

## The Spirit of Proximity

Dorit Cypis  
September 2008

---

Journal for Art and Protest

What is the lifespan of *the spirit of revolution*? I always wondered about this question ...even as very young child. I remember my father, a textile engineer, traveling every year to Central America from Israel, and then from Montreal, and returning home, it seemed to me, with stories of either recurring natural disaster or revolution. My juvenile mind couldn't comprehend, but I did wonder: why another revolution in the same place, when there had been one only a few years before?

Recently, I was speaking with my friend Ken Cloke, an accomplished international mediator. He had been a consultant to Fidel Castro and his government over a period of seventeen years, until 2000 when our government restricted all travel to Cuba and strengthened an economic embargo. According to Ken, Cuba's revolutionary ideals themselves did not become fixed, but their manner of implementation, as well as Fidel's style of leadership, grounded in a history of guerrilla warfare, could not evolve as the country evolved. Of course, coercive politics from the outside had a huge effect on the implementation of their ideals. But what were the circumstances within Cuba, within Fidel Castro, which also shifted these ideals?

There is a spirited potential at the beginning of any new movement - be it a cultural revolution, new aesthetic awareness, or rebuilding a country after genocide or natural devastation. At the beginning there may be collaboration, support, and an ability to imagine change. Over time, this spirit may devolve into something completely unintended. Generosity and reciprocity may become fear based, protectionist, and adversarial. Where does the threshold between possibility and fear lie? How are these thresholds parallel within individuals?

In Israel, where my family found "safe haven" in the 1930s, there was belief in an ideal of community through generosity and reciprocity. This ideal devolved over several decades into fear and protectionism... it completely flipped.

*Where do you hold out your ideals for now?*

I hold out for an understanding of how psychological capacity and political action are parallel, simultaneous movements. To allow for recognition of both within any group, an infrastructure of physical, psychic and social safety must be developed.

*Why the focus on the safety of communities in political work?*

As we each live in an animal body, safety is a natural need for us and between us. If we were not meant to live in community, the universe would have created human beings as one gigantic body, an un-individuated body-blob, but we are many, and at the same time each is one. We must constantly balance between the group and the individual. Living with each other is an imperative. We live in many worlds and have many different relations with many different communities. Our goal ought to be how to meet each other and at the same time not lose our individuality. Seemingly opposite notions of the collective and the individual are necessary and simultaneous realities.

*So what tools and structures do you find useful when you work with concepts of community?*

For any group building cohesiveness, it is essential to look at the group container that is being created. Whether it is a home or a community hall or a business center, there is a container of visible and invisible infrastructure that binds each community. How physically and psychically safe each member feels in the collective is an essential first question if the group is to function well. The container must be a channel or a process for the group to understand how to communicate with each other and recognize each other's difference. Protocols of accountability, inclusion/exclusion, decision-making, collaboration, speaking out, funds allocation, implementation, evaluation, conflict engagement ... each require participatory thoughtfulness. Who is accountable to whom? Is crisis dealt with by punishment, ostracizing some out of the group? The group needs to have a sense of it's own social justice.

*In our era, when we operate between communities so much, how does an individual navigate between communities while maintaining something?*

I can refer to my experience of growing up in multiple cultural contexts. I have had several passports, as have my parents. Many languages were spoken in my home and in the social communities around me, so navigation between communities has always been a natural imperative to me. At a very young age, I was hyper-conscious of the differences around me and of my own limitations in knowing who and where I was. It is a norm that people are socialized into the group that is immediately around them, but what if that group is always changing? One either accepts that change as implicit in life or one feels crazy and inadequate. I fit the latter.

It's common to feel as if you don't belong. Group identity is often formed in opposition to the social differences of those outside the group. Group members protect the sameness within the group, recognizing the comfort in how group members are like one another. Human difference, which inevitably continues to exist alongside human sameness, is often repressed or taken for granted, creating an artificial homogeneity and eventually an institutionalization of vision and values. Change becomes mandated rather than thoughtful and negotiated. It's difficult to navigate between groups unless one is very sure of himself/herself and can accept difference intimately, not only theoretically.

*How did you learn to navigate your place?*

Self-consciousness has taught me to recognize the suffering of others as well as my own. I became aware of strategies that facilitate change. In the late 1960's I studied sociology to understand human difference. After two years I dropped out of college because the manner of studying others at that time seemed pretentious to me. It was as if all sociologists were undifferentiated from one another and the individuals in the group being studied were undifferentiated from one another. Two groups, one empowered to look and the other disempowered to be seen. This was a limited dualistic understanding of identity as fixed and mandated by cultural variables. I wanted to understand not only *who* I was looking at but also *how* I was looking. My early experiences taught me that there was a relationship between the two, that who I was internally and socially was implicit in how I saw you and vice versa. Many years later I understood that identity itself pivots on this relationship.

*How did you learn to maintain an insider and outsider position at the same time?*

...Through aesthetic skills of discernment. For example, writing about beauty with a pen and writing about beauty with a typewriter may be the same words but each is a different beauty. I would apply these skills to noticing patterns in my own emotions and behavior, recognizing that a certain action by another would elicit a particular response in me. In the 1970's I began exploring subjectivity, though back then that word wasn't used; I was asking, "what is this I, that I use to designate myself, and how is this I constructing this relationship between me and the object before me or between me and that other person?" I became fascinated with the differences within myself and the differences between others and me, differences of language, politics, conflicts... all histories of difference.

*How does this personal discerning relate to a social practice?*

I was very aware of what was outside of me. Partially through strategies of critique I was learning in art school, I gained an awareness of where my differences were on the inside, where foreignness lay inside me and how my actions mirror those things that I find oppositional on the outside of me. I became fascinated with psychology in relationship to social construction.

*I get a good sense of your interior relationship to the world, how do you externalize it? This is a social question as much as a curiosity around one person's practice. I mean it can be such a struggle to be true to oneself and others in public settings*

As an artist, if I were to only externalize my interiority, I would probably be an abstract expressionist. That was never my interest. To externalize in a constructive way I had to recognize that interiority is an ongoing aspect of each one's identity not just my own. I had to learn empathy, to see/feel the person before me, to look deeply, to ask where the threshold between you and me is, to make space for this other interiority. How much can I know about the other when we are not each other?

*It not only seems to be a deep looking, it also seems to be a manifesting through language. I always find language to be such a struggle. How does that work for you?*

English being a second language for me always played a large part in how I see. Language never felt safe to me so I grew to depend on navigating more psychically from the interior out to understand how the world becomes represented through me and not as separate from me. When the world is unfamiliar, you learn to depend more on your interiority for framing, analogy, and connection. For example, take any newspaper image of someone else's experience. The reader can never know just what that image is representing. As context and experience is missing for the reader, the image must be read through the reader's interiority to give it meaning.

*So as an artist you construct how the world is meeting you. How do you know what the world needs back from you?*

It depends on the roll I'm playing. If I'm with a child, they certainly don't need the same thing back from me as an observer of my artwork, or from a party of a conflict that I am mediating. I don't give the same thing to each person.

Listen with discernment, from the present not the past, not from judgment or a fixed idea. Just as the world is not fixed, need is not generic. Each event or person is different as is each engagement. We each come through a set of culturally defined circumstances of heritage, religion, class, gender, race...all real variables experienced infinitely differently by each person. We are like mercury, infinitely multiple, while of course we are each also tied to certain cultural variables. We each are fixed within culture and are not fixed at all. Both are true.

*What is actually real... or not real?*

Everything is both real and unreal at the same time, fixed and totally mutable. "Is it truth or is it fiction?" Both. It's truth to somebody because it's the only way perceived or experienced by him or her, and it's fiction to somebody else because they don't perceive or experience it that way. I love aesthetics because it depends on a liminal space between truth and fiction, between art and life, a dialectical betweenness that creates an opportunity for dialogue between positions. The operative question is not "what is real?" but, "can there be dialogue?"

*An image or object can be so iconic and yet so utterly meaningless.*

It can be sublime, like this quote by Fidel Castro:

*This is not my farewell to you. My only wish is to fight in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading Reflections by Comrade Fidel. It will just be another weapon you can count on. Perhaps my voice will be heard. I will be careful. Thanks.*

*Fidel Castro Ruiz. 5.30 PM. February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

His words are autocratic, didactic, adversarial, and they are humble, poetic, resigning, gracious. There are two Fidels here. One does not cancel out the other. I wonder if Fidel recognizes this?

The ability to sense complexity in any individual creates huge leverage in knowing how to engage. Engagement must be dialectical in movement, within each person and between each person. Engagement is not a fixed dance. Moving from this understanding of identity and engagement would make social activists more effective, more nuanced than acting from a fixed adversarial position of wrong and right.

*I often find myself operating with binaries in personal relationships. Is that normal?*

We are utterly socialized in this binary way. Our history is based on it, at least the history that we know, that we've been told. It's constructive to notice this pattern of behavior in yourself, realizing that you have a choice to not engage in this way.

*I assume that your roll as a mediator is to point out that identity and engagement are not fixed. How do you do this, and how does this realization help mediate a conflict?*

I'll use as example a formal mediation I conducted in a contract dispute between an artist and a gallery. The parties in conflict with each other had no idea that each was providing for the other what the other most hated, and yet most desired. This is a formula for the mirroring of co-dependency. Although this was ultimately a business relationship that required a mutual contract of expectations, the gallerist blindly treated the artist like a child needing protection, while having no legal rights. On the other hand, the artist, blindly addicted to being treated like the special child, wanted to be taken seriously so resented that he was being patronized. Neither party could recognize the conflicting signals they were sending to each other as neither could see that the external conflict was mirrored within them. In the mirrored outer conflict, they reflected to each other their private inner struggle.

The artist unconsciously needed something utterly essential from the gallery, acceptance and nurturing, so suppressed his right to a legal contract that would put both parties on an equal footing. The unconscious goal of the gallery was to have more intimate connection with creativity so infantilized the artist to get closer. Their behaviors created awkward distance and left them in an unequal power relationship. Other contextual differences included nationality, ethnicity, religion...each packed with histories and experiences leading to very different perceptions and expectations.

Mediation uses various strategies to ensure an environment where each party is carefully guided into a dialogue of speaking, listening, reflecting and option setting. The mediator manages the process of communication such that each party can eventually hear not only the position of the other party but also the layers of invisible personal interests, memory, history, family and emotional need, which may be fueling this position. One mediation strategy is when one party speaks, the other may not interrupt, rather listens for points of provocation and knee-jerk reaction he/she may have. The parties learn where their

thresholds are for provocation, and where their patterns of resistance may be. Mediation teaches reflection and the ability to hear the other.

Reframing is another mediation strategy - where the mediator repeats what a party says so that the other party may hear it but without the intended daggers attached. The mediator will replace the didactic or punitive nouns, verbs and adjectives with more open ended ones. For example, one party may say, "I hated what you did...that was a really stupid thing you did." The mediator would re-frame with, "I'm hearing that you have a strong dislike for what happened, and feel that the other party reacted in a way that was deeply bothersome to you. Is that right?" Through reframing, the parties hear words of affect rather than words of attack that close discussion. The mediator acknowledges the party's perceptions, empathizing and acknowledging feeling, "I am so sorry you are feeling that much anger. This must be so stressful." Through this process, the "enemy" is humanized through a context of how he/she perceives and feels the conflict. The intention is to be able to see the person and "the problem" as separate and intertwined. It is often the "problem" that needs transformation so that the relationship between the parties may also transform.

*While you talk, I hear this process as a psychic reorganization of space. I see you talk with your hands. You're pulling an invisible box apart and twisting it into something new. There is within your hands a shaping of an imaginal, fictional but real, space.*

Yes, it's like virtual sculpture!

*A fictional space you create through words where the space of conflict can exist differently.*

The parties have to hold the possibility of change in their body-mind. Much of mediation is about this possibility. The process is quite physical and gestural with language and action manifested through the body. Through role-play parties can psychically become the other. Many mediators are terrified of this much uncertainty, preferring to only discuss tangibles that can be mathematically divided.

*The final subject I'm interested in is about proximity between peoples and communities. The Fidel quote talks about this as a contemporary position- lots of clear, divergent points with no clear center. We are near each other but without explicit relation. If one holds on to that as an ideal and not as a problem, how do we best utilize this moment?*

The critical question is one of proximity, spatial relationship and intimacy. How do we get close to otherness, foreignness...on a psychophysical level, not just by studying social psychology and learning the social codes of the other?

Say you are a Guatemalan woman, working class and you're 40 years old. I could translate this information through:

- A. The political structure of Guatemala is authoritarian - people are used to growing up with authority over them and behave in a more predictable way.

- B. Guatemala is a more homogenous culture where people are more used to recognizing sameness in the group.
- C. There isn't fear of proximity between people because sameness allows for trust.

Suppose that I am a Guatemalan woman, second generation in the USA, working class and I am 40 years old.

- A. The USA is a less authoritarian structure than Guatemala.
- B. Individualism is greatly valued and encouraged so I'm allowed to be different.
- C. I don't fear authority like someone in Guatemala might so I have more lateral space to be an individual. I'm not afraid to push boundaries outside of the group.

Although we are both Guatemalan, these are clear differences between you and me, but this information still does not provide proximity between us. I may be more aware of cultural codes, which have socialized your general behaviors, but the you that reside within, I know nothing about. I know nothing about how much you may love your son, that as a child you may have wanted to be someone else, that your dream life is full of desire to fly, or that you love listening to flute music more than guitar. These are the more liminal variables of your differences. Reading about your social codes is one layer of proximity. Knowing what you dream about is a much more intimate proximity. They're both important. You know a bit about a person if you know that they lived in an authoritarian culture. Knowing that they love flute music is a knowing with more proximity, a more intimate level.

Those of us who grew up with ideas of post modernism, feminism, multi-culturalism, grew up with knowledge of difference, but intimacy with difference requires psychophysical proximity. Get close.