Conflict, Mourning and Aesthetics
(what happens when history does not pass?)
Dorit Cypis

Conflict, informed by a complexion of personal subjectivities and cultural forces, exists within and between people. Where there is difference there will be conflict and as human difference is inevitable, so is conflict. The question is, what tools are available towards questioning, examination, reformation and transformation?

Peace is not the absence of conflict. The vision of democracy itself is based on the sharing of difference towards change. Healthy engagement with conflict builds trust, recognition, reciprocity, accountability and responsibility. The Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement are examples of clarification of societal values through conflict and engagement with difference. Healthy conflict is a simultaneous destructive and constructive movement resulting in change.

The fear and suppression of engagement with difference leads to a diminishing of spirit where trust is eroded, relationships are destroyed, positions are polarized and ideology becomes rigid. We witness this in our personal lives, in the lives of others close to us and in the lives of those we have never and will never meet. The newspaper is a repository of social upheavals on local and global levels. There is no end to conflict but there can be understanding and recognition of social context and personal collusion which stultify the conflict dance to entrenched positions, distorted perspectives, unmanageable escalation and violence. What are the contexts of conflict and how do we unwittingly collude and get stuck?

It has occurred to me, since I formally began the study of Conflict Resolution in 2002, that Aesthetics, and specifically the history and pedagogy of visual art, has an intrinsic and implicit relationship to conflict and a such has much to offer the field of conflict mediation and negotiation.

Aesthetics, the philosophy of questioning the integrity of form, offers brilliant tools for how to see, question, disassemble, reform, reframe, speculate and unknow. Aesthetics thrives on conceptual, formal, structural, perceptual and experiential conflict, needing to undo in order to see anew, displace in order to revise meaning, obscure in order to seduce, rupture in order to reveal the sublime....all this intentionally in the name of change. Aesthetics does not distinguish in value between chaos and order, form and formlessness, meaning and nonsense and as such can easily find its way around and between the disruptions, internal and external, psychological and political, of conflict.

While we live in a culture that puts value on exclusivity, uniqueness, certainty, objectivity and resolve, artists must function as open and sensorial, sensitive to subtlety, ambiguity and contradiction. Artists must constantly negotiate their internal capacity for uncertainty with the culture's inability and refusal. While artists may be highly creative and inventive, they must also evolve self-knowledge, criticality, form, discipline and choice. A successful artist is both playful and intentional, frivolous and exacting.

Artists are trained to generate many different novelties from which are selected only those that satisfy some intellectual or aesthetic criteria. As French poet Paul Valéry argued, "It takes two (minds) to invent anything. The one makes up combinations:

the other chooses." Psychologist William James called this process "abrupt cross-cuts and transitions from one idea to another, ...where the most unheard of combinations and partnerships can be joined. Chemist Linus Pauling has said, "you aren't going to have good ideas unless you have lots of ideas and some sort of principle of selection." Einstein described how "combinatory play seems to be the essential feature" in creativity.

While an artwork may be interpreted to reflect on public life issues of culture and history, this same work simultaneously reflects on and is generated by the private life of the artist herself. Art is of and from the artist, yet is not the artist. Art, like a mirror, is utopic and heterotopic, present as form yet reflecting something outside of itself. Art is simultaneously objective and subjective, dependent on its power to represent or signify something larger than itself while tied to a social context of time and place and to being read by a receiver/reader outside of itself. Roles of public and private, always implicitly present in an artwork, are inter-reflexive, inseparable and infinitely uncertain.

Art may touch the soul, may touch the heart, allowing what is felt but not known to be experienced, exposing humanity...the uncanny.

The great contemporary artist Allan Kaprow, father of the 1960's aesthetic era know as the Happenings, where social play disrupted societal norms of separation, has said,

> *"Art and life are not simply co-mingled; their identities are both uncertain*."
> Great Bear Pamphlet Manifestos, 1966

There have been countless artists throughout time who have dedicated their life vision to representing the uncanny nature of personal and social conflict as mirroring each other. Charles Simic writes of Hieronymous Bosch,

> *(The) artist's imagination holds up a mirror to reality, both the outer and the inner, but how those two realities will end up co-mingling in the reflection, the owner of the mirror may not even suspect.*

> *Each one of us is a synthesis of the real and the unreal. We all wear a guise. Even within our own minds, we make constant efforts to conceal ourselves from ourselves, only to be repeatedly found out."*

This co-mingling and uncertainty are equally true and present in every conflict. As conflict is fact driven by the person/subject telling the story, there may be as many "facts" and stories as there are subjects involved in the conflict. Individuals often feel a moral imperative in the truth of their story and will feel that their identity is threatened by another's version. In many ways those involved in conflict blindly mirror each other and miss the richness of their likeness and their difference, preferring to focus on the impossible fracturedness of their difference and believing that only one complete whole can be right at any one time.

Is conflict, in and of itself, the problem? Can we objectify the existence of conflict apart from personal and social contexts? Are facts the truth? Is each person's identity whole? Is one's subjectivity separate from the world? Are we separate from each other?

To unpack conflict we have to ask questions of subject formation and identity, not what do we know but how do we know it? How is a subjectivity formed and what constitutes an identity?

1.

I was born into psychological and political hysteria, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1951, six years after the violence of the Holocaust, three years after the violent creation of the State of Israel. I was innocent and unaware of the historical and emotional contexts, nevertheless experienced directly the psycho-physical affects on the survivors and their imperative at primal self preservation and self determination. This radical imperative, in the aftermath of violent conflict, left no room for mourning, emotional processing, evaluation and self critique... rather blindly laid the foundation for conflict based on guilt, neglect, fear and entitlement. The repercussions were, and are, personal and political, within the self, the family and throughout the social fabric of the region and in fact the world. Today we look towards the Middle East and we witness a politic ignorant of its own psychology, blind to mirroring its resemblance to the other. The result is a perpetuation of violence and conflict, internally and externally.

Art, the integrity of form, speaks vibrationally to this question of blind mirroring. In the words of the noted Israeli novelist, David Grossman:

> *Indeed, after many years of living in the extreme and violent reality of a political, military and religious conflict... the world is, indeed, growing increasingly narrow, increasingly diminished, with every day that goes by. And I can also tell you about the void that is growing ever so slowly between the individual human being and the external, violent and chaotic situation within which he lives...*

> *And this void never remains empty. It is filled rapidly — with apathy, with cynicism and, more than anything else, with despair: the despair that fuels distorted situations, allowing them to persist on and on, in some cases even for generations. Despair of the possibility of ever changing the prevailing state of affairs, of ever being redeemed from it. And the despair that is deeper still — despair of what this distorted situation exposes, finally, in each and every one of us.*

> *And I feel the heavy toll that I, and the people I know and see around me, pay for this ongoing state of war. The shrinking of the "surface area" of the soul that comes in contact with the bloody and menacing world out there. The limiting of one's ability and willingness to identify, even a little, with the pain of others; the suspension of moral judgment. The despair most of us experience of possibly understanding our own true thoughts in a state of affairs that is so terrifying and deceptive and complex, both morally and practically. Hence, you become convinced, I might be better off not thinking and opt not to know perhaps I'm better off leaving the task of thinking and doing and establishing moral norms in the hands of those who might "know better."*

> *Most of all, I'm better off not feeling too much — at least until this shall pass. And if it doesn't, at least I relieved my suffering somewhat, I developed a useful numbness, I protected myself as best I could with the help of a bit of indifference, a bit of sublimation, a bit of intended blindness and large doses of self-anesthetization.*

> *David Grossman, Writing in the Dark,*
> *New York Times, May 13, 2007*

2.
As a teenager in the late 1960's, studying sociology held for me the promise of revealing the mysteries of cultural difference and conflict. After 2 years at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, I recognized that there was a substantial piece missing from my studies. How could I study others when I did not know who "I" was? Intrinsically I understood that there must be a relationship between me as observer and whom I was observing. At that time academia did not provide a framework for answering this question. Subject and object, self and other were still thought of as separate, so I left in order to study art where I believed I would find my answers.

The first impact of art schooling, 1971-1977, was an assignment to write a definition of beauty on 2 separate sheets of paper, one with a pen, the other typewritten. My first aesthetic lesson taught that the same definition would look different depending on the context...in this case 2 different apparatus used to convey the same meaning. "Beauty" by pen is not the same beauty by typewriter.

> *Beauty is our sameness when we smile together.*

3.
There came a succession of endless Aesthetic Lessons turning my world upside down, not only requiring me to constantly re-evaluate meaning as relative to context but emphatically to recognize identity as relational. During the 1970's and 1980's, early on in my career as an artist, my explorations centered on questions of the subject and the ineffability of locating one's subjectivity. Who is this "I"; from where do "I" see; how do "I" see; why do "I" see in the way that "I" do? I came to understand the importance of witnessing the simultaneous presence *and* mutability of "I" as implicit in the process of self - knowledge. It became clear too that this "I" is always contingent on relating to "you". To know oneself one must encounter the other. In presence and mutability, the act of relating is both real and fiction.

> *"And ever since: hunting, harrying, I track you down, run away, I hunt your soul in every corner of your body, I hunt without weapons, it is a love hunt, I turn clever and powerful doves loose on you. But this is not always possible. Sometimes where you hide is inside me, I have to search myself to drive you out of hiding...Our drama is that we live in a state of mutual invasion. Now you are not only outside me but also within me. I am full of you and empty of you. How can that be possible?"*

> Helene Cixous, <u>The Book of Promethea</u>, 1983,

Cixous brilliantly points to this ineffability of locating "I" and "you", both present and absent. Translating this into the context of mediation, David Augsberger, in his book <u>Conflict Mediation Across Cultures</u>, uses the term *"interpathically"* to describe the ability to perceive and experience another's culture, its content and context, from a place within oneself while also being present from without. Interpathically, is the phenomenology of *knowing* through the sensorial dimensions of physical experience, touching, seeing, smelling, hearing, feeling.

The somatic and cultural body is both a channel and a catalyst for revealing and recognizing this co-mingling of identities, self and other. Aesthetics can be utilized to break down the complexity of "seeing" in order to reveal layers of cultural codes and subjectivity. We often take for granted the experience of seeing, assuming that what we see is self-evident. In actuality, seeing is a very complex act, physiological, psychological, social and emotional. Our deeply held cultural beliefs are evident in how we see, as are our personal experiences and memories often held as emotion in our bodies and projected onto the object or person of our sight. We often believe we are seeing what is before us when in actuality we are seeing our assumptions, reflections of ourselves.

The *Seeing Triangle* unpacks 3 dominant and interdependent aspects of seeing to better recognize our experience of each one. Each of us may have a dominant way of seeing, formally/physically, perceptually or experientially, but in fact all three aspects are occurring simultaneously. If one tends to dominantly see perceptually, through judgment or belief, (i.e. I hate that chair), underneath this "seeing" there is also an experiential element of memory, emotion and sensation, (i.e. the blue colour of the chair reminds me of a chair I fell off when I was 5 years old). The suppression of the experience will colour how one sees shifting what seen. Recognizing "how" we see, informs us on our particular differences. This self-knowledge is an important process as recognition of our difference help us to appreciate the difference of others, and opens paths for engagement.

Seeing Triangle:

FORMAL/PHYSICAL
mechanical, formal
shape, mass, volume
colour, texture, line

PERCEPTUAL
cultural beliefs
judgments
values
dislikes/likes, contrasts
ethics

EXPERIENTIAL
visceral
somatic
memory
pain, pleasure
emotion

4.
The Body in the Picture is an aesthetic exercise culled from my personal artistic practice and further developed to uncover the subtleties of identity as inter-subjective and relational. Participants are asked to bring with them pictures which they have collected both from the public domain and from their personal autobiographies. The only qualifier is that the images be compelling to them, either through attraction or repulsion. I know from my own practice, that a picture is collected because we consciously or unconsciously have an identification with it both psychologically and socially...it represents, often subliminally, an aspect of ourselves. This aspect may exist in the psychic realm of desire, fantasy, memory, dream and may be socially connected to family, history or culture.

Sitting in a circle, I invite participants to focus on one of their images, scanning how they are viewing the image through formal/physical, perceptual and experiential filters and noticing the effects that are stimulated within their body/mind. After 2 minutes I ask participants to pass their image to the person on their left and for each person again to focus on this new image...This is repeated until each person has their image back. Once more, they are to focus on their image...after having their attention intercepted by the images of others. We will then break for personal journaling before opening to a collective discussion of how each person experienced "seeing" the images and reflecting on themselves and each other. I have utilized this exercise since 1985 and I continue to be fascinated by the richness of what can be uncovered about subjectivity and otherness.

Psycho Portraits
Between 1991-1995 I created a portfolio of photographs as portraits, inviting individuals


to bring me their collected autobiographical and public domain pictures, chosen because they were compelled either by repulsion or attraction. I turned their images into 35 mm slides and projected 2 and 3 at a time to super impose onto a screen floor to ceiling size. The person was then invited to physically move through the space between the projectors and the screen using their body shadows to explore relationships between their overlapping images. By blocking projected light they would reveal and conceal parts of the over laying projections. The result was like a lava lamp of fluid inter-narratives. I would watch through my camera, placed behind the projectors, and would call "freeze" on seeing a compelling relationship between their physical body, their shadow and the mutated images. Their position was held and I would take a picture.

In the image above, the subject, Kelly Hemenway, stands in black silhouette with her head thrown back. She instinctively took this position when she recognized herself as the hair shaven teen, now with cartoon bullets whizzing across her head. She was quite surprised at the inherent violence within this relationship. Each of these portraits represents invisible seams between who we think we are, who we've been and who we would like to be, rendering identity as mutable and uncanny. What is revealed is full of internal struggle and conflict. The subject is challenged into a personal recognition she was unaware of.

The woman, Malka Michelson, faces the screen and sees within her shadow herself as a child, 1962. In the overlap of images the child is now embedded amongst prisoners of war in the famous photograph by Margaret Burke White, *The Living Dead of Buchanwald*, 1945. Malka later told me that this war left a deep pathos of grief within her family of origin.
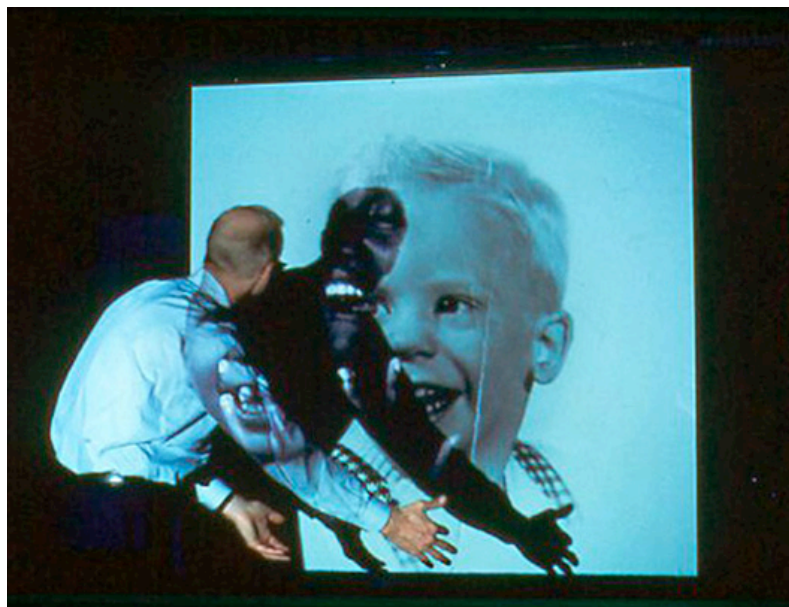
This man, Robert Radloff, stretches his arms out towards himself as a young child. Within the shadow of his silhouette and cutting through the child he reveals the face of Jesse Norman, the famous American opera singer. The synthesis of a black woman embedded within the image of a white corporate man is uncanny and disturbs our cliché cultural mores of racial identity stereotype.

5.
In 1992 I became compelled to pro-actively question the function of aesthetics in every day life. I was looking for an intimacy of engagement missing in my life as an artist. One day in July, as I was walking to my studio I noticed a sign over a storefront, *Project OffStreets*, and walked into a crisis center for homeless teens. I was met by an overwhelming shadow of our culture, neglected youth. They came from diverse ethnic, racial, class, gender and sexual orientation backgrounds. What was common to them was their tenacity in surviving the violence they each experienced in their families and in the surrounding hostile culture.

Over the next 7 years I created and directed *Kulture Klub Collaborative*, a partnership between artists, arts and cultural organizations, social service organizations, funders and at-risk homeless youth. *Kulture Klub* became a bridge between survival and inspiration, of artists guiding youth to move from isolation to expression and for artists' voices to participate in creatively affecting community. Hundreds of youth have since been introduced to looking at conflicts of gender, race, family, myth, and histories, as well as to whimsy, fantasy, and abstraction through the arts. They have witnessed arts presentations at theaters, museums, cinemas and have interacted with diverse artists of many disciplines. These youth have been offered tools to see themselves and others as mutually inter-reflective. *Kulture Klub* youth have subsequently created and presented their own artistic expression at public venues across Minneapolis.

> *"They want to tell us the stories of who they are and we must listen. We must take the time to listen to the details of their lived stories. We must respect their pain and their survival. To not do so draws us into colluding with their victimization, rendering both we and they powerless."*
>
> Dorit Cypis, 1996

There are many reasons why *Kulture Klub* works as a context for inspiration, self-knowledge and intimate recognition of the diversity of others. From the dozens of examples, I offer three :

On an evening in November 1997, Pumpkin was one of several youth who stayed on to hear the discussion after Spike Lee's film "Four Little Girls", sponsored by the Walker Art Center. The film re-exposed the racial tensions which led to the 1963 bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four young black girls were killed. During the discussion Pumpkin raised her hand to say that although she had studied Afro-American History at High School, she never heard of this incident. "Why?" she asked. The black elders present, two of whom had been present at that church in 1963, admitted that the shock and trauma of the incident had numbed them from speaking publicly about it until now. Suppressing the experience they could not grieve their loss nor mourn. This public screening of Spike Lee's film was the first time that they felt permission to grieve collectively. "Now that you told all of us here, now what do you want us to do?" asked Pumpkin. All those present, young and elder, black and white, turned pointing to her and said, "It's up to you!" Pumpkin's jaw fell open in recognition. "Oh. You mean I have to continue telling this story...", she replied. For an extraordinary moment all those present formed a supportive community guiding and honouring this homeless youth on. She felt a pride of purpose and the potential power of her voice affecting the lives of others.

In August 1997, Khadar, a recent Somalian refugee to Minneapolis, 16 years old, was tragically murdered by other homeless kids. Images of Lord of the Flies filled the mental gap left by sheer unbelievability. Denial, shame and guilt set in to the Drop-In Center quickly, just as it had with the elders present during the 1963 bombing in Birmingham. No one, not youth, not staff at the crisis center, spoke of this incident for the entire next few weeks. Hurting, everyone was avoiding conflict and therefore could not grieve.

To create an open forum in which to acknowledge the crime and the suffering, *Kulture Klub* invited elders of the refugee Somalian community in Minneapolis, youth, artists and social service staff to a memorial service honouring Khadar, the Somalian community and youth. We recognized that to break the mirage of numbness, youth and Somalian elders had to discover the details of each other's humanity so obscured by misperceptions, strong emotions, lack of trust, legitimacy questions and poor communication. We invited both communities to reveal themselves through mutual mourning and through a shared contribution of their respective cultural dress, food, song and poetry. People revealed representations and reflections of themselves. Instead of blame and judgement, we engaged in contribution and understanding. Interpathically, we experienced each other from within while also being present. Together, we saved face and we forgave.

> *Empathy involves a shift from my observing how you seem on the outside, to my imagining what it feels like to be you on the inside, wrapped in your skin with your set of experiences and background, and looking out at the world through your eyes."*
>
> Stone, Patton, Heen, <u>Difficult Conversations</u>, 1999

6.

Interiority	*Cultural*
Myth	*Race*
Memory	*Class*
History	*Gender*
Fantasy	*Ethnicity*
Dream	*Sexuality*
Family	*Age*
Desire	*Physical/Mental Ability*

The cultural qualities on the right are what typically signify identity. One may be able to "see" these qualities and therefore assume knowing something of the other. The qualities named on the left are not visible on the surface yet potently drive identity from inside. Who then is before us? Can we assume we know who we are looking at? How do the more numinous aspects of subjectivity move with, wrap around, slip through the social pores? We all too often get fixed in our opinions and judgments about the other based on simplistic identity codes which obscure the humanity and difference of the person. Ironically, when we fall in to these traps we obscure our humanity and our difference as well.

Difference between people requires an agreement of mutual recognition and recognition requires a commitment to engage intimately with each other's differences. When we refuse engagement we subordinate not only the other but also ourselves. When we annihilate the other we annihilate our otherness. When we exclude the other we run away from that which we do not know of ourselves. We divide and isolate.

> *In the mirror image, the mirage, we see only the surface details, and it is as if each detail holds the key to who we really are.*

> Leslie Dick, <u>The Narcissism of Small Differences</u>, 2003

Similarly, when we refuse our own visibility, that is, when we refuse to engage with our subtle selves, we cannot know our own otherness. How then can we engage intimately with someone else? Ralph Ellison, the brilliant author of *Invisible Man*, 1947, an epic journey of a Black American man towards self recognition in a racist society, eloquently writes in the prologue,

> *I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility: any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests on recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement...*

...and in the epilogue, at the end of his journey, the protagonist says,

> *I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.*

7.

Cinema, as an aesthetic form, is an important and highly ambiguous site of communal and individual identity formation. The film *Crash*, by Paul Haggis, 2005, teaches us a lesson about false engagement. The film extends into many seemingly fractured narratives that crisscross each other like overlapping freeways, intimately binding parties together through violent car crashes which trigger anger, frustration and fear expressed through racial conflict.

"*In LA nobody touches you. We miss that touch so much*," one character admits to another. "*Look for a frame of reference*", continues one, implying that a lack of intimacy precludes a loss of reference. We need intimate relations to recognize ours and each other's differences. We cannot assume an understanding of the other without the experience of daily relations. In *Crash*, we see a cacophony of mistaken identities, each assuming he or she recognizes the other, and each failing. In the absence of engagement across race, ethnicity and class, characters identify strangers through popular culture clichés set by advertising, television, newspaper reporting, film and music. Cultural mythologies are perpetuated through no frame of reference. The incomplete self is mirrored by an assumed other.

In 2006 I screened *Crash* as an aesthetic lesson on identity and racial conflict to a group of at-risk high school teens. The class was self segregated between Latino and Black youth who saw each other as the enemy. In their daily lives each group experienced similar issues of racism and poverty and negotiated similar peer pressures to join gang activity against one another. Survival to them was adversarial, dependent on killing the other to claim their own visibility. Ironically, they looked much like each other and yet were radically different. They unconsciously saw in the other their own incompletion and failure.

This is an uncanny truth...much like an infant who cries out when being picked up by a woman who is not her mother. The adult woman is "like" her mother yet is "different" than her mother. The infant cannot negotiate the trust that is required to engage with the difference, so negates the sameness. Likewise, these youth would not, could not, engage each other's difference directly. They had inherited a cultural conflict which had become suspended like a stranded object between them. Each reflected for the other the failure of a complete self. They identified with each other as victim, objectifying each other and externalizing their disappointment as rage.

> *The task of mourning involves the labor of recollecting the stranded objects of a cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned by an unspeakable horror.*
>
> *...in Nationalist Socialist Germany, Jews (the other), threatened the ideal narcissistic notion of a complete self.*
>
> Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects : Mourning Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, 1990

The warring characters in the film *Crash* mirrored to the youth their own social and personal conflicts. Through reflecting on the characters in the film they could acknowledge each other. This opening of mutual recognition allowed for some empathy between the youth towards conciliation.

8.

In Summer 2001, I read an article in the *New York Times* about Dr. Irma Rodriguez, a forensic scientist working on the many unsolved kidnappings and murders of young women in the desert around Juarez, Mexico. Dr.Rodriguez had finessed a way of re-creating sculptural likenesses of these murder victims whose identities had been erased. I was deeply moved and compelled by her abilities to transform human absence into presence.

THE NEW YORK TIMES INTERNATIONAL SATURDAY, SEPTE.

s Haunt Sleuth in a Murder Capital

r Investigator in Mexico Who Lost Husband and Daughter

As a forensic investigator, Irma Rodriguez often re-created the features of murder victims. Then one night murder came to her home, when gunmen killed her daughter and husband and seriously wounded her son.

In Spring 2002, more than a year into the current Intifada between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, a cover of *Newsweek Magazine* depicted the double portrait of a young Palestinian woman, the first female Palestinian suicide bomber, and one of the Jewish Israelis killed with her in the blast, a young woman who looked very much like the bomber.

Each woman holds the gaze of the viewer but neither will look at the other. How do these two seemingly disparate cultural violences, Mexican and Middle Eastern, strangely the same while different, worlds apart geographically as well as in their respective confounding and incomprehensible natures, become conflated and reconstituted in the mind and heart of a reader?

In November 2003, I sought and found Dr. Irma Rodriguez and invited her to forensically sculpt the heads of the 2 Middle Eastern women following the cover photo from Newsweek Magazine. Fascinated by my request, Dr. Rodriguez invited me to her home in Chihuahua, Mexico to assist her in the completion of the heads of oil clay. These heads, Semitic in their nature, also took on the uncanny reflection of their Mexican maker, Dr. Irma Rodriguez. My fascination was held most by the human gaze with which we were able to shape their eyes adding a haunting human psychology to their funereal clayness. In the summer of 2004, I created a series of photographic portraits of these sculpted heads focusing on the specific gaze each woman holds towards the other.

*(While) Dorit Cypis', Sightlines, 2003-2005,...engages with cultural difference, it nonetheless short circuits the reassuring ecumenism of multiculturalism by insisting on the difficulty of mutual recognition.
In a truly astute allegory of contemporary media (and politics), Cypis demonstrates that the production of images may be an index of civic blockage rather than of social connection....*

Interspersed with the photos...angled mirrors of the same dimensions as the photos extended the relay of blank looks within the room into the deep space of infinite regress...Sightlines dramatizes the incapacitation of public identification that results from the failure of mutual recognition. Without acknowledging one another how can we possibly build communities?

David Joselit, Public Image Ltd, Artforum, 2006

Sightlines, is my aesthetic response to witnessing a daily politic between people around me and globally devoid of reciprocity, accountability and responsibility, a politics of death that is despirited, adversarial and violent..

In my immersive environment layered with mythologies, psychologies, and politics, the viewer becomes partner to cross-historical and cross-cultural variables where relations are manifestly interdependent and cultural identities are not separate from one another. Who is seeing and who is seen? Whose memory? Whose history? Where is reciprocity between oneself and another, between history, memory, myth and desire?

When I encounter the vacancy between Palestinian and Jew, I am spun into a grieving, a mourning at the loss of possibility between relations. I do believe it is my capacity for mourning which allows me the space to image what I cannot know about the other, to allow the other to exist past my projections of whom they might be. This is the space of recognition we must hold out for one another...to grow into new futures and not recycle the death of the past.

> *Consider that the struggle for recognition...requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. That means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject positions, and allows us to see that the community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition.*
>
> *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 trans- formation, to petition a future always in relation to the other.*

Judith Butler, Precarious Life, 2004

By this phrase 'political dimension' I mean an analysis that relates to what we are willing to accept in our world, to accept, to refuse, and to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances. In sum, it is a question of searching for another kind of critical philosophy. Not a critical philosophy that seeks to determine the conditions and the limits of our possible knowledge of the object, but a critical philosophy that seeks the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves .

Michel Foucault, Subjectivity and Truth, 1980

9.

Liberty(leading the people), Dorit Cypis, 2003

In the summer of 2001 I cut an image out from the Los Angeles Times, of a group of young men running from tear gas in the Gaza town of Yan Kunis. This was the beginning of the current Intifada between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. In the original news image, which read politically, the men were right side up above the boy who was trying to crawl away from their path. I transformed the image to shift and expand its political narrative into one evoking memory of mythological proportions. Whose memory? Whose history?

Liberty (leading the people), a reflection on Eugene Delacroix's romantic/classical painting *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, is a poetic evocation of longing, loss and mourning...all inner emotions associated with unrequited desire for freedom, a "freedom" seemingly within reach and inevitably beyond our reach. It is a desire which propels human beings no matter what our cultural heritage, no matter what our gender, class and race lines.

Cypis' body, images, and objects stage a sit-in strike in the House of History. "They all speak at once. [. . .] Rather they whisper. They rustle. They murmur." (Samuel Becket, Waiting for Godot) They pose questions: If a body is a complete and rational object delimited by political and social coding and

complex ideological structures, what happens when its very materiality—the fidgety 'liveness' of the flesh—'disrupts' this coding and its critical prose? What becomes visible or thinkable when the body is un-housed in its being-ness? What becomes visible or thinkable when highly public and politicized images of private lives/private bodies are freed from the zeitgeist of a consumer society?

There are no easy answers to these questions. In their stead there are Cypis' historical hallucinations in the Space of Memory/History. They articulate the condition of being historically formed and yet not reducible to historical or ideological determinations which their (and her) very presence contests.

Michal Kobialka, University of Minnesota,
Theater Department, 2007

10.
To extend my inquiry further into the social domain, I completed a Masters of Dispute Resolution in 2005, learning strategies of mediation, negotiation and reconciliation. This knowledge informs and extends my current artwork to explore intimacy and social engagement. Mediation has thrown me head first into the public psyche, a social lab of the real and the immediate where form meets content and ideology shifts back to experience. Here too I maintain an emphasis on the reciprocity between looking "out" at culture and looking "in" within oneself.

I am very aware of how social conflict has become chronically internalized within individuals and is blindly perpetuated between people in all types of social and political relationships. To bring together the best of my professional practices as artist, mediator and educator I am developing *Foreign Exchanges* to provide services for conflict resolution, as well as coaching, consulting and training to assist individuals and groups in building engagement across personal
and cultural differences.

Foreign Exchanges borrows perceptual skills from aesthetics, sensorial skills from the somatic arts and communication and negotiation skills from mediation to build self-knowledge, critical thinking, recognition of difference, empathy, and aspiration.

Foreign Exchanges looks at the systemic social and personal conditions beneath each conflict to re-view and unwind the knots of identity. Our abilities to recognize personal and cultural differences allows us to create new relationships of generosity and reciprocity.

There is a sameness to being human, but humanity hinges on the subtlety of our differences. How is foreignness to ourselves and to each other shaped by simultaneous political and psychological forces? There are endless subtleties implicit in identity. Who are we to ourselves and to each other? The notion of *foreignness* is a highly charged contemporary axiom, from the stranger next door, to the undocumented worker, to the party with whom we are in conflict, to the unidentified terrorist. Who is the foreigner? How are we each foreign?

I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection to others. In this sense, I cannot know myself perfectly or know my "difference" from others in an irreducible way.
Judith Butler, Precarious Life, 2004

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