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Silent Witnessing: Questioning Sacred Spaces

In March of 2001, I was introduced to Bradley McCallum at the Ford Foundation. He spoke at a roundtable discussion of the particular challenge of presenting large-scale public artworks addressing socio-political issues, focusing on the needs of individual artists in today's art community. *Witness: Perspectives on Police Violence*, is an illustration of this type of artwork done in collaboration with his wife Jacqueline Tarry. His words proved timely. The following day, *Witness*, installed at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York City, was thrust center stage in New York's media arena. The installation caught the eye of Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who opposed the work calling it "political propaganda," and used it to seek the creation of a "decency review panel."

McCallum and Tarry recently completed the first installation of *Silence*, a meta-artwork that continues their investigation of socio-politics, amplifying the voiceless in what they have coined "performative sculpture." The impetus for their work is the desire to uniquely commission public sites as "sacred," bringing awareness to issues of civic concern, as well as using religious sanctuaries (representing a sacred home) to highlight the spirit that underlies the art. These sites inspire individuals and communities as they seek to reclaim history, and bring to the forefront histories and realities that are generally avoided.

The first installation of *Silence* took place in the historic Center Church on the Green, in New Haven, Connecticut. In this work, the artists used the history of antebellum America, the gradual emancipation of slaves and the Underground Railroad to address race relations today. The installation focused on a period in 1820 when the members of African descent petitioned the church elders to sit in the central pews on the ground floor.

The petition was denied, thus the members were required to sit in the balcony, continuing the commonly held practice of segregated seating. The decision led a number of the members to establish the first black Congregationalist church in American known today as the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church.

The installation had three components. First, photographs of contemporary African American members of the Dixwell Avenue Church represented their ancestors whose images were placed on pedestals and “seated” in the pews on the main floor. Also, a series of granite “memorial” plaques were etched with the biography of the original church members of African descent. Finally, an address given by Reverend James Wright to the Anti-Slavery Society in 1834 was read. The granite plaques, part historical record and part appropriated text from other memorial markers in the church, served as an acknowledgement to the African members of the Center Church, which were installed in the balcony.

On November 9th, the Board of Stewards, the church governing body, elevated to removed portions of *Silence*. Specifically, the series of photographs were removed from the central seating area and placed in the balcony. In response, the artists shrouded the memorial plaques that remained installed in the balcony. The balcony windows were shuttered and the audio component continued.

During the final weeks of the installation McCallum and Tarry held three discussions in the church that brought together twenty-three artists, curators, scholars, historians, and community members to talk about the underlying issues addressed in *Silence*. What follows is an associative edit by the artists to give the reader the experience of eavesdropping on the conversations.

Represented are: **Dori Laub**, Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine; **Johanna Bodenstab**, Freelance Journalist; **Patricia Phillips**, Dean, SUNY at New Platz, Visual and Performing Arts; **Donna Harkavy**, Independent Curator; **Eathon Hall**, Curator of Education, Bronx Museum of the Arts;

Caron Atlas, Arts Consultant; **Rev. Samuel Sly**, Pastor, Yale University; **Norman Frisch**, Executive Director, Snug Harbor Cultural Center; **Nadine Wasserman**, Curator, Samuel Dorskey Museum; **Helen Kauder**, Executive Director, Artspace; **Rev. Sheppard Parsons**, Center Church on the Green; and **Wayne Winborne**, Dialogue Mediator.

Jacqueline Tarry: When artists use history, what is off limits? What is culturally sacred?

Eathon Hall: I think it is the artists' job never to censor themselves. Everything is open. In fact, society looks towards artists to be that kind of voice... to give visual form to the ideals that are circulating in society at large.

Nadine Wasserman: I think as artists your need to take ownership of your intention. It needs to be out there as the purpose of the piece. That doesn't mean that everybody who comes to the piece has to interpret one way, but you have to take ownership of the fact that you have reconstructed the histories.

Norman Frisch: One of the things that I've learned from late-night reality television is this concept of "my house"... It's obviously one of the really central principles of American culture...this idea of my house where I'm safe. Who's the host and who's the guest? Who's the owner and who's the trespasser? If we look back over decades of public art, that issues comes up over and over again, whether it's just corporate space or public space in the sense of being government owned, or community space in the sense of churches and other kinds of community institutions. Laying claim to territory is not only a historical thing. It's a very literal floor, walls, ground we stand on.

Bradley McCallum: Clearly, for some members of the congregation the work violated their space enough to lobby the Board of Stewards to hold a special vote to remove the photographs from the central pews. Reading into this history reveals a series of grays. In 1820 when the members of African descent were denied permission to sit in pews on the ground floor, providing the catalyst for several members to leave to establish their own church, some chose to stay. Ella Thompson left but returned 18-years later. The current-day Board of Stewards' decision probably also reflect a range of influences and internal forces that shaped their decision. However at the core of these forces, I believe, exist the

history and the silent impact of race. Our concern as artists is not to silence this history and its impact on race-relations further.

Norman Frisch: I found one of the really difficult aspects of working in community-based festival projects involved the invitation of artists into other peoples' homes. I think it's something that... journalists struggle with all the time. Where do they draw the line among their journalistic responsibility, their logistical dependence on hosts and interpreters when they enter a foreign situation, and their ethical responsibility to their informants whose lives could be changed by information that the expose or even threaten? My suspicion is that we probably have a lot to learn from the guidelines established in journalism. It's something I'd be interested in seeing as part of our ongoing dialogue about arts and communities.

Norman Frisch: There's something implicit underneath a lot of this conversation that an artist wants to avoid conflict. And there are loads of artists who don't want to avoid conflict... I don't think we should assume that it's the artist's responsibility to avoid conflict or to make everyone comfortable with either the process or the product.

Caron Atlas: For me [the artist's intent was] to engage people in a dialogue. That was a given. If you're going to set it up with that frame, you're going to say, "We want to engage people in dialogue." It is about everybody knowing they are entering an unsafe place together ahead of time...

Jacqueline Tarry: This relates to our use of testimony in our work. We are interviewing descendants of antebellum America, regarding their ancestors' experiences with slavery and their own lived experiences with race. These interviews will be used in the New York installation of *Silence*.

Dori Laub: Testimony is a process in which you provide both a sense of security and a certain human presence. You help someone embark on a journey into the inside, into maybe partially uncharted territory. You say, "Well, who are you? Start and I'll be with you." You both embark and you take a risk sometimes to go to risky places, and you also make sure that when it becomes too risky that you stop the journey ... some understanding of psychological balance is important.

Wayne Winborne: Folks haven't talked about how [the exhibit] made them feel and why. For instance, when I saw the pictures, I thought the photographs were of folks from

the 19th century, provocative photos of former slaves and freed slaves. But no, its just folks down the street. That's pretty mild on the scale of what an artist could really do to provoke folks, and yet it evoked this very strong reaction. Why? What are you experiencing? It's difficult, it's hard and it's just below the surface.

Rev. Sheppard Parsons: Since I came here, I began to talk about this vision of [Center Church] being a diverse community. We went through a two-year process to declare ourselves open and affirming to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks. I led another church through this process and the same [questions] arise – “Why aren't we talking about race? Why aren't we talking about class?”

Norman Frisch: I have a strong affinity for the history of gay theater and performance art, which was never welcomed when it appeared. Nobody was safe going into it. The performers were not safe. The audience was not safe. Everybody got tense. I don't think it's the responsibility of every artist to negotiate with people in advance. I think a lot of it can happen after the fact; it's not the responsibility of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to engage the Pope in dialogue before they go out in the street. The outrage is part of the work.

Rev. Sheppard Parsons: Maybe it's not so much the artist's responsibility as it is the collaborator's – the institution with whom the artist is collaborating. If we were given a chance to do this [installation] over again it would be a very different kind of communication and collaboration... this “my house” business really rings true to me. Six days out of the week this was the “meeting house” and on Sunday it became the house of worship. I was really drawn up short. This may sound strange coming from a pastor, but this is the peoples' holy space.

Helen Kauder: It's a different kind of house.

Rev. Sheppard Parsons: It's a very different house. You look up here; people sit in the pews. That's where we buried Mom, we had her casket open right there; that's where the baptism was; so and so were married there- that kind of stuff taking place. I was not fully aware of the effects of this holy space. Talk about the movement of history... my institutional forebears of this place would die if I call this a holy space. You know? They would...well they're already dead, they'd roll over.

Rev. Samuel Sly: I grew up in the church... This art is... not anti-sacred space, but it would need the development of a commitment to its presence, much more than a commitment to an exhibit... it's a statement in the presence, and a statement, as Shep said, toward an ethical end – to get the congregation reflecting.

Patricia Phillips: We have examples of artists who have lifelong commitments to working within a particular community or constituency. But more often or not, artists come into particular sites and work for a period of time and often move on to something else. I think that the difficult thing is that you never want to judge art by its effectiveness, because what does that mean? But what is a paradox of this kind of work. What does it do? I think it is an interesting question, what does art do in the lives of people? What does it do in the lives of individuals or in communities? And as interesting as I think that question is that it always ends up being a trip step. You don't want to go, “Oh. I've changed the minds of twenty-five people.” It sounds crass, but what constitutes success with community-based work?

Ana Honigman: This seems to be a period when there is a lot of really unhealthy disdain for work perceived as being social or political.

Patricia Phillips: It's interesting to think about how community-based art or dialogue-based art is different from other art, but I think it's also very important to ask ourselves why it is like other art as well. You are raising the question of ethics. I think there's an ethical dimension to all art making. When it comes out, goes into the community or into a public realm it becomes much more transparent. When artists begin to work much more directly with ... [their] audience, suddenly there's this intensity, this kind of mutual engagement. That's when all these questions get raised.

Dori Laub: The historian cannot take the liberty of an artist to imagine; his domain is the documented fact, which does not necessarily render the truth, much remains left out and buried in silence. I don't see an ethical infringement, if art is something that you feel serves the truth. If you can't bring people back to life or can't free them of their slavery, you can at least free up the story, the event. So as an artist you are the only one who can do it. I don't see an ethical dilemma that should chain you.

Johanna Bodenstab: I was debating with myself while I was walking up their reading the plaques. Part of me was wondering, “Why did they put all this extra text? Should

they rather have put simply the names, only what they found on the records?” Then I was thinking, “It’s not a historical document after all, they are not trying to do that.” Art is free, which is good and bad. Everything has these two faces. You can invent something on the basis of what you know, you can go beyond, you can give a voice to your longing, you can give a voice to what you think should have been said. Yes, you can fill in gaps... especially when there is hardly anything left.

Donna Harkavy: I thought that they were recreations that they were actual texts taken from plaques at the time of the member’s death. What struck me about them was the dignity with which the texts were written. There was a sense that each of these lives were valued and celebrated. Given what I think the treatment of African-Americans must have been at the time, these texts seemed even more dignified and gave a respect to death that may not have been granted in life.

Johanna Bodenstab: It’s like taking the ornaments from the gravestone, this is what was used then and this is the language that was used. But there is also something missing which you are filling in. And I don’t mean this as an ethical mission. It’s just the possibility of art. It can fill these gaps, which is a very important cultural function. Not so much on a scientific or societal level but really on a human level that we can fill what is missing, and why it is missing?

McCallum and Tarry have envisioned *Silence* as a multi-phase artwork that will engage historic sites of significance nationally. The next series of installations will take place in New York City, and will build on their experiences in New Haven, Connecticut.

Keisha Lewis is an art critic based in New York.