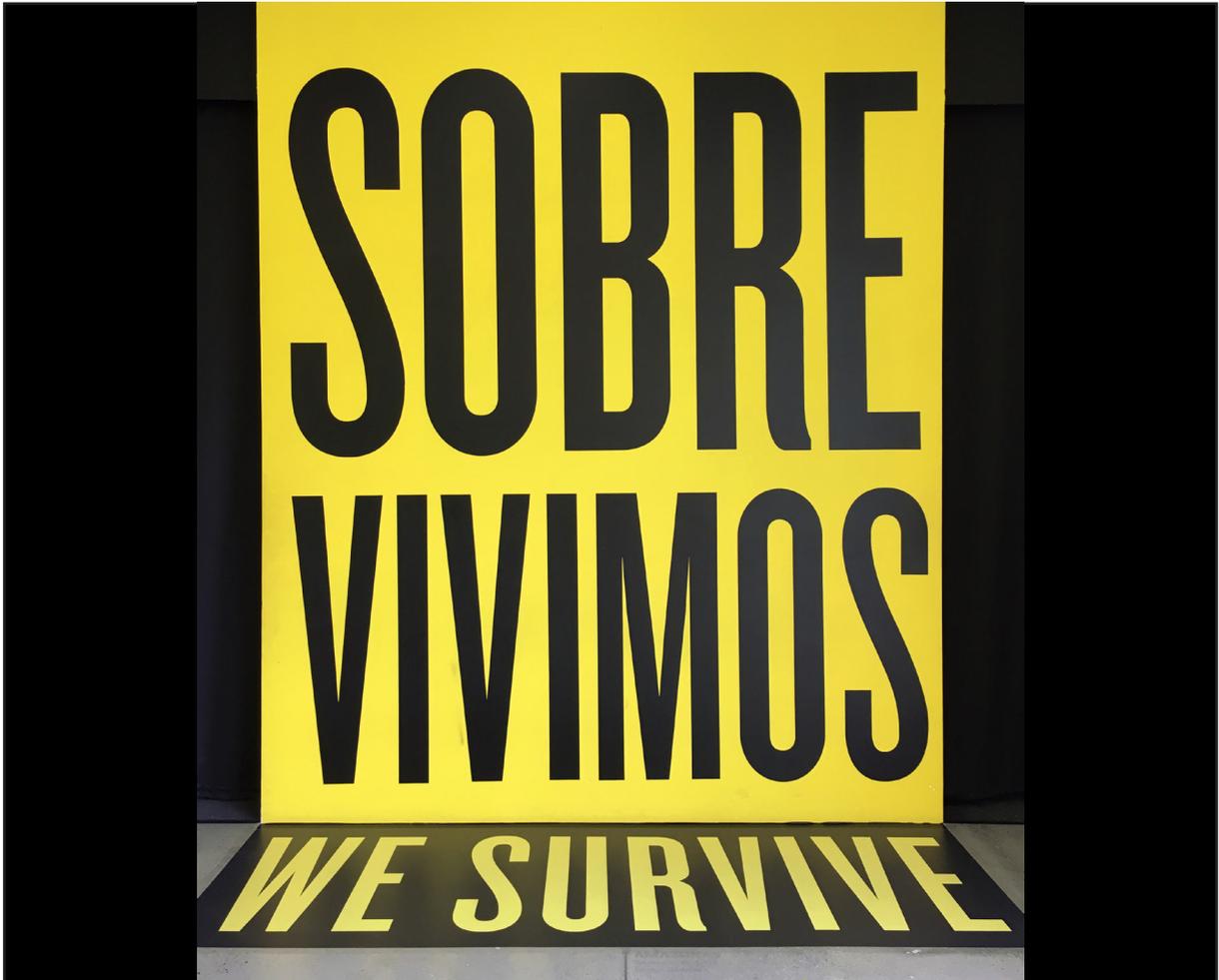




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
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Museo Casa de la Memoria (Medellín) | 2018 | photo Felipe Cammaert

WE SURVIVE(D)?

Felipe Cammaert

[Medellín / es 70, 80, 90](#), (Medellín(s) 70, 80, 90) a temporary exhibition at the *Casa Museo de la Memoria*, presents a chronology of the three most atrocious decades in the twentieth century history of Colombia's second largest city, one of the most violent in the world. Curated in the space of the *Casa Museo*, as Miguel Cardina recently discussed [on this platform](#), the memory of the Colombian conflict acquires a configuration that we might understand in terms of "living memory." As such, the exhibition has to be understood in its present, as well as historical, context.

At the end of the last room of the exhibition, the spectator is confronted with a word, written in large black characters on a yellow background (reminiscent of danger signs): SOBREVIVIMOS. The English version is on the floor, pigmented like a film negative: WE SURVIVE. Probably because of my professional (de)formation, something in this projection struck me as incoherent. As a Colombian born in Bogotá in the 1970s, the memory of Medellín's painful past paradoxically seems both very close and very distant. The sign engendered an increasing sense of unease.

In Spanish, the forms of the present indicative and the past tense of the verb 'to survive' are the same: *sobrevivimos*. Should we, then, read the sign – an epilogue to a journey through the purgatory lived by the people of Medellín – in the past or present tense? To me, the semantic ambiguity enriches our understanding of the city's recent history. If it had been me translating this colophon to Medellín's "red line of time", I would have chosen to keep the Spanish word's indeterminate temporality: WE SURVIVE(D). We have survived in the past and continue to survive today. We survive(d) despite the many deaths, victims, losses and traumas. We survive(d), despite the many sops to narco culture by the Colombian and foreign media in recent years, the "narco tours" and the Medellín Pablo Escobar Museum.

The travelling exhibition *Voces para transformar a Colombia* (Voices to transform Colombia), from Bogotá's Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica presents another example of a narrative of resilience. The journey through that exhibition is organised around three axes: body, land and water. These themes represent different spaces of conflict. Deep, still-open wounds from the violence come into view, but also the voices of resistance to it. The [exhibition's wall-texts](#) convincingly justify the curatorial choices: "The profound interconnection between body, earth and water as places of human action, coupled with the formative nature of relations between all types of living beings, offers us a narrative space – a diverse ecosystem of reportage and relations – in which we aim to bring into view the faces, voices and impacts of armed conflict, as well as the multiple ways in which the body, land and water stand as means and places of resistance to violence."

As a Colombian who lived (and still lives) the armed conflict through the press and the television, this itinerary through the tracks of memory (of individuals and of the earth) and through these voices in the silence is a disturbing though reinvigorating experience. As I walked around this second exhibition and its stories of pain and hope, I remembered an installation in the Medellín *Casa Museo*, entitled *Susurros*:

historias para gritar (Whispers: stories to shout about). The piece is composed of small wooden boxes and loudspeakers, which softly play the testimonies of the victims of brutality. These are all voices that, after all, survived and survive.

In a country that has not yet closed the door to armed conflict, spaces for engaging with historical memory are both fragile and unpredictable. The construction of this discourse is an ongoing task in Colombia, which civil society is gradually taking on. In the arts, the work of Doris Salcedo is perhaps the most substantial, and has received the most attention on a global scale (Salcedo exhibited, for example, at the [Calouste Gulbenkian Museum](#) in 2012). Salcedo's most recent project, in the aftermath of the peace accords with the FARC (1), is highly pertinent to this discussion. Salcedo and her team are collaborating in the establishment of a new space for remembering this armed conflict in the centre of Bogotá.

With the help of women victims of sexual violence, Salcedo is creating a “counter-monument” in a ruined building. The piece is horizontal and disavows any attempt to glorify the violent past. [In the artist's own words](#), the space “will be a museum of contemporary art and memory, whose floor or foundations are literally made of the weapons handed over by the FARC guerrillas. These weapons have been fused and reconfigured to form the physical and conceptual structure upon which this site of memory is built.” The work, *Fragmentos* (Fragments), thus appears as a heterogeneous and public site of memory, representing the emptiness and absence that characterises the “absolutely irredeemable nature of war.” Doris Salcedo is creating a pedestal, silent and yet full of meaning, on which other artistic initiatives will be exhibited to remember the war.

These three museums of living memory in Colombia join many other initiatives abroad aimed at recovering and protecting the traumatic past of nations dealing with horror. After many years of conflict, some (not all) of the victims have survived and are surviving, and are gradually finding a space to express pain and resistance through their stories. That is, by representing their trauma. Perhaps most importantly of all, they are leaving a trail so that future generations do not forget those experiences. As for Colombian society, and thanks to these nascent works of historical memory, it has survived, survives, and will survive.

(1) The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were the largest guerrilla organization in the country from 1964 until 2017, when they became a political party as a result of a peace agreement signed with the Colombian Government.

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