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ON THE MAKING OF THE ORATORIO FOR THE DISAPPEARED

Erika Diettes in conversation with Vikki Bell

In loving memory of Nadis Milena Londoño Cardona (1980–2022)

The art practice of Erika Diettes (1978–) has produced some of the most striking contemporary artistic responses to the armed conflict in Colombia. Each of her three latest projects – *Río Abajo* (2008, *Drifting Away*), *Sudarios* (2011, *Shrouds*) and *Relicarios* (2011–2015, *Reliquaries*) – arose from a careful process of working with relatives of the murdered and disappeared. These relationships with the relatives are at the heart of her work; indeed, the art is not ‘about’ their experience, but arises from the offer of her artistic sensibilities to them as a resource. In both *Río Abajo* and *Relicarios*, the families gifted Diettes objects – clothing, a favourite toy, photographs – that were cherished reminders of their loved ones, and worked with her as she crafted her responses, offering her beautiful artistic installations back to the families, the primary audience, as she emphasises. For the former, the clothing was photographed underwater and displayed as large glass panels, lit like stained glass to form a set of images that people spontaneously began to treat like shrines, bringing candles to lay before them (see cover of this book). In the latter, Diettes encased the gifted objects in amber-coloured rubber tripolymer cuboids, displaying them in a large grid laid out on the floor so that visitors need to kneel to examine their contents. The first exhibition of *Relicarios* was at the Museum of Antioquia in Medellín, where Diettes kept the exhibition closed to all but the relatives for the first three days while she conducted workshops with them, together with a team including psychologists, allowing them to meet each other and to reflect on the process (Image 11.1).

In *Sudarios*, women who had witnessed horrific murders allowed Diettes the privilege of making intimate and moving portraits of them; printed on floating silk panels, they have been hung mostly in Catholic churches. Such projects demand an ethical sensitivity and awareness that must be carried through from the initial



IMAGE 11.1 Installation of the *Relicarios*, Medellín (2018) With permission, archive of the artist.

conversations through to the choice of location and curation of the final exhibitions. Given the ethic of care embedded in her work, it was a great opportunity to be able to speak to Diettes as she embarked on a new project, to follow her decision-making process as she developed it.

The following conversation took place over a year, from July 2021 to May 2022. Since we could not meet due to the Covid pandemic, we spoke across four Zoom sessions. Diettes describes her wishes for the new project, a piece that, like her previous projects, is routed through her relationships with families who have suffered profound loss due to the armed conflict, but it is also quite distinct from them. For the first time, Diettes is making a site specific work, a little building, a chapel – not a *capella* but an *oratorio* as she will explain – built on the hillside near La Union, Antioquia, and filled with photographic images made with the families of the disappeared, the *dolientes*, those left to live with their grief (Image 11.2).

I. July 2021

In our first conversation, Diettes starts by explaining that this project arose in many ways from her previous project, Relicarios.

ED: *Relicarios* was such a powerful body of work. It was intense for all those years of working. It was scary and painful for all. But it was a process that allowed some of the families – not all of them, but a large number – the chance of some



IMAGE 11.2 Architect's visualisation of the *Oratorio* on the hillside surrounded by the rows of lavender. With the kind permission of Alejandro Vélez Restrepo.

sort of healing. Healing is a word I hesitate to use, but I believe that grief inaugurates a new state of living that will endure for the rest of your life. My father died three years after *Relicarios* and so this new work has become connected to my personal story. Intellectually, I tried not to let it blur the boundaries of what I'm doing but somehow, and quite suddenly, I find I am a different artist. One important part of the current project for me is to create a healing centre here, alongside the *Oratorio*.

You know the day after the opening of *Relicarios* – the very next morning – I saw the *Oratorio* in my mind. I don't want to be dramatic, but it was like a vision! A little building made of glass with a high roof. And it was all foggy! Here on the mountain, there is always fog early in the morning. So now, I am following that vision, at a stage of art-making where I might not be able to explain it with words, but I know what I'm doing. It was the same with *Relicarios*. No one understood what *Relicarios* was until they saw it in the museum in Antioquia. But for seven years, I had been exploring and following my idea.

VB: How did you find the site for the *Oratorio* project?

ED: My friend, the sociologist Nadis Milena Londoño, who worked closely with me on *Relicarios*, found it. When *Relicarios* ended, she knew I was sorry to close my studio in La Unión, Antioquia, and leave. Then she sent me a picture of this farm for sale. And I've been here, just outside La Unión, for five months now, waking up at 5am every morning, feeling time. Being here has changed my ideas about the *Oratorio*. The landscape – its contours, the weather, the way the light falls and changes through the day – has an impact on the site and my vision for it.

With *Relicarios* we wanted to build something responding to all the horrors of the conflict in Colombia, which includes not only forced disappearances but also those who have been murdered, gang-raped, forcibly displaced. The idea was to speak to Colombia as a whole. But one thing I noticed from *Relicarios* was that it was the families of the disappeared who stayed the longest in front of their relicarios. They visited and revisited the exhibition.

VB: So the Oratorio is working only with families of the disappeared?

ED: Yes, the Oratorio will contain images from eighty families, printed on to glass. I'm aiming for eighty families. I am asking them to choose objects for me to photograph, but these objects are to represent not the absence as such, but the story of the on-going conversation that is never-ending for the one who is grieving [*doliente*], the mourner of the disappeared. For example, the image of the two glasses relates to a story a mother told me. She told me that she does not allow her surviving children to toast her on her birthday, because the only toast she wants to receive is that from her disappeared son (Image 11.3).

So, the aim is to give physical space to an image of the relationship or to what they are longing to see. So that it is not blocked or held endlessly in

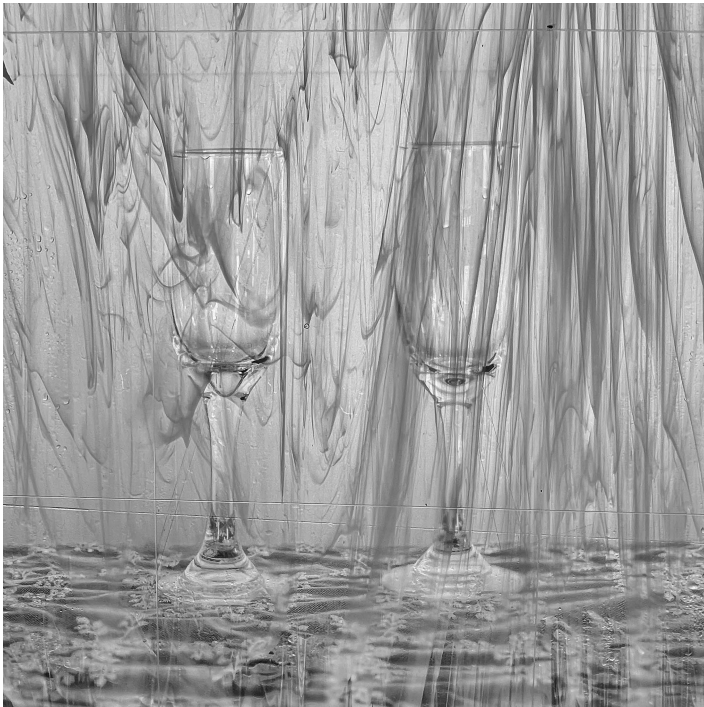


IMAGE 11.3 Murano glass panel with printed image of two wine glasses. With permission of the artist.

one's mind, as a wish. When you see this image printed on the glass, you can barely see it. It's a ghostly image. But it has a space in the world. I mean, the *Oratorio* could be a place relatives could come on that person's birthday, for example, to commemorate. Because life goes on, and I'm trying to figure out how to help people feel less burdened with these thoughts and wishes.

Before Covid, we brought ten families here for the first of what I had hoped would be three meetings. Because it's disrespectful to just take the objects from the families and to photograph them without doing that work with and for them. We planted quartz in the foundations, and did yoga and gardening together. With Nadis, and Dorcus Atyeno, who I met when I was in Uganda with the Transformative Memory project,¹ we facilitated workshops.

My rather ambitious idea was to create these meetings with healers from different parts of the country that I have connections with, and from abroad, because it's wonderful to facilitate the dissemination of this practice. But of course the pandemic has forced us to postpone these retreats.

VB: Was one of the outcomes of that retreat to make some first images for the *Oratorio*?

ED: Yes. My hope is that these images might allow the spirit to rest because the families find a path to translate something that is not translatable. One of the women told us she is still serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner for her son who's been disappeared for the last 15 years. I think that's devastating. I know her anguish won't disappear simply because she has an image in the *Oratorio*, but if together we can conjure up this situation in the image, maybe through this process she will come to understand something more about it. It is painful for her and also, perhaps, one could say it's not allowing that soul to rest.

VB: Maybe it won't be any sort of solution but you have given her a gift, a physical object outside the body, which gives her something external to consider...

ED: Yes, it is made public but *without the story*. This is important because I understand that through telling the story, she feels exposed and vulnerable. Especially in the Colombian context where grief is a complicated peculiar state, it is difficult for the relatives to live in peace. My decision not to publish the story or names alongside the image is to try to honour the pain of the person that I have worked alongside.

VB: You are not trying to make people understand somebody else's story and their pain as if it was just a cerebral issue. Instead, you always acknowledge the gaps and the distances and the limitations of, well, just being separate human beings. You can never fully share the experience of another. Better to always start from an acknowledgement of that failure, accept it while still trying to give care, to be human among humans.

ED: Exactly. I mean of course I believe in the importance of naming, of not forgetting, of remembering each story. But if you visit a site with 3,000 names you are not really reading the names, you are looking at the idea, the lines, at how overwhelming it is.

VB: Yes, I wrote a chapter about the memorial wall in *El Parque de la Memoria* in Argentina where I was reflecting on precisely this issue². The message is scale, and it's impressive but unsettling precisely because you don't have the ability to stand before each name, to consider each story. It was interesting how as I heard more stories, those names would almost jump out at me as I recognised them.

ED: It also feels right to follow my instinct not to tell the stories because I would potentially put people in danger. We're still in the midst of conflict here. And we still don't know exactly who, which names, we are trying to memorialise. That's why I just feel – the way you put it was beautiful – it is more about recognising being human alongside other humans.

VB: How have you found the people whose images you are making? Are they people you knew before, from the *Relicarios* project?

ED: I have a list of names through my social media and other routes, including those who have seen *Relicarios*. It was not an open call because it would be impossible to choose. I have to call and speak to each person one by one. They are people who want to be part of the project because they have been in another of my projects or they have seen it somehow. One is a woman who had told me her story of forced displacement after a massacre for *Relicarios* but then she 'confessed' that she had held back another part of her story, as she was not sure she could trust me. So now she wanted to tell me that story, about her brother's disappearance. She said, 'I have to apologise to you'. It was such a beautiful moment because there you understand the complexity of this country.

VB: Can you say something about the difference between the *Relicarios* being shown in museum spaces and this project where you're constructing a site-specific piece?

ED: I am not an artist who works only in museums, but with *Relicarios*, because of the fragility of the material and the lighting system required to be able to light the auditorium, it is a body of work that needs that infrastructure. It doesn't need to be necessarily in a museum, but you need a controlled secure space. And you have to be able to plug in those 165 lights! The lighting makes it feel *sacred*. With the *Sudarios*, because they are elevated, the logistics are complicated, so you do need a team. Although *Sudarios* are not so fragile so the transportation is easier. I can show them in a cathedral or in a *salon communal*. This is the first time I have thought about this but while

Sudarios are portraits and *Río Abajo* displays images of the object, with *Relicarios* you are transporting the actual objects themselves. They are precious. I think that's the reason that it needs a museum. Also, the idea of it being shown in the museum is, from the families' perspective, very dignifying.

VB: Yes, there was a lovely quotation from one of the women who said to her *relicario* 'look where you are!' as if to say 'you will be remembered because, look! You are in a museum'.

ED: Exactly. It's giving it a respectful, honouring place. I'm still cross that the Museo Nacional didn't show them and Banco de la República didn't want to show them because it was a chance to acknowledge the history of the country. I mean, they should be in the most important museum ever! With the *Oratorio*, because it is here in the landscape, on the mountainside, it is quite different. I've been thinking of it as similar to visiting a cemetery – the newer type of cemetery, the *parque cementerio*, not those in the city – where one goes out into the countryside, where the concept is more to blend in, dust to dust, etc. I imagine the structure, the *Oratorio*, in the middle of the field. I have been deciding which plants to grow, wondering if I should create a farm, if I should plant tomatoes, potatoes, and so on. But I have decided to create a lavender field. I chose lavender because of all its spiritual and healing properties. I hope it will help the visitor arrive at a place of calm, through the senses. You are not going to be healed, but I want this body of work to be soothing. I have planted 500 lavender plants so far.

VB: Can you describe how you imagine the site will be when you enter it and the *Oratorio*?

ED: If you visited at dawn or dusk it would be beautiful, especially if the fog created a pale background for the purple and the silver-white ashy colour of the lavender. What I want to do is to interrupt the landscape. Everything around here is bright green, so by interrupting that colour scheme it will be as if this mountain is in grief, in mourning. I'm also planting dark, black flowers so that when you approach *El Sosiego* it appears as if the colours have been demurred. It is like a parenthesis, to signal that something is different about this place.

And if you visit the *Oratorio* at midday, you will be enchanted by the beauty of the skies and overwhelmed by the potency of nature. I hope that will allow you to connect nature with your own life, to recognise beauty and to connect with the joy of living. Very different from visiting *Relicarios*, which takes you into a very intense space. Here, the space will connect with you. We reshaped the mountainside so you will see the *Oratorio*, then you walk through the lavender towards it against a background of more lavender with the sky beyond.

VB: In this midday sun, how will the images in the *Oratorio* fare?

ED: They will fade, for sure. In fact, I can't wait to see how they fade. I am seeking to avoid being part of a mantra of 'remember, remember, remember' and instead to allow time, to allow healing with a certain forgetting. It's tricky to explain. It's not the kind of forgetting that doesn't recognise or know what happened, but the healing oblivion that comes with time. We cannot live in suffering endlessly. Nobody deserves to live there.

VB: The phrase that comes to mind is a 'tender forgetting'. A forgetting, but very soft and gentle. Recently I was writing a review of a book from Peru³ and the author was saying how often people become really angry, telling other people 'you have to remember' or 'you have to forget'. It becomes very brittle. Your idea that actually there could be a gentle process to forgetting resonates with his reflections.

ED: Yes, memory within the socio-political context can be aggressive, a sort of a 'luchamos por la memoria'. We're in a battle. But when you are working with the victims, when you are listening to them, you wish for them to have just one minute pain free. You know, just one second.

A tender forgetting doesn't mean you forget you had a son; obviously, it doesn't mean that you are not searching and looking for justice every day of your life. But it means letting go of the horror, a resting in peace. My idea is to create a space to facilitate that, to help the people who are mourning. But it is not a tomb. There's no way the images can replace a grave. That's why it's important to me that the images retain a strong connection with the life of the mourner and not to the disappeared person. Nor can or should art adopt the role of the state. The solution cannot be that instead of a proper state or judicial response to conflict, we make art. Art is not able to replace law and art doesn't occupy the place of law or the official.

VB: To return to the images that will be within the Oratorio, were they the result of listening to people's stories and talking to them? How did you choose which image you would create to represent their story?

ED: The objects were brought by the families. I never choose the objects because I think they are what's important for that person. Let me show you this one. For this woman, it was important to include the letter and the drawings of the daughters of the man who is disappeared. What she wants to do with the *Oratorio* is to let him know that his daughters are okay. So this image would be more effective for *her*. It is so important is that she feels connected with this image and that she feels that the story as she told me was heard. The whole purpose is for you to feel represented here, to see that your loved one is being honoured, but in these cases of disappearance also to respond to that constant conversation with a person who you don't know if they are really dead or not. With this image it's as if the image is saying 'look at the girls, look at how I'm taking good care of them'. It's in conversation.

II. October 2021

ED: Clearly, the pandemic has interrupted our ways of working profoundly so here I am, almost like a monk in my monastery – well, on my mountain! I have realised that all the elements here are part of the *Oratorio*: the lavender, the sun, the rain, the hens, the locals passing by the land, the chicks who were born here – we have six now! The *Oratorio* is not to be extrapolated from these things. I don't want to force it to reflect a theme or a theoretical point about art, but instead to let it sit within life here. Letting it all pass by. Its time is the time of seeds, sowing and planting, of the earth. It gives the rhythm I'm living. I have cancelled all my exhibitions and I'm here effectively living the time of the *Oratorio*.

I've been thinking about your concept of 'tender forgetting'. The *Oratorio* is a work that I want to have such a softness. There are so many images, some truly awful, such as the bodies found recently on the coast, and so many very hard processes for the victims and relatives of this conflict, talking to the JEP and so on.⁴ *Oratorio* is a work that is softer, that is given in a spirit of kindness. It is for the mourner [*doliente*] and the visitor [*espectador*]. And it is a work that lets the dead be dead.

If we believe in the ability of art to help us look at reality, then we have to look at that reality. But it is not about becoming journalists. Art is not journalism, searching for documents about reality. For me, the long-standing critique of art – its aestheticisation of suffering, its ethics, etc. – neglects the simple fact that this reality *is* seen, and moreover, when it enters the worlds of creative people – artists, photographers, choreographers, people who work with sound – that experience is inevitably aesthetic, for them, and this reality is going to pass through their aesthetic sensibility.

All of this project, each thing that is made, is for those who are mourning [*dolientes*]. If we could we achieve that tender forgetting, this restful pause, it would be to me the most magical thing in the world. Of course, you will never absolutely forget. It is ridiculous to tell a mother 'you should forget it'. And it is very different from saying that as a whole society 'we will remember for you'. She knows that we are not going to remember the suffering of her child each year in their specificity. Within the larger political discourse you cannot propose forgetting when it's right we must not forget. But this work is in the sphere of emotion – it is about an individual, emotional process – and not in the sphere of politics, debating with politicians.

I hope we can 'tenderly forget'. I love that formulation. To be over the intensity of sorrow and achieve a softer memory. It's not a political memory. It's not memory with a capital letters, set in stone, but is like a memory of a small moment, a lovely moment. Such as 'when I was little my father brought me this bar of chocolate', like those memories that can be retrieved with delight and carry lighter emotion, rather than a painful memory of the absence. To have memories that you can carry with you, that nourish you, rather than being hurtful. This would be the aim.

VB: I wanted to ask you some more about the images you are going to put on to the glass. Why did you decide to use objects in this work, rather than the portrait photography that you used for *Sudarios*? And what is the difference between *Río Abajo*, that used clothing, or *Relicarios*, that also used objects, and these images that you are creating for *Oratorio*?

ED: In *Río Abajo*, the photograph of an object that belonged to the disappeared person conjured up something of the aura of the person. Their shirt, their clothes, occupy the shape of their body, so there is something intimate about it. In *Relicarios*, the family chose the objects and the majority chose an object that had belonged to the person, that represented them, such as the music he liked, or the last present he gave his mother on Mother's Day. In the case of the *Oratorio*, the representation that I would like to achieve relates more to the *doliente* themselves – the mourning person – and the conversation that they have maintained afterwards often for many years. The object conjures this desire for the conversation they wish for, more than it conjures up the aura of the disappeared.

VB: So it's a way to approach something impossible to represent, that is, grief itself? Your way of working involves a lot of care, working with relatives.

ED: Yes, it concerns their suspended grief. How to represent suspension? It's a delicate idea, because the object often represents hope. I try to find more abstract modes of representation than a portrait might be. It is a form of care. Because the family of the disappeared is not the disappeared him or herself and I feel that people don't deserve to be just the daughter of the assassinated general, for example, or the mother of one of the missing. She is a person, in spite of, or as well as, that fact.

I will gift the families something from the *Oratorio* project. I still don't know how, what format it will take, but I know I will create something for them.

VB: As you did with *Relicarios*. It seems yours is a staged approach – you have the work with the families, then an exhibition, and also you make a gift for them, present it and take more images of them receiving the work, which becomes in itself another body of work.

ED: Yes, but you know the images of the people receiving the gifts will never be part of my exhibition. Maybe they will find their way into an academic book or be available for academic reflection but they are not mine to exhibit. That's part of the care.

VB: So have you begun printing the images onto the glass, those that you have already? Can you explain the printing process?

ED: They're printed directly on to the glass, with a special printer. Obviously the hard surface does not absorb the ink, so it needs another layer on top. It goes

into an oven with another pane of glass on top, so they are fused together. It is murano glass so has these white swirls in it naturally. It's both transparent and, in places, white.

This image is one I really like. It's an image of a boy holding a baby. But it also has a photograph of the photo I took for *Río Abajo*. It's incredible for me that the things they brought to 'speak' about their son include not only the photo they carry in their wallet, and the larger version of that photograph that they have on the wall in their living room, but also the photo that I took of that document several years ago. So, we are returning and creating layers of images (Image 11.4).

VB: I'm thinking about the sun causing these images to fade. As they fade, you will also see more of the landscape outside. I wonder if this is a metaphor for this tender forgetting. It's not that you are left with nothing because you are left with the land, with where you are.

ED: Yes, it is a metaphor for life. The images will fade, and at different speeds, depending on the ink. The magenta will be the last to fade. When the image has gone, the family is probably at another point, emotionally. Nonetheless,



IMAGE 11.4 Murano glass panel with printed image showing the photograph and documentation of a young disappeared man. With permission of the artist.

the initial image will continue to exist, in the catalogue, or in the images we take of it. So the perpetuity of the image will be assured in other ways. The fading is part of this process and in the end the image on the glass will not matter [so much as the issue of] how are you going to spend this life?

VB: So will you display all the images at different times, according to when they are ready to go into the *Oratorio*?

ED: Yes. I have some already; we are discussing these and some from the project in Uganda. The other panels will be grey glass. So the sunlight will only pass through those with the images on them. It is not my idea to fill the *Oratorio* once and then it is complete. The photographs are not a part of the structure of the *Oratorio*, they are hanging within it but there is a museographical concept to the *Oratorio* too. The images will circulate. They could be here, then go to Uganda, then maybe to the UK. And nor will the *Oratorio* just have images from Colombia. It is about the pain of disappearance, and people understand that is not particular to here.

VB: You take such care and time with your work, you are very patient but the work is impatient in that sense that these people may not have time to wait for peace, for the political process. We can't wait for everything to be at peace again before we deal with this healing process, with people's mental health. Yours is an ethic of accompaniment.

ED: Thank you, yes. *Río Abajo* was a process over four years. And the work and contact with the *dolientes* has continued, it goes on. And I have learnt with *Sudarios*, too, that my work won't change anything, but I understand that it can be part of a beautiful process. I can't do anything heroic, you know. But these things, they can make all the difference in the world to someone. Like a nurse for someone in a terminal state, turning them if they need to turn over, bringing a pillow. You can't change anything radically but you can make sure someone is comfortable. It is nothing scientific, just a gentle attention, a softness, tranquil and quiet. Everyone needs some form of accompaniment. It's why I like the image of the nurse.

III. January 2022

VB: You sent the photographs, thank you. I can see some lavender!

ED: Yes, this past week we cut the first harvest of the lavender, it's an intoxicating smell! We have just the first row and we have sown more seeds to grow more. I'm at a really nice point. For a long time, an art project is just an idea. Sometimes you think it is an illusion. It only exists in my imagination, there and in the render that I have produced with the architect. But everything is still to come. Many practical and economic considerations too. But we

have marked out the rectangle where the *Oratorio* will be, and I hope that by November we will have constructed the *Oratorio*. So, I am considering the landscape and attending to the lavender, but it is like working with a photographic negative, working in reverse. As with the *Relicarios*, you don't know until you remove those pieces from the mould what they will look like, so you are preparing, imagining and working backwards. It's the opposite of taking a portrait because when you're photographing someone your subject is to the fore [*en primer plano*]. And later you work on the background. Here it is the reverse, working on the background and the foundations, before I create the subject, the *Oratorio*.

VB: I'm trying to understand what that feels like for you.

ED: It is about holding fast to the same idea. The project is to sustain that idea, like an exercise in meditation, while around me everything is almost the same every day, evening, night. Of course, the weather and the seasons are changing. But there is a sense of time that feels and is eternal. It is repetitive and even monotonous. Having animals means you must get into a routine. The hens announce the start of the day in the morning, and in the evening its end. This time doesn't have an end, it doesn't have a conclusion.

VB: When you are walking in the lavender and imagining the chapel there, are you imagining the image that you have produced with the architect? Can you say something about the design of the chapel, why this particular design?

ED: It was designed by the architect Alejandro Vélez Restrepo, around the remit that I gave to him. It is a little house like a child would draw. Maybe it is not a universal image exactly because I suppose some children would draw the houses in whatever region they live in. But it is the most basic of shapes, as if drawn with a pencil, a rectangle with a triangle on top. Of course, I discussed with Alejandro, and since my background is Catholic, there is a church-like quality to it.

It contains something of my vision of the sacred, I suppose. I could have chosen another form, of say a *maloca*,⁵ but that wouldn't be true to my vision of something scared, which evidently has something Spanish about it too. My main consideration was to have something narrow, with a roof as high as we could make it.

VB: You are calling it the *Oratorio*, which is different from a chapel. In English it is oratory. Can you explain the difference?

ED: Yes, the difference is that an oratory is not officially consecrated by the church. It could be a chapel in a house, a place to pray. It is an intimate space. Like in the airport, the little quiet space is called an oratorio. They are ambiguous spaces, with no particular faith, no images – or several – and

several books including the Koran, the Bible. It's a space of quiet, to pray or meditate, to rest and relax. But it is not the same as a lounge!

The design is important. The visitor enters and leaves the one passage through the Oratorio. There won't be any doors, it's open. The ground will be the grass, so that a little of Nature will enter the Oratorio, and the space is not enclosed. It's about the paradox of things that contain absence. It is a space of shelter [*resguardo*] and a space of imagination.

I don't want visiting the Oratorio to be like visiting a monument, but more like visiting a sacred place. Not a space of pilgrimage but a place of rest [*descanso*], especially for people who don't have that elsewhere. There are not many places for *dolientes*. It is a spiritual space that is historical without being a monument. The work I am doing now is to think about how to create that atmosphere.

VB: Imagining the atmosphere and affect as well as the architecture that you want this space to have. It's quite delicate.

ED: Maybe 20 years ago, I visited the piece by James Turrell at the Quaker Meeting House near Houston.⁶ He works with light, he builds architecture so you can focus on looking at the sky. He is an inspiration for me. What I am hoping for here is something like the projects of land art, where you contemplate the artwork but always within a specific context. I hope the *Oratorio* will be an experience of light. And that it becomes part of life. If art doesn't become a part of life it has no sense. I take comfort in the fact that when people go to the cemetery it is as a part of life. People visit with family, they have lunch together, collect flowers, then they go together. With *Relicarios*, I remember people left flowers in the exhibition, they would sing or perform a little ceremony. These were the things that people wanted to do in front of the artwork.

There will be a second part to the project, of course, because the photographs will also be printed for exhibitions beyond the *Oratorio*, and those images will travel. Also, within the *Oratorio*, it will be possible to put new images up and remove others, to rotate the images. What I had originally in mind [with the images] is not possible at the moment because of Covid. It would be irresponsible to have groups of people brought together. And we can't visit people's houses so we have to pause. I can't just ask people to send me their objects.

VB: No, that is not the way you work at all. And the people you have been working with so far – who came to visit before Covid – have they been in touch with you?

ED: Most of them follow me on Facebook or Twitter. Two of them have passed away from Covid, and another two are very ill from that small group of twelve people. What life is giving us is these challenges, and this extended time. This could have been a 3-month project! Just to go slow is a test for me! Once I get my booster, my third vaccine, I think I will be ready to start again.

May 2022

Erika has recently returned from a trip to Tucumán where she was invited to talk to a group of families of the disappeared and visit the notorious Pozo de Vargas, a deep well used as a clandestine burial site during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, where at least 147 individuals were thrown. As usual, we start our conversation measuring time by the lavender.

ED: The process here is going better than I expected. The mountain has given me this incredible blossom of lavender. It's that weird moment when the idea that existed only in my mind starts happening in front of me. It's a very particular moment, it is incredible sense of joy but at the same time it is peculiar, like you are stepping into your own mind. I can see so clearly now where the *Oratorio* should be built.

VB: Is it in a different place from where you thought at first?

ES: Yes we have moved it. We had created a lake so that we could place the *Oratorio* where it would be reflected. But being here, working here, understanding, how can I put this, the 'spirit' of the mountain, I felt it needed to be down in the midst of the lavender field. So that it feels less exposed. It means there will be more mystery as you will have to walk through the lavender to reach the *Oratorio*. So it is adding these layers of 'care' to the construction.

VB: A sensory care. The look and smell of the lavender will have a calming effect.

ED: Exactly. And approaching, the first glimpses of the *Oratorio* will make you consider whether you are ready to enter it or not. To go back to *Relicarios*, when we showed it at the Museo Tadeo you had to walk up the staircase to it, before entering the room where all the *Relicarios* were.⁷ But many people just had to sit at the top of the stairs and wait for a while. I think the same may happen here, walking through this beautiful field, being careful to avoid stepping into the lavender, passing by the magnolia tree, will give you time to adjust. It will give you a sense that you are in a safe place of shelter.

VB: How was your trip to Argentina?

ED: So interesting. I gave a talk and afterwards I was speaking with some of the families there who are all relatives of the disappeared in Tucumán. There was a lot of positive response and support for the idea of a space like this, like the *Oratorio*, precisely because it was not described in terms of a monument. With a monument there is no space for talking about the duration of waiting, the sense that these families are forever waiting. I also visited the houses of five sets of relatives, and I made four images with them.⁸ In one, a daughter and a niece of a disappeared man brought the banners that they

had taken on marches, a shawl of their father's, a *mate* [cup for drinking mate], and a little tin [*relicario*] with the hair of his child in it. She didn't really know her father, so her relationship with him was the experience of looking for him. Her image of her father is only as one of the disappeared.

VB: Did you feel a difference with Colombia there in Tucumán?

ED: Yes, of course. I used the word *doliente* in my talk there. I knew I was introducing something a bit different with that. In Colombia I started using the word *doliente* because the way we speak here about victims doesn't bring together all those who grieve. Instead, we name the victims from the point of view of the perpetrators. In terms of 'victims of the FARC', 'victims of state terror', and so on. To use the term *doliente* is to see people from the point of view of their humanity instead. But in Argentina they had hesitations around the word. It relates somewhat to the different struggles.

VB: Yes, I understand. This word does not sit very well with the slogan '*los llevarán con vida, los queremos con vida*'. We want them with life. The idea is that we will act as if they are still alive, and we demand that the state returns them to us. That remains the focus, not the pain.

ED: Right, and the *Oratorio*'s focus is elsewhere, on the experience of having lived with this absence. The one who searches [*el buscador*] is the focus.

VB: Who asked you to visit Tucumán, and the Pozo de Vargas?

ED: It was an archaeologist, Andrés Romano, who works as part of a team there. They have been excavating the well for 20 years, and they have found the remains of 117 people there, in fragments. There are people who did not want to bury the fragments of bones, they say 'my relative was not only one bone, where is the rest?' One of the team came across my website, and saw the images of *Río Abajo* and *Relicarios*. His question to me was: what should we do with the clothes we have found in the well? They are thinking of making an artwork of some kind. There are three families who agreed to lend me these clothes, but they are still held by the state as part of the on-going judicial process, so actually they cannot give them to me at present. This is for a future project. It will be very delicate, because the clothes are very intimate, some are underwear, and because some have signs of torture.

VB: How was your visit to the well itself?

ED: It is 40m deep! I went down the shaft twice. The second time was with a group of relatives, because the group CAMIT had an event going on.⁹ At the conference some of the relatives asked me, 'How was the visit to the well?', because they haven't been. I said it isn't as one imagines. The archaeologists

have spent 20 years in the well, scrapping and searching, looking for anything that could help in the struggle for justice. It is so clean and the water's like glass! It is a site of truth, justice, and memory, though it is not open to the public, because the judicial process is on-going. But they allow educational visits and give access to the relatives of those involved in the trial.

VB: So at the Oratorio you will include the images that you made with the families from Argentina with those from Colombia, and from Uganda too?

ED: Yes, but they won't be arranged by country. Because this is not a place with information to read about these situations, but it is to be a place about the experience of waiting and hoping. I would like to give a place to and through these intimate personal conversations, spiritually and metaphorically, as well as literally, to give people a place. It happens to be here on a mountain in Colombia, but it could have been in Tucumán, in Uganda, or elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 The Transformative Memory project website is: <https://transformativememory.ubc.ca>. It is a knowledge-exchange network of scholars, artists, community-based organisations, and policy makers engaged with the question of what makes memory transformative of a sense of self, relations to others, legacies of violence, and connections to the land. Members include memory workers based in several countries including Colombia and Uganda.
- 2 See Chapter 5 in Vikki Bell (2014).
- 3 See José Carlos Agüero (2021) and Bell (2022).
- 4 JEP is the justice component of the Integrated System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (ISTJRN) established by the 2016 Peace Agreement, signed between the government and the FARC-EP on 24 November, 2016. The SJP is tasked with investigating, clarifying, prosecuting, and punishing the most serious crimes committed over the more than 50 years of armed conflict in Colombia, before 1 December 2016 (see <https://www.jep.gov.co/Documentos/JEPWP/2englishversion.pdf>).
- 5 South American indigenous large communal hut.
- 6 *Skyspace at Live Oak Friends Meeting House*, Houston, Texas. A retracted skyspace in the ceiling shows light changing as sun moves through the day and sets at night. Subtle lighting within the meeting house complements and accentuates these changes. There are a few restricted hours in which tourists can go into the meeting house.
- 7 Museo de Artes Visuales de la Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogotá.
- 8 One of the families said they needed more time to think about which objects they wanted to bring to be photographed on Erika's next visit to Tucumán.
- 9 Colectivo de Arqueología, Memoria e Identidad de Tucumán (CAMIT).

Works Cited

- Agüero, José Carlos (2021) *The Surrendered: Reflections by A Son of Shining Path*, Charles Walker and Michael Lazzara (eds and trans.), Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bell, Vikki (2014) *The Art of Post-Dictatorship: Ethics and Aesthetics in Transitional Argentina*, London: Routledge.
- (2022) Review of *The Surrendered: Reflections by A Son of Shining Path Memory Studies*, 15(1): 250–254.