Art’s Transformative Potential: A Comparison of Doris Salcedo’s *Plegaria Muda* and Ludmila Ferrari’s *Cultus*

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# Abstract

This paper examines the transformative potential of two contemporary Colombian artworks on society. The question is interesting in light of the internal conflict and an increased activity in the art market in Colombia recently. In order to approach the question, two installations created by Colombian artists are contrasted. Doris Salcedo’s *Plegaria muda* (2008-2010) and Ludmila Ferrari’s *Cultus* (2007 - 2015) provide an interesting basis for comparison, because the two artworks differ with respect to their involvement with art institutions. The installations are juxtaposed along different dimensions: they encourage connections among citizens, transcend their immediate publics by linking different audiences and restructure space so as to introduce a different set of norms.

Key words: Doris Salcedo, Ludmila Ferrari, Colombian art, Artistic practice, Political Art, Rancière, Habermas, Arendt, Bourriaud

El Potencial Transformador del Arte: Una comparación entre *Plegaria Muda* de Doris Salcedo y *Cultus* de Ludmila Ferrari

# Resumen

Este artículo analiza el efecto transformativo de dos obras de arte contemporáneo en la sociedad Colombiana. El creciente mercado de arte colombiano en un contexto de un conflicto largo afirma la importancia de esta interrogación. La pregunta esta analizado comparando dos instalaciones de artistas colombianas. Doris Salcedo’s *Plegaria muda* (2008-2010) and Ludmila Ferrari’s *Cultus* (2007 - 2015) forman una base de comparación sólida, porque ambas obras son diferente con respeto a su integración a las instituciones de arte. Las instalaciones serán comparadas en función de tres dimensiones: como incentivan conexiones entre ciudadanos y ciudadanas, como transcienden su espacio inmediato y conectan diferentes públicos, y como reestructuran el espacio para introducir normas diferentes.

Palabras clave: Doris Salcedo, Ludmila Ferrari, Arte colombiano, Práctica artística, arte político, Rancière, Habermas, Arendt, Bourriaud

O Potencial Transformador da Arte: Uma Comparação entre *Plegaria Muda* de Doris Salcedo e *Cultus* de Ludmila Ferrari

# Resumo

Este artigo examina o potencial transformativo de duas contemporâneas peças artísticas colombianas. Com este objetivo, são contrastadas as peças Plegaria muda (2008-2010) de Doris Salcedo e Cultus (2007-2015) de Ludmila Ferrari. As instalações são justapostas em três dimensões. É analisado como estes trabalhos encorajam conexões entre cidadãos, como transcendem os seus públicos imediatos interligando diferentes audiências e como reestruturam espaço para a produção de um conjunto diferente de normas. As duas instalações oferecem uma base interessante para comparação no que diz respeito ao seu envolvimento com as instituições de arte convencionais. À luz do conflito doméstico e de uma crescente atividade no mercado colombiano de arte em tempos recentes, avaliar o potencial transformativo da arte na sociedade é de suma relevância.

[Palavra-chave](https://dict.leo.org/ptde/index_de.html#/search=palavra-chave&searchLoc=0&resultOrder=basic&multiwordShowSingle=on): Doris Salcedo, Ludmila Ferrari, Arte colombiano, práticas artísticas, arte político, Rancière, Habermas, Arendt, Bourriaud

# Introduction

Bogotá has seen an art boom in the past years. Numerous galleries have emerged and an international art fair, artBo, has been launched in Bogotá in 2005. In 2014 BogotáAuction has been founded, encouraging a secondary market for Colombian art. Colombia was invited as a guest to the international art fair Arte Contemporáneo (ARCO) in Madrid in 2015. And yet these cultural offerings contrast with the insecurity in public space that limits their enjoyment. Cab drivers cannot be trusted and walking by oneself on foot at night is not recommended in some of the neighborhoods, including the center of the city. One wonders to what extent the boom in contemporary art may induce a change in public life.

Even though violence has been a prominent topic in Colombian art,[[1]](#footnote-1) art’s transformative potential is less analyzed. Colombian visual art is more often than not discussed with respect to how[[2]](#footnote-2) it memorizes and reflects on violence, but not with respect to its capacity to transform society or project alternative worlds. Assuming that art may not only represent the world, but also have an impact on it, this paper takes on a different focus than current discussions on Colombian art.

This paper addresses the question how contemporary art relates citizens, transcend their publics and transform space comparing Doris Salcedo’s *Plegaria muda* (2008-2010) and Ludmila Ferrari’s *Cultus* (2007). *Cultus* in contrast to *Plegaria Muda* has been created outside of conventional art institutions and is therefore likely to affect Colombian society in a distinct manner. Art’s capacity to transform a social, an institutional and a spatial dimension of society is elaborated by drawing from four theoretical concepts. The theories were chosen because they illuminate contrasting ways in which art affects society. Hannah Arendt’s theory of judgment and Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational art help understand how artworks relate citizens. How artworks may transcend their immediate publics is analyzed drawing on Jürgen Habermas’. Jacques Rancière’s analytical category of the distribution of the sensible is helpful to examine how artworks introduce a new set of norms through restructuring public space. The paper first presents the two artworks. Drawing on the authors mentioned above, the artworks’ contributions are then analyzed. In a concluding chapter, we will discuss the main results.

# Plegaria Muda and Cultus

The two pieces of art presented in this paper lend themselves to a comparison because they take part in very distinct settings and address very diverse parts of society. Taking into account different groups is important if we want to gain an understanding of how different publics are created and connected by artworks. The selection is furthermore justified because both artworks have earned important prizes.

The first piece of art is *Plegaria Muda* by Doris Salcedo (\*1958, Bogotá). Doris Salcedo is one of the most celebrated contemporary Colombian artists. She has gained wide recognition in 2007 when she cracked the floor in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall with her artwork *Shibboleth* (Tate, 2015). *Plegaria Muda* is an important work of Salcedo and was awarded the 9th Hiroshima Art Prize in 2014 (Hiroshima-Moca, 2015).

The second piece of art *Cultus*, constructed a garden in one of the most disadvantaged neighborhood of Bogotá. Ludmila Ferrari (\*1989, Buenos Aires) created a kind of oasis in Ciudad Bolívar as part of her art project *Prácticas Artísticas en la Grieta* (Artistic practices in the crack). *Cultus* was awarded the Premio nacional a las nuevas prácticas en artes visuales in Colombia in 2011 (L. Ferrari, personal communication, April 27, 2015). At the time of the project Ferrari was an art student at Universidad Pontifica Javeriana Bogotá. Ferrari currently studies in the U.S. and continues to work on different artistic interventions.

## Plegaria Muda (2008 – 2010)

Salcedo’s *Plegaria Muda* consists of many pairs of tables. Each table standing on the floor supports another table that lies reversed on it, with its legs towards the ceiling. A layer of soil of about 10 cm thickness divides and unites the two tabletops. From the layer of soil, single blades of grass grow through the upper table top. The tables are made of wood and about as long as a human body. They are very simple in their make because they are handcrafted and therefore unique.

[1][2]

Figure 1 and 2: Plegaria Muda in the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2015). Source: Own Data.

Walking through the tables, the visitor’s eyes meet primarily the legs. The installation presents a forest of poles with narrow paths, in which the passerby could lose orientation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Lowering one’s eyes to the table tops, the scarce green of the grass guides the way. The smell of the soil as well as the temptation to touch the grass gives the work immediacy.

*Plegaria Muda* can be translated with “silent prayer” (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2015, p. 7). Salcedo explains that *Plegaria Muda* has been the result of two research processes she has engaged in (Salcedo, 2014). Visiting Los Angeles in 2004, the artist learnt that 10,000 youths had died in local gang violence over the period of twenty years. One of the facts that surprised Salcedo was that the victims and perpetrators often lived in the same neighborhood and in similarly precarious circumstances. According to the Los Angeles Police Department more than 450 gangs operate in the city and some have been active for over 50 years (Los Angeles Police Department, 2015). Around 45.000 individuals participate in gang activity. These organizations are sometimes involved in drug trafficking and usually form along migratory or racial backgrounds (Zilberg, 2004, p. 761). Gangs identify with and defend a certain area in Los Angeles and consequently fight rival cliques and their zones. This territorial logic puts civilians living in a gang-inflicted neighborhood at risk, since they may be targeted due to their location, even though they are not affiliated with any group (Los Angeles Police Department, 2015).

Salcedo also relates *Plegaria Muda* to the murder of innocent adolescents from marginal sectors in Colombia by the military. The Colombian army abducted young men, dressed them as guerrilla fighters and killed them in order to present better results in their fight against the FARC. The killings are referred to as *falsos positivos* (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Salcedo accompanied the mothers of the victims in their search for their sons over a couple of months. Although there had been extrajudicial killings previously, the number of victims soared under the government of president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). The policies *Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática* during the first and the *Política de Consolidación* during Uribe’s second turn of officeput great emphasis on the recuperation and control of territory by state authority and the reduction of drug trafficking activities (Observatorio de derechos humanos y derecho humanitario, 2013). When first protests from families of these victims emerged, the government denied its responsibility and blamed the families for making false accusations (Observatorio de derechos humanos y derecho humanitario, 2013, p. 11). Impunity of the responsible of the *falsos positivos* continues to be a problem due to legal deficiencies, as well as political and social mechanisms, such as threats to victims (Observatorio de derechos humanos y derecho humanitario, 2013, p. 145ff).

The increase of extrajudicial killings are sometimes also related to the involvement of the U.S. in Colombian efforts to fight drug trafficking. In 1999 the Colombian government under president Andrés Pastrana developed *Plan Colombia*, a strategy to combat drug cultivation, and sought financial support for its implementation from different countries. The Clinton administration in 2001 provided financing as well as technical equipment (Council on Foreign Relations, 2000). Although the funding also supported the improvement of governing capacity and human rights, the priorities were the expansion of counter-narcotics operations and the interdiction of drug trafficking (Council on Foreign Relations, 2000). The Bush administration continued the efforts undertaken under *Plan Colombia* under the *Andean Counterdrug Initiative* (U.S. Departement of State, 2003).

Different aspects of this artwork are interesting for interpretation. Referring to violence in the U.S. as well as in Colombia *Plegaria Muda* equates the deaths of Colombian civilians with the victims of gang violence. It furthermore points to the transnational dynamics of drug trafficking. The reference to both, the U.S. and Colombia avoids a stereotyping of Colombia as a violent, “developing” country, and makes the visitor aware that violence is also a problem in “developed” countries. Assuming that each table pair represents a victim and its perpetrator, the artwork also establishes a relation between the two, in which they mirror each other. Conventional understandings of responsibility and guilt are challenged by the equality of victim and offender. This reading gains support in light of Salcedo’s remark on the violence in Los Angeles, where people from similar backgrounds fight one another. The work could also be interpreted as connecting the victims of violence and the audience by reminding the visitors of their own mortality. The loss of orientation in the forest of table legs and the moment of fear of not finding a way out of the symbolized graves, make the onlookers aware of their own inevitable death. Viewers are connected to the victims, since they are part of the same natural circle in which all will bite the dust at the end.

## Cultus (2007 - 2015)

Ludmila Ferrari’s *Prácticas Artísticas en la Grieta* *(PAG)* comprises two art projects, *Cultus* and *Tejedores de historias.* The projects took placein one of the poorest parts of Bogotá’s south, where many internally displaced people settle down. The first project, *Cultus,* initiated the construction of a garden by fifteen people living in Ciudad Bolívar (Ferrari, 2014, p. 39). The garden was built in a vacant lot of about 20 square meters, which needed to be cleaned from wood and bricks. In its first stage *Cultus* was carried from the 25th of October in 2007 to the 22nd of November in 2007 and its second stage lasted from the 29th of November until now. Around 22 different kinds of plants were cultivated in the garden. The group collaborated and the produce was shared equally. Some sold their vegetables on the local market while others used it for their own consumption.

[3][4]

Figure 3 (Left side): La Huerta de Cultus. Foto: Ludmila Ferrari, 2008. Source: Ferrari (2014, p. 42).

Figure 4 (Right side): Acondicionameiento del lote para la huerta. Foto: Ludmila Ferrari, 2008. Source: Ferrari (2014, p. 42).

[5][6]

Figure 5 (Left side): La huerta Cultus en un día de trabajo. Foto: Ludmila Ferrari, 2008. Source: Ferrari (2014, p. 43).

Figure 6 (Right side): Semilleros y primeros cultivos de la huerta. Foto: Ludmila Ferrari, 2008. Source: Ferrari (2014, p. 43).

Ciudad Bolívar is a very uncommon area for an artistic initiative to take place, and a very difficult one. The neighborhood has been one of the areas that traditionally received internal refugees. Already in the 1940s, when around 50.000 people lived in the area, Ciudad Bolívar accommodated citizens fleeing from the period of bipartisan violence. From the mid-eighties to today Ciudad Bolívar has been one of the major areas receiving migrants within Bogotá and Colombia, reaching a number of 715.000 inhabitants in 2013 (Ferrari, 2014, p. 77). This makes Ciudad Bolívar one of the largest informal settlements in Bogotá.

There are differences with regard to infrastructure and the effective presence of the state, but generally, citizens in Ciudad Bolívar live in rather tenuous conditions. Of the 252 quarters only 146 are officially recognized as such (Ferrari, 2014, p. 78). Infrastructure lacks in many parts and some of the settlements do not have running water or heating. Moreover, many of the settlements are built in locations unsuitable for construction due to environmental hazard such as landslides. State presence, including police forces, is limited and the primary cause for death in Ciudad Bolívar is human aggression. The limited authority of the state in Ciudad Bolívar also affected Ferrari’s art project. After local elections in 2007, the new city mayor of Bogotá withdrew social programs in Ciudad Bolívar. As a consequence, paramilitaries expanded the territory they controlled. Ferrari found herself on a list with persons that were not welcome in the area any longer, and had to move her project *Tejedores* to another part of Ciudad Bolívar (L. Ferrari, personal communication, April 27, 2015).

However, the living conditions are not the only difficulty for people arriving in Ciudad Bolívar. Newly arrived often feel at a loss, because life in an urban setting is very different from life in rural Colombia. Migrating to the city, the people that worked predominantly as farmers have their knowledge all of a sudden substantially devalued. The space created by *Cultus* was therefore most meaningful to those taking part, since it allowed them to engage in practices they were already familiar with. *Cultus* gave the gardeners the opportunity to connect their existence in Bogotá to their previous experiences in the countryside by practicing skills they had learned earlier in their lives as *campesinos*. The project incited a lot of interest and many people wanted to join, but the number of participants was limited for practical reasons (L. Ferrari, personal communication, April 27, 2015). *Cultus*, apart from being a real space, also functioned as a symbolic space. Needless to say, the topic of the garden generates countless associations from garden Eden to symbolizing the generative power of nature as such.

# Transformative Potential of Art

This chapter explores different ways in which art may be seen as transformative. The following three sections look at art’s capacity to create interaction, to link different audiences and to open up an alternative space with a different set of norms.

## Artworks Relate Citizens

The violence in Colombia disrupts social ties in communities and families.[[4]](#footnote-4) Shifting territorial control of guerrillas, paramilitaries and state authorities leads to generalized distrust, since citizens never know who controls the territory tomorrow (Pécaut, 2001, p. 240). In conditions of extreme uncertainty, distrust also affects the relations between neighbors and family members. Colombia is faced with a higher number of internal refugees than any other country, since the conflict has led to 3-4 million internally displaced people (Amnesty International, 2013). The migration of large numbers of citizens that need to be accommodated affect existing social networks negatively (Flores, 2006, p. 354).

### Arendt and Bourriaud: Relating Citizens

In the context of disrupted social ties in Colombia, generating connections among citizens is important. In this respect, Hannah Arendt’s concept of judgment is helpful, since it outlines how aesthetic judgments create community. Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics which describes how certain artworks generate interaction is equally interesting.

In her “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy” Arendt approaches the concept of judgment.[[5]](#footnote-5) Judging is important in a political sense, because we do not judge alone. Community and judgment are related in two regards: we adapt our evaluations so as to fit into our community and we select our company based on shared judgments. We anticipate and take into account the community’s likely opinion when judging. Even though the particular aesthetic experience is subjective, our evaluations are inter-subjective and converge therefore. Judgment is also important with regard to forming a community, because we engage in soliciting company when communicating a judgment. When we disclose what we like and dislike, others will join us in that judgment, or they will not.

To base a political community on the contingency of judgments is problematic. Arendt’s solution to this is that we use our imagination so as to take into account the thoughts of other individuals. We need to “enlarge” our thinking in order to arrive at a judgment that escapes the idiosyncrasy of our own position (Arendt, 1982, p. 42). The more viewpoints we can keep in mind, the more valid will be the final judgment. In Zerilli’s view, Arendt’s concept of judgment allows to see and to take into account things that are beyond our daily lives, which we have not yet incorporated into our understanding of the world (Zerilli, 2014, p. 52). Insofar as artworks open up a new perspective, they may contribute to a more inclusive society.

Even if we achieve to take different perspectives into account, a community of judgment remains exclusive to the extent that it is impossible to reconcile all points of view. Nonetheless, Arendt’s concept of a community of judgment is useful, because it helps to trace how people align their judgments with the values in society, and how they build a community by communicating their evaluations to others. Furthermore, the concept also sensitizes our analysis. The paper not only traces how the two artworks contributed to form a community, but also examines in what degree these communities were exclusive.

In contrast to Arendt, Bourriaud is not concerned with the judgment of an aesthetic experience, but with the interactive aspect of an artwork itself. He coined the term *relational art* for a type of artworks emerging in the 1990s that facilitate human interactions (Bishop, 2004, p. 54). The creation of relations between the viewer and the artist is at the center of this concept. An example for such an artwork is Rirkit Tiravanija’s work *Untitled* installed in 303 Gallery in New York in 1992, in which the artist cooked curries for his visitors (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 26). While any artwork can be defined as a relational object, the specific nature of relational art is that it facilitates relations outside the field of art; relations between the artist and the world or between the beholder and the world. Relational artworks function like interstices, producing a particular time and space, and a particular kind of sociability. Bishop, discussing Bourriaud’s concept of relational art summarizes it as follows:

*“(…) relational artworks seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be they literal or potential), in which meaning is elaborated* collectively*.”* (Bishop, 2004, p. 54) *(Emph. in the original)*

Bishop criticizes this concept, because it does not reflect on the kind of relationships that are produced. It is not analyzed for whom Rirkit Tiravanija cooks, and who is excluded from enjoying his curry (2004, p. 64). Although Bishop raises a valid point, it is also important to note that aesthetic experiences are always limited to a public that engages with it. Since it is difficult to prevent exclusion, it would be more useful to specify which sort of relations would be more valuable than others, rather than criticizing an artwork for being exclusionary. Connections among those that are usually left outside of the art circuit might be particularly valuable, or connections between different publics. The paper tries to address Bishop’s criticism by not only looking at the interactive potential of the two artworks, but also by questioning who is involved in the interactions and who is left outside.

### Plegaria Muda Generates Connections

*Plegaria Muda* hardly provides ground for interaction in Bourriaud’s sense of relational art. Walking through the tables is an impressive, but not necessarily a very interactive experience.

The artwork may have contributed to build a community of judgment in Arendt’s sense. The discussion in Colombia’s most active art blog *EsferaPública* gives an impression of the extent to which the artwork created a community. The art scene in Colombia reacted with a mixed response to the installation. Around 190 entries appear when searching for *Plegaria Muda* and many were critical. In that regard one could argue that *Plegaria Muda* contributed to create a community of skeptics.

Keeping Bishops criticism in mind, it is important to take into account that not all citizens in Colombia had equal chances to join the discussion on *EsferaPública* even though it is a public blog. Although the online discussions seem to facilitate a broadening of the public, it is unlikely that citizens that did not visit the installation expressed their opinion on it online. Thus, the boundaries of the audience that visited *Plegaria Muda*, to some extent also set the limits of its online community. The interaction was thus limited to a public very much interested in art, presumably visiting art institutions on a regular basis.

However, the installation offers an opportunity to enlarge one’s thinking in Arendt’s sense and to imagine the fate the represented lived through. Reminding the visitor of his or her own mortality creates a connection between the two, and may facilitate onlookers to include the perspective of the victims. In that sense, *Plegaria Muda* encourages the audience to think more inclusively about society.

### Cultus Generates Connections

*Cultus* facilitated interactions among its participants and shared many of the characteristics with Bourriaud’s concept of relational art. Participants in *Cultus* were not only onlookers, they were placed in a unique space and time, in which they cooperated and engaged in a whole range of actions involving all senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and, since the vegetables were eaten at the end, taste.

Bishop’s criticism on the exclusiveness of relations could not have been addressed more carefully. Ferrari wasvery much aware about the interactions she facilitated and between whom and where *Cultus* enabled connections, as she consciously located *Cultus* in a difficult neighborhood, where the establishment of relations among citizens was most needed. Even so, the participation in *Cultus* was limited to 15 members, excluding some of the people that would have enjoyed gardening as well.

*Cultus* also led to conversations, apart from planning and coordination within the project. Since many more wanted to participate than the 15 gardeners, there probably was a discussion about the projectin the neighborhood. The number of interested people indicates a positive attitude towards *Cultus*. However, Ferrari was also threatened by the paramilitary. The diverging attitudes might indicate that *Cultus* generated distinct communities of judgment, opposing one another.

### Comparison

Both artworks generated connections among citizens. While *Cultus* is likely to have created relations between its participants as outlined in Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics, both artworks achieved to create communities of judgment as proposed by Arendt.

While the communities created by *Plegaria Muda* involved more people, several features indicate that *Cultus* created stronger relations. First, the kind of sensory experiences the two artworks provide are different. While *Plegaria Muda* relied on sight as a main experience, *Cultus* touched all senses. To share more than just a visual impression may help to establish bonds. Second, *Cultus* took place over an extended period of time, whereas visitors in *Plegaria Muda* probably did not spend more than a couple of minutes within the installation. A further difference concerns the amount of people that took part. *Cultus* was limited to 15 people, which means that all people were known, whereas *Plegaria Muda* was seen by many people that do not know each other. All of these features, the greater intensity, the extended period of time and the acquaintanceship, contribute to *Cultus’* creating strong relations between participants.

While the two installations established communities, they were both exclusive. Participation and attendance in *Cultus* and *Plegaria Muda* was limited. Nevertheless, to the extent that society must be thought of as a multiplicity of different publics, the communities created by the two artworks may be seen as an important contribution. By generating links in precarious conditions *Cultus* is arguably a particular achievement, since creating a public in such conditions is both more needed, and more difficult.

## Artworks Transcend their Publics

The Colombian state is sometimes seen as not being apt to provide a basis of shared identifications. While the Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in the region, state institutions were unable to secure peace and stability, resulting in the “Colombian paradox” (Tuft, 1997, p. 2). Colombians distrust government institutions, since they are incapable of protecting citizens, and are perceived to be involved in the violence (Blanco & Ruiz, 2013, p. 286). In the light of the disregard of Colombians towards public institutions, Martín-Barbero suggests that the cultural sector might provide such a shared sphere, and proposes setting up a calendar of festivities reflecting different regions and groups in Colombia (2001, p. 27). It may therefore be interesting to look at artworks’ capacity to relate different audiences and to provide a basis of identification.

### Habermas: Institutions and Media

Habermas describes how institutions apart from the state established and stabilized publics and connected citizens to a larger, national group over time. This is interesting in the Colombian context, not only due to the lack of a shared identification as discussed above, but also because of the growing number of art institutions. The many emerging art initiatives might indicate that a similar process is evolving.

Following Habermas, cultural institutions played an important role in creating a public sphere. People informally gathered in salons and coffee houses in order to discuss literature (1990, p. 89). Concert halls, theatres, and art museums became accessible to people outside of the aristocracy and provided a focal point where citizens met. In Habermas account, the different publics were eventually united through being addressed by an institutionalized press (1990, p. 116). The description of the integration of different publics into a collective readership bears similarities to Anderson’s notion of imagined communities. Anderson emphasizes an awareness of others’ reading the same print products as important to facilitate the imagination of large communities, and as a basis for a national consciousness. People were connected to their fellow citizens through the awareness of sharing the same books and newspapers, and formed a nation (Anderson, 1991, p. 44). The paper examines how media merged different audiences of the two artworks, and how institutions helped to raise a public.

Although neither Habermas nor Anderson take into account the international dimensions of art or book markets, one may think of the connections of institutions across borders leading to transnational publics in an analogous manner. Art visitors in different locations see the same artworks travelling to institutions around the world and are addressed by publications that operate across national boundaries. The building of such a transnational public is examined by tracing the way of *Plegaria Muda* through different international institutions.

Even though art institutions contribute to form a public sphere, they are not equally open to everyone.[[6]](#footnote-6) Bourdieu analyzed the accessibility of art museums and found that the majority of those who visit art institutions enjoyed higher education. Art is used to distinguish certain classes of society against others (Bourdieu, Kunst und Kultur. Kultur und kulturelle Praxis, 2013, p. 248; Bourdieu, Der Markt der symbolischen Güter, 2011, p. 26). This observation also holds for Colombia, where socio-economic status and lack of education are the main constraints inhibiting the attendance of art performances (Quintero & Martos, 2012, p. 16). The paper is aware of institutions’ exclusionary nature, and therefore compares two artworks that take a very different stance with respect to the art circuit.

### Plegaria Muda Transcends its Public

*Plegaria Muda* was exposed in many highly recognized museums abroad, arguably connecting different publics internationally. The installation has been commissioned by the *Foundation Calouste Gulbenkian* (Portugal) and the *Moderna Museet Malmö* (Sweden) (ArtNexus, 2014). After exhibitions in Lisbon and Malmö, the installation travelled on to *MUAC Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo* (Ciudad de México), *MAXXI Museo Nazionale dele Arti de XXI Secolo* (Rome) and *Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo* (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 103). It was exposed in *Ars+Flora* (Bogotá) in February to March 2014 and consequently in Hiroshima, Japan. The work was showed in Doris Salcedo’s first retrospective in the *Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago* in February 2015 and travelled on to New York and Miami.

As *Plegaria Muda* was exposed in different locations, it might have contributed to create a transnational public sphere. Habermas describes how an awareness of reading the same products may merge different audiences. Correspondingly one could argue that seeing the *Plegaria Muda* united publics in different locations by providing a shared visual experience. The creation of such a transnational public is supported by the international attendance at the retrospective in Chicago. The exhibition was inaugurated with a panel discussion in the presence of a high-ranking Colombian delegation, including the minister of culture, Mariana Garcés Córdoba. There were also Colombian citizens in the audience. Moreover, *ArtNexus*, the leading magazine on Latin American contemporary art published one article on *Plegaria Muda* in Chicagoand two short notes indicating where and when it could be seen. Since *ArtNexus* reaches out to readers in Latin America as well as North America, one might argue that the art publics in North and Latin America were addressed jointly. This underlines the suggestion that audiences from different places may converge to a transnational public.

*Plegaria Muda* also addressed a Colombian readership through publications as described by Habermas, arguably merging different audiences within Colombia. Interestingly, the installation’s reception in Colombia seems to have depended more on the exposition abroad, than on the local presentation. The installation was exposed in *Ars+Flora* from 22nd of February to 29th March 2014. Adapted to the dimensions of the available space the installation comprised only eight pairs of tables. As Salcedo has not exposed in Colombia in recent years, the installation in *Ars+Flora* was one of the few occasions her work could be seen in Colombia. Surprisingly, the Colombian press reacted more to the exhibitions abroad, than to the one in *Ars+Flora*. Colombian art and news magazines reported on Salcedo at the occasion of the exhibition of *Plegaria Muda* in Chicago, but much less on the artwork’s display in Bogotá. The Colombian Art Magazine, *Arteria*, featured an article on the show in Chicago in February 2015 (Brinson, 2015, p. 4), while it did not write about the exhibition in *Ars+Flora* in Bogotá in 2014. Moreover, a few weeks before the opening of the retrospective in Chicago, the front page of the Colombian news magazine *La Semana* titled: “El año de Doris”. The article expressed pride of the Colombian artist:

*“On February 21st the Museum of Modern Arts in Chicago inaugurates the retrospective of the artist with her most emblematic works; on June 26th the exposition will travel to Guggenheim in New York and from May 6th 2016, it will be exposed in the Museum Pérez in Miami. Few Latin-American artists have enjoyed similar recognition.” [[7]](#footnote-7)* (La Semana, 2015)

The artwork might thus have reached a Colombian public usually not interested in arts through mainstream media. While this is quite an achievement for an artwork, it seems likely that not the installation itself generated attention, but rather the fact that a Colombian artist had attained recognition abroad. The comparative tone of the news article suggests that the success of a Colombian artist was at the center of attention. In that sense, the artwork might have stimulated a sense of national identification.

### Cultus Transcends its Public

*Cultus* was deliberately created outside of any official cultural institution. Ferrari describes that she wanted to set a contrast to the rather exclusive art institutions (L. Ferrari, personal communication, April 27, 2015). Artworks and exhibitions representing violence in comparatively safe parts of the city did not convince Ferrari as a strategy to raise awareness about the precarious circumstances a major part of Colombian society lives in.

Despite its distance to art institutions, *Cultus* relied on the cooperation with institutions, to bring the project to life and also to maintain it (Ferrari, 2014, p. 41). This corresponds to Habermas’ idea that institutions are needed to stabilize a public over time. A soup kitchen providing meals for the poor, *Cuna del Arte*, delivered material resources such as compost and water. Moreover, the local organization attracted many people, more than could actually take part so that Ferrari decided to create a second project, thus expanding its audience.

Even though Ferrari successfully competed for a Colombian art prize in 2011, winning the award did not generate a wider recognition of the artwork. *Cultus* was not discussed in the Colombian press, despite the prize. There are currently two scholarly publications on *Prácticas artisticas en la grieta*,[[8]](#footnote-8) but neither the Colombian art magazine *Arteria*, nor the international publication *ArtNexus* reported on the project. *Cultus* did not expand its public through publications as described by Habermas. On the one hand this might be interpreted as evidence of the exclusionary forces at work in Bogotá’s art circuit that do not integrate artworks taking place outside of their conventional sites. On the other hand, one might even ask whether this project was not exclusionary, since the number of participants was limited and accessing Ciudad Bolívar is difficult.

### Comparison

In line with Habermas’ concept, the comparison of the two artworks suggests that institutions are important in order to create and cultivate a public, despite their exclusionary nature. Moreover, publications are important to expand an artworks’ audience. A further observation is that international recognition is central to expand an artworks’ reach.

Institutions are crucial to establish and maintain a public. Even *Cultus,* renouncing on participating in the traditional art circuit, relied on local institutions to generate a community, as it mobilized its participants by cooperating with local institutions.

Reaching a wider audience seems to depend on the media. While an artwork may create a public, as *Cultus*, it is difficult to extend its reach beyond an immediate audience without publications on it. *Cultus* was not mentioned in any of the art magazines, limiting its potential to reach beyond the public that gathered around it. *Plegaria Muda* in contrast was discussed in different articles addressing the art connoisseurs in Colombia and abroad, but also the general public in Colombia.

Media response seems also to rely on recognition abroad. The popularity of *Plegaria Muda* with the domestic press was related to its international success. *La Semana* explicitly mentioned its international journey and compared Doris Salcedo with other Latin American artists, while *Arteria* only reported on the artwork when it was exposed in Chicago. While an artwork exposed in the most recognized institutions may be mentioned in the general press and reach publics in the periphery, the process does not work in the reversed direction. An artwork like *Cultus*, taking place in a marginalized area has difficulties entering the press and reaching a wider public, even when winning a national art prize.

## Artworks Provide a Spatial and Normative Experience

In Colombia, public places are often not used, since the majority of Colombians does not feel safe outside. According to the Colombian Statistics Department’s yearly poll from 2014, in Bogotá 82.7% of the population does not feel secure in the street, 79.9% feel unsafe in public transport, and 52.5% feel at risk in market places (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística DANE , 2014, p. 8). As citizens get used to live with a feeling of insecurity and the necessity to watch their back, violence becomes embedded in daily life and turns into a norm (Pécaut, 2001, p. 197). Some of the research in Colombia concentrates on how public space is and should be modeled in order to be of service to the citizens (Burbano, 2014, p. 188). Space is also attributed a transformative function, since an adequate design of public arrangements is seen to reduce violence. In Medellín efforts to rehabilitate public areas were undertaken in order to stabilize the rule of the state after authorities had gained control from armed non-state actors in the 90ies (Celli & Angeli, 2011, p. 31). Artworks are physical artefacts and in that sense might transform space, and hence norms.

### Rancière: The Distribution of the Sensible

Rancière’s concept the “distribution of the sensible” suggests that the structure of physical space has normative implications. The word sensible may be understood as perceptible, as well as reasonable and the concept seems to aim at exactly that: a distribution of physical things that can be experienced, and is also socially accepted.[[9]](#footnote-9) Two aspects of the concept are particularly interesting for our discussion: neither the norms in society nor the inclusion of marginalized citizens into the political order depends on formal political institutions.

Norms in society are not defined by an institutionalized order, but by a distribution of what can be sensed and experienced. The distribution of the sensible delimits the common and the private in society, and determines the positions of each individual in the sphere of the common (Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 2004, p. 12). It defines who has access to the common parts, in what forms, and at what times (Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 2004, p. 12). The concept attributes artworks a normative potential to the extent that they restructure space. According to Rancière:

*“Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society’s structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames the time and peoples this space.”* (Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, 2009, p. 23)

As discussed, violence has affected public space in Colombia for a long time, leading to a normalization of the phenomenon. A different structure in a physical order, implementing another set of norms would ideally result in a space without violence. The emphasis in Colombian literature on the transformation of public space fits well with Rancière’s account. Both share the assumption that exposure to certain sensitive experiences translates into a change in norms and eventually behavior.

Another interesting feature of Rancière’s concept is that the process in which marginalized citizens become regarded as equal political subjects does not rely on formal political processes, but on sensitive experiences.[[10]](#footnote-10) In contrast to other authors, Rancière understands politics as the processes by which previously excluded individuals claim access to the distribution of the sensible by manifesting their equality with those that currently participate. People excluded from the distribution of the sensible create statements or actions that are understood as emanating from equal human beings and that do not match their current status as excluded (Rancière, Das Unvernehmen: Politik und Philosophie, 1995/2003, p. 45). Political action, in that sense, does not need to take on a certain form, such as demonstrating, or elections, but depends on the intention to confirm the equality of individuals in relation to established groups, which were not perceived as equal before (Rancière, Das Unvernehmen: Politik und Philosophie, 1995/2003, p. 44). Artworks may constitute a political statement, as they make visible something that has previously not been seen and may state the equality of the excluded.

One question that arises from attributing a normative function to aesthetic experiences is how a locally contained aesthetic impression transforms norms in a whole public realm.[[11]](#footnote-11) An artwork is unlikely to be seen by all members of society, since aesthetic experiences depend on the physical presence of a person. Moreover, our perception is subjective and we may or may not agree on the meaning of what we see. The contingency and local restrictedness of aesthetic experiences may make their effect on the normative framework more complicated and less certain than as conceptualized by Rancière.

### Plegaria Muda Redistributes the Sensible

*Plegaria Muda* introduced an alternative set of norms insofar as it made visitors aware of the threatening reality of death in a museum in which they usually feel safe. The installation established a particular space with the table tops confusing sight, the earth smelling and the green grass blinking through the wood. Trapping the visitors in a mazy cemetery, the installation reminded them that they eventually face the same destiny as the victims of violence. Even so, one can also question to what extent the installation was able to override the norms operating within the museum space, and whether visitors actually felt threatened in the secure surroundings of the art institution.

The artwork also stated the equality of the marginalized in society*. Plegaria Muda* brought the victims and their grieving families from their peripheral conditions in Colombia and Los Angeles to the center and made them visible. Neither the victims nor the grief of their families had been recognized, and the deaths were not only physically, but also a normatively excluded from society. Salcedo brought these experiences to places where the represented have probably never been. *Plegaria Muda* can therefore be seen as an attempt to manifest the equality between the visitors and the victims. But even though *Plegaria Muda* may be said to have staged the equality of the victims with the viewer, the equality remains one of representation. Neither the deaths, nor their families were actually visible, but only represented. The claim to equality that is staged in *Plegaria Muda* is limited by the fact that the victims do not speak for themselves. Whether someone can raise a political claim on behalf of someone else may be questioned, since the very act of doing so denies the victims equal status.

Furthermore, *Plegaria Muda* may be seen as a normative claim to renounce on hierarchies in the international realm. By mentioning violence in the U.S. and Colombia in the same piece, Salcedo put Colombia on one stage with the U.S. This challenges conventional classifications of violence as a “developing country” phenomenon and advocates the equality of “peripheral” regions on the international stage.

Even though *Plegaria Muda* may be interpreted as having challenged conventional norms in different ways by reordering space, one may question whether this new structure had effects beyond the museum, or gallery. The altered space is unlikely to have led to a change in norms throughout society, since the redistribution of the sensible that the installation undertook was only perceived by a small number of people.

### Cultus Redistributes the Sensible

*Cultus* transformed a small enclave in a difficult surrounding, covered with rubble, where nobody wanted to spend time into a flowering garden. This new space followed a different set of norms as *Cultus* would not tolerate violence as an option. The art projectdid not fall short of its symbolic potential as a garden Eden, in which citizens could interact and trust each other without feeling at risk. Within the context of Ciudad Bolívar where authorities are not capable of granting the rule of law the artwork restructured space and transformed norms. However, the newly created garden and its norms depended on the acceptance of its surrounding. As discussed, Ferrari had to change locations due to threats from the paramilitary. The strength of the safe heaven provided by *Cultus* was limited in the sense that its norms could have been overridden by the space surrounding it.

The artwork can also be read as a manifestation of the equality of the *desplazados* as political subjects. *Cultus* put the citizens of Ciudad Bolívar in charge of their own garden. In contrast to public policies, the projectrefused to see them as victims that need to be cared for, but featured their skills as farmers. The displaced were not represented, but acted and organized themselves. The artwork can therefore be read as a manifestation of the *desplazados*’ status as political subjects.

*Cultus* may also be seen as a normative claim to reverse the hierarchies in urban planning. Ferrari suggested a way of thinking of the 19th district as equally important as the other parts of Bogotá, setting up a garden in this area. The area does not enjoy top priority in city planning projects, as citizens in Ciudad Bolívar don’t have access to basic public infrastructure, and fewer opportunities to spend their free time. Ferrari’s proposal marks a protest particularly at a time, in which the mayor of Bogotá withdrew social programs in this neighborhood.

Even though *Cultus* introduced a new space, there are limitations to the installation’s capacity to project new norms. It is uncertain to what extent the normative change reached beyond the altered space. It is unlikely that citizens outside the project experienced the safety and hope within *Cultus*, the political equality of the displaced and the importance of Ciudad Bolívar with the other parts of the capital.

### Comparison

Both artworks created their own physical space, and suggested alternative norms along with it. In Rancière’s term they thus “redistributed the sensible”. *Plegaria Muda* created a space in which visitors felt just as mortal as the represented victims. *Cultus* created a zone in which citizens from Ciudad Bolívar felt secure to trust and interact with each other. In that sense the artworks each translated a different reality to the audience: *Cultus* brought a sense of security into a very precarious area, and *Plegaria Muda* took a sense of threat to a part of society that was not exposed to violence. Both artworks found their limit in the surrounding space. The secure museum space restricted *Plegaria Muda*’s effect of threatening its viewers, and the instability in Ciudad Bolívar limited the sense of security and hope *Cultus* provided to its participants. This suggests that different spaces incorporating different norms compete with one another – an aspect that is not explicitly discussed by Rancière.

Moreover, both artworks can be read as an expression of the equality of marginal sectors of society as conceptualized by Rancière. With *Plegaria Muda* the victims and their families entered a space reserved for more privileged groups which they would normally not access. *Cultus* gave victimized citizens an opportunity to act as subjects in their own garden. Whereas both artworks aim at giving disadvantaged sectors a place in the distribution of the sensible, *Plegaria Muda*’s representation of victims contradicts a statement of equality, as the victims are not seen as apt to speak for themselves. *Cultus* in contrast avoids such representative logic and brings the marginalized in the form of acting citizens to the center.

Both artworks can be read as reversing geographic hierarchies. *Cultus* attributed Ciudad Bolívar equal importance, as the rest of the citizens in Bogotá with respect to the provision of public services. *Plegaria Muda* challenged conventional hierarchies in international relations by positioning the U.S and Colombia on the same level.

Even though the artworks suggest a change in norms, it is unclear to what extent the claims raised are translated into society, since the aesthetic experience of the installations remained physically contained. Rancière’s concept features a disparity between the locally contained physical experiences, and the pervasiveness of shared norms in society. The distribution of the sensible is helpful in order to assess an artworks’ potential to introduce a different structure, however, it is less helpful to conceptualize whether this proposed change generates an effect in society.

# Conclusion

This paper analyzed the potential of select artworks to generate relations among citizens, to transcend their immediate public as well as their capacity to establish a different normative order.

While both artworks created social connections among onlookers, the strength of the relations an artwork creates seems to be negatively related to its dispersion. The interaction facilitated by *Plegaria Muda* on the blogs involved more people, but the relations were probably not as close as among the participants in *Cultus*. The ties *Cultus* enabled are difficult to replicate in a wider setting. Scaling up the project is expensive, and since the quality of the relations was also connected to the limited number of participants knowing each other, it is doubtful that the same ties would emerge among a larger number of participants. As social relations within Colombian neighborhoods have been affected by violence, local initiatives may nonetheless be very valuable. A further insight is that different publics of the same piece of art may oppose one another, when they evaluate an artwork distinctly. The opinions on *Cultus* diverged to an extent that the artist was threatened. As Colombian society is fragmented, the creation of different art publics that oppose one another may be problematic.

Institutions and the media play an important role in the expansion of artworks’ publics. Broad coverage by the media depends on success on an international level, as a sentiment of national pride, much rather than the artwork itself generates attention. The wide recognition in the media of *Plegaria Muda* in contrast to *Cultus* was based on the triumph of a Colombian artist on an international level. This indicates that the key to a wide audience in Colombia lies outside national boundaries; as such a comparative logic cannot be generated without relations to foreign institutions, or markets. This makes it much harder for visual propositions from the margins to reach out, as the artworks discussed in the paper illustrate.

Artworks’ capacity to incorporate normative claims into society is difficult to assess relying on Rancière’s distribution of the sensible. The transformation of space is always locally restricted, and it is unclear how a normative claim reaches wider parts of society. While both artworks transformed space, they also competed with the surrounding area incorporating different norms. The conditions of the alteration of space, such as who is when and where confronted with a sensitive experience, and also the kind of norms proposed, might play a role.

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1. For an overview on the representation of violence in different kinds of artistic genres, see Suárez (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Malagón-Kurka i.e. distinguishes different styles of representation of violence in Colombian art: During the 60s in a reaction to the bipartisan violence, artists represented violence literally, painting distorted human bodies. In the 80s, artists referred to violence related to drug trade, and represented violence in a conceptual way, i.e. using damaged furniture to represent human bodies (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The description refers to the installation as it was curated in Chicago. In its installation in *Ars+Flora* (Bogotá) this experience was likely to be different, since only eight table pairs were exposed (Contreras, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Even so, some authors find that ties and reciprocity increase locally in Colombian communities that are directly affected by violence. Experiments show grater contributions to an abstract common good in municipalities with a high outflow of citizens due to violence. (Hopfensitz & Miquel-Florensa, 2014, p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Whereas Kant is careful to distinguish the aesthetic from the political, Arendt does not draw such a line (Arendt, 1982, p. 105) (Beiner, 1982, p. 105). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similar observation holds for the represented artworks. Zuidervaart observes that it requires cultural organizations so as to disclose concerns that merit public attention (2011, p. 126). However, a formalization and consecration of a selection of art is problematic, since art may take many different forms, and selections are always contingent. Ferguson describes that there is a tension between the permanence of a selection and the contingency of an aesthetic judgment (1999, p. 44). With the internationalization of art markets, such selections in exhibitions may also misrepresent another culture entirely. Ramirez describes how certain forms of Latin American art, such as video, were systematically excluded from exhibitions of “Latin American” art in the U.S. during the 1990s in order to present Latin American art mainly to build contrast to Western art (1992, p. 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My translation. Original: *“El 21 de febrero el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Chicago inaugurará la retrospectiva de la artista con sus más emblemáticas creaciones; a partir del 26 de junio la exposición pasará al Guggenheim de Nueva York y el 6 de mayo de 2016 estará en el Museo Pérez de Miami. Pocos artistas latinoamericanos han gozado de semejante reconocimiento.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The two publications are one by the artist Ludmila Ferrari, titled *En la grieta: práctica artística en comunidad* (2014); and one by Ruben Yepes titled, *Lo Político del Arte: Cuatro Casos de Arte Contemporaneo en Colombia* (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as the form of physical things (The aesthetic dimension, 2014, p. 263), and defines the ethical order as an aesthetic one (The aesthetic dimension, 2014, p. 269f). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Similarly, Corcoran finds important parallels between visual perception and political recognition. The question of what looks “good, beautiful, right” is not only a question about our personal taste, but has normative implications that also shape our thinking in the political realm (2008, p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Norval is concerned with a similar issue and asks under what conditions a new demand is actually incorporated into the “distribution of the sensible”. She suggests certain normative criteria for a distribution of the sensible to be more open to new demands (2014, p. 194). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)