

Mediation and Aesthetics
Conflict Studies: the New Generation of Ideas
University of Massachusetts, Boston
October 28-30, 2004

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**Subject/Mirror
Within and Without**

*I use the term "aesthetics" to refer to a relationship between representation and ethics,
an equality with difference.*

Subject and Mirror

In 1969 I decided to drop out of a college program in Sociology, a program teaching me how to study an "other" in need. My question became, "how can I study others when I do not know who "I" am as the looker?" To answer this question I determined to become an artist and to explore the relations between viewer and viewed, I and thou. Thirty-five years later, I enter the field of mediation and conflict resolution, a field of multiple gazes.

My interest in Mediation is to go beyond resolution of conflict, to create a context where relations can not only be repaired but also transformed. This desire for transformation has both a psychological and a political dimension, two sides of the same coin.

"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

During the 1970's and 80'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; what 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, The Book of Promethea, 1983,1991

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 Conflict Mediation Across Cultures, uses the term "*interpathically*" to describe the ability to perceive and experience another's culture, its content and context, from a place from within oneself while also being present from without. How can we know another person from our experience of both our self and the other? Interpathically, a phenomenology of *knowing* through sensorial dimensions of physical experience, touch, sight, smell, hearing, feeling. In our experience of the difference and sameness between oneself and an other is the potential for transforming our fear of human differences from intolerance to tolerance and further to understanding and acceptance. From here we can create new conceptual paradigms of personal and social interaction.

"Power is relation; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals..."

Michel Foucault, What Our Present Is, 1981

According to the cultural philosopher, Michel Foucault, to understand the genealogy of the subject, we must not only look at the ways that other individuals have socially dominated the individual but also take into consideration how the individual has acted upon himself. Without analysis and recognition of how we each internalize the ways we have been dominated by others, these oppressions will be recreated in how we oppress others, which in turn will continue to be internalized and will oppress us.

"The contact point, where individuals are driven by others, is tied to the way they conduct themselves... it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself."

Michel Foucault, Subjectivity and Truth

We see in the other, that part of ourselves, which we not only do not recognize but also separate from ourselves. That "other" becomes the foreigner, the unrecognized, the denied.

"I see more than the bad faith of another white person. I see myself. And the mirror image of the potential of my own racist tendencies - the ugliness, the desperateness, the irrationality - stops me cold. For the first time since my college years, I am disgusted at the sight of another person's racism."

Maurice Berger, White Lies, 1999

In a black/white photograph by artist Carrie Mae Weems, a Black woman looks into a mirror. The reflection staring back at her is of a White woman. Below the image is the text,

"...Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all?" The mirror says, "Snow White you Black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!"

Carrie Mae Weems, Ain't Jokin, 1987-88

How can we "see" our humanity behind our difference? This "seeing" lies at the core of deeply recognizing difference as both same and other, allowing trust to take the place of fear, creating a space for debatable dispute leading to creative resolution. Just as this is a seminal question of defining the slippery threshold between the self and the other, it is also a seminal tenet of Mediation. It is a mirror reflection.

"Long ago, the pig and the baboon lived together on the hillsides. One day it was bitterly cold and a cutting wind was chilling them to the bone. As the pig and the baboon sat in the sun trying to get warm, the baboon turned to the pig and said, "This wind is enough to freeze one's nose off until it is a flat ugly stub." "Yes," said the pig, "it's really enough to freeze the hair off one's buttocks and leave a dry, white patch."

Look here," said the baboon crossly, "don't make personal remarks." "I did no such thing," replied the pig, "but you were rude to me first." This began a bitter quarrel and in the end they concluded that both despised the other's company, so they parted. The baboon went to the rocky ridges, the pig to the swampy lowlands, and there they remain to this day."

African folktale, Abrahams, 1983

Mirage

Conflict is mirrored and two fold, the internalized conflict within us and our perceived conflict with the other. Same and different. When we subordinate the other we subordinate 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 Mediation Process, Moore quotes Curle,

"...many of man's feelings about others derive from his feelings about himself. Since these feelings are often intricate, contradictory, and not fully grasped at the conscious level, his attitudes towards others are correspondingly obscure and irrational."

Moore continues in his own words,

"...individuals conceal from themselves and others *true* representations of themselves and, in place of these, present a mask that expresses how they would like to perceive themselves or how they would like to have others perceive them....when a person uses a mask, the image she holds of other disputants is often that of another mask or mirage. A mirage is an image based on the psychic needs of the observer rather than on the real or objective characteristics of the observed."

I would argue, as would Cixous, that there is no "true" representation of our self. The self is mutable and fluid, many not one. Rather, I would say that the problem we face is that we are culturally taught that we have a "true" self, which is representable as whole and as fixed. That is part of the underlying problem behind conflict. Not being comfortable with one's own fluidity of identity, each party fixes their respective self with a mask/mirage and projects this onto the other. Like The Pig and the Baboon, each is blind. They can neither see themselves nor the other.

To the point made by Moore that,

"Mediators should take great care not to be drawn into believing that the image is the real person".

I would add that (we) mediators ought not believe that the image is the *only* image of the person. There is no "real" person, rather a self in relation to their fluid subjectivity, the present context and presence of others. What is "real" is in the *details* of one's experience of the other and of themselves, and of course experience is always in movement.

Gillian Wearing, a contemporary British artist, uses masks to obscure and enhance the contradiction between authenticity and fiction of identity. In her project Confess all on video. Don't worry you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian, 1994, Gillian videotapes an array of individuals recruited through classified ads, who confess to a variety of their real or perceived misdeeds while disguised by one or another of Wearing's wigs and Halloween masks.

"Wearing recognizes both the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of identity, while at the same time acknowledging the continuing desire to escape from the apparently limited and inherently false personae in which we find ourselves clothed. Her intent, however, is not to valorize one over the other. Rather it is to put her work into the contested space between the two crude poles."

Russell Ferguson, Show Your Emotions/Gillian Wearing, 1999

As part of the process of negotiation and mediation, we mediators need to recognize our own contested space of identity, and ourselves feel safe and comfortable in managing this flux before we can recognize the flux within and between others.

"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, The Narcissism of Small Differences, 2003

Mirror/Mirror

From 1992 to 1998 I developed and directed Kulture Klub Collaboration in Minneapolis, MN, artists working with homeless youth to model the bridging of survival and inspiration. Through KKC, using aesthetic expression to mediate and communicate sameness and difference, I and other staff facilitated numerous interactions between the youth, cultural venues and social institutions.

In 1994, George Coleman, a youth social counselor and I took 12 youth out to a pizza parlor we knew was frequented by local police officers. As the officers looked on suspiciously from a nearby table, these street kids who would often be involved in police altercation, revealed to the officers details of their concealed identities. George and I were aware of the divide and mistrust between the officers and the youth. In order to shift this divide we encouraged the youth to engage in a vocal dialogue that normally they would have hidden. We were their trusted agents, ones who stood by them, ones who they trusted to dispel and open up misperceptions and stereotypes, ones who validated them in their struggles with legitimacy conflicts, ones who guided them through poor communication. The police officers watched.

The youth argued amongst themselves and pontificated their differences. They stood, shouting, on chairs and even on tables, but they never walked out on each other. With our guidance they

penetrated through their disputes and differences. They bounced off the walls *and* they remained present to experience each other in their reflections and projections, authenticity and mirage. They were changed, as were the officers. That night a conciliation of many dimensions occurred.

In describing conciliation, Moore describes negotiation as a psychological process. He quotes Curle,

"Conciliation is essentially an applied psychological tactic aimed at correcting perceptions, reducing unreasonable fears, and improving communication to an extent that permits reasonable discussion to take place and, in fact, makes rational bargaining possible."

Moore, The Mediation Process

"Honor is one's value in one's own eyes, but also in the eyes of one's society. It is an estimation of one's worth, one's claim to pride, and it is also the acknowledgment of that claim, one's right to pride, and one's ascribed excellence or prestige. Honor is the nexus between the ideals of society and their reproduction in the person who aspires to achieve them. The right to pride is the right to status, the right to a recognized social identity."

Augsburger, Conflict Mediation Across Culture

In August 1997, Khadar, a 16 year old homeless Somalian refugee who participated in Kulture Klub, was tragically murdered by other homeless youth. Khadar was the most vulnerable youth, the most foreign and the most unknown. Images of Lord of the Rings filled the mental gap left by sheer unbelievability. Denial, shame and guilt set in quickly. Not one youth or staff at the youth crisis center spoke of this incident for the next week. Hurting, everyone suppressed their feeling to avoid conflict. Kulture Klub knew that conciliation was an imperative antidote to self-destruction.

"Guilt is an equally painful internal experience. The self punitive judgment of conscience that condemns the person for violating moral, social, familial, or existential rules and values can be a merciless voice demanding the internalization of all conflicts."

Augsburger, Conflict Mediation Across Culture

We invited the refugee Somalian community of Minneapolis, youth, artists and social service staff to a memorial service honoring 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 rituals of mourning and through a shared contribution of their dress, food, song and poetry. People revealed representations and reflections of themselves. Instead of blame and judgment, we engaged in contribution and understanding. Interpathically, we experienced each other from within while also being present from without. 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, Difficult Conversations, 1999

"Face is a psychological image that can be granted and lost and fought for and presented as a gift; it is the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself or herself; it is a projected image of one's self in a relational context. Face is an identity defined conjointly by the participants in a setting."

Augsburger, Conflict Mediation Across Culture

Half in Half

In the fall of 2001, I pulled an article out of the New York Times on Dr. Irma Rodriguez, a forensic scientist in Juarez, Mexico. Juarez was and is in the throes of scores of unsolved mutilation murders of young women from surrounding villages who had come to work in the Texan factories of this poor border town. Dr. Rodriguez was working on solving them. The image in this Times article was very compelling to me, Irma Rodriguez using forensic evidence in sculpting 2 clay heads of murder victims who had been disappeared. I was emotionally provoked by the transformational notion of recreating identities that had been eradicated. I knew that I wanted to meet her.

In Spring 2002, more than a year into the current Intifada between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, a cover of Newsweek Magazine depicted a double portrait of the first female Palestinian suicide bomber and one of the Israeli Jews killed with her in the blast, a young woman who looked very much like the bomber. The mirroring of otherness, their sameness and difference, was very palpable. Both women were disappeared by the blast. How did one "see" the other psychologically and politically?

In November 2003, I contacted Dr. Irma Rodriguez and asked her if she would consider sculpting the heads of the Palestinian and Israeli women through forensic recreation. She agreed enthusiastically. I arranged to meet her at her new home in Chihuahua, Mexico. Irma sculpted the heads and we together spent the 2 last days realigning facial touches focusing especially on the gaze of their eyes. I videotaped this process...this recreation of 2 Middle Eastern identities disappeared through violent conflict, by a Mexican woman who herself lives within a cultural context full of cultural struggle and violence. Both cultural conflicts have deep psychic and political dimensions, two sides of the same coin.

Violent conflict is not specific to any one cultural milieu. Terrorism is a term constructed to fit the party claiming it of the other. Within "terrorism" is deep human conflict and injustice gone unrecognized and untreated for too long, an injustice inscribed through structures of social coercion and through personal internalization of these coercions. Within conflict is always the human condition, humanly sized, humanly felt, humanly experienced, mirrored in the other. It is at this level that we must meet it.

"Once there lived on earth creatures known as Half in Half. Each of them was only half a human being, with only half the feelings, half the intuition, and half the wisdom of a human soul. These half humans spent all their time quarreling and fighting, disturbing everyone in the village, injuring the children and trampling the crops. Each time one half-human began to fight another, cries went up to God, "Oh God, they are at it again, the half humans are fighting again! So one day, God came down, brought the two halves together, and a whole human being appeared."

Asante Tribe Fable, Conflict Mediation across Cultures,

Until that day, we have art and we have mediation.

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