

THINKING POLITICS WITH *THINK AGAIN'S* ACTIONS SPEAK

NATALIE LOVELESS



THINK AGAIN (David John Attyah and S.A. Bachman), *Actions Speak*, 2008, inkjet, 17' x 67'.
Image Credit: Worcester Museum of Art

Part 1: An Encounter

Large. Very Large. Black. White. Grey-and-a-bit-of-brown. Red: sharp, punctuating red. I am looking over the Renaissance Court of the Worcester Art Museum at the 67 x 17 foot interior mural that comprises half of THINK AGAIN's 2009-10 *Actions Speak* – the other half consists of an exterior projection.

Situated as I am, on the balcony at the opposite end of the Court, I am at the same height as the mural, but still the scale overwhelms me. It overwhelms me and simultaneously draws me in. What am I seeing? A mass of dry bones, drawn, enlarged, collaged into a pile and intertwined with a black glossy microphone cable (I can make out the words “noise” and “microphone” along the cable at various points). Shifting my perspective, I look up to a bed of – is it coal? – in front of which dangles the head of a microphone, the word “on” visible above its switch. The microphone points down towards the pile of bones, as if asking them to speak. While the pile of bones and cable situate me vertically, the perspective of the coal places me horizontally, in what feels like an unnatural proximity. I would have to be hovering, face down, no more than six inches from the coal, for this visual encounter to make sense. Either the bed of coal is a wall or the bed of coal is a bed, and the microphone and pile of bones will not let me decide.

Following the end of the cable across from the bone-coal field on the left towards the clean pile of cable attached to its microphone on the right, I am brought on a perspectival roller coaster ride from a tense flatness to a familiar depth. From a standing/hovering oscillation to a subtler set of scopic/haptic conflicts. From the language of collage to the slick language of advertising. From genocide to sex. The mural has me hooked. I am struck by the queerness of its perspective – the difficulty that I have in sustaining any stable perspectival relation to the image before me. I am curious about it visually, I am curious about it as an intervention into the inherited philosophical space of the museum (how it is in dialogue and tension with the discourse of historical space and time that surrounds it), and I am curious about how it is making me feel: both seduced and disturbed.

The right side of the picture plane is dominated by two enormous microphones (at least four times the size of the one on the left) forming an implied cross or “T” shape against a wide bed of what looks like salt. The expected function of each of these microphones (clarity of recording) is compromised – the left one covered in a condom, and the right in a mass of broken lipstick heads. The condom is a long, limp, translucent, glistening sheath, hovering just above a salty floor. Where the cable, above and behind, seems to sit at least partially *in* the salt, the condom hovers above it, extended, postcoital...still wet inside. This prophylactic microphone is protected from any voice that would want to speak into it. But, if it doesn't speak, nonetheless, *something* is happening or has happened. Anthropomorphically, it has life. This microphone *came*. I am confronted with the wet weight of an aftermath that I don't quite understand or know what to do with. There is an element of danger here, as the wetness meets the electricity of microphone – a post-coital moment that could at any moment erupt in malfunction.

The antagonism of oppositional forces is held in tension, here, and extends, as well, to the other microphone. Covered in the chopped heads of countless smashed and smeared lipsticks, with this second microphone it is as if someone set about stuffing each orifice; the mural's scale of magnification reads as if each diamond shape making up the grating of the microphone head is, itself, a tiny mouth stuffed into silence. Disturbed as I am by the imagery, these microphones manage place me in a familiar perspectival relation. But even this moment of perspectival comfort is pushed just a little off, as I notice that the grains of salt in the background are the same size as those in the fore. In other words, while the shapes and shadows of the microphones tell me that they are lying in perspective, the salty background communicates flatness; another perspectival oscillation that I am beginning to read as central to the political invitation of THINK AGAIN's *Actions Speak*.

This invitation seems most obvious in the lines of text that cascade down the far right of the frame: *Raid. Violate. Shame. Scar. Occupy. Embed. Pollute. Surveil. Understate. Imply. Smear. Hype. Gloss. Whitewash. Deride. Suffocate. Exile. Scapegoat. Pander. Sugar coat. Harass. Humiliate. Bruise. Chastise. Stereotype. Discredit. Misquote. Fabricate. Lie. Deny. Understate. Debase. Shatter. Explode.*

Every time I look up new words emerge.

Quarantine. Deport. Harangue. Implicate. Sanitize. Machete. Censor. Cluster-bomb. Essentialize. Detain. Mystify. Infibulate. Obliterate.

I am inside a political terrain, and faced with the words of media hype -- the language of terrorism and global conflict. Rwanda. Darfur. Iraq. I don't know which war we are in, but a US American war it is. In

this candy-pop lipstick and condom world, I read anger, anguish, guilt, protest, and persuasion.¹

The end of the one microphone that, were it not muffled by lipstick, could, conceivably, be made to work (it is the only one with a visibly attached cable), emerges from amongst the pile of bones. The tip of the plug sticks out and seems to hover, barren. The tops of each femur thrusting out of the pile. My own string of words follow, solicited and soliciting in turn: *Barren. Desirous. Sexy. Forbidding. Enthralling. Disturbing. Queasy-making. Repulsive. Fascinating. Seductive. Awkward. Displacing. Voluptuous. Artful.*

The right-hand side of the mural leaves me angry; the left hand side, mournful. The right makes me want to walk away from the entire fight; the left makes me want to grab a shovel and join the cause. The left is so artful that I am strangely comforted; somehow, in the *materiality* of the collage, I read hope. The right is so glossy that it screams a strange kind of denial: we will parade under the banner of protest but to no effect (the only microphone with a visible “on/off” switch isn’t even switched to “on”). The brash look of resistance; protest on a T-shirt.

Of all the words on this right side of the frame, five are made to stand out, in a red that is slightly softer than the condom-lipstick duo: *silence. stigmatize. brutalize, actions speak.*² Set apart, just enough, from the other words, these last two are, of course, the title of the piece. I resist reading these words as a propagandistic call to action – an “Uncle Sam Needs You” address to the various audiences who wander the halls of the Museum, and, during the hours of the outdoor projection, the streets surrounding it.³ Rather, where I read “action” is in the very *perspectival activation of the encounter* solicited by the piece itself. The mural, as I have read it, has *taken time*, optically and haptically *refusing* any simplicity of message. Instead, it has activated and implicated me as a viewer.



THINK AGAIN (David John Attyah and S.A. Bachman), *Actions Speak*, 2008, external projection.

Image Credits: Worcester Museum of Art

¹ In conversation with the artists (January 10, 2009, LA) I was informed that this text is divided into three overlapping categories. The words at top refer to acts of individual violence — what people do with their own hands — the middle section to state sanctioned violence, and the bottom section to discursive or media violence.

² The artists underscored the importance of the first three of these words to their interpretation of the piece — the word “silence,” with its “silence = death” reference, in particular (personal interview, January 10, 2009, LA).

³ The projection is a crucial part of the conception of the piece for the artists. A single-channel video of the projection is also on view in the space to give viewers a sense of the continuation of the piece and its invocation of the “world outside.” In interview with the artists they underscored the importance of this outdoor projection to their imaginary of the piece as a “call to action” — and invitation into the museum and, at the same time, a call to agitate beyond its walls. A video of the projection is viewable at <http://c-m-l.org/?q=node/171>.

Part 2: A Conversation

THINK AGAIN is an artist-activist collaborative composed of Los Angeles based David Attyah and Boston/Los Angeles based S.A. Bachman (www.agitart.org). They have been working collaboratively since 1997. Their work is influenced by political artist collectives such as Gran Fury and Group Material, and cites a wealth of AgitProp and interventionist practices including the Guerrilla Girls, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In turn, their work speaks to the interventions of younger collectives, such as the Boston based collective iKatun (www.ikatun.com) and the L.A. based collective The Toxic Titties (www.toxictitties.com). While much of their early work took the form of poster and postcard interventions in public space (including web resources: www.protestgraphics.org), since 2003 they have been working extensively with large-scale mobile billboards and public projections.

Initiated in 1998, the *Wall at WAM*, where *Actions Speak* is hosted, is organized by Susan Stoops, curator of contemporary art at the Worcester Art Museum. Central to the Museum's contemporary curatorial mandate, the *Wall* is proposed as "a laboratory for participating artists and visitors alike."⁴ This laboratory is one in which "monumental scale, ephemeral nature, and moving juxtaposition of past and present"⁵ come together to delight, solicit and challenge an audience that is initially drawn to the Museum's well established and substantial historical collection.

What follows are two questions from me to the artists, and their responses:

Q1: On Institutional Site and Setting

LOVELESS

This project, unlike many of your previous works, is set in a museum. In this context, then, it is at least in part the museum as institutional structure that you are intervening in, and it is this museum's particular community of visitors that becomes your public. Rather than contemporary intervention, these kinds of historical museum spaces are often thought of in terms of *collection* and of the work of care embodied in long-term preservation and display. This practice is put into question by the intended ephemerality of your piece – one that, while initiating political thinking and dissent, is designed to be a temporary and uncollectable intervention into the conventional space of the Museum. Furthermore, this intervention is featured in one of the Worcester Art Museum's prime locations: its Renaissance Court. Juxtaposing the contemporaneity of the *Wall* with fragments of ancient sites, the court is place of gathering where people sit on the balcony, relax, exchange ideas and discuss -- it is the Museum's *agora*.⁶ How did these contradictions, as context of production and viewing, alter your conception and execution of the piece?

⁴ http://www.worcesterart.org/Exhibitions/think_again.html. Last accessed April 2011.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ In line with this, as is common in contemporary museological practice, this site brings with it a particular commitment to pedagogy. With a salaried education curator on its staff, the museum has organized tours contextualizing the wall project, instructing school groups, family groups, and others, on how to look at difficult political imagery and how to use art as a starting point to have a conversation that is not necessarily about art, but that extends into political and personal experience. It has put together a tour of all the pieces in the museum that, while they can now be looked back on with nostalgia, at the time were biting political commentaries themselves, asserting *Actions Speak* as a continuation of this trajectory of institutional political critique.

ATTYAH

That a museum is the site for this work only changes the following for THINK AGAIN: the duration of the viewing and the visual context of the piece. All of our projects require an understanding of the institution and social context of viewing: a museum does not feel to us any more institutionally or visually entangled than the institution of the billboard, protest march, or street intervention (all of which manage their own aesthetics and encounters). In fact, this museum was really interesting to us because of its identity: one known for its classical (as opposed to contemporary) collection, a strong community education effort that mixes classical and contemporary ideas about art education, a traditional donor pool, located in a mid-sized, generally conservative urban community. In superficial ways, it's the stereotype of the "classic institution." But, in practice, we found the opposite. Against the stereotype of the "sterile exhibition space," the Renaissance Court of the Museum on any given day bustles: school groups, adult education tours, visitors, researchers, security guards, café employees, senior curatorial staff, wedding parties, social luncheoners, all streaming through the central court (some viewing, some on their way to other commitments in other areas of the building). Empty, the space feels gargantuan and hollow; filled, it's as packed and as socially interesting as any highly-trafficked site of public intersection.

BACHMAN

Also, while it is a "classical museum" in the sense that David mentions, the Worcester Art Museum, in addition to the *Wall at WAM*, offers an annual program of contemporary exhibitions – including recently the only showing of Martha Rosler's 1970s and recent collages. There is also an interesting integration that the Museum practices: Bill Viola in the medieval gallery, etc. All of this has flourished under Susan Stoops as curator of contemporary art. Against the common conception of the Worcester Art Museum as a repository of the revered and authoritarian, our conversations with museum goers underscore their expectation of challenge -- though some museum goers, certainly, were either put off by the contemporary and political quality of the piece or were offended by its central imagery (the prophylactic) in the most general sense.⁷ But more frequently viewers were *expecting* the visual challenge, and looked to the Museum only in part to tell them what has artistic merit. But also, I think, in part they look to struggle against what they see and may or may not be able to decipher, or connect with. It's a less explored aspect of the institution: from the vantage point of critical theory the museum is always encumbered as a site of social power; to the (self-selecting) museum goer, the museum holds an expectation of intellectual and visual struggle. Tapping into this (less critically informed) excitement with the challenge of art, for THINK AGAIN, coincides with the challenge of political discourse.

ATTYAH

I agree. Most expect political division, divergence of agenda; the key is to use this (dis)connect as a moment *to* connect. And we use this as a central metaphor for the mural: the microphones open the question of speaking or not speaking; the cords are metaphor for connecting and disconnecting. That the viewer will resist (or at least question) the image is more provocative than the presumption that the viewer assents to the museum's scene. THINK AGAIN wants to cultivate a certain version of American liberal/progressive political discourse: publics that willingly engage, discuss, and amicably resist: especially over such enormous, confounding, and serious issues as political violence. This is also the reason that the aesthetics and messaging of the mural shift from inside (the mural) to outside (the projection): the tenor of one encounter is gravity and challenge; the tenor of the other is invitation, action and collaboration. Both are aspects of the civic moment.

⁷ Author's note: One set of donors, who threatened to withdraw their funding due to Actions Speak, were invited on a personal tour to discuss the history of controversial exhibitions as well as pieces in the Museum collection that, while seemingly tame today, had been controversial in their day. The successful outcome of this was that the couple agreed to disagree with the piece: that is, to not stop funding but still not like it. (Personal interview with Susan Stoops, August 3, 2009.)

Q2: On Dialogism and Activist Art

LOVELESS

Contemporary activist art (whatever its form – intervention, social practice, etc.), with its commitment to socially engaged, relational practices, confrontational topic-driven work, and participatory dialogic ideologies, works to raise questions about both the political (how one speaks up or doesn't speak up) and the social (who has a voice). My experience of *Actions Speak* is that it solicits unquantifiable political, social and pedagogical effects. It seems to ask: What can emerge from the confluence of unexpected differences – from multiple forms of implication, identification and dis-identification? Could you speak to your desire to allow the *logic of viewing* to do the political work of the piece, as well as to your commitment to the kind of political art that gives people the permission to disagree? For example, the official opening event for *Actions Speak* was scheduled to coincide with the 2009 US presidential election between John McCain and Barack Obama. Given the context of a national election in which questions of voter turnout and participation were central, and given much of *THINK AGAIN's* earlier AgitProp work, you've told me that expectations for *Actions Speak* tended towards a kind of "vote Obama" rhetoric of political positivity. Having produced the piece painstakingly to account for site and context (the color of the bones echo the earth tones of the Renaissance Court and the scaling of the salt references the tiles of the Roman mosaic of hunters from Antioch that it dwarfs) and having spent the better part of a year working toward a thicker aesthetic encounter from which to combat the seeming moral clarity and rhetoric of political action and responsibility in a post-9/11 United States, this expectation was, as you've described it, a point of contention, as well as a welcome challenge. How do you see the relation between the political content of the piece and its aesthetic articulation?

BACHMAN

For *THINK AGAIN*, the importance has always been not changing opinions, but altering views; that is, to recast political issues through a different or unexpected lens; sometimes that shifted view is achieved through confrontation; sometimes through humor or parody; sometimes via solemn solemnity. This is a way of holding on to public dialogue while avoiding public parochialism – shifting the frame, and seeing whether individuals come to think politically in a different way. It is an acknowledgement that different viewers enter political encounters in different ways (either by vision or by discourse). Another part of it is about accessing the different ways in which visual and textual modalities express and reciprocally deepen one another. A consistent aspect of our work is a shared joy in both the poetry of pictures and the poetry of words. For *THINK AGAIN*, the distinction between "didactic" or "directive" political work and "ambiguous" or "open-ended" contemporary art work has never made sense, and is a bit of a straw-man. It is based on a presumption that political processes are always based in clarity and direction; and that artistic processes are always interpretive and rhetorical. Neither seems true to us, as politicians hire speechwriters, spin doctors and PR firms (and artists write laborious statements). It is more the case for *THINK AGAIN* (bolstered of course by more traditional theories of media culture and more avant-garde theories of digital life) that ALL political processes (even the most concrete ones – voting, donating money, watching CSPAN) are at the core dialogic, rhetorical, ambiguous *and also* directive, pedantic, and reductive. So why should political/socially engaged art be held to a standard of being "recognizable as political" which in our minds sometimes means recognizable as pedantic.

ATTYAH

The way we designed it, the mural and projection seek to tag back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, combining the institutional, militaristic, domestic, ethical and psychological aspects of struggling with why political violence exists and what institutions support or ignore it. This is both a question of struggling with the specific (carpet-bombing and its effects in Iraq for example) and the general – why the

language of political violence seems to reverberate throughout ALL political discourse. If mainstream political debate has to hold together both the specific (Sudan) and the general (UN Resolutions on genocide), why shouldn't political art? And if mainstream politics deploys both the practical (your taxes went up last year) and the psychological (government is perverted), why shouldn't political art? THINK AGAIN has tended to view the question of the "effectiveness" of a piece of political art as *yet another* straw-man, holding art to a different standard than we hold other political processes. Instead, we see our work as one of many (sometimes coordinated, sometimes diffuse) efforts to engage an ongoing, productive civic process. No one expects a single presidential debate to change minds: we acknowledge that public opinion evolves over a number of public discursive events. It is nonlinear and non-causal in its change. We acknowledge that Presidential speech gets reformulated and discussed by commentary, and that commentary receives commentary. We acknowledge that speech alone does not determine how publics make opinions. THINK AGAIN sees its work through the same lens: as part of ongoing encounters, actions, and speeches guided by ethical imperatives to social justice – our allies are social workers, politicians, academics, unions, public health officials, college students, formal organizations, bloggers – who share some conception of a progressive political future (though the details of this future are debated).

BACHMAN

I agree and think this is an important point: we never presume that we are more politically informed or engaged than our viewers; we presume that our pictures inspire some, confuse some, and prompt reflection and (hopefully meaningful, constructive) feedback on our views and approaches. In this way, we conceive of consensus as a loose prerogative: that our images, whether they galvanize, alienate, confuse, or get dismissed, are part of a meaningful and powerful civic flow.

Part 3: A Reflection

The real issue concerns the possibility of a critical art, the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony. Once we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that critical artistic practices should aim at fostering... According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate."

Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 2007, p. 4.

I end this impressionistic and dialogic encounter with a short proposition regarding how to think *with* the kinds of politics that I see Attyah and Bachman engaging in. Referencing (at least) Sudan, the war against women in Congo, Guantanamo, and HIV prevention, the monumental scale of *Actions Speak* is mirrored by its open-ended and critical politics. On my reading, rather than telling the viewer what to think, *Actions Speak* invites individual political affect and engagement. In doing so, it implicitly acknowledges that within any and all of these practices respectful attention to difference and dissent can reconfigure the realm of the social into one that makes room for strong claims and debates that work *with* difference without a pre-supposed need to transcend it.

That said, if *Actions Speak* attempts to prompt the visceral political imagination through offering a seductive (but ultimately undigestible) image, it also seems to acknowledge that the artistic encounter fails to transform more often than it succeeds. In face of this, it champions a model of participatory knowledge production that takes dissent and difference seriously, not to assimilate it, but to allow it to engage all participants in ways that remain persistently unpredictable. Making poetic and political connections across unexpected signifiers, Bachman and Attyah solicit a relational and embedded political “consciousness,” one that, in its complexity, refuses not only easy answers, but *conclusive* answers of any kind. That is, it insists that we make our own way through a multiplicity of perspectives and incongruities to find that location from which *we* can speak powerfully, from which we are *moved* to action.