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Public Space and Private Investigation

A Conversation with Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry

By Ana Finel Honigman

The sculptural installation projects created by Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry merge aesthetic achievement, civic discourse and social advocacy. Their work directs an empathetic focus toward issues that are considered “difficult,” highlighting the effects of political or social injustice. *Witness: Perspectives on Police Violence*, was conceived in 1997 following the much-publicized violence Abner Louima endured while in police custody in New York City. The first installation of *Witness* was located in the sanctuary of New York’s Cathedral of Saint John the Divine from November to December 1999. *Witness Call Boxes* were installed citywide during 20-day periods in October 2000, with the project’s culmination taking place at the Bronx Museum of the Arts from February to April 2001. The heated reaction their work provokes testifies powerfully to its strength and ability to expand the dialogue surrounding vital social concerns.

Ana Finel Honigman: *In Silence, do you intend to draw parallels between slavery and current attitudes?*

Bradley McCallum: *Silence* investigates the role of silence as a conscious, active, civic decision within the period of slavery as well as today. This type of active silence, in its most toxic form, was as much an element of slavery as it is an element of contemporary racism. *Silence* represents a body of work that will engage historic sites, as well as traditional art-world venues. As with *Witness*, *Silence* is a form of performative sculpture that will encompass multiple sites and installations.

Jacqueline Tarry: “Performative” in the sense that the sculpture organically adapts from the circumstances in which it was created. The civic – or issue-based nature from which our work arises, combined with its public placement, allows for aesthetic variations on the same theme. So, after the first installation of a particular project, the public response of the changing social climate dictates that another work be created.

BM: The first installation of *Silence* was in the sanctuary of Center Church on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut. It focused on the congregation members of African descent who petitioned the leadership of Center Church in 1820, seeking permission to sit in the ground-floor pews. After their petition was denied, and they were required to remain seated in the balcony, several of the parishioners left to establish the nation's first black Congregationalist church. The installation consisted of three elements: a reading of an address given by Rev. James Wright to the Anti-Slavery Society in 1834, a series of 19 photographs intended to establish the presence of African Americans seated in the central pews, and a series of granite "memorial plaques" that acknowledged the African Americans who were members of the Center Church in the 1820s.

JT: The photographs are portraits of current day Dixwell Avenue Church members. Dixwell Avenue Church is the current incarnation of the original first black Congregationalist church established in 1820. The photographs are of the descendants of those original black parishioners. We installed the images in the areas where their ancestors were not permitted to sit. The photographs themselves were printed on a very thin, delicate, translucent rice paper, which appears very much like skin. They were presented in a manner integral to the interior architecture, so that the images merged with that specific space and could be seen from all sides. As a historic landmark, the sanctuary combines an influx of tourists with its ongoing responsibilities to its congregation. It was important that we integrate the work in such a way that the experience would unfold gradually for the audience, as they explored the church or participated in worship.

The granite markers were installed in the balcony area in such a way that viewers reading the text gained an empathetic understanding of the experience of segregated seating. These granite markers were made from a composite of various direct historical references. Center Church has a plethora of plaques commemorating the pastors, the worshipers, and those involved in the church's history. It was also built over an existing cemetery so that the basement is a crypt with gravestones from the 1700s and 1800s, preserved in near-perfect condition. By researching church records, we discovered parishioners' names, marital status, membership numbers, and the racial indicator "colored." We integrated this terse information about the black parishioners into fictional

narratives, “sampled” from the available texts commemorating the church’s acknowledged members. We combined the phrases taken from the plaques with rubbings of the decorative patterns, winged skulls, and angel heads that mark the gravestones. These hybrid granite markers serve as means of reintegrating the excluded parishioners into the church’s history.

BM: One of the commemorative plaques given to an early pastor of the church included the phrase “Devoted in the Service to his Lord and Master.” When his text is reapplied to a black parishioner, it highlights the complex interweaving between the church’s history and slave history. Part of our concern is how to take the existing language and ascribe it to these unknown individuals so that we create a sense of identity and personal narrative. The installation changed on the morning of November 9, when the Board of Stewards, a governing body responsible for the maintenance and use of the Church, elected to remove the photographs from the central seating area and place them in the balcony, because of the parishioners’ lobbying. They did not notify the Pastors, the congregations, the sponsoring arts organization, or Jacqueline and myself. It is a startling example of history repeating itself. These events were beyond our control, but they illuminate the ways we associate silence with denial or secrecy, especially in our collective silence about persistent racial inequities.

JT: The reason given by the Board of Stewards for removing the photographs (two weeks into a five week installation) was that some of the parishioners “felt uncomfortable with the images in front of them” and could not “enjoy their worship experience.” We want to have a dialogue that could contribute to our communal understanding of what informs feelings of discomfort on issues involving race. The success or failure of that dialogue will inevitably inform the next iteration of *Silence*. As this project continues to develop, we will interview the descendants of slavery—slave-owners, abolitionists, and bounty hunters, as well as descendants of slaves. We are interested in the stories of their ancestors but also in their lived experience of race and the experiences of silent injustice that they have encountered, participated in, or observed.

AFH: *How do Silence and Witness, both having been installed in houses of worship, relate to “sacred spaces” and the discourse of faith?*

JT: I think our work relates strongly to the dichotomy between these being public spaces and sites of private spiritual investigations. Churches are rarely apolitical.

BM: For me, our work at Center Church is very different from the installation of *Witness* at Saint John the Divine. Contextually, there are overlaps – traditionally churches are places where we grapple with or confront life’s complex issues. In the ideal sense, the church is a place where we seek guidance, reflection and answers. These are spaces intended to help us ask unanswerable questions.

AFH: *How does that fit with the reputation and history of political conservatism associate with some religious groups?*

JT: Police brutality and race are public issues, communal issues, but are at their root deeply private. The examination of these issues in the church taps into the traditional use of the sanctuary as a place of private inquiry and civic concern. In theory, the church ought to respect the range and complexity of human emotions, but as with *Silence*, we realize the fallibility of congregations in creative places of healing, confession and understanding.

AFH: *Saint John the Divine is known as politically progressive. It is a site with a strong history of social protest. How did that history inform Witness?*

JT: They don’t shy away from the “tough work.” When we installed *Witness* it was during the height of media attention to police brutality. Cathedral officials were very welcoming and supportive of the work’s controversial nature.

BM: We were trying to create public discourse in a manner that was not invited by the mayor’s office. Obtaining permits for *Witness*, as a temporary public artwork was not possible at that time. The offer of the sanctuary, a safe space, for this artwork was very instrumental in providing a “public” venue for the work. Their support validated the work in a way that a museum wouldn’t or couldn’t at that time.

AFH: *James Young, who has written extensively on the symbolism of memorial sites, asserts that a nation’s symbolic character guides how it addresses its historical guilt. Do you feel that there is something particularly American about your work in the way you address current issues or in the way you confront contemporary relationships to the past?*

BM: We are living through a period in which we are all examining what “American” means and to what extent our understanding of history has changed since September 11. Our work addresses issues and histories that are specific to America yet they represent dynamics that are universal. The most radical social aspect lies in the possibility of sparking discourse that shapes public policy. How can we create another kind of public conversation that goes beyond media sound-bites? How can we create a degree of empathy and understanding when the structure of the media denies a truly complex comprehension of events and human reactions? How can we create a situation in which people can speak for themselves? I hope that the work creates a sense of intimacy that shapes the experience for the viewer – a moment where public spaces are experienced as sites of private listening.

JT: While there has been national attention to the issues of police brutality, what does it mean to listen intimately to those speaking in *Witness*? What is inherently American in the work is the awareness of how the media addresses these stories versus how we would like them to be addressed. One of the women interviewed for *Witness* spoke of the profound frustration of seeing a picture of mothers crying accompanied by a byline that failed to explain or express their experiences. The experience of intimate space in *Witness* is intended to counter the lack of information that results when sensationalized visual images overshadow the actual people and stories.

AFH: *You do not ignore or avoid making beautiful sculpture. There is a reverence for something beautiful, adding attention, awe, and respect for the issues you address. Are the aesthetic concerns secondary when making art dealing with civic issues?*

BM: Thank you for describing the work as beautiful. When I listen to the critical discourse regarding civic-based, social/political art I rarely hear critics speak about ideas of beauty and reverence. For me, the seduction factor is very important as a means of engaging an audience with differing points of view in the experience of the work. It is through aesthetic concerns that the political is activated. Pure aesthetics captures the attention of communities beyond the like-minded, the choir. It is through the objects, their materials, the acoustic space, a soft-spoken voice that we hook people who would normally avoid conversations of police misconduct or race into an extended experience of

the work. By creating environments of discovery and eavesdropping, the civic issues resonate.

JT: We are seeking the experience of a conversation that takes place across the kitchen table, but while standing on the sidewalk – to capture the experience of private, intimate space in public.

BM: Your questions reveal what we feel as a crisis in critical discourse on the field of civic – based art practice. There seems to be a “correct” politics surrounding civic – based artwork that keeps the discourse on a remedial level and prevents sustained criticism. How do we lift the discourse beyond the civic issues being addressed? What value systems for community art go beyond the degree to which it gives back to the community? There needs to be an aesthetic standard applied to the work. The civic focus is not self-justifying.

AFH: *Your work deals a lot with oral tradition. Does recounting the history of groups outside “official history” influence your use of testimony?*

JT: The importance of oral tradition influences our work’s reception as well as its execution. The topic of police brutality was so prominent when the piece was put up that people assumed the work was “anti-police.” What was not fully appreciated was that we interviewed police officers willing to recount their experiences. Desmond Robinson was an officer shot by a fellow when undercover. He talked about his experience, the media treatment of his story, and the “blue wall of silence.” We wanted to discover the meaning of a secret, coded relationship among police officers.

AFH: *There has been such a change in the perception of the police since September 11. How do you see these recent events altering the meaning and reception of the work?*

BM: Overnight, racial profiling took on a new meaning and the NYPD was praised, when a day earlier debates were focused on police reform. This dramatic change offers a unique opportunity to critically analyze the relationship between the social climate of social/political artwork and its ability to transcend the politics of the moment. If we were beginning the series of 20-day public installations of the *Witness Call Boxes* a year later, on October 1, 2001, would we continue with the installations as planned? No, the social space had changed to such a degree that the work would have lost its meaning.