Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *The Skin of Memory*, 1998–99, installation view of interior of bus-museum, barrio Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia (artwork © Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá; photograph by Carlos Sanchez/Pregón Ltda.)
The project La Piel del Memoria/The Skin of Memory brought together the public-art vision of the artist Suzanne Lacy and the research and community work of anthropologist Pilar Riano-Alcalá. It responded to local needs and situations influenced by specific global forces, using art, ritual, and commemoration. The project took place in 1998–99 in the Colombian city of Medellín, in a barrio called Antioquia, a neighborhood with a distinct history marked by exclusion, social tensions, and multiple forms of drug-related, territorial, political, and everyday violence. Lacy and Riano worked in collaboration with local youth, women, and community leaders, with five local nongovernmental and governmental organizations, and with a multidisciplinary team of historians, social workers, educators, artists, and architects. The following text interperses a description of the project with excerpts from an ongoing conversation between Lacy and Riano.

**The Skin of Memory/La Piel del Memoria**

**Suzanne Lacy:** I’ll ask you this because you came up with the name, or one of our colleagues there did, why The Skin of Memory (La Piel del Memoria)? This name made a biological reference to body and memory.

**Pilar Riano-Alcalá:** Our project dealt with issues of loss and the relationship to memory. With this title we connected the way memory relates to sensation, as does skin; we explored the reciprocal relationship between body and memory, memory and body.

Memory in this metaphor has sensation, is mutable; it is also not only individual, but resides in places, physical spaces. So if memory were like a texture, a surface, wherever you touch that surface it would be felt sensorially within the whole described by that texture, that skin. We hoped that if we touched the skin of people’s memories there would be some impact on their sensory world. The project’s central image, a transformed bus, became a collective body that stored a myriad of individual and family memories.

But you mentioned this idea of the skin as container?

**Lacy:** The skin is the container of a living organism—the sinews, vessels, organs, chemistries, and fluids. When you penetrate that skin, the body is vulnerable, exposed, revealed. Remember the medieval torture of skinning people alive, the most extreme exposure? Once the skin that protects us—forms the barrier between ourselves and our environment—is removed, pain results. It’s as if barrio Antioquia were a living organism with the skin of its memory all that stood between it and the tremendous loss experienced there. We explored that territory between the body individual and the body of the whole, the barrio itself, with its calcified memory.

**Riano:** A key to memory is that it is not only isolated within an individual, but much of what you remember is part of a relationship.
The Violences of Medellin

Medellin is the second-largest city in Colombia, with a population of 2.3 million. In the 1980s, it became the strategic center for the operations of the powerful Medellin drug cartel, undergoing a dramatic social transformation. Youth, in particular, joined gangs, became sicarios (hired assassins) or part of an underground network of illegal services for organized crime. Death statistics and victim profiles changed dramatically during the 1980s: homicide victims were now mostly men (90 percent) between thirteen and twenty-four years old. Colombia had become one of the most violent countries in the world. By 1991, Medellin's homicide rate reached 381 per 100,000 people.

The proliferation of guerrilla and paramilitary groups also had a major impact on regional violence. Nationally, two leftist guerrilla groups (the FARC—Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—and the ELN—Ejército de Liberación Nacional) demonstrated a steady growth in the number of combatants, controlled territories, and subversive actions. Right-wing paramilitary groups, financed by rich landowners and drug cartels and with direct links to some members of the Colombian army, expanded to disseminate terror through massacres and forced displacement.

Colombia, the third-largest recipient of US military aid, is at the center stage of competing international interests and forces, with massive internal displacement (3 million people internally displaced in the past decade), violent death (25,000 per year in the 1990s), over a million people leaving the country in the last decade, and one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world.

Riaño: When you work with people who have experienced violence for a long time, you see how memories of loss become an obsession. We heard from people that because they have not dealt with their past, memories haunt them. They want revenge.

Lacy: In East Oakland, where I worked for a decade, so many young people carry deep and largely unprocessed personal losses—the disappearance of fathers into prisons, the break-up of families, the deaths of friends by gun violence. Many youth have a huge reservoir of depression, fear, and anger that can lead to nihilism, recklessness, and despair about the future.

Riaño: Living with unprocessed loss and its consequent paralysis and violence is not restricted to poor youth in barrios and ghettos. In Colombia, the president himself is trapped by his memories of the kidnapping and murder of his father, and he swears to fight the guerillas to the end, no matter what. Obsessive memory takes one to the point of revenge, a revenge that might be expressed in many ways.

Lacy: Art is one way that people can reconstruct memories of loss in a positive way, to find new meanings in the experience and to gain some control over it. Monuments are a process of transforming memory into a broader social context, where personal pain takes on a social meaning.
The various armed groups in Medellín and their territorial claims for the period 1995–2000. Map from Pilar Riano Alcalá, Jovenes, memoria y violencia en Medellín, Colombia: Una antropología del recuerdo y el olvido (Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia and Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2006) (map © Pilar Riaño-Alcalá)

**Barrio Antioquia’s Disputed Terrains**

The political violence that ravaged the country in the 1950s was intensely felt in barrio Antioquia, a neighborhood in the center of Medellín. In 1951 the neighborhood was declared a red-light district by a municipal decree. The barrio’s streets were filled with prostitutes and brothels, schools were converted into prophylactic centers, and various social delinquencies took root. During the 1960s and 1970s, a growing drug industry took over barrio Antioquia as a social and geographic base and offered residents their only chance for social mobility.

Some people of the barrio joined the marijuana industry networks as drug mules and traffickers, and in the 1980s these links expanded to the cocaine industry and networks of organized crime. In the early 1990s violence intensified when six local gangs engaged in territorial battles, the most critical moment coming in 1993, when more than two hundred local youth died violently. Over the two years in which *The Skin of Memory* developed, the barrio went through three different cycles of “peace” and “war.”

Violence has made deep fissures in the social and sensory fabric of barrio Antioquia, reducing the possibilities for interaction among residents. Perpetrators of violence are often known to the families of their victims, and retaliation is part of an ever-growing spiral of enmity and retribution. Mourning is a privatized act within the intimacy of family life. The excess and intensity of violence that repeats itself hinders the possibilities for collectively coming to terms with loss. And it is precisely this type of collective mourning that is needed when human suffering has its origins in large-scale violence and political and economic power.
Researchers, politicians, and journalists contributed, over a period of four decades, to the construction of a discourse and social representations that put the residents of this neighborhood somewhere between pathology, immorality, and social delinquency. They have constructed the barrio as a niche of social marginalization that is to be feared. But within the barrio, people live with the extremes of illegality and armed violence, daily anxiety, and emotional pain, while tenaciously maintaining an oral tradition and community celebrations that represent feelings of belonging and identity.

Memories of residents coexist in a contested manner, making evident multiple versions of the past and illustrating the permeability of memory within sociocultural practice. It is the maintenance of these cultural practices of memory that allow people to adhere to some form of collective identity even when their worlds are shattered by violence and loss. Memory here is a disputed and present terrain.

Riano: I’m not talking about the act of remembering per se, but how, in the process of remembering, you remember as part of a group. I mean the relational capacity of memory as a bridge between past, present, and future, as well as between the individual and the collective. Memory as a never-ending source of collective positioning.

Lacy: There is a strong sensuality to memory. A smell, a sound, a visual image suddenly evokes a memory, or maybe not even an identifiable and placed narrative, but perhaps a sensation. My Buddhist teacher, Joko Beck, used to talk about “shadow thoughts,” fleeting imagery that flickers across your awareness too fast to grasp, but producing results that are felt as bodily sensations. Often this is barely conscious, and we are left only with feelings, not the narrative memory that evoked them. But these feelings affect our behavior.

Riano: Fundamental to memory work is the recognition that you are not only looking at people’s narratives, but considering that people also remember with their bodies, both as individuals and as social groups. The barrios are physical spaces charged with memories. Landmarks of memory are everywhere, and the streets themselves are part of that sensory dimension. In barrio Antioquia, for example, many of the street names convey a rich, layered history of past events, moral stories, and references to physical features.

Material Memories

Riano: I want to make another point about the dimensions of memory. Barrio Antioquia sits at the intersection of larger social forces that directly impact individual residents. We are used to looking at violence from the place of victims and perpetrators rather than from the point of view of human suffering, which denies agency to the so-called victims. In barrio Antioquia, stigmatized because of its historical circumstances, applying the notion of human suffering is not just about helping with loss, but about creating avenues for resistance.

Lacy: What does it mean for people, in your words, to “deal with” their memories? Do you mean that the outcome of the residual memory is socially productive?
The ubiquitous bus is the prevalent means of public transportation in Medellin (photographs by Suzanne Lacy).

Riaño: “To deal with” is not forgetting but completing a mourning process, some-how putting a memory to rest as you continue with your life. You are not stuck in the loss. When memory becomes fixed and unchanging, people lose their capacity to reflect.

Lacy: When I first began teaching performance, I was astounded at how often women students enacted memories of incest and violence and came out of the representation empowered, as if to re-create the memory in their own terms, body and narrative, was somehow healing. You and I came together to do this work from a common belief that art-making itself, as a process of representation and meaning making, was one way to deal with obsessive and destructive memories of the past.

Pilar first described barrio Antioquia to Suzanne as a territory invisibly marked by its residents' histories. Access to specific alleyways and small streets was based on how residents were perceived in the social structures of the barrio. One person's street, the center of her or his cultural and social life, was another's danger zone. Rivalries and territorialities had divided the small barrio into a crossword puzzle whose boundaries were forgotten and transgressed at one's peril. Yet the lifelong, identity-forming memories of barrio Antioquia residents were also rooted in these same places—in their homes, stores, churches, movie houses, bars, and streets.

We employed the strategy of a “museum” as a space for nonpartisan display of memories. A bus—drawn from the colorful and ubiquitous public buses connecting Medellin’s barrios—was chosen for the memory-museum when our discussions with the neighborhood coordinating team led to the conclusion that there was no single place that all residents could safely visit. A bus that moved from one place to another within the neighborhood and eventually to the center of Medellin became a practical solution that transgressed local territorialities. This museum of memories would, for a brief time, break the stasis of localized, privatized grief, becoming a place of community commemoration that re-created the past from treasured objects loaned by families.
There were three levels of project leadership: sponsoring organizations and the academic activists who worked in them, an artistic team from three countries, and a team of fifteen women and youth who received honorariums to visit each house in the barrio and collect an object that represented a significant memory for that family. This last team, one that soon became an informal leadership training opportunity for local youth, took a great sense of ownership in the project, visiting approximately two thousand homes over the course of several weeks. As the barrio team members visited their neighbors, they became both witnesses and scribes of the histories and emotions that accompanied treasured objects of the material world. They aimed at establishing close relationships that allowed people to share memories through the objects. A local journalist described this task as a form of daily archaeology: look for objects, identify their symbolic weights, and help residents establish relationships among the objects, the place each occupies in the material world, and the ways in which it establishes a link with the past. Through storytelling, the objects became bridges between individual, the past, and the present community of relationships.

Each of the five hundred objects collected from residents of barrio Antioquia was accepted into the project based on what it meant to its owners. Memories were often, though not exclusively, of loss or grief. There, in the intimacy of the bedroom or the living room, as the objects were taken out of chests, off shelves, from walls or corners, the stories were told:

Marta: Here is a ring from one of my sons whom I haven’t seen for six years since he went to Miami. He left me this as a keepsake. . . . I love him a lot and I miss him . . .

Juan: This balaclava belongs to a buddy of mine who was killed. We brought him downtown to buy a shirt and we saw the balaclavas, and he bought two, one black decorated with a little marijuana plant and one gray, and . . . well, we buried him with the black balaclava and I kept this other one and my little brother kept some gloves, the only things that were left as a reminder of him . . .

Father: It belonged to the girl who we abandoned in Putumayo after she had died . . . and I want to preserve this photo, keep it by my side. It’s like a treasure, you know what I mean?

Each person maintained links with the past through singular practices of preservation: a piece of cotton, a little stamp, a trunk, a cigar, pieces of clothing, photos, and letters. A porcelain figure of a church, with a crack in the bell tower and an angel playing the guitar, is a gift that Tulia doesn’t let anyone touch; she received it from “a person that I loved a lot who now is far away.” Scented talcum powder in a little black box made of cardboard and plastic, with silver flowers on top, was the last Mother’s Day gift that Nora received before her son was killed. Once the subject disappears, objects become evidence, like the blue jeans that Omar was wearing when he was murdered, which Mayerly kept “as a memory of him, because there are so few reminders left.”

Together, the objects—artifacts of memory, community signifiers, and aesthetic displays in their own right—transformed the museum into a dynamic site
Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, The Skin of Memory, 1998-99, details of installation in the bus-museum, showing objects loaned by barrio Antioquia residents (artwork © Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá; photographs by Suzanne Lacy)
of individual and collective memories, paying tribute to the people of the barrio, but also unveiling the conflictive and disputed character of the local memories. The sequence of these objects, which were placed with care and creativity behind hundreds of small white lights, created a visual web of relationships and a candelit aura of ritual underscoring the magnitude of loss. The placement also accentuated the continuities and identity-related references.

**Riano:** Objects carry memory in the way they are used. They also acquire meaning because someone has given them to you or because an object was present when someone was with you—they support the memory of the event itself. There is another layer of memory if, for example, you are away from that person. Let’s say you travel, you become a refugee or move to another country, then that object not only conveys the memory of the event but also the memory of the person. Particularly when someone dies, that object then gains added significance as a carrier of that person’s memory.

In contemporary material culture many objects are reproducible, particularly true here because of the economic level of the community. But different people bring different sets of meanings to similar objects, making each unique.

**Lacy:** I’m remembering the shelf with the stuffed animals in the museum. Aesthetically we were combining so-called high and low culture. However, the contextual meaning was not at all abstract but rooted in people’s lives. All those little stuffed animals were definitely kitschy, but they were rarified by their context in the museum. Placed together, their accrued mass was eloquent.

**Riano:** Yes, here you have stuffed animals and all of them look alike, and each one of them is a reproduction among thousands of thousands, but as they become part of community culture, they multiply again, as each becomes a unique and special object because it conveys a memory.

Objects are not simply material possessions, but provide us with particular meanings about our environment. Where we place such an object gives it a meaning, whether on our desk, in our bedroom, on an altar, or hidden away in a box under the couch. Wherever it goes, this object becomes a critical referent of the material world that surrounds us. And I would argue that in the case of objects that are particular carriers of memory, this placement is extremely important. These objects become spatial landmarks of memory.

Brushstrokes of memory about national events that survive within family life became evident, along with the connections between local conflicts and macro social processes, such as the political violence of the 1950s, the global market of illicit drugs, and policies of urban planning and social exclusion. Residents recognized the objects for their historical significance and as markers of important moments for individuals. In this subtle manner, the links were drawn between local, regional, and national history: the coal irons with engraved handles, the pots and pewter jars, the picture of the Holy Trinity from the first religious procession in the barrio (1950), the seventy-year-old plastic Pinocchio figure passed through four generations, the hundred-year-old sewing machine on which “my great-great-grandmother used to sew waistcoats and anything needed for breast...
support.” Included were travelers’ objects from the United States—a radio in the form of a 1970s Cadillac, dollar bills, or garish decorative objects—and objects that joined family histories to life cycles, generational changes, and kinship ties—birth, baptism, the first steps, religious ceremonies, and marriage. Sometimes these objects had been kept in secret; at other times, they had been kept to tell one’s history many times over: sculptures or paintings created in jail, a newspaper clipping narrating the drama of a woman caught in the 1970s carrying drugs and sent to a US jail, the letters from a five-year-old girl to her dead father, which she stored away carefully in a little plastic box, the cross made of bullets that the soldiers made during military service in 1928, the rope that saved many people during the flood, and the cutlery refinished in gold that Griselda Blanco, the “Queen of Cocaine,” gave to one of the neighborhood grandmothers who had worked for her.

Lacy: The night we organized the objects on the shelves of the bus, not only were we displaying a collective narrative, we were also reassembling that narrative, whether by accident or design. We hoped to create a metanarrative that would assemble known bits into a new story of all the stories.

Riano: It is an act of transgression to take something seen as belonging to a very intimate space into a public setting. The museum was also able to transgress territorial boundaries and differences both within the barrio and between the barrio and the rest of the city.

Lacy: One of the things people discovered was how one memory looked like another, and that was not only about developing empathy, but also about identity. This is a common strategy in public art, revealing private experience as a way of demonstrating commonalities. Displaying formerly hidden histories can be a way to build pride, to develop the relevance, in this case, of the owner’s object (and grief) within the larger community.

Riano: Comments people made in the bus expressed the idea of a sacred space in a secular setting. Beauty inspired respect, and people’s memories were elevated to social significance. I never thought it could be that beautiful, not as an abstraction but as a stuffed animal!

The opportunity to mourn collectively as a community—although from the safe remove of displayed objects—offered the possibility for an emergent empathy in the form of recognition of the suffering and losses of others:

It wasn’t easy for Estela to hand over the photo of her deceased sister, as it represented the only object preserving her memory that she owned. But Alejandra convinced her when she explained that this photo would be there alongside many other artefacts. And Estela, who felt the emptiness left by the missing photo every day, could verify this when she entered the bus-museum and, full of emotion, saw the photo in a glass-and-aluminium display case lit up by hundreds of incandescent light bulbs. Days later, another sister, Mirta, visited the bus without knowing that the photo was there. With tears in her eyes, Mirta recognized the photo from Estela’s wall, showing it


To her night-school friends. Meanwhile, the eyes of another classmate filled with tears as she remained silent. Later she would tell a friend about the sorrow she felt for Mirta that combined overwhelmingly with her own loss of her husband, in jail for the murder of that young girl. 2

Given the tense climate in the barrio and the kind of stories and memories the objects evoked, discretion and confidentiality were important. We were aware that in the museum, objects of “enemy” neighbors or members of warring gangs might be placed together, so we were careful to preserve anonymity, wherever possible. Objects were placed on shelves in the museum without identification, an important strategy to avoid responses preconditioned by prior antagonisms. Errors could be harmful in this fragile social ecology.

After the neighborhood team members finished their work and the museum opened its doors, they turned into its witnesses and guardians. One could say that they became literacy workers of memory who shared the histories of the objects with the many visitors, accompanied them in their grief, listened to visitors’ stories, and collected comments. Their labor bore witness to the powerful acts of remembering, the ways in which strangers trusted their intimate stories to them, and the ways in which people would recognize each other through this communication of shared emotion.

These custodians, coming from different sectors of the territorially divided barrio, assumed the task of ensuring that people in their sector were informed about the bus in advance and respected it. Gang members and drug dealers were among the visitors. The bus received the respect of all armed actors in the barrio, and there were no incidents of vandalism or violence. The very fact that the bus went through and opened its doors in every one of the sectors of the neighborhood without incident testifies to the recognition that The Skin of Memory received, despite taking place during one of the barrio’s worst periods of armed confrontation. As organizers of this event, we were afraid that by bringing objects and photos of people involved in the conflict to the bus it would become a target of aggression. But this did not happen, and the bus crossed symbolic and physi-
This map of the barrio charts sites memorialized in The Skin of Memory and places of conflict in the barrio. Similar maps of barrio sectors were placed in the exterior windows of the bus-museum. From Pilar Riaño Alcalá, Jovenes, memoria y violencia en Medellín, Colombia: Una antropología del recuerdo y el olvido (Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia and Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2006) (map © Pilar Riaño-Alcalá)

cal territorial borders without incident, creating another type of topography and movement.

Although these artifacts of material culture were, through installation strategies, associated with the sacred, the real purveyor of the profound was the audience itself; with curiosity, pride, and a sense of hushed concentration and connectedness to each other, members of the public came by the scores each day to witness the many perspectives on their history. The sequence and number of objects created an aura that underlined the magnitude of loss. As one visitor, a woman, asked, "Why haven't I seen this or these people before?"

Imagining Reconciliation

Lacy: I remember you telling me about the popular street culture in barrio Antioquia, the spontaneous parades, the residents’ love of history, the need to strengthen the cultural fabric. When you first approached me, you wanted something that would build on the work you were doing there with your colleagues. How important was it to introduce art into this process you had already established in barrio Antioquia?

Riaño: My colleagues from collaborating NGOs were thinking that initiatives based on straight education were not having any effect. The field of culture, we thought, had a broader impact, and people would be more motivated to participate.

Lacy: Do you have any evidence of people being impacted by the project?

Riaño: Oh yes, we’ve had lots of results that continue to be reported. I go back a few times each year. One interesting thing I keep hearing is how amazed people were that an art project (with all the aesthetic qualities of art) was presented in such a poor neighborhood. People felt the bus was beautiful in every sense of the word. Usually in cultural work with poor people, the “scrapbook” kind of art is OK. Here we created an installation as good as any in a museum. It brought significant media attention and visitors from all over the city.
The second part of *The Skin of Memory* aimed at overcoming mistrust and hostility among residents and creating an expressive venue to envision the future. Residents who had given artifacts and many museum visitors wrote letters to express a wish for an unknown neighbor as well as a specific wish for the future of barrio Antioquia. Nearly two thousand letters, written on thick white paper, were put inside large white envelopes and exhibited unopened in the museum.

We came upon this metaphor as a way for residents to safely communicate with each other. A letter was disembodied and removed its author from the obligation of dealing with the physical presence of another and all that might evoke. It was important that letters were addressed to an unknown recipient, rather than someone known, since there was a chance that this letter—distributed randomly the final day of the project—might reach someone the writer loved or hated. In a place riddled with painful memories, breaking down definitions of “the enemy” was one of our major aspirations.

The acts of writing letters and registry-book entries were central elements of our pedagogical intervention, activating visualizations of the future as a unifying device. The writers of these letters moved from a mere recognition of pain toward a sense of shared social responsibility. This type of process anchored in visual, experiential, dialogic, and written tools supports the view of a community reconciliation process as a collective act of literacy.

As Kelly, one of the youth leaders of the barrio team, said, “These letters were something very special—the sentences and pretty words—because while we were in the museum, we were *terapiados* [people under the effects of therapy] by this thing of remembering. The letters were like a cure, like a cleansing of all the things that we were living through, a kind of forgiving that took place.”

Letter, July 24, 1999

Neighbor:
You know how sad it is to see all those bodies bleeding to death and dying in silence, gossip, and the screams of everybody around them. You know it is sad to bury, to speak badly about, to cry and pray for, and to see our loved one lying completely still in box more pathetic than death. You know it is even more sad and painful when we ignore the fact that we are also guilty, even if we haven’t killed whatever guy from whatever part of our dark neighborhood.

After ten days, the conclusion of the exhibition was celebrated, and the museum sent off to downtown Medellin for an additional three days. This final celebration was based on the dynamic, border-crossing itinerary of the bus-museum. Six processions traveled through the various sectors of the neighborhood delivering letters, each troupe composed of young people and adults in a choreography of bicyclists, mime, storytellers, musicians, stilt-walkers, and pedestrians. Sixty mime on bicycles—the common mode of transportation in the neighborhood—came painted with smiles. The mime delivered the letters randomly to residents in their houses, bowing reverently to draw attention to the powerful significance of the delivered missive.

Then all the celebrants came together in the main street, and the mime used the top of the bus as a stage, performing the contents of letters and visitors’ reactions to the museum. Amidst the complex idiom of local celebrations, the

4. The text is from one of the letters written by one anonymous neighbor to another; it has not been previously published.
bus was sent on its way. Transformed, the artwork then represented a community’s view of itself in the context of the broadly held prejudices of the population at large. Barrio Antioquians were proud of their bus, its national newscasts, and subsequent television documentary.

**Lacy:** You talk about the importance of reconciliation and neutrality in peace processes in Colombia. Did people who wouldn’t normally transgress local factionalisms in barrio Antioquia go to the bus in less familiar sectors?

**Riano:** They went when it was in their own sector, except when it was in the central district, where everyone can safely go. But though they didn’t necessarily physically cross territorial lines, as far as we know, it did happen symbolically, and we know they began to make the kinds of connections we were hoping they would make, a slight crack in the rigid boundaries caused by grief.

**Lacy:** How do you know?

**Riano:** Because of what they said when they left the bus, comments that are well documented. What we felt was important about art—that it lives as a visual and embodied memory—proved to be the case. The bus is embedded in people’s minds as a place of memory and a record of suffering, a lived sensory and collective memory.

**Art and Civic Pedagogy**

Although transient public art was almost unknown locally at that time, the interdisciplinary team of historians, anthropologists, educators, artists, architects, and designers who created the project wanted to find new ways of bringing people together as a form of civic pedagogy. The concept of “active neutrality,” developed by indigenous people in Colombia, was applied to the development of the project. The neutral space of art created a neutral public place, one that allowed people to sort through their past pains and concepts and imagine reconciliation. Perhaps the artwork did not exist long enough for lines to be drawn, or perhaps there were no clear sides to choose in a bus loaded with multiple and sometimes conflicting memories. There was, however, a reprieve in localized violence for the duration of the project. It is also true that to call something “art,” and through it challenge the expected social landscape, is to create a new territory. For a brief period of time, at least, the new is neutral.

**Riano:** At the time we were working there, there was little if any public art in Medellín, except for the Botero-type monuments, and museums were the repositories of high culture. With time they have become more open. It is clear that our project has inspired the development of public art in Medellín. The project also had an impact on the young people who were artistically oriented. As they were going house to house within their barrios, they were also going out of the barrios, meeting with other youth, and thinking of themselves as a part of the wider city.

**Lacy:** We saw with our work with youth in Oakland that art became a form of public pedagogy: they were learning leadership skills, going to neighborhood watch
groups to speak, and seeing their issues emerge as important sources for policy development, and adults were witnessing a more complex representation of youth and in response developing a deeper understanding of their needs.

**Riaño:** Because the violence continues, we cannot say this project achieved peace, but it did leave a mark of memory in the neighborhood, slightly altered perceptions about the barrio, and supported the emergence of strong leadership among the youth and women who participated.

**Lacy:** One of the outcomes for me personally was the experience of working with such an engaged group of professionals, in which I was only one part of a complex process rather than the generator of the whole—pedagogy, rationale, media distribution, community organization, and so on. Art is more valuable when it is part of an ongoing engagement, not just a drop-in affair. Artists themselves can be temporary "consultants," as I was, but only when the sustained activity of change is authored by preexisting agents and the art seen as part of an identified need.

**Riaño:** What was critical to our success in Medellin is that this project was one specific intervention within a long-term commitment to community development in this barrio. The project was just one element reinforcing a broader vision of civic pedagogy.

During the ten-day exhibition, more than four thousand visitors from all over the city were transformed into promoters and disseminators, sharing their reactions and descriptions with others—itself a process of resignification and transmission, acts of literacy and communication. At least half of the visitors came from other parts of the city, and for most this was the first time they visited what they saw as a dangerous neighborhood. People returned to the bus as it went to different locations.

A visit to the museum generated a variety of reactions and relations: reactivating visitors' memories, recognizing objects they were not aware could be there, finding historical pieces, recognizing those who have died, and breaking down stereotypes about the barrio. We heard from many about the profound experience they felt inside the bus and how the visit allowed them to reflect on the past and face emotional baggage while witnessing what had happened to others:

Woman: ... I left overwhelmed, moved, shaken. The objects, the voices, the photographs palpitate.

Man: I worry that our neighborhood is being built on the blood of our youth. Our tolerance of death is leading us toward an abyss. Every family in the neighborhood has been affected by death. This is like entering into the insides of oneself—I feel like crying.

Man: All of these objects talk to us, tell us about the many histories of those who had them in their hands, don't you think? It was really impressive because, how can I explain it, you don't need to know the complete histories of all the things that are together there because they all speak about life, death, of youth and old people, of the past, the present.5

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5. These visitors' comments are from the registry book in the bus museum.
The entries in the registry book make evident the diverse ways in which the museum was experienced, as well as how visitors synthesized this in their own words: "very special," "super cool," "heavy!" "very chimbu" [beautiful, something that is liked], "the true museum that we all believed in." The comments also demonstrated how "associative meaningfulness" was an important determinant of beauty: what each object might mean to its owners, why it was selected, and where it was placed. Most important, however, was the meaning that was given to the entire assemblage and the framing of a local, collective material life that took place through the agency of the installation. Whatever the significance and beauty of each object to its owner, the respectful display of the objects together created a new aesthetic presence.
The Skin of Memory demonstrates the importance of a symbolic legitimation of the claims made by those who suffer, and the ways in which historic memories have a decisive influence on relationships in the present. Individual subjectivity, a key element in the construction of meaning in both private and public life, is, over time, lost to the public sphere, but we live with the legacy of its unknown presence.

By contrast with more permanent memorials, The Skin of Memory has its ongoing life in the imagination, not in a park or plaza. The reason the project has turned out to have permanence in the local culture is that it continues in the community-reconstruction work of scholars, artists, activists, and educators. It was art designed in concert with and specifically to further complex and plural ways to support residents in making sense of the violence affecting their lives. Process is a vital aspect of both artistic intervention and civic pedagogy; the way the work is created, witnessed, and remembered is central to its aesthetic purpose of evoking common references to serve new meanings. This process set in motion a series of possibilities for whomever was touched, in any way, by the public-art intervention: addressing grief, exorcising specific sorrows, and as one leader stated, the possibility of forgiveness at the local level. This entangled universe of actions, resignified by a process of social interaction through public art, illustrates the trajectory and emotions that accompany the construction of viable peace processes at the local level.

To develop a meaningful pedagogy where the city instructs and interactions are beneficial and creative, individual expression must be reimagined with respect to its role in social life. Of course attempts by society to deal with a past of terror must be guided by processes of administering justice through criminal prosecution and the establishment of social and political responsibilities. These civic processes must respond to demands for justice and the recognition of silenced histories, demands to face atrocities and the state’s responsibility, while appropriate social reparations are developed. As we demonstrated in barrio Antioquia, locating public art and collective pedagogy processes within broader agendas of social justice, prevention of violence, and society reconstruction is vital to the longevity and effectiveness of the work.

In a country where memory is revered, The Skin of Memory demonstrated to many what its local makers believed: that recovering memory has cultural and political importance and is a process that can contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric, the strengthening of local networks, and the recovery of a critical view of historical processes. When they told their stories to each other, the conflicts and peculiarities of their history came to life for the residents, whose versions of meaning created a monument specific for their time, a commons in which empathy constructed new possibilities.

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