



Art history: modern and contemporary

Salcedo installation

JOEL:

I think Salcedo's *Shibboleth* is so compelling because it really engages with the architecture of the museum, the space of the Tate Modern art gallery.

PENNY:

Dr Joel Robinson of the Open University.

JOEL:

Unlike a lot of the other Turbine Hall commissions, which desperately seek to fill this colossal space of the former power station, Salcedo's work rejects the need to fill that space, it leaves the void in its full presence, as it were.

I first came across the *Shibboleth* work in 2007 and one of the things that was so interesting about this work is that people were engaging with it in all different ways. There were families there, there were children there, people liked to walk along the crack, people would step over it.

On closer examination the visitor will see that the chasm opened up by Salcedo in the floor of the gallery is one whose walls feature chain-link enmeshed in their surfaces. I think that the mesh perhaps has evocations of abhorers, the violence of racism, the violence of difference generally.

Many will have seen it and wonder why or how this can be perceived as a work of art. What we've been presented with is an empty space. What's equally interesting though is that just as many people will have entered this space and not been bothered by that question, and have assumed that if a work of art, if something has been presented to the public, in such a space, there's no question as to whether it qualifies as art or not, and I think this is very interesting because this is perhaps an example of the institutional theory of art in action.

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The institutional theory of art effectively states that if something has had the status of art conferred upon it, by a certain member of the art world, then therefore it's art. It's that sort of philosophical tradition in which we can perhaps locate a work such as Salcedo's *Shibboleth*. Salcedo's *Shibboleth* is clearly not presenting us with an object that can be handled, moved, bought and sold, displayed at one's home or in one's business. It very much negates the object-like character of works of art.

Instead, what we've got here is an example of installation art. Installation is often bound up with the idea of institutional critique. Institutional critique is a kind of art, or refers to a kind of art, that is critical of the institution in which art is being displayed, and that's certainly the terms in which we can understand Salcedo's *Shibboleth* here, that the meaning of this work just could not be the same were this crack to have been installed in any other space in the world.

This is not only a work that requires the space that the Tate Modern affords, it's also a work that requires the symbolic value of the Tate Modern itself, the Tate Modern being arguably one of the world's most important forums for the display of modern and contemporary art.

This is an institution at the heart of the former Empire, no less, that is claiming to represent the history of modern art, but Salcedo is perhaps saying wait a minute, is it really presenting

us with the history of modern art? Where is the non-Western content, we might ask. Where is the non-European content?

It's this perhaps that Salcedo is alluding to. It's not an overt form of segregation or racism, it's one that perhaps is implicit in certain choices that have been made over the years. I think it may be the case that Salcedo is celebrating the fact that an artist can bring this form of institutional critique into such a moneyed institution like the Tate Modern, but that's not to say that it dilutes that institutional critique. I think that that institutional critique that she wants to come across is still very much there.

Unlike the others, which have come and gone, Salcedo's work is, in a sinister way, still present, present in its absence, in a sense, because the crack in the gallery is still, in effect, visible. It's been plugged by concrete infill since but one can, if one looks hard enough, see the traces of that work of art, the leftovers, as it were, the scar which serves to, in a way, remember Salcedo's project and memorialise it.

whereas in the past memorials and permanence seemed to rely on heavy objects that were massively present to the beholder, *Shibboleth* is a work that is there by virtue of the trace that it leaves behind.