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Brad McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry

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By Jenni Sorkin

Witness (1999) is a sculptural sound installation by Brad McCallum in collaboration with Jacqueline Tarry. It comprises five emergency phone boxes equipped with photographs and speakers which emit the testimonies of police, victims, families, and survivors of police brutality. Grim and specific, these black metal structures were installed throughout New York City in locations where either violence or injustice had occurred, or outside the courthouses where officers were indicted. Through its very public presence, *Witness* functioned as both a mobile memorial and inflammatory reminder of the pervasive problem of police violence. Reminiscent of Joel Sternfeld's 'On This Site' (1995-1997), a series of images which documented locations where high profile violent crime had occurred (such as the high profile Rodney King beating in Los Angeles), McCallum also uses photographs as artifacts from the aftermath. Tainted by the viewer's knowledge, these images of mundane locations, such as a subway stop or a residence becomes sites of astonishing discomfort. McCallum's black and white photographs are lit up at night like small advertisements of despair. One depicts the bottom of a stairwell where Nathaniel Gaines was stripped and shot by police; another is of a quiet residential street where Anthony Baez was choked to death outside his home. An image of two police officers cruising in an NYPD car, (the only image which doesn't focus on a site), feels like a portrait of the enemy.

Somewhere between documentary and protest poetry, the phone boxes utter different narratives in a range of voices, mostly black and Latino, rich with inflection and double negatives. Over the course of the five tapes, the racism of police brutality in New York becomes painfully apparent: 'He violated my husband's rights and now he can get out of jail and get a job as proof of he was not convicted of nothing' one woman rages. A painful collaboration exists between the artists and those interviewed. There are no

names or dates, only layers of cracking, indignant voices – grieving mothers, frustrated cops, and fearful neighborhood kids. Slippage occurs within the text, resulting in a continuous echo of hopeless expectation. The effect is an eloquent urgency at the intersection of oppression and justice.

Like other public art projects exploring issues of history, memory, and race – such as New York – based activist collective REPO History's *Civil Disturbances* (1999), which addresses sites of police brutality through signage last spring in New York; or Simon Leung's *Surf Vietnam* (1998), a collaboration between Vietnam veterans, Vietnamese *émigrés*, and surfers – *Witness* relies on a co-operative network of people, fusing art with direct political action. McCallum and Tarry have involved themselves with a number of social and civil rights coalitions, choosing to work within a structure of resistance, rather than co-opting their organizational strategies and documenting the results. Public art has often been criticized for its didactic interventions and idealistic aspirations, but the potential for lazy activism seems a far greater threat. The slick, web-based tactics of the group @TMARK are an example of the kind of unengaged, hands-off approach that has hampered much, seemingly proactive, work. The strength of *Witness* lies in its ability to craft space for collective, public grief. The decisive use of an audio (rather than an ocular) text, activated a dramatic sense of social crisis and roused a collective thirst for justice, but the true wisdom of the project lay in its mobility. By embedding art within different communities – from outside the precinct where Abner Louima was assaulted by officers, to the gallery district in Chelsea that is situated between two low-income housing projects – McCallum and Tarry created a public forum for both awareness and resistance, negotiating the terrain of tragedy through the poetics of opposition.