

Copyright 2001 The New York Times Company
The New York Times
December 16, 2001, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 14CN; Page 11; Column 1; Connecticut Weekly Desk

LENGTH: 956 words

HEADLINE: Artists of Church Installation Welcome the Controversy

BYLINE: By STACEY STOWE

RACISM. Gun violence. Police brutality. The work of the artists **Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry** charges headlong into provocative territory. That their public art projects in Connecticut and elsewhere ignite response is perhaps typical of contemporary artists.

But with their recent effort, in New Haven, they are seeking to fold that reaction into their work.

In October, they created an installation for New Haven's First Church of Christ, known as Center Church. The work included photographs of black worshipers from the Dixwell Avenue United Church of Christ, which they set in the pews at Center Church.

The artists wanted to invoke the spirit of black congregants at Center Church who, in 1820, had been denied the right to sit with white worshipers on the main floor, and had been permitted only in the balcony. Some of those congregants later founded Dixwell.

Last month, the pictures were removed at the request of Center Church members who said they had not been given enough information about them before they were installed, and that the images blocked their view of the pulpit and could damage the pews. The removal created negative publicity about the church in local papers, which bruised the feelings of many members.

The result? The artists invited representatives of museums in the tristate area to a series of dialogues in the church about race, sacred spaces and the ethics of using history to make art. The church's minister and a specialist in race relations attended those dialogues, which the artists recorded. The two hope to use the recordings in a possible reinstallation of the images at either New Haven City Hall or Dixwell.

"The work we do is trying to grapple with the most dire social, ethical and political issues of our time," said Mr. McCallum, 36, a Wisconsin native, who is married to Ms. Tarry. "We're not trying to be controversial but working in spaces where there is a radically divided, heated debate, where there is so much divisiveness that people aren't able to listen to each other. We give space to have people listen and understand each other, to connect to an issue and put a human face on it."

Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry, who was born in Buffalo, live in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, but have worked in Connecticut before. Ms. Tarry does not have formal art training and holds a day job as a flight attendant. She and Mr. McCallum met on an airplane in 1996, and were married in 1999.

Mr. McCallum received a graduate degree from the Yale University School of Art in 1992. His thesis project was inspired by obituaries in local newspapers in 1991, when gun violence was at a high.

He videotaped oral histories from victims' families and created silk rubbings of photographs of women who lost children to gun violence. The project was shown at Yale and then at a juvenile detention center in Cheshire and at Connecticut College, in New London. In February, it will be displayed at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

In 1991, Mr. McCallum and another artist, Elise Wright, created an installation at the John Slade Ely House in New Haven. This work included a series of condoms stuffed with rifle shells and oil, a reference to the Army's use of condoms during the Persian Gulf war to prevent sand from getting into rifles.

Mr. McCallum's first collaboration with Ms. Tarry was on an installation for the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford in 1996. The exhibition displayed manhole covers cast from guns confiscated by the Connecticut state police.

The covers were inscribed with the motto of the Colt family, which built its gun-making business in Hartford in the 19th century. Speakers mounted in columns played oral histories of Hartford residents affected by gun violence.

The piece was conceived as a counterpoint to a Wadsworth show on the Colt family and business. The manhole covers were later installed throughout Hartford.

Andrea Miller-Keller, the former curator of contemporary art at the museum, described Mr. McCallum as a "swashbuckling artist."

"His collaboration with Jackie has doubled the efforts of his good work," she said. "Together their work is a really thoughtful and sometimes poetic contribution to our public dialogue on civil rights."

Last year, Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry created a piece about police violence that was displayed at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, in Manhattan. Their next project will be in Madison, Wis., where they plan an installation about the impact of violence there.

At Center Church, the artists' work was inspired by the events of 1820, part of the long history of the congregation, which was founded in 1638. The artists asked 19 members of Dixwell to pose for photographs in 19th-century attire, and installed the images on the main floor of the church, providing a metaphorical presence for the black worshipers who had sought to sit there.

But when members complained, the pictures were moved to the church balcony. Local newspapers remarked on the metaphorical return of the parishioners to the balcony.

Another part of the exhibition was granite plaques bearing the names of 19th-century black parishioners. When the photographs were moved upstairs, the artists shrouded the plaques in netting.

"This place is more than a building," the Rev. Shepard Parsons said at one of the dialogues held by the artists. "It is a spiritual house that people hold very, very dear. It wasn't the subject of the work that caused its removal, it was lack of communication."

Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry, who say fostering communication is central to all their projects, said the next time the work appears publicly, it will be preceded by a written plan for its installation.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

GRAPHIC: Photos: Images of black worshipers in the pews of New Haven's Center Church, left, were part of a controversial exhibition. At the request of church members, the pictures were moved to the church's balcony. (Mark Luttrell); Top, Jacqueline Tarry and Bradley McCallum, whose installation at a New Haven Church was criticized by some church members. Part of the installation was shrouded after the complaints. (Photographs by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times)