

Monumental Interruption

Democratic process and public space cannot, even for a moment, be sustained if we do not provide conditions for the inclusion of the silent, invisible, and seemingly passive, though potential, speakers and actors on the public stage. It is the silence of the city, the invisibility of many of the city's residents, that needs to be interrupted. It is our fear of seeing the faces, hearing the voices, of these "others" —our unwillingness, even incapacity, that needs to be exposed and disrupted.

We must be supportive and inclusive specifically towards perhaps the most important potential speakers: those incapacitated by the very experiences they may wish to communicate, are incapable of opening up. Their capacity for sharing their "passion," their witness, their testimony and their critical vision has been internally and externally, politically and psychologically, shattered. Before they can add their voices to the democratic *agon* ("contest"), they must regain and develop their communicative abilities, while we must regain our ability to listen and hear. This is a healing process that must be inspired and protected both for the sake of the social and psychological health of the city and its residents, and for public space and democracy in general.

The process of unlocking the post-traumatic silences of the city requires both a critical and clinical attention and approach. For my part, though without a proper theoretical rigor, I must risk injecting into the theory of "agonistic" democracy proposed by the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe other concepts and ideas. In my practitioner-artist's mind I try to infuse (and hopefully not confuse) concepts of agonistic democracy with ethico-political concepts from Michel Foucault and psycho-political ideas and suggestions from Judith Herman, a trauma therapist and theorist. Calls for *dissensus*, disagreement, passion, and an inclusive adversarial discourse that acknowledges and exposes social exclusions (Mouffe) must be injected and interjected with the call for an "ethics of the self," and of the other, through "fearless speaking" (Foucault), combined with a call for psychotherapeutic recovery through "reconnection" that emphasises a role of public truth-telling and testimony (Herman).

Today's public space is barricaded and monopolized by the powerful presence of historic symbolic structures and events, as well as by a monumental form of "publicity," commercial and political. It represents what Walter Benjamin called "the history of the victors," of those chosen to remember and be remembered, at the expense of the forgotten and invisible tradition of the "vanquished." It is the Vanquished, not the Victors, who are the most invisible and unheard, and they should be first to share with others the truth of their testimony. Some of them may have lost confidence that their voice will make any difference, while others may be locked into post-traumatic silence, and even amnesia.

In my case the attempt to disrupt the city means doing so in an aesthetic way, through the introduction of especially designed communicative artifices and participatory monumental spectacles. Their aim is to animate both the voice and gesture of the city's contemporary Vanquished, the blind and numbed ear and heart of the more fortunate Victors, alienated from them and isolated from the city's reality. Inspired and encouraged they may in turn disrupt the silent continuity of the city's historic and symbolic space and the passivity and the exclusiveness of its public life. Such disruption may awaken, if only for a moment, a night, a week or month, the city with dynamic and critical public discourse.

In my own artistic work I have sought to contribute, as much as I can, to a fusion of seemingly opposing political and ethical attributes. My projects practically endorse some of the propositions by the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas which call for the "projec-



Dis-Armor, 2000: This instrument was used by high school students in Hiroshima. A microphone and two video cameras in the head piece transmit voice and images of the user's eyes to speakers and two LCD screens on his or her back. The piece also includes a rearview mirror, computer, and batteries, as well as wireless video transmission that allows pairs of users to wear each other's eyes and speak with each other's voices.

tion" of an ethical space of asymmetry, the inequality in our ethical obligations toward those less fortunate than ourselves, onto the usual public space of political symmetry and equality in rights. Such ethics include these strangers, the inhabitants of the blind alleys, the dark and hidden scarred pockets of our urban life where true public space is located today: undocumented immigrants, the hidden victims of the U.S. Patriot Acts, traumatized survivors of urban violence, mothers of murdered children, the homeless and others living in the shadows of city monuments are more important to me and the basis for my artistic work. The hope behind such an aesthetic enlargement and more open artistic transmission is to disturb the illusions of egalitarian society by creating, on a temporary basis, an interruptive, interrogative, and ethically asymmetrical public space. This temporary space may become, as I hope it will, the seed of a new *agon*, a contest of competing voices of truth-telling, and lead, as I hope it will, to the recognition and creation of further critical speech acts on the part of those unequal others, and to *their* greater social, political and cultural inclusion.

Memorials have been built as a reminder, a minder, and as a warning. Even when built without such a conscious intention, they should be perceived as having this monitory, and questioning function—monitors and critics of (and in) the present. Despite such a demand and an expectation most memorials are (in an uncanny way) quite inactive and incapacitated. Monuments and memorials, in their speechlessness and stillness, look strangely human, while traumatized humans, in their motionlessness and silence, may appear strangely monumental. Speechless survivors living in their shadows face the blank façades and blind eyes of our public buildings and memorials, those speechless witnesses to present-day injustices. Both require re-animation. My public projections focus on animating—awakening back to life—our silent monuments and memorials, as well as the silent residents of the cities they inhabit.

But in the shadows of historic and official monuments and memorials lives a new city, the new city of new living monuments and memorials. These are the nameless and speechless, potentially new, agonistic living monuments who with regained voice could become new public monuments (from Latin *monumentum*, “warning.”) Just as survivors through their witness become monuments in their own right, public memorials, too, can come to life. Indeed, they can doubly live, and often contend, in an internal dialog with those who animate them. But before they can add their voice to the democratic *agon* they must recover their shattered communicative abilities, for the sake of their own health, and of the health of democracy. In such a situation, those among the initially speechless survivors who wish to learn how to animate the equally speechless monuments of the city, for example, and eventually speak through them, must become both patients and doctors. In order to heal and animate themselves they will attempt to bring the monument to life and cure its numbness and dumbness; in order to animate the monument, they need to critically animate, and bring to life, and cure themselves. This is an opportunity for using these respectful and respectable structures as the stage sets and as the costumes or as the monumental puppetry in the dramatic therapy for the survivors of the post traumatic stress who will learn with the strong sense of their mission how to contribute to social change by becoming artists in public truth-telling and free and fearless speaking.

A central question for me is how to find a place for technology in the explosion of communications technologies during a time of breakdown in cultural communication—a search for a new interface, an artistic, not just an industrial, interface. Technology, as communicative artifice, is needed to operate between alienated subjects. Using psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s concept, technology is also needed as a “transitional object,” as a potential space located between the inner and outer world, between reality and fantasy. Such a transitional communicative and technological effort can protect and encourage a developmental process through the use of the designed or adopted object, a vehicle from the inner “me-world” towards the “not-me-world” of others, from post-traumatic hopelessness and silence to the use of words and gestures directed toward both the conscious self and others. What I have done is design special speech-act equipment and events, even to the extent of taking up, on a grand scale, one’s fantasy of becoming a powerful “cyborg” or a “speaking monument.”

But in order for them to be more fearless witnesses, critical speakers, a true “monumental therapy” must be undertaken. This is best done through the intervention of willing monument-animators. Firstly, those who, in the process of recovery from their trauma, have just become themselves the speaking monuments should initiate it, those of whom clinician Judith Herman has said, “In refusing to hide or be silenced, in insisting that rape (or any other unspeakable life event) is a public matter, and in demanding social change, survivors create their own living monuments.” It is possible that the architectural monument or memorial, too, may similarly get and feel better.

Artists, designers can do something to help by creating a developmental “third zone,” a potential space or holding zone for these potential fearless speakers and truth-tellers to be inspired and assisted in learning how to speak. My own projections onto monuments, participatory video animations of these memorials, magnify the participants’ urgent testimony. They constitute an attempt to take on the memorial’s greater physical scale and weight. My work “adopts” these existing symbolic structures of city architecture, often with the help of specially designed instruments, and offers participants (the co-artists) and the public (the co-agents), as well as media people, activists and others, such a transitory and transitional space. All the preparatory stages of recording and re-recording by participants (before the projections and performances using my instruments), along with



The Tijuana Projection, 2001: The headpiece, equipped with a video camera, LED lights and a microphone, allows the wearer to project her face and voice in real time onto the facade of the Centro Cultural in Tijuana.

the architectural forms and organizing cultural institutions, are transitional phenomena. This situation is designed to foster an enhanced confidence in our engagement with an often unfriendly and risky world, both the outside world and the fearful, often frozen and discouraged, inner world. Those who speak are at the same time helping themselves move from private confession, through critical public testimony, into action, because they begin to understand that what they have to say is going to change something. The very fact that they are speaking of something of which no one else wishes to speak, and that they are using the authority and the phenomenological power of the architectural body, allows them to assume the historical significance of these monuments as silent witnesses to previous and present events. They also make a link between their present life and past events, hoping that these events will not repeat themselves in the future; they end up becoming real memorials.

By actualising built memorials, they also become living memorials themselves, as well as agents and witnesses. They testify and “pro-test” (from *testis*, “witness”). The testimonial is submerged into the life of the city. Now there is the new and powerful presence of someone who denounces and announces, in an organic connection to a symbolic structure of some importance. It becomes clear that if those people can say something, if the monument can speak, than perhaps they in turn can also *do* something. There is a possibility there of spreading the contagious process of unnerving, irritating, and interrupting the passivity and total silence of the city. The silence of the city is the speech of the city, but no one hears that speech. When they speak of that silence, they also question it. They themselves may use it, some more than others, as a vehicle to reconnect with society, since they—during the long process of recording, rerecording, editing, actually putting words to unspeakable experiences—use it as a therapeutic vehicle. Because they must

also become the animators of the structure, they contribute a comic and strange aspect to it, like some new dramatic therapy. They create a certain distance from themselves, because they themselves become monuments and buildings. They see others in the same situation: they are no longer alone. They are unique, but also part of a larger picture. It is a process of “reconnection” that artists, or an art of the animation of the monument, can provide.

There are other forms and techniques of reconnection that occur through therapy and in cultural work. One instrumental factor in my work is that the projection is not only practiced and pre-recorded over a long period of time, which is very important, but that it also has a live component: real time. Thus there is the possibility of feedback, meaning that the public (whoever chooses to do so) might have the chance to speak back to the building through the projected person animating that building. That is what I am trying to test in my more recent work. In the *Tijuana Projection*, the speakers were able to add life to speech, once they realized that people were listening and looking seriously at their faces on the façade. They put on the instruments, and told the truth, in open and “fearless” speech. They were able to face the listeners directly, and the listeners were also able to face them—both the actual faces of speakers, and those projected on the façade of the monument. Now, in my project for St. Louis, I used a microphone in such a way that when a passer-by speaks back to the huge body of the building, the person animating the building or monument is able to see her or him through some kind of wireless or wired feedback transmission. An argument is thus be able to take place, a dialogical wrestling with and through the monument.

My artistic method has consisted in creating a socio-esthetic situation that allows, inspires and protects a process where others may become (if only briefly) artists themselves. In this way my art may be used as a transition in the development of their lives and the lives of others. A re-articulation of the silences in the city and the transmission of the regained voices of the residents—a newly developed “response-ability”?—practiced with a sense of responsibility is, in my opinion, the beginning of the creative *dissensus*, civic as well as aesthetic, we need more of. All this works against dangerously passive concepts of collective memory and of public memorial that still predominate in our thinking today. As Walter Benjamin himself put it, “The way in which [the past] is honored as ‘heritage’ is more disastrous than its simple disappearance could ever be.”