

Civil Servants

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Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry blur the barriers of gender, race and religion in order to heal open wounds.

The first time I heard about Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry, I was inspired. Their piece, *Silence*, was a multimedia, multilayered, multi-spaced installation in a New Haven church created by two artists (man/woman, black/white) who sought to open up the conversation on race and history. How profound to collaborate on art that challenges our own notions of the “civil” society in which we live. The next time that I heard about *Silence*, the work had been altered and the whole process undeniably ruptured.

McCallum and Tarry have a history of creating innovative, politically conscious, public art. One of their most well known installations, *Witness: Perspectives on Police Violence*, consisted of a series of call boxes outfitted with sounds and images recalling specific instances of police violence. The boxes, a metaphorical reminder of the victim’s lack of agency, traveled through sites of police violence in New York. McCallum says, “The call boxes framed a space to eavesdrop, collapsing intimate conversations into the city streets.” After the boxes were installed outside the Bronx Museum, some teenagers from the neighborhood began to stand beside them to guard against vandalism and explain their importance to passersby.

Like *Witness*, *Silence* was planned as a series of site-specific installations. The first was Center Church in New Haven, Connecticut. In the 1820’s Center Church was petitioned by several of its African-American parishioners for permission to sit in the main part of the sanctuary, the ground floor. Until that point, they were relegated to the balcony (a national practice that existed in some form until late in the 20th century). Reportedly, some members even offered to pay for pews on the ground floor. After being denied,

many of these members left in protest and formed the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church (also in New Haven). Though many years have passed between then and now, many of the same feelings that ignited the original exodus linger between the two churches. In an effort to right the wrongs of Center Church, the pastor enlisted McCallum and Tarry to create art that would unite the two congregations.

McCallum and Tarry were the perfect artists to execute a plan of civic action, create formally beautiful and meaningful work, start a dialogue about race and history, and maybe even mend a rift in the community. McCallum was an artist-in-residence at the New York Civil Liberties Union. Both were involved in the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, which explores the ways in which the arts can enhance public discussion of social issues. Prior to this, they had been thinking about how antebellum history informs contemporary discourses on race. *Silence* consisted of a haunting sound piece (a hallmark of McCallum and Tarry's work) performed by Imani Uzuri, who read an 1834 address to the Anti-Slavery Society. In the balcony, where the former parishioners sat, there were individual, granite memorial markers placed around the wall commemorating each of the 19 members who left in the 1820s. On the lower level (the site of contest) were photographs on posts of current members of Dixwell Avenue. Though not depicting direct ancestors of the members who left, the photographs "sat" in the pews denoting both absence and presence. The photos innervated the contemporary conversation about race and rights in similar ways that the sound component and the memorial markers served history.

During the first weeks that the work was installed, members from Dixwell Avenue, the community and the artists came to services at Center Church. After two weeks, a faction within Center Church removed the photographs from the lower sanctuary, citing them as disruptive to the worship service. The photographs were then placed in the balcony. The hideous irony of their removal and replacement sparked McCallum and Tarry to drape sheer black gauze over the memorial markers that remained in the balcony, an act as grave as the original exodus. About this experience, McCallum explains, "The decision to have a continued presence in the church after the photographs were moved to the

balcony served as a mirror to the way in which silence functions in relation to race today. By doing this, hopefully we made people aware of their own silent and covert actions.”

Currently, the artists are working on installing another phase of *Silence* in another space in New Haven and bringing it to historical sites in New York in the fall of 2002. They are also interviewing a range of contemporary citizens on the impact of race and silence.