A Resounding Silence
From Rush Arts Gallery Exhibition of Silence
April 12th – May 18th

U.S. history and culture is inextricably entwined with the legacy of its enslavement of millions of African people. The history of slavery, of antebellum America, of the gradual emancipation of slaves and its ramifications in race relations today, are felt in every aspect of U.S. life. Despite the great advancements made over the last century and a half, social and economic inequality persists, the pain of which lingers in the cracks and fissures of our society.

“I say remember the pain because I believe true resistance begins with people confronting pain, whether its theirs or somebody else’s, and wanting to do something to change it. And its this pain that so much makes its mark in daily life. Pain as a catalyst for change, for working to change.”

-bell hooks, from Yearning (1990)

This past autumn, Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry were invited to make an art installation in the historic Center Church on the Green, in New Haven, Connecticut. The installation (Silence) at Center Church focused on the period in 1820 when the members of African decent petitioned the church elders to sit on the ground floor in the central pews. The petition was denied, continuing the commonly held practice of segregated seating, thus leading a number of the members to establish the first black Congregationalist church in American, known today as the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church.

The installation of Silence at Center Church had three components: photographs of current African-American members of the Dixwell Avenue Church, whose images were placed “seated” in the pews of the main floor (standing in for the ancestors who were denied access); a series of granite memorial plaques etched with the biographies of original church members of African descent, which were installed in the balcony; and a
third element, an audio reading of an address given by Reverend James Wright to the Anti-Slavery society in 1834.

Silence is an elegiac, respectful and moving piece of memory exploring one congregation’s relationship with its multi-racial past. The attempt to address – perhaps in some way make amends for – the church’s segregationist history proved too painful, or too embarrassing, for some board members. On November 9th, Center Church’s Board of Stewards, a governing body responsible for the maintenance and use of the church, elected to remove portions of the art work; specifically, the photographs of Dixwell Avenue congregation members were moved from the central seating area and placed in the balcony. The artists, in a public statement, declared that “the actions by the Board of Stewards to remove the artwork, prompted by the private lobbying of parishioners, without notifying the Pastors, the congregation, the sponsoring arts organization or the artists, is a startling example of history repeating itself.”

Most of us would prefer to turn our heads and hearts from this ghastly past and dream of a better future. Yet the pernicious effects and insidious consequences of New World slavery still linger... American’s historical amnesia about black humiliation and black suffering is seen as a basic prerequisite for a better American future of racial harmony. Yet history – the past as history and the present as history – will not let us off so easily.”

-Cornel West, The Ignoble Paradox of Modernity (1997)

For its re-installation at Rush Arts Gallery, Silence bears witness to its own battle against marginalization, struggling through the pain to remember those faces and voices who fought segregation in the past, as well as those who confront exclusion today. This quiet, persistent monument sounds out forgotten and hidden histories by addressing the silence that conceals racial discrimination.

A resounding silence.

-Simon Watson