

# Excursions

Volume 12, Issue 1 (2022) | Home



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# Art, Memory, and the Absent Ones: What Hannah Arendt, Doris Salcedo, and *The OA* Tell Us About Homelessness

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## **Abstract**

This paper maps Hannah Arendt's (1958) phenomenological categories of the private, public, and the social onto the experience of homelessness under neoliberalism. Amidst what is better expressed as contemporary practices of "dehousing" (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 3), we require contestations of the political malaise that perpetuates this violence; we are in need of *new things*. I argue that a revitalizing of the political can be found within forms of artistic practice. The work of Doris Salcedo engages the recovery of absent citizens, memory, and publicness, while strategically blurring Arendtian public/private distinctions. Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's (2016) TV show, *The OA*, offers a way to imagine a world outside the 'false public' and its inversion, the 'false private' realm of contemporary homelessness. In borrowing from theorists like Wendy Brown (2006, 2011, 2015), Bonnie Honig (1992, 2013, 2017), and others, I argue that Salcedo and *The OA* illustrate the role of aesthetic practice in restoring the private realm, which in turn can open up venues of encounter. Such a work of recovery is necessary in imagining — and pursuing — an alternative future, one in which citizens have a shelter from which to emerge, be heard and seen in public.

**Keywords:** Publicness, Art, Homelessness

This paper maps Hannah Arendt's (1958) phenomenological categories of the private, the public, and the social onto the experience of contemporary homelessness. Homelessness is characterized by a constant presence that is somehow simultaneously invisible. People in such a position are a *topic* of civic debate, but they cannot meaningfully *appear* in public forums. Today, the loss of publicness has intensified with the rise of neoliberalism (Boggs, 2000; Brown, 2006; Fisher, 2009; Honig, 2017). One of neoliberalism's salient features is the loss of a private realm — nowhere is this more apparent than in the process of 'dehousing' (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 3). I ask, what does it mean to suffer homelessness under neoliberalism? In developing this theoretical terrain, I engage in an analysis of the artistic practice of Columbian artist, Doris Salcedo (Enriquez et al., 2017) along with Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's popular TV show, *The OA* (2016). The private realm is that which allows us to maintain our interiority — a space for recuperation, meditation, and consideration (Arendt, 1958). As Arendt would have it, it is a space that allows us "to think what we are doing" (Arendt, 1958, p. 5) — a precursor to our action in concert with others. In what ways does the loss of a private realm produce a political experience whose expression is encountered as 'inchoate noise' (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010, p. 7)? How does this loss foreclose practices of contestation? And thus, my analysis reveals forms of contestation that remain available to us. I suggest ways that art and storytelling can help us envision a restoration of the private, even as — or perhaps because — they keep open the possibility of authentic *encounter* (Berardi, 2018; Evans, 2018; Rancière & Corcoran, 2010) in public. The role of artistic practice is such that, while art offers us the capacity to bear witness to unheard stories, the materiality — or artifice — of such practice can provide a literal footing from which to foster relational connection, political power, and think anew a system that denies shelter to citizens. Thus, the work is always twofold: the art provides a modality for (unheard) speech, while the artifice justifies and facilitates future action — this can be thought of as a kind of resolution to what

I term the ‘appearance paradox’ that we are subjected to under neoliberalism. In order for an acting-speaking ‘praxis’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 97) to occur, we require spaces in which to appear, but in order to cultivate such spaces, we need the freedom to act and speak. In other words, art *translates* experience and artifice provides the *venue* for contingent participation with others. As new stories are told, so new stories can emerge.

### The Public and The Private Realm

I begin by borrowing the title of Arendt’s second chapter of *The Human Condition*. For it is in this chapter that she articulates the phenomenological categories of the private, public, and social realm; she explores the purpose of each realm while pointing to the slippage in their distinctive qualities amidst the rise of the modern nation-state. Arendt draws on Greek and Roman conceptualizations of democratic politics to map the private and the public. The private is the realm of the household; it is where basic economic needs are met through practices oriented to hidden, intimate familial relations. The public realm, on the other hand, is where citizens can enter the “bright light of the constant presence of others” (Arendt, 1958, p. 51) and distinguish themselves through action and speech. The two realms require one another. This necessary symbiosis offers the most obvious point of departure for discussions of what is commonly referred to as homelessness, but which I prefer to call ‘dehousing’ (Hulchanski et al., 2009, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> For, in order to enter the public a citizen requires a “location in it...properly [their] own” (Arendt, 1958, p. 30) from which to emerge, then a loss of private space would

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars prefer the use of ‘houseless,’ which suggests that the loss of the physical provision does not necessarily mean a loss of homeplaces. I opt for ‘dehoused/dehousing,’ as these illustrate the ways that nefarious political machinations have resulted in this loss—rather than the depoliticized labels of homeless/houseless, I think it’s important to gesture toward particular *processes* that are occurring when we speak of unhoused citizens. That said, at times I adopt the language of ‘homelessness’ in response to the scholarship I take up in this piece.

mean a loss of the capacity to participate in democratic politics. As Joseph Betz has noted,

[i]f [home] is not attained, life is insecure, uncomfortable, perilous, since we lack the benefits of work and the place maintained by the most common human labor. We do not go forth to politics. Politics lacks participants (1999, p. 230).

Finally, the rise of the social realm, for Arendt, is the modern age's absorption of the family unit into homogeneous social groupings held in a kind of equality (that is actually conformism) through the despotism of "unanimous opinion" (Arendt, 1958, p. 40). Here there is none of the spontaneity and contingency that characterizes the public realm; rather, particular kinds of behaviour are imposed on/by society in ways that constrict alternative ways of being and "normalize' its members" (Arendt, 1958, p. 40). Those who do not adhere to the encoded expectations are pathologized and alienated (see pp. 40-41).

There have been other accounts that attempt to demonstrate how Arendt's distinctions can help us understand modern homelessness (Betz, 1999; Feldman, 2000, 2006; S. Hill, 2015; Kennelly, 2018). The homelessness we see today is a distinctly neoliberal problem, brought about by economic restructuring that led to the gutting of the welfare state and the loss of any meaningful commitments to public housing (Clarke, 2020; Cooper et al., 2013; Dunlop, 2006; Gaetz, 2010; Hulchanski et al., 2009; Wellesley Institute, 2010). These aspects go overlooked in Betz's (1999) writing; he uses 'homeless' as though Arendt would have had any reference point for the kind of post-1980s homelessness experienced today. Betz would be better off using Arendt's thinking on refugees, as Leonard Feldman does (see Feldman, 2000, p. 2; 2006, p. 21), as a model for the precarity and voiceless qualities of this experience. Indeed, Feldman (2006) draws on Arendt's famous assertion concerning the "right to have rights" (Arendt, 1966, p. 296), rather than adopting the view of the homeless subject as the dehumanized object of humanitarianism. Leonard Feldman (2000, 2006) offers a well-developed

analysis of homelessness. That said, while Feldman acknowledges the implications of neoliberal economic policy and its “punitive underside” (2006, p. 48), our accounts differ in important ways. Using contemporary examples, Feldman (2000, 2006) seeks to contest the way neoliberal logic is played out in enactments of policing and urban policy, uses of public space, and forms of housing activism. I appreciate that Feldman focuses on the significance of placemaking practices and the “pluralization” of modern conceptualizations of home (2006, p. 113) — thus challenging current discursive categories of ‘home’ by empowering dwellers of encampments<sup>2</sup> or residential hotels. Rather than legitimize ‘alternative’ forms of living under conditions of dehousing, I seek the recognition of the speech and action of dehousing citizens — the *demos*<sup>3</sup> — insofar as they might then be able to access *adequate* housing and re-enter (and revivify) a more democratic arrangement for publicness. Rather than an orientation toward placemaking practices, I illustrate the role of art and artifice in confronting what has become ‘common sense’ neoliberal thought — in doing so, I explore what such provocations offer for contestations of contemporary dehousing.

### The Art and Artifice of Doris Salcedo

Columbian artist Doris Salcedo is known for placing personal, household artifacts in public space in an effort to illustrate the effects of violence and war on particular people. Her work seeks to carefully manipulate and alter material objects in ways that speak to processes of grief and remembrance

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<sup>2</sup> Personally, I find Feldman’s (2006) characterizations of encampments somewhat naïve and utopian (see pp. 105-106). I understand that he ultimately appreciates the poor conditions of such forms of ‘housing’ (see p. 118), and is concerned with how the alternative, carceral approaches to homelessness silence and pathologize homeless citizens, but I also cannot help but think about how, with the COVID pandemic, we have witnessed the logical endpoint of encampment dwelling in neoliberal times: the dramatic and violent dispossession, alienation, and negation of the encampment-dweller as citizen or person (Kanji & Withers, 2021; Wilson, 2021). Thus, the possibilities for such forms of organizing political action seem particularly bleak at the moment.

<sup>3</sup> “To be of the *demos* is to be outside of the count, to have no speech to be heard” (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010, p. 32).

(Enriquez et al., 2017). In an Arendtian sense, Salcedo can be understood to play the role of the artist (Arendt uses Homer as her example) who ensures that people “will not remain without witness” (Arendt, 1958, p. 197). And yet, I argue that Salcedo also strives to cultivate the conditions of publicness in the manner of the *polis* — “a kind of organized remembrance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 198) — by using artifice to constitute a “space of appearance between acting and speaking [people]” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). In other words, while Salcedo’s *art* bears witness to trauma and to people who have been disappeared by various forms of violence, her *artifice* also enables democratic spaces for relational contact and political engagement. These spaces charge citizens with a two-fold task of memory: that they will first participate in the remembrance of others and second, that they too will engage in word and deed in such ways that ensure a kind of immortality — an *ongoing* remembrance. In the same way, Arendt describes how the Greek *polis* ensured that “the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made ‘products,’ the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would be imperishable” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 197–198). Memory and the public realm are uniquely linked; memorialization certainly has the capacity to revivify a public realm by its inherent quality of “storytelling” — a “deprivatized and deindividualized [form]...fit...for public appearance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 50).<sup>4</sup> Salcedo’s work enables the memorialization of traumatized and absent citizens and works to reassert a public space suitable for (re)appearance, together.

Within neoliberal logic, any political desire/agency/participation is subsumed under social relations designed entirely to maximize the individual’s profitability (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). Under neoliberalism,

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<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the capacities of the artist-as-storyteller, it is significant that Seyla Benhabib’s (2011) analysis of Arendt’s methodology expresses the ways she sees “the theorist as story teller” (p. 76). Benhabib (2011) describes Arendt’s process as “a remembering, in the sense of a creative act of ‘remembering,’ that is...of a rethinking that sets free the lost potentials of the past” (p. 76).

we observe the rise of the individual as “market [actor]” (Brown, 2015, p. 36). Often thought of as (mere) free market capitalism, neoliberalism certainly has led to the loss of public things (Boggs, 2000; Honig, 2017) and a gutted welfare state (Clarke, 2020; Dunlop, 2006; Hulchanski et al., 2009; Wellesley Institute, 2010), but it also has entrenched a particular *rationality*. Demanding the end of popular sovereignty (Brown, 2015), neoliberal thinking stifles “*homo politicus*” (Brown, 2015, p. 35), rendering humans (and their conduct) as wholly “*homo oeconomicus*” (Brown, 2015, p. 33). Wendy Brown (2015) thus traces the way in which democratic concerns of equality, liberty, and freedom — for the production and maintenance of popular sovereignty — are hollowed out through a system that rewards winners and stigmatizes losers,<sup>5</sup> reduces liberty to consumer choice, and proposes a so-called freedom that is narrowly constrained by market instrumentalism. Elsewhere, Brown (2011) reveals how such instrumentalist thinking has led to the diminishing of forms of higher education aimed at cultivating critical, democratic citizens. Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) suggest that within the sociality of post-Fordism the neoliberal subject assumes the role of “networker”<sup>6</sup> — with increasingly complex and instrumentalized forms of relationships, human capital (Brown, 2015) develops personalized forms of “insurance” against the precarity of contemporary life (Couldry et al., 2010). And so, under neoliberal market rationality, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives (Fisher, 2009). Art and artifice, though ever at risk of being co-opted by capitalist consumerism (Couldry et al., 2010), still offer us a way to imagine the new. As Arendt suggests:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds

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<sup>5</sup> As Chantal Mouffe (2011) has pointed out, the false notion that “we are all middle class” serves to obscure two aspects of sociopolitical relations: those on one side who are excluded (in neoliberal terms, by their own choice) and those on the other who leverage immense power and thus preserve systems of unequal power relations, undermining the very possibility of democratic contestations (see p. 62).

<sup>6</sup> A kind of neoliberal addendum to Arendt’s (1958) “jobholder” (p. 46; 199).



are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (1958, p. 200).

In this way, Arendt's sense of the public offers a reparative potential for those subjected to alienation, exclusion, and violence. As I will argue, Salcedo's work extends this repair-work insofar as 'absent' citizens and private grief are provided with art and artifice to facilitate meaningful encounters. Rather than sustain the 'false private' realm that constitutes systemic dehousing, art has the potential to exchange the profitable for the political.

In 2007, Doris Salcedo put a crack in the floor of Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, in London. Stretching 167 metres, the crack reconstituted the space of the art gallery by literally rupturing its foundation. Titled *Shibboleth* (2007), the installation has been interpreted as a critique of international as well as local borders (Stephenson, 2012), while Salcedo herself has discussed the way it points to the violence of racism and the myth of a homogeneous, democratic global north (Tate, 2008). I suggest that this installation can also be read as a direct contestation of neoliberal hegemony by virtue of how it imagines something new. Salcedo spoke of her intention to "bring...a question mark" into the supposed "consensus" (Tate, 2008) to reorient the public toward unrecognized life. Beyond this, what does a rift in the very floor of such an institution mean? What strikes me are the photographs that show the entirety of the space, such that the very authority of the gallery seems to be itself crumbling apart (Enriquez et al., 2017, p. 112). Salcedo deemed this piece to be a political failure; as Mary Schneider Enriquez (2017) summarizes, "the artifice was greater than the art" (p. 114). Indeed, she noted that, in what was perhaps an indication of contemporary neoliberal conditioning, many spectators missed the point (Lyall, 2007; *The Guardian*, 2007). In her disappointment with its reception, what Salcedo may have not considered is what Arendt calls the "thing-character" of the world (1958, p. 9); the world is conditioned and preserved for others through artifice, which "bestow[s] a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life" (p. 8).

The Arendtian notion of work is that which cultivates and preserves material permanence. Work has the capacity to create things that “stabiliz[e]” (p. 137) relations between people. Just as Arendt points to the material walls of the polis (p. 194), so I illustrate the role of Salcedo’s artifice in initiating new forms of public exchange. *Shibboleth* (2007) disrupted the solidity — the ‘thing-character’ — of neoliberalism by literally fracturing it. If the contemporary art gallery ‘houses’ the successful artist-as-market-actor, then this installation sought to shake the very ‘housing’ of such an instrumentalized, human capital. For Arendt, what matters is cultivating the “condition of natality” (1958, p. 9). By birthing new artifacts into the world through work, Salcedo creates a ‘thing’ that lives on as story, even after it is covered up.<sup>7</sup> Even when the ‘thing’ itself is ‘dead,’ so can it be ‘resurrected’ whenever it “comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it” (Arendt, 1958, p. 169). Art, artifice, and the public therefore share something of the same, contingent nature — capable of being revived, capable of interrupting.

As artist-scholar dian marino [*sic*] theorized, there are always “cracks in consent” (1998, p. 15) wherein counter-hegemonic movements can take root (Cavanagh, 2014; marino et al., 1998). *Shibboleth* (2007) can thus gesture toward the precarity of the architecture of power, perhaps embodied by the ruptured infrastructure of the Tate, but it is also suggestive of what happens when cracks emerge: like dandelions in pavement, new forms of political life can spring up. While a fissure can separate bodies, I believe there are myriad ways of ‘reading’ such an artifact — who/what falls in such a crack? Who lives in the crack? How might they be recovered? What does it mean to look into the void? Dehousing is a powerful example of the tyranny of the social realm. Dawn Rothe and Victoria Collins posit that we inhabit a system that “creates, facilitates, and reproduces socially disposed populations: the socially dead”

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<sup>7</sup> And, as Salcedo pointed out, the crack is never actually removed—it is always there, underneath, gesturing to those ‘outside;’ to the cracks in the established order; to those who have been made visible through the work of memory (Tate, 2008).

(2016, p. 2). Such violence occurs with the “consent” of the “general population” (p. 6). Such forms of passive social consent can be as violent as any form of tyranny (Arendt, 1958; 1966). In neoliberal times, such consent is “naturalized” and relies on a “pervasive *atmosphere*...[that acts] as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2009, p. 16). Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 2011; Mouffe & Martin, 2013), following the work of Antonio Gramsci, emphasizes the need to recognize hegemony — the recognition that all dominant orders “could always be otherwise” (Mouffe, 2011, p. 18) — and further, that “[t]hey are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed” (p. 33). One of the ways Salcedo has described her own work has been the impossible tension of “looking for an absence” (Salcedo et al., 2016).<sup>8</sup> This tension includes, I suggest, the contingent nature of recovering people, things, and ideas in the cracks. Plurality, for Arendt, is “the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (1958, p. 198), which thus ensures “reality” (p. 50; 199). Could it be that Doris Salcedo is attempting to widen even this sense of appearance, by making possible the remembrance of the nameless and the disappeared?

### The Palace of Justice and Spaces of Appearance

On November 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, 1985, a group of guerillas laid siege to the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, leading to an armed conflict with the military and the deaths of over 100 Columbians, including almost all the Supreme Court justices.<sup>9</sup> To commemorate the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event, at the precise moment that the first person was killed, a single chair was lowered from the roof along the

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<sup>8</sup> One of Salcedo’s largest participatory pieces involved writing the names of victims of the ongoing conflict in Columbia in ashes across Plaza Bolívar in Bogotá, Columbia. The piece was titled, “Sumando Ausencias,” which translates (roughly) to “adding up the absent ones” (Salcedo et al., 2016).

<sup>9</sup> The leftist guerrillas, part of M-19, were attempting to have the court justices try President Belisario Betancur for his earlier violation of a peace agreement. Rather than achieve the intended peace agreement, Betancur deployed the army and a bloody battle ensued (Riding, 1993).

public-facing walls of the building. Over the next 27 hours, mirroring the timing of the siege, Salcedo and her team of artists lowered a chair for every person killed until passers-by began to notice dozens of chairs hanging at various angles along the wall (Enriquez et al., 2017). This subversive, performative piece became “a site of pilgrimage in the center of Bogotá, with people stopping to remember the tragedy” (Enriquez et al., 2017, p. 91). After seemingly being effaced from public memory, Salcedo relates how citizens began to express their own account of the event — to paraphrase, in Arendtian terms, she recognized that the event was latent in people’s memory and needed somehow to be awakened in order to appear (Salcedo et al., 2016). In discussing her concept of power, Arendt details the contingent nature of the “space of appearance” (1958, p. 199). Similarly, for Salcedo, the piece (simply called “Noviembre 6 y 7”) is temporary, only lasting as long as the event it recalls. In the same way, the power that “springs up” in the gathering together of people outside the Palace of Justice “vanishes the moment they disperse” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). In the face of the tyranny of neoliberalism, which relies on isolation, Salcedo’s works urge citizens towards moments of togetherness. While it is naively optimistic to assume all art can facilitate what Arendt conceptualized as “plurality” (p. 175), Salcedo’s art fosters such conditions. The public realm is restored through an invitation toward *Amor Mundi* (Hill, 2017) — love for the world — which calls people into relations of togetherness that are reparative. Such artistic practice blurs the characteristics of the private and the public, just as Salcedo’s use of chairs — a signifier of artifice as the “sheer functionalism of things” (Arendt, 1958, p. 173) — is recast by the artist so as to allow the survival of memory and story — that “the human artifice...be a place fit for action and speech” (Arendt, 1958, p. 173).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion on Salcedo’s use of chairs (and tables) as signifiers of the interior, private, and domestic (yet jarringly made public and political), see Mary Schneider Enriquez’s (2017) commentary (Enriquez et al., 2017, pp. 5–7, 86). Interestingly, Hannah Arendt (1958) repeatedly invokes tables and chairs in her discussions of artifice and work (pp. 137, 153, 167).

What happens when there is a *story* lodged within each chair? What do we make of such “blurring” of Arendtian categories—art/artifice and private/public? Jacques Rancière’s critique of Arendt, if distilled to one line, is that “politics is a process, not a sphere” (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010, p. 70). For Rancière, Arendt’s strict categories preclude the contingent appearance of those who might partake in the counter-hegemonic process he calls “a dissensus: the putting of two worlds in one and the same world” (2010, p. 69). In articulating the political potential that can emerge from the social, the domestic, and the private, Rancière is wary of anything that “restricts the sphere of citizenship” (2010, p. 57; see also pp. 3, 38). In bringing the absent ones — the disappeared — into public, Salcedo identifies the political qualities affirmed by Rancière, which “consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech” (2010, p. 38). Rather than simply reject Arendt, Bonnie Honig (1992) seeks to recover Arendt’s performative, agonistic politics by contesting and amending her strict distinctions. For instance, rather than see a ‘labourer’ as a particular class of person, Honig conceives of labour (and work and action) as a “sensibility” (1992, p. 222), a way of thinking about the world as part of every person’s unique “multiplicity” (p. 222). Indeed, a public realm made up of homogenous only-actors would defy the Arendtian impulse toward heterogeneity and plurality (see p. 227). Just as she complicates the labour/work/action distinctions, Honig also reveals the way “action...happens to us” (p. 223) — just as we cannot predict the effects of our actions (Arendt, 1958), so we cannot predict *where* its effects will be felt (Honig, 1992). Thus, Honig asks, “[w]hat if we treated Arendt’s notion of the public realm not as a specific *topos*, like the *agon*, but as a metaphor for a variety of (agonistic) spaces...that might occasion action?” (p. 224).

Salcedo’s use of domestic furnishings and her juxtapositions of public and private are suggestive of a complex, blurred private/public that affirms — among other things — the possibility of an acting, visible, dehousing person.

While Arendt observed the mass statelessness/homelessness of a war torn world, she noted that “[w]hat is unprecedented is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one” (1966, p. 293). While Arendt is pointing here to a “deprivation of a place in the world” (p. 296), vis-à-vis the loss of a political community (or, a public ‘home’), I think it is worth also considering the implications for Rancière’s ‘process’ of politics wrought by the loss of actual homeplaces. For Rancière, as Honig puts it, “the transformation of the private into a public affair...is...the great task of political life” (2017, p. 105). By challenging and extending Arendt’s phenomenology, Salcedo and these theorists offer ways to consider the revivification of publicness amidst “ever-increasing numbers [of people outside the common world that] threaten our political life, our human artifice...” (Arendt, 1966, p. 302). Rather than concede to the violent exclusion of invisibilized persons, Salcedo mobilizes the work of memory in ways that ontologically expand previous notions of plurality. In the re-remembering of our sociopolitical body, new forms of togetherness are made possible by the recognition of those who were once disappeared from view. Her artworks find ways of making public the private silences, the unnamed dead, and those who have — previously hidden from view — grieved them. Perhaps forms of pedagogical, affective contestations are in fact possible from the very position of those abjected from public regard.

Salcedo’s work both constitutes a space of appearance in its contingency, its capacity for remembrance, and through the durability of artifice. It can be both brief and permanent, public and private. She promotes recovery of the ‘absent ones’ in works that recuperate private, individualized trauma in ways that “undo” us (Butler, 2003) and force the public into relations of “togetherness” (Arendt, 1958, p. 182). What I am arguing here contradicts Arendt’s perspective on the “predictability” of art (1958, p. 182), but rather suggests that art can, surprisingly, “interpellate” (Honig, 2013, pp. 68, 74) us into relations of equality. It has, as Arendt would say, a “stabilizing”

capacity to function “in-between” people (1958, p. 182), in order to get at “*who* somebody is” without being “[led] astray into saying *what* he is” (p. 181).

### *The OA* and the Pain of the False Private Realm

*The OA* is a ‘weird’ television show, in Mark Fisher’s (2017) sense of the word, which is to say that it elicits a sense of “*wrongness*” (p. 15) — why is this thing here, now, in this way? As audience members, the show constantly destabilizes us, not just in its unpredictability, but in actually not believing what is unfolding before our eyes. This is not just some trick of special effects (though a giant, telepathic octopus does appear in the second season); the narrative is guided by a story which five central characters — and the audience — are simultaneously being told by a woman who refers to herself as The OA.<sup>11</sup> Due to the utterly strange and fantastic nature of her story, we never can tell if what we are hearing/seeing is trustworthy. Is it real? As a previously houseless and pathologized woman, are her memories reliable? As Arendt recognizes, “...stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer” (1958, p. 184). The OA herself is merely “the agent who set the whole process into motion” (Arendt, 1958, p. 185). Consequently, she is not only the agent of the story but is implicated and drawn into the story even as she is telling it.

The site of this storytelling occurs in an unfinished house, which can be read as a framed, but unfinished private realm, perhaps with the capacity to spill out into public through the cracks between beams. It is a transgressive gathering of six individuals — whose capacity to act and speak has been curtailed in the neoliberal world they inhabit — seeking a space of democratic plurality,<sup>12</sup> while yearning simultaneously for interiority and shelter from the

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<sup>11</sup> Her parents know her as ‘Prairie’ and, before her 7 years of unexplained absence, she has had other names as well. We come to learn that OA stands for ‘original angel.’

<sup>12</sup> These characters can relate to the pathologization that *The OA* experiences. As the OA says in Episode One, “it’s not really a measure of mental health to be well-adjusted in a society that’s very sick” (Batmanglij, 2016a, 36:35).

gaze of parents, employers, or other structures of power. Without a space to appear together, these characters stigmatize and isolate one another amidst various forms of pathologization and discrimination. As ‘French’ says to Buck, “It’s different for someone like Steve — he’s fucking his own life up. And I’m just trying not to fall into the *default* of getting my life fucked...I don’t need help. I do everything on my own” (Batmanglij, 2016b, 34:40).

The OA’s mission is to relate to the five listeners her story and teach them a series of movements, which allow for interdimensional travel. Using the movements, the group can assist The OA in the recovery of several captives, with whom she was, until recently, a fellow prisoner. Each individual, along with learning the physical movements — a kind of collective dance — participates in this forum as a kind of political ‘movement’ to contest their own abjection from the visible registers of the contemporary neoliberal regime. Having been invisibilized on the basis of normative arrangements of gender, class, or other forms of social hegemony, they are ‘housed’ in this new arrangement together, in tenuous relations of trust. This is both “a privately owned place to hide in” (Arendt, 1958, p. 71) and a kind of *polis* — an “organization of...people...[arising] out of acting and speaking together” (Arendt, 1958, p. 198). They are oriented toward “[establishing] relations and [creating] new realities” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). Insofar as *The OA* blurs public and private, aesthetics and politics,<sup>13</sup> and also considering it presents the possibility of interdimensional travel, it is perhaps best described as a bridging of two worlds: a “dissensus” (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010).

In Season One, the action alternates between the storytelling within the unfinished house to the site of The OA’s former prison, a strange basement of an experimental scientist. The scientist, named Hap, has captured five prisoners and is studying their “near death experiences” (Marling & Batmanglij, 2016) in a haphazard attempt to open up interdimensional

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<sup>13</sup> “In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something else than art” (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010, p. 118).



gateways and thus achieve a kind of immortality. The prison constructed in the basement is a kind of mirror image of the unfinished house. If the house represents a movement toward political voice and coherence for the invisibilized (and house-less) other, then the basement is the dark shelter, separate from the light of the public realm. Rather than anticipating the rise into light from this darkness, Hap's basement suggests darkness in perpetuity. It is thus the inversion of Betz's (1999) "false public realm" — it is a false *private* realm. A further Arendtian reading is possible here: the weird infrastructure of Hap's basement is such that each prisoner — though physically confined by walls from floor to ceiling — faces walls made of *glass*. As a result, the captives are exposed yet silenced, seen yet — in the case of the OA, literally — blind, and in proximity, but without the means of togetherness. Here we see the strangeness inherent in the warehousing of human beings — as is the case with the contradictory nature of 'emergency' shelter systems and so-called 'chronic' homelessness — at play in a sci-fi context. In such false private realms, individuals are unceasingly in proximity yet isolated. In spite of Arendt's observation that "[o]nly where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them" (1958, p. 201), under conditions of neoliberal warehousing, a false private has made impotent the gathering of citizens. It is perhaps best described by Arendt's notion of *pain* as "a borderline experience between life as 'being among men'...and death...removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all" (1958, p. 51). In making visible (and central) the political experience of pain, *The OA* works to expose the "possible world" (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010, p. 39) wherein hegemonic political arrangements can be addressed by a dehousing, pathologized subject.

I return here to my earlier notion of the 'appearance paradox.' When citizens are held in a false private realm, there can be no acting and speaking to bring about meaningful spaces of appearance. It is no coincidence that glass cages constitute both Hap's basement prison and the walls of Toronto's new

“Better Living Centre” (Mastroianni, 2020), to use a particularly Orwellian example of contemporary infrastructure for the unhoused. In the glass cage one is always-seen yet ever-invisible. To borrow from a still-relevant, albeit older, American study, Jean Williams (2005) examines the ways in which political protests led by shelter-dwelling activists were toppled by tactics used to inspire fear, further stigma, and curtail dialogical engagement in California City, USA. In these instances, shelter inhabitants witness the consequences of a false private realm. Despite aligned political interests and close physical proximity, individuals are a) easily removed from the shelter system, b) silenced by threats of removal, and c) politically distanced from one another as a result of stigmatizing labels placed on them by shelter staff and housing workers (Williams, 2005). What *The OA* so wonderfully (and necessarily) conceives of is the mirror image of the false private realm, wherein the subjects listen to one another’s stories, recognize their power to move together in generative ways, and maintain their capacity to withdraw and cultivate their interiority.

Following *The OA*’s premature cancelation by Netflix, Brit Marling wrote thoughtful social media posts about our capacities to author or participate in new stories, encouraging fans of the show in their various political “movements...performed in public squares, bedrooms, nightclubs and backyards all over the world” (Patten, 2019). Amidst the pain of dehousing, I find myself circling back to the question: what role might art play in (re)establishing a world of things to “constellate” (Honig, 2017, p. 83) around? I am reminded of a conversation between Chantal Mouffe and Krzysztof Wodiczko where they bemoan the possibility that “not even in art is there space left for subversive resistance” (Mouffe & Wodiczko, 2012). Of course, Marling and Salcedo, ostensibly, would disagree. Indeed, their art invites the public to author stories of their own, to imagine entire worlds that could be otherwise (Patten, 2019) and to, in doing so, “create new realities” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200).

## Conclusion

At the outset of Season One of *The OA*, a pivotal scene occurs when The OA (or ‘Prairie’ as she is known to them) is interviewed by the police after reappearing after her 7-year absence. Upon being asked about what is termed her *disappearance*, she replies, “I didn’t disappear. I was present for all of it” (Batmanglij, 2016a, 7:55). What we see in the work of Doris Salcedo is the possibility that the ‘absent ones’ were not actually — or never fully — disappeared, but that their (re)appearance is always fraught; always contingent; always up against a logic that enables and systematizes their invisibility. The ability of art and artifice to include — to make *present* — can orient us toward encounters that contradict neoliberal regimes of visibility. The invisible can appear; the blind can see anew. In the case of contemporary dehousing, what spaces are made available for the ‘reappearance’ of the unhoused? There is a crucial difference between ‘false private realm’ warehousing — physical proximity in emergency-shelter contexts — and authentic togetherness, in Arendtian terms.<sup>14</sup> In similar ways, Salcedo and Marling urge us to ask: how might art open up new ways of being in the world together? In what ways do artists make durable a world in which new things can be introduced? How might art open spaces for the ‘absent ones’ to appear in public—to recoup story and memory in/for the political?

I must acknowledge the limitations of my approach. No analysis of the experience of dehousing is sufficient without the voices of those embedded in these cycles of violent displacement. That said, rather than attempt to reveal the lived experience of such an event, my paper articulates the political nature of such an experience — or, more accurately, the way in which the political itself is at stake. I turn to cultural artifacts because they can help us contest

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<sup>14</sup> There are a range of examples of what this can look like amidst the politics of dehousing. In my context, the Toronto Homeless Memorial (Toronto Homeless Memorial Network, 2018) is a site where activists, artists, and community members gather to make the nameless (re)appear. Such commemorative efforts seek to recognize John/Jane/J Doe’s lives as “publicly grievable” (Butler, 2003, p. 23).

mass modern homelessness by animating the realm(s) in which such contestations can take place. In order for citizens to appear together, we first need to establish who is a citizen, what is required for publicness, and what is at stake in/for the (dis)appearance of the dehousing. We require art and artifice to both bear witness to violence and provide footings from which we may appear together. Creative, common objects can interpellate us in ways that embrace plurality and the contingent nature of political contestations — there is an alternative to dehousing, and art may help us find the way.

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