

The Space of Conflict: *Aesthetic Lessons for Mediators*

Dorit Cypis, 2016

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Introduction

The Space of Conflict: Aesthetic Lessons for Mediators frames lessons on recognizing the knots of chronic conflict through considering the spatial nuances of human identity and social relations. As an artist and mediator I use the double lens of aesthetics and mediation to explore identity as psychic spaces within bodies and politicized spaces surrounding bodies that mirror, inform and extend each other. If we miss this reflexive relationship between internal and external spaces, we miss a large part of the story of human identity differences and what fuels conflict between and within people. My artist practice has always explored identity and social relations through aesthetic genres of performance, photography and social sculpture. I became a mediator to extend out from the studio to the street, to explore conflict embedded in identity and social relations.

Early in my mediation career I came across a critical question posed by Bernard Mayer in *Beyond Neutrality*: How can Conflict Resolution processes root out systemic social causes of conflict and not cover them over with neutrality and resolution? **1** As an artist I understand that identity is contextual and rooted in the individual and the collective culture. As identity and conflict are inseparable, I now understand that to resolve conflict on the individual level does not necessarily address the social level where many conflicts are rooted. Mayer's suggestion opened mediation to a finer volume control of engaging rather than resolving conflict. My practice of mediation is as a *conflict specialist* with a toolbox of skills and approaches, highly inquiring and thoughtfully responsive to each conflict situation uniquely.

The lessons of *The Space of Conflict* are aesthetic as they question the form and meaning of space, calling on perceptual and sensorial strategies to reveal nuanced threads often not seen. Artists disturb the peace of our quotidian lives to unmask hidden threads of form and meaning. As a mediator I employ aesthetics to mediate conflict dangerously, to unmask hidden threads of conflict with "*a deep and dangerous level of honesty and empathy*". **2** Celebrated mediator Kenneth Cloke encourages mediators to open Pandora's Box, to listen more deeply and explore conflict even when it seems out of control. The following aesthetic lessons on the experience of space are meant to build the mediator's capacity to more fully recognize and embrace sensorial and perceptual strategies as core to mediating conflict towards deeper engagement and hopefully individual and social transformation. You never know who your next teacher is.

Prelude: *Recognize the attributes of physical space.*

In our information age of online communication, we become more unaware of the attributes of physical space and how these affect our face-to-face relations. As a mediator how often do you walk into a space and immediately sit down without first moving through the space to experience it's attributes? When you look across a space do your eyes scan across the surfaces, missing detail? Do you notice how the furniture is arranged, the spaces between objects, the way light falls over various areas, the colors, the textures, the height of the ceiling, the ways sound is filtered, whether there are windows that can be opened, or window shades that can be drawn closed?

Next time you enter a space check out these variables and explore them as if this was a playground. Ask yourself if the spatial variables connote inclusion, trust, expansion or exclusion, fear, contraction? Honestly, how do you feel in the space? Empathize with the conflicted parties who will fill this space to sense how they might feel. Is the space conducive to setting a tone of equity between parties? Consider

that intentionally shifting spatial variables would dramatically alter the physical space and increase or diminish trust between people, encourage or discourage sight lines for people's eyes to connect, soften or enhance power dynamics between them, and add calm or anxiety to any conflict engagement.

We so readily accept the conditions of our environment, even as they often distance us from each other. Recognize how easy it can be to animate a space for more dynamic engagement. Take the time to look more deeply at the ways that space can be made dynamic and flexible for all parties no matter their status or culture. An animated spatial environment reframes experience from contraction, mistrust, hesitation, to expansion, trust, and attention, allowing for more open dialogue. Arrive early to your next mediation site to explore the spatial nuance of the environment that will frame the mediation.

Lesson 1: Practice Dynamic Listening

As mediators we are highly prone to our own unrecognized bias riding the coat tails of our internalized memories of past experience. We are vulnerable to being triggered by parties involved in the conflict we are mediating. Listen to how you listen. Ask yourself if you are hearing the present or your own past circumstances blocking you as mediator from engaging the conflict more honestly and more empathically.

Gaston Bachelard, philosopher of phenomenology, wrote on the human capacity to hear dynamically from within, therefore to be more available to deeply sense the subtle qualities of the present, in objects, space, and in people. *"The subconscious is ceaselessly murmuring, and it is by listening to these murmurs that one hears the truth."* ³ Memory is in the present - it is our past perceived in the present. How do our filters of the past held within spaces of our body affect our perception of present circumstances? What inner murmurs may be filtering and biasing how you are hearing yourself and others? How do you sense murmurs internalized within and between people in conflict?

*Contracted. Dense. Tense. Tight.
Claustrophobic. Dark. Shallow. Full.
Opaque. Anxious. Refracted. Breathless. Blind.*

Dynamic Listening is to listen at once to the one speaking, to the spatial environment and to your self as listener. To hear the murmurs of your own subconscious, whether whispering in your head or tingling somewhere in your body, is to more fully recognize your self. These murmurs are current memories of past experiences that clamor for attention, offering you recognition of what may be blocking you from more deeply hearing the one speaking, or from recognizing how the nuances of the space around you may be filtering what you are experiencing, perhaps even sustaining inequitable power relations between the parties. Listen. *"People escalate (their) conflicts by not being authentic. As they accept themselves more fully they become more accepting (aware) of others"*. ⁴

My path to learning how to listen dynamically included many years of working with dancers. Simone Forti was the first to teach me the capacity of the human body to *listen dynamically*. In the late 1960's Simone spent many hours at zoos watching animal movement to better understand how primal body movement responds to the earth's gravity. Simone recognized an animal's capacity to tune in to their bodily experience, detecting the nuance of sensation that informs their place in the immediate spatial environment, to trust, fight or flight. While animals are keenly sensorially aware of their relationship to space, humans must be reminded to tune in and listen. Forti created a dance form to subtly listen to the resonance of her body's sensorial experience of physical space. *"As I sat in the chair... I felt my body occupying the same space, as had the body of the original player. I could feel and even smell the player"*. ⁵ Simone inspired me to develop strategies to teach mediators to listen to their bodily responses to spaces they inhabit - to attune to present experience and recognize how space may confuse our perception of present and past.

The following scenario reflects on how listening dynamically to one's experience of space can expand dialogue between parties in chronic conflict. A few months after the 2009 Israel–Gaza war, I arranged travel to Israel for myself and two other members of *Mediators Beyond Borders*, ⁶ to visit *Neve Shalom Wahat al Salam*, ⁷ an Israeli village of Jewish and Palestinian residents dedicated to peace, coexistence and reconciliation. Abdesalam Najar, a Palestinian founding member of NSWAS, had initiated a series of cross-cultural mediation trainings for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli educators, community leaders and community mediators. The week we were there was their third and final training session. The three of us came to listen and share tools. Feeling sensitive to the palpable post-war tensions between the bi-cultural participants, I presented a dynamic listening exercise of spatial movement and attention.

I intentionally chose a large room, empty except for a few chairs, to provide a safe and open space for everyone to have the same opportunity to explore. Over the next hour I guided the participants to walk through the room at their natural gate in silence and gradually, while focusing on their breath, to slow the pace of their walk and pay more subtle attention both to the physicality of the outer architectural space and to the spatial experience within their moving body. After time enough for each person to acclimate to this dynamic attention, I asked them to individually gravitate to an area of the room that was most compelling, either because of feeling pulled towards or feeling pushed away from this space. In conclusion, each person was asked to share an experience triggered by the spatial qualities and the location they chose to be in.

What was revealed brought us to an intimacy of mutual recognition that we would not have arrived at if we had started directly with facilitated dialogue. While most of the Jewish participants gravitated to open spaces that were light filled, most Palestinian participants tended to spatially hover closer to walls, away from windows and direct light. The ensuing dialogue amongst us resonated with feelings of who felt safe where, of spaces of trust, mistrust, pride, fear and fearlessness. We existed in the same physical space but for the participants, vulnerable and less vulnerable, their psychophysical experience of this space mirrored their respective experience of the political conflict in which their daily lives were embedded. Their psychic internal spaces mirrored the external political circumstances surrounding them. Sharing these experiences did not resolve the political power imbalance between Israeli Jew and Palestinian, but did allow for deeper mutual recognition and empathy.

John Paul Lederach reminds us that listening takes more than technique alone, but must also employ the subtlety of aesthetics, “...akin to the haiku moment...attending to what things mean...achieved through aesthetics and ways of knowing...a capacity and pathway that rely on intuition more than cognition...moments of the aesthetic imagination”. ⁸

When involved in mediating difficult conflict conversation, ground the group's sensation and memory in an awareness of the present spatial environment. Give people time to explore and experience themselves in silence so they can hear their interior bodily voices and memories. Once trust is gained, the conflict conversation can be engaged expansively rather than resisted.

Lesson 2: Design the space for everyone's trust.

Spatial variables within a meeting space can mitigate, frame and sustain an existing conflict especially when the conflict is chronically embedded in the community and the community lack trust. I was witness to a public dialogue in South Central Los Angeles, which can instruct mediators in why it is so important to recognize the power relations between parties in conflict and to intentionally design the physical dynamics of a meeting space to gain everyone's trust.

The City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission invited the Neighborhood Council Commissioners elected to serve South Central LA, to hear community members express what they

considered to be excessive police force that had resulted in the multiple deaths of their black youth ⁹ and to make recommendations on the future of policing in their community. Most people were seated in 25 linear rows, while some stood against the outer walls holding cardboard cutouts of coffins with drawings and names of local youth killed by police bullets. The community members faced four Neighborhood Commissioners who sat at the front of the hall behind a long table raised on a platform. Noticeably, a fifteen-foot cavernous space separated the community and the Commissioners - an abyss of dead space. A podium with a microphone was placed in front of the seated community.

This spatial format is called proscenium design, where two groups face one another framed by a separation that can easily become adversarial. In this case one group was also seated higher than the other adding another spatial attribute of power differentiation. The result was two groups facing each other across a spatial gulf in a binary configuration evoking power and separation. How would this spatial design support reciprocal dialogue and listening?

Community members came up to the podium to address the Commissioners, expressing grief, anger and frustration. To them nothing had shifted procedurally to change their experience of oppression, victim hood, and perceptions of the police department as racist. As this spatial format did not inspire a mutual trust necessary for dialogue, community members and Commissioners could not listen nor



Francis Alys, *L'imprevoyance de la Nostalgie*, 1999 (11)

respond thoughtfully to each other, nor could they hear their inner murmuring to recognize thresholds between their past memories of oppression and the present. Harvard School of Negotiation professor and author William Ury coined three ways that people often react when trust is absent: avoidance, accommodation or attack. **10**

The ensuing event seemed like scripted theater. A community member took the mic off the podium, stepped into the spatial divide and asked why the community was positioned to be so isolated from the commissioners. Other members then occupied the spatial gap activating it as a space of conflict. The Commissioners immediately left to avoid their fear of further confrontation. The possibility for dialogue turned to mayhem. The spatial divide symbolized yet another oppression and impossibility. Although this was a clear public representation of a systemic racial oppression as a root to this conflict, the public officials could not see it and could not be adaptive and responsive. The intended dialogue did not take place.

The lesson to mediators: spend time to recognize your parties' cultural histories and perceptions of power. Know what the conflict issues are before mediation. Carefully assess the physical attributes of the space you are using for dialogue or mediation. Recognize that physical space will trigger psychic space. Allow space to engage with the conflict, not stifle it with neutrality and resolution before it can be expressed and honest dialogue can happen. Allow for dynamic shift. What if the public officials who had organized the meeting had been adaptive and responsive, recognizing that elements in the space mirrored the community's experience of separation and isolation? What do you imagine they could have done spatially to encourage options to suggest possibility?

Lesson 3: *Witness the experience of others.*

James Baldwin spoke eloquently of the experience of being made "other". How a dominant (white) culture blind to its racism is blind to the experience of a (black) minority group, unable to look directly into their eyes to recognize them. This double blindness mirrors itself, maintaining status quo, theirs as well as yours. *"In order to learn your name, you are going to have to learn mine."* **12**

America knows this symptom well, and we can transpose it onto any other chronic cultural conflict. In the Middle East there seems to be no end to the high cost on human life waged by political conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. We are used to seeing media images of this human cost, but what can we viscerally understand by looking at pictures when we are entirely distanced from the physical context of their space and time?

Travelling through Israel in 2015, I was moved to contact *Machsom*, **13** an activist peace group of women initiated in 2000, courageously and humbly working as witnesses to the daily crossings of Palestinian laborers who live on the other side of the Israeli border wall, bringing attention to the human costs of political and spatial restriction. As witnesses *Machsom* women dare to cross the spatial divides imposed by politics and culture, to stand close and become intimate with others kept behind a wall. Their role is of a conflict specialist, shifting between advocate, witness and conflict engager, present to hear, see, feel, acknowledge, apologize, facilitate and channel communication. They are an answer to Bernard Mayer's question.

On two consecutive mornings I accompanied *Machsom* members to witness crossings at three border checkpoints, including two checkpoints along the West Bank where Palestinian farmlands are divided by the Israeli boundary wall. Day workers, farmers and teachers cross daily into Israel from their homes in occupied territory, waiting two hours in line from 5AM to "enter" Israel, and wait two hours crossing to return home nine hours later. Witnessing this event was humbling, deeply disturbing and stupefying. Feeling my internal conflict at being witness to their humiliation was palpable and visceral, mirroring the spatial conflict of their physical reality. In wanting to turn away I was reminded that refusing to

look and see their anguish framed in physical space, was to negate the conflict, negate them and negate myself. This became a huge challenge for me, and ultimately a huge lesson that I now carry proudly.

“If you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover too, the terms with which they are connected to other people.” 14

Recognizing my conflicted psychic space focused me to more honestly reach into the unspoken spatial divide between us. One by one I wished each person crossing a good morning and shared eye contact. Most people passed by me looking back into my eyes reflecting a vulnerable acknowledgement of our mutually awkward positions, yet with an appreciation for sharing a human glance across intractable conflict. If only for a moment we engaged the conflict with an intimacy that overshadowed the divided space between us - between Israel and Palestine.

On day two I accompanied Nura Resh, a founding member of *Machsom*, to one of the larger border checkpoints at Irtach, where six thousand Palestinian laborers take two/three hours to cross into Israel each morning, and back home each end of the workday. We arrived early to witness throngs of men and women in a deafening silence clicking through a quarter mile of turnstiles. Nura later wrote in her journal: *“The unrelenting line of laborers moves incrementally through the clicking, squeaking turnstiles. Zachariah, a laborer, gives Dorit a rose bud, “...on behalf of all the laborers. Dorit is stunned. Through her eyes I see freshly the terrible injustice.”*

Indeed I was stunned and took photographs constantly hoping to learn something more through the collapsed space between my camera lens and the eyes of men and women who would look back at me. A shallow, full, listless, anxious space with no breath is the space of systemic institutionalized conflict. Once more I recognized that here only the intimacy of eyes meeting empathically could contradict the spatial impossibility for connection. *“To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other.”15* In my moral imagination, this is a conflict specialist’s aesthetic form for engaging conflict

Recommendations

1. Recognize the attributes of physical space.

Use elements of the space to animate the environment, to challenge expectations and habits – consider lights, chair/table positions, windows, curtains, and objects. Keep your eyes and ears open. Be inventive. Engage the environment so all participants feel safe yet fluid.

2. Practice Dynamic Listening.

Grow your capacity to recognize what is present and what is past experience. Pay attention to your parties’ gestures, movement, tone, gaze, and body positions to recognize how they may be holding conflict internally. Allow them space and silence to recognize their experience and their difference. Notice how parties in conflict inhabit space, feeling safe or unsafe.

3. Design the space for everyone’s trust.

Recognize how external social space can reflect internal psychic space to connote power, cultural difference, isolation and separation. Ask how people feel. Notice if the physical space replicates and mirrors aspects of the conflict between the parties. Be open to engaging a party’s triggered memory of conflict. Be adaptable to shift spatial attributes to suggest options and possibility.

4. Witness the experience of others.

Acknowledge your own experience of chronic social conflict. Be open to an intimate moment of eye contact. Allow for space, time and silence for tiny intimate gestures to occur – the movement of an arm, a breath, a smile, a direct empathic gaze, a moment of shared silence – these are core attributes of deep connection even in intractable conflict.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned/Knots Untied

Conflict takes place in the many spaces we inhabit - interior and exterior. We may be unaware of narratives of conflict that seem distant from our daily lives but are reflected within our psyches and in the environments we inhabit daily. Conflict that lives between us also lives within us. Reflecting critically on the spaces where conflict takes place reveals something about us - how the memories we carry silently drive reactive habits, and how spatial contexts we inhabit mirror our relationship to feeling safe or unsafe. We inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously: our thoughts, our memories, our somatic body, and the environmental, architectural, social and political spaces that we move through daily. Spatial awareness can stimulate us to recognize how we may be contributing to and responding to conflict, and allow us insight to shift from habitual reaction to thoughtful recognition of ourselves and of others, the backbone to engaging and transforming conflict into generative relations.

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Artist Dorit Cypis addresses aesthetics and ethics critically from studio art to education, conflict mediation and community building. Cypis explores psychosocial aspects of history, knowledge and experience that inform identity and social relations. Current projects include: *The Sighted See the Surface* – a performance, book + exhibition on sight and blindness, *North East Youth Council* - interaction between police, youth and community, and *The Future of Policing* –dialogue between police and community. Cypis has exhibited internationally and has been a recent recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as many other awards and fellowships. She has taught on identity and social relations internationally and is the founder of *Kulture Klub Collaborative*, artists working with homeless youth to bridge survival and inspiration. She earned a Masters of Fine Art, California Institute for the Arts and a Masters of Dispute Resolution, Pepperdine University. Cypis was born in Israel and currently resides in Los Angeles, USA.