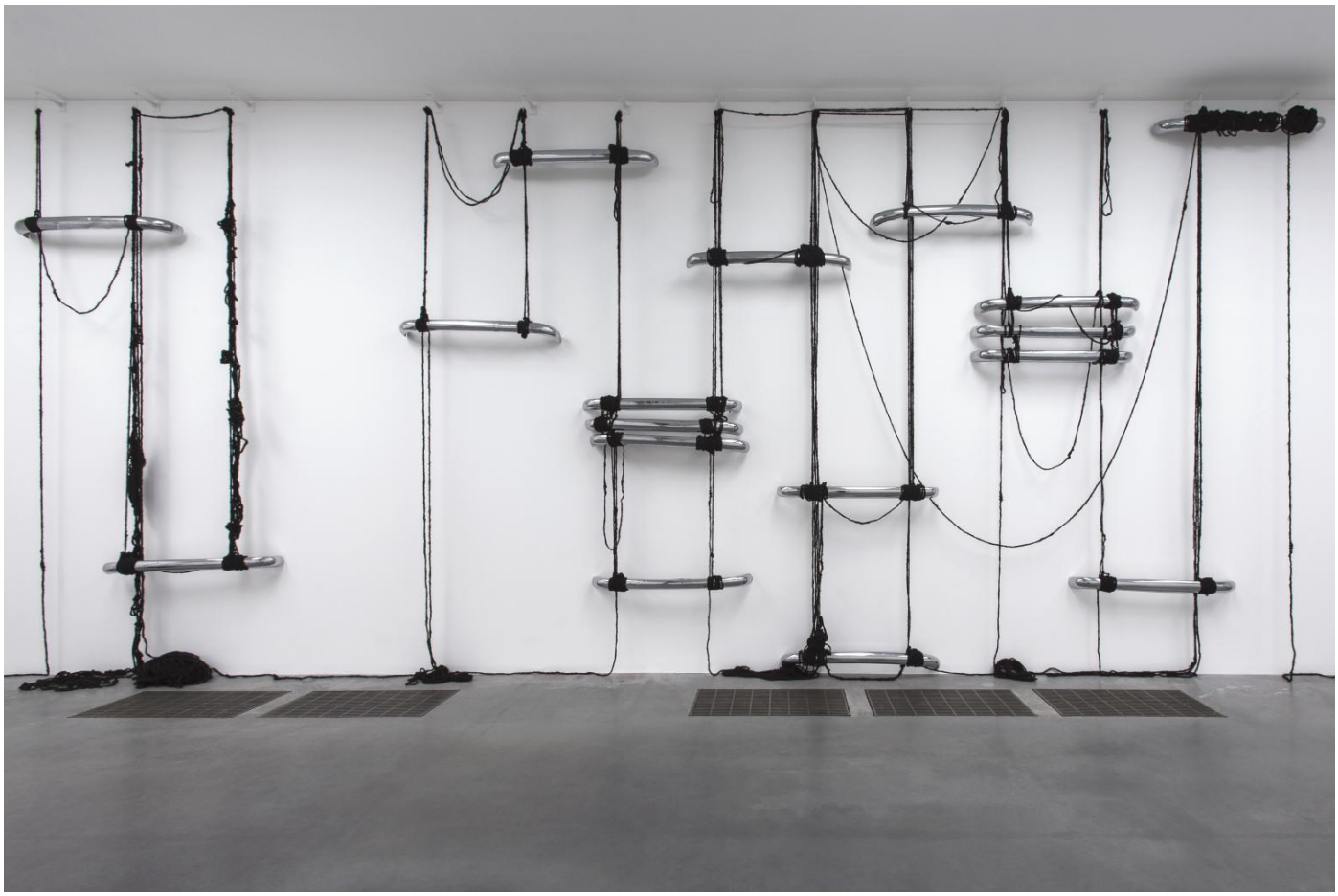

Figure 3: Sheela Gowda, *Behold*, 2009. Metal and hair. Tate Modern London, United Kingdom. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gowda-behold-t14118.

Figure 4: Sheela Gowda, *Behold*, 2009, detail. Metal and hair. Tate Modern London, United Kingdom. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gowda-behold-t14118.

Figure 5: Sheela Gowda, *Behold*, 2009, detail. Hair rope. Tate Modern London, United Kingdom. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gowda-behold-t14118.

Figure 6: Soltan Frédéric, *Tirupati Pilgrimage in Andhra Pradesh*. Getty images. January 01, 1994. https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/tirupati-is-a-city-of-pilgrimage-and-is-considered-as-the-news-photo/542379196?adppopup=true.

Figure 7: Emma Tarlo, hair rope amulet fixed to the front of a vehicle in Southern India. Courtesy of Emma Tarlo. May 18, 2022.

Figure 8: Tate Modern, *Sheela Gowda – 'Art Is About How You Look At Things,'* June 24, 2016. Still image captured from documentary series “Tate Shots,” 4:02. https://youtu.be/AA28QmJTap0.

Figure 9: Emma Tarlo. Human hair rope for sale at a market in Southern India. Courtesy of Emma Tarlo. May 18, 2022.

Figure 10: Emma Tarlo. Human hair rope amulets for sale in Southern India. Courtesy of Emma Tarlo. May 18, 2022.

Figure 11: Friedrich Rackwitz and Stephan Vorbrugg, *Shedding Light – A portrait of the artist Sheela Gowda*, March 29, 2020. Still image captured from documentary video produced for the Lenbachhaus München, 7:03. https://youtu.be/epCgZ7M8lsc.

Figure 12: Friedrich Rackwitz and Stephan Vorbrugg, *Shedding Light – A portrait of the artist Sheela Gowda*, March 29, 2020. Still image captured from a documentary video produced for the Lenbachhaus München, 7:12. https://youtu.be/epCgZ7M8lsc.

Figure 13: White Cube, *In the Studio: Doris Salcedo making 'A Flor de Piel,'* January 2, 2023. Still image captured from a video documenting the making of Doris Salcedo's *Flor de Piel* artwork. 0:54. https://youtu.be/GCtJ9Za8baM.

Figure 14: Susan Sollins and Susan Dowling, “Compassion.” From Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5, Art 21. October 7, 2009. Still image captured from a video produced for Art 21. 40:45. https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/compassion/.

Figure 15: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Audible in the Mouth*, 1995-98. Wood, cloth, and hair. 800 × 750 × 3150 mm. Tate Modern, London.

Figure 16: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Audible in the Mouth*, 1995-98. Wood, cloth, and hair. 800 × 750 × 3150 mm. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_5.html.

Figure 17: Doris Salcedo*, Unland: The Orphan's Tunic,* 1995-8. Wood, cloth, and hair. 80 × 245 × 98 cm Photograph by Patrizia Tocci. https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/memories-of-europe-in-the-art-from-elsewhere.

Figure 18: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Orphan's Tunic*, 1995-8. Wood, cloth, and hair. 80 × 245 × 98 cm. Photograph by David Heald. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_1.html.

Figure 19: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Orphan's Tunic*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, cloth, and hair. 80 × 245 × 98 cm. Photograph by David Heald. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_1.html.

Figure 20: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by David Heald. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_3.html.

Figure 21: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by David Heald. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/images/unland_3.html.

Figure 22: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by author.

Figure 23: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by author.

Figure 24: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by author.

Figure 25: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness*, 1995-8, detail. Wood, steel, silk, human hair, and thread. 111.8 × 248.9 × 88.9 cm. Photograph by author

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