



Doris Salcedo

# DORIS SALCEDO

Edited by Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn

With contributions by Elizabeth Adan, Katherine Brinson,  
Helen Molesworth, and Doris Salcedo

A mountain of chairs piled between buildings. Shoes sewn behind animal membranes into a wall. A massive crack running through the floor of Tate Modern. Powerful works like these by sculptor Doris Salcedo evoke the significance of bearing witness and processes of collective healing. Salcedo, who lives and works in Bogotá, roots her art in Colombia's social and political landscape—including its long history of civil wars—with an elegance and poetic sensibility that balances the gravitas of her subjects. Her work is undergirded by intense fieldwork, including interviews with people who have suffered loss and endured trauma from political violence. In recent years, Salcedo has become increasingly interested in the universality of these experiences and has expanded her research to Turkey, Italy, Great Britain, and the United States.

Published to accompany Salcedo's first retrospective exhibition and the American debut of her major work *Plegaria muda*, *Doris Salcedo* is the most comprehensive survey of her sculptures and installations to date. In addition to featuring new contributions by respected scholars and curators, the book includes over one hundred color illustrations highlighting many pieces from Salcedo's twenty-five-year career. Offering fresh perspectives on a vital body of work, *Doris Salcedo* is a testament to the power of one of today's most important international artists.

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## Seeing Things

*Elizabeth Adan*

Over the course of its relatively short existence, contemporary art history has grown exponentially as a field. At the same time, it has become an object of study, with considerable attention focused on the incongruities that can seem to permeate, and potentially even destabilize, the field.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most obvious is the apparent contradiction between present and past implied in the very phrase “contemporary art history,” along with related concerns that art and cultural production of the current moment are generated at an ever more rapid pace, while the work of researching and writing about these objects of study occurs more slowly.<sup>2</sup> In addition, some authors have questioned the feasibility of what for many remains a central objective, to resist and intervene in the seemingly all-encompassing market forces associated with the global proliferation of capitalism and its attendant visual forms, in what Guy Debord has termed “the society of the spectacle.”<sup>3</sup> At least one further set of potentially conflicting concerns has also shaped art and cultural production since the postwar era: tensions around the viability of representation, especially in the face of theories of unrepresentability in art and culture that have developed with the spread of political violence and terror in the world.

Together, these manifold issues could suggest that the field of contemporary art history is riddled with conflicts and inconsistencies. More important, though, as several authors have noted, such debates point to determined efforts to comprehend, or at least indicate, the full complexity of visual practices in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Indeed, for a number of authors, these issues, with their apparent incongruities and potential contradictions, in fact constitute the field of contemporary art history.<sup>4</sup>

There is also another matter to consider, one that may initially appear to be relatively minor but

that is likely to become increasingly at issue in contemporary art history and that is central to the work of Doris Salcedo. In examining practices such as Salcedo’s, which emerged at the moment, in the late 1980s and 1990s, often aligned with a historical shift to contemporaneity,<sup>5</sup> and which have since continued to play a role in contemporary art, how does one actually locate the contemporaneity of such practices? To put it another way, how does one contend with an artist whose work has been contemporary for, say, twenty-plus years?

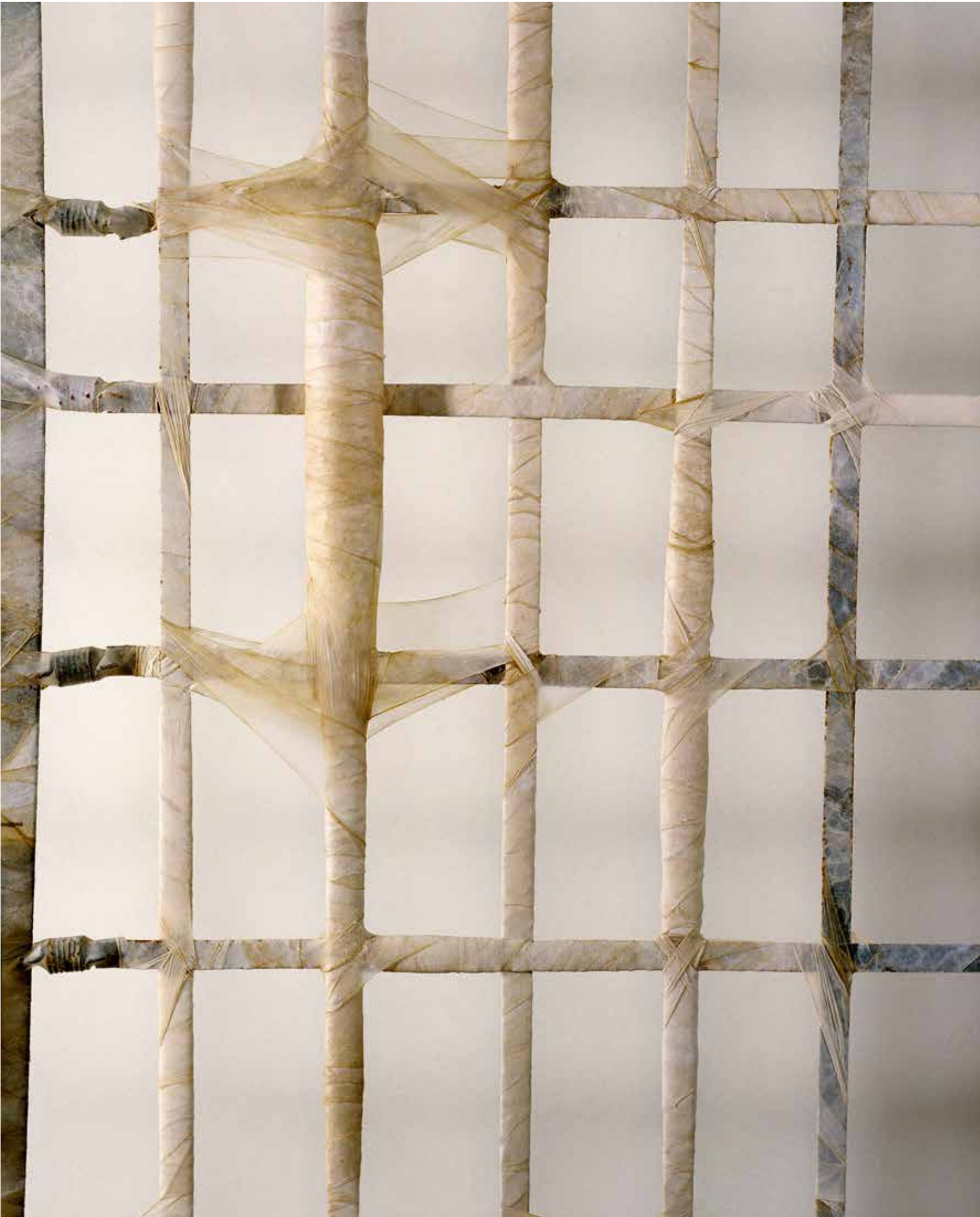
In Salcedo’s case, the subjects that she addresses, as well as the materials and techniques that she uses, continue from her early projects in the late 1980s and 1990s into the present day. But, again, how does one account for the span of contemporaneity in Salcedo’s work? Does one consign the earlier work to the past and historicize it, reserving the word “contemporary” for the chronologically more recent work? Does one assert that the contemporaneity of certain developments extends well beyond the moment of their emergence? Or, does one trace the nascent history of certain concerns that emerged during the period termed “contemporary” with an eye to the perhaps subtle, but no less consequential, shifts one might find within such concerns since their initial development?

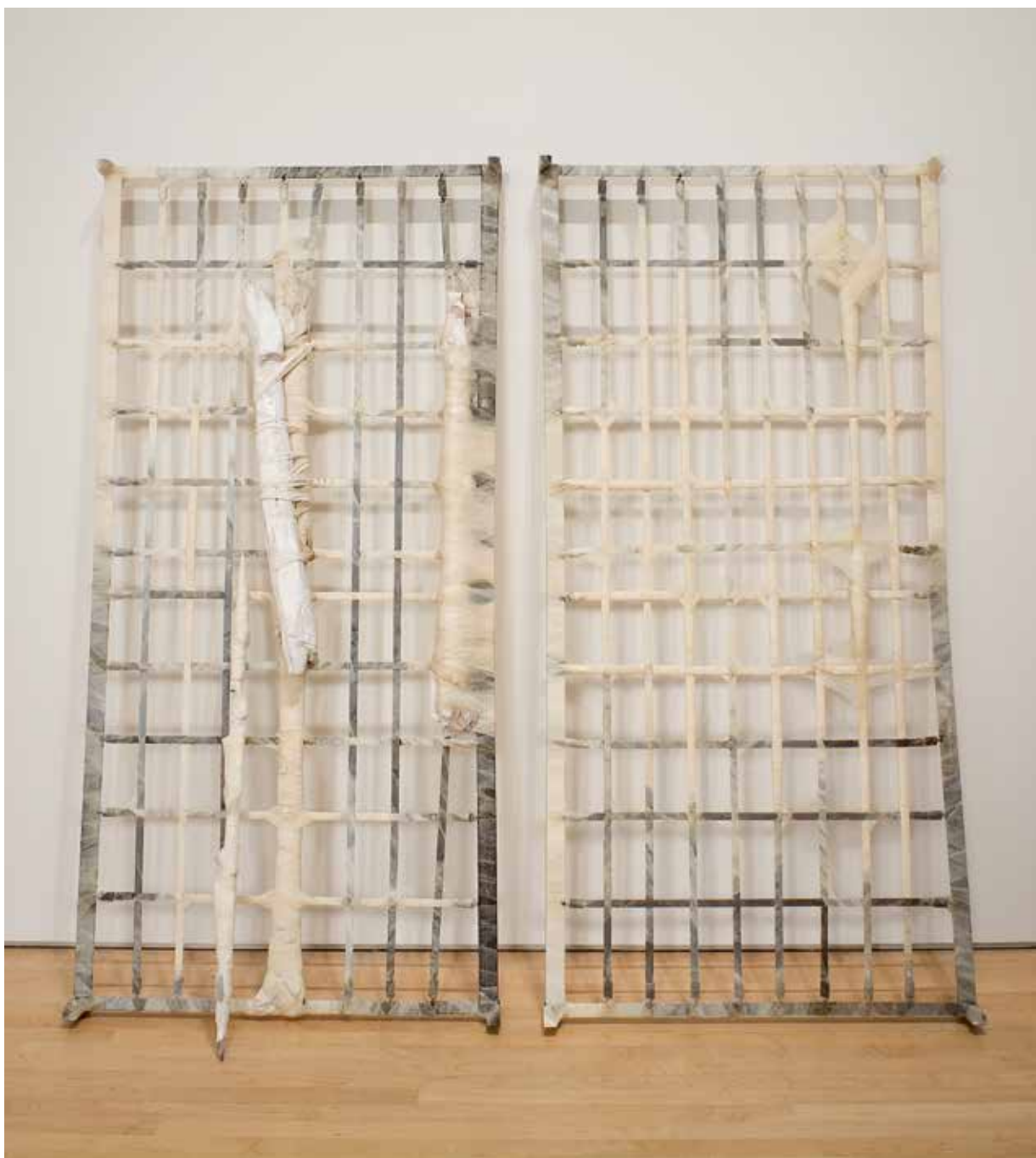
It is a combination of these latter two approaches that I take in this examination of the artist’s sculptures and installations. For more than twenty years, Salcedo has investigated the individual experiences, social conditions, and lasting impacts of political violence and terror, as well as the challenges that such matters pose for visual art and representation. She is especially known for projects that explore the ways in which, as a result of such violence, victims vanish, leaving a profound absence and sense of instability in the world; above all, the artist’s works have insistently attempted to counter these effects. As has been widely noted, however, nowhere in her work does the artist depict, document, or otherwise include pictorial imagery of victims or their experiences of violence. Instead, at the same time that Salcedo has committed to making victims and their experiences present and evident, she has placed

*Untitled*, 1986  
Steel shelving, steel cot, plastic dolls, rubber, wax,  
and animal fiber  
73½ × 94⅞ × 18⅞ in. (187 × 241 × 46 cm)









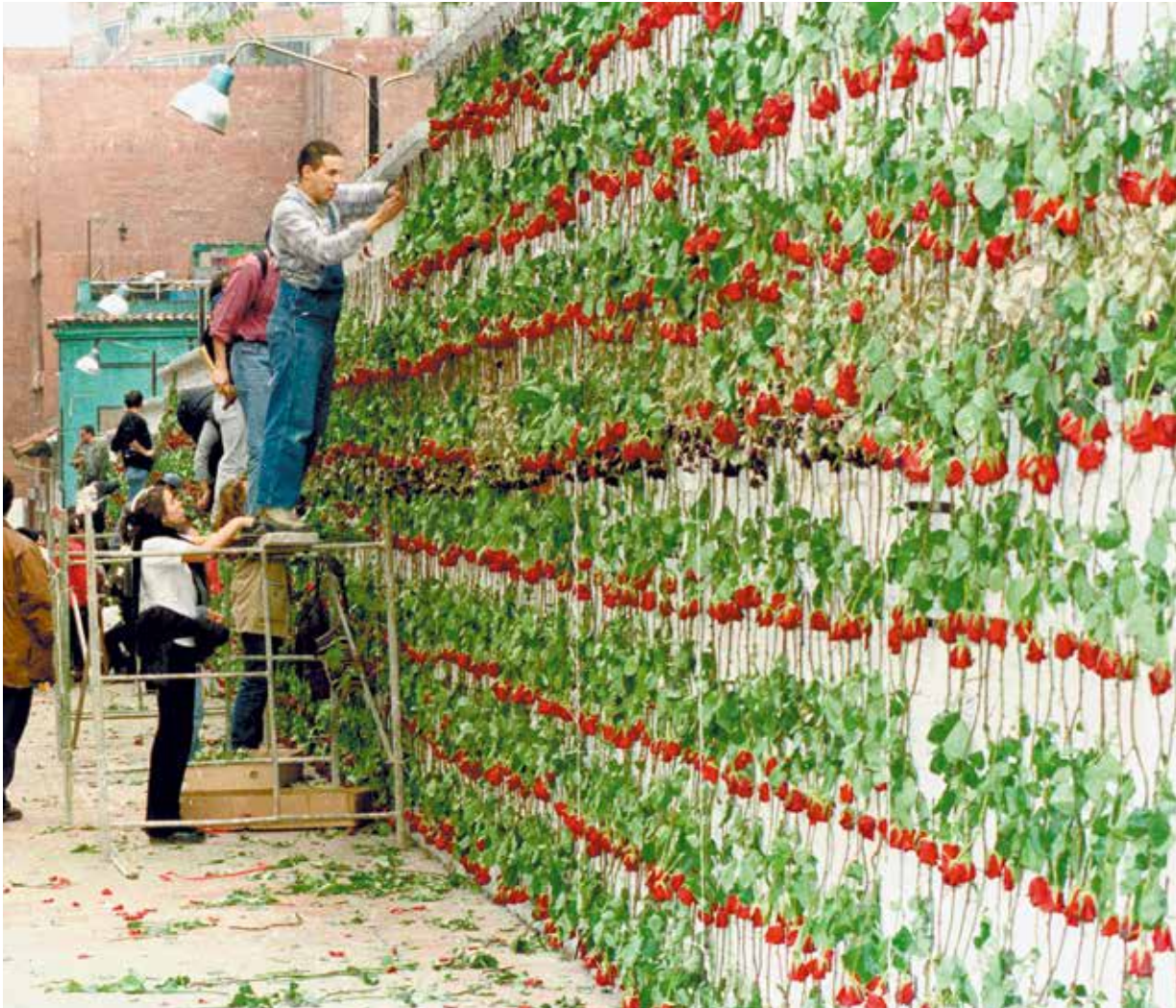
*Untitled* (and detail, left), 1989–90  
Steel bed frames, plaster, cotton shirts, and animal fiber  
Two parts, each:  $71\frac{7}{8} \times 35\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$  in. (182.6 × 89.5 × 14 cm)





*La Casa Viuda I* (and detail, right), 1992–94  
Wooden door, wooden chair, clothing, and thread  
22<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (57.8 × 59.7 × 38.7 cm)





*Untitled, August 27, 1999*  
Roses  
Dimensions variable  
Ephemeral public project, Bogotá, 1999



*Untitled*, August 13, 2000  
Roses  
Dimensions variable  
Ephemeral public project, Bogotá, 2000



Nov. 6, 11:45 am



Nov. 6, 12 pm



Nov. 6, 2:15 pm



Nov. 6, 4:30 pm

pp. 152–55:  
*Noviembre 6 y 7, 2002*  
Two hundred and eighty wooden chairs and rope  
Dimensions variable  
Ephemeral public project, Palace of Justice,  
Bogotá, 2002



Nov. 6, 8 pm



Nov. 7, 11:30 am



Nov. 7, 4 pm



Nov. 7, 7:40 pm



pp. 172–78  
*Shibboleth*, 2007  
Concrete and steel  
Length: 548 ft. (167 m)  
Installation views, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2007







