We Didn’t Talk About This: The Ephemerality of Utterance

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On the occasion of the exhibition, Ephemera As Evidence, curated by Joshua Lubin-Levy and Ricardo Montez for Visual AIDS, we make available through download (to the side) a poem by award winning poet Thomas Devaney. The work, “We Didn’t Talk About This” is based on a conversation between artist member Charles Long, who is in Ephemera As Evidence, and Ted Kerr, the Visual AIDS program manager. Below, Kerr provides context to the poem, which you can download from this page. The poem and essay are also available in zine form, designed by Bridget de Gersigny.

The world was most profoundly known through the accretion of language, the nuances of interpretation, anecdotal accumulation and overlay.
Michele Wallace, “Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory”

Invitational Rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination.Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter, the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others’ perspective, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own. Ideally, audience members accept the invitation offered by the rhetor by listening to and trying to understand the rhetor’s perspective and then presenting their own.When this happens rhetor and

audience alike contribute to the thinking about an issue so that everyone involved gains a greater understanding of the issue in its subtlety, richness, and complexity.

Sonja K. Foss, Cindy L. Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric”

Ephemera...a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself.

José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence"

The Ephemerality of Utterance
Ted Kerr

In the spring of 2012 Charles Long was returning to Brooklyn. After spending ten years doing frontline grassroots social justice activism focused on poverty, health, race, gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS around the US he wanted to refocus on his art practice.

Hearing him talk about the move it became clear that what he was going through was less of a transition (my initial thought around what was happening) - and more of a realignment. For over a decade he channelled his curiosity, passion, and energy into direct action, civil disobedience, fundraising, and training others. Now he wanted to knit, draw, conceptualize, and perform. Same impetuses, similar goals, different practices. He didn’t know how it was all going to take shape, but he knew he had to keep moving and growing--to communicate in different ways. His body and soul were still on the line for what he believed.

Around the time of his return I was co-curating a salon called, “I am not alone in this way.” The event was created as an invitation for audiences to consider how our most intimate ways of being--striving and surviving, often in hostile worlds--can be viewed as responsible for positive social change. The salon was part of the exhibition “Don’t Worry What Happens Happens Mostly Without You” curated by Kris Nuzzi at Radiator Gallery in Queens, NY. That show explored the personal identities of the invited artists (Jeanie Choi, Camilo Godoy, James Richards, Aldrin Valdez, Sam Vernon and myself) as we--in Kris’s words--navigated:

through a world shaped by experiences of marginalization, silencing and difference. Whether speaking from their own life, recreating a historical memory or representing an underrepresented community...communicating issues of immigration, race, queerness and desire.

Seeing connections between the exhibition and what Charles was going through, it was important to me to have his voice and person included in the salon. Specifically, I wanted us to do an interview together in front of an audience about what was going on in his life, the ways in which art, activism, and his life were coming together to create a path he was following. It was my desire that our conversation not only be about his realignment, but to have it be a part of it as well.

Charles and I met two years earlier in Mexico City at the International AIDS Conference. He was a lead organizer with CHAMP (Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project), an activist group I was blogging for. Charles, and his friends and peers like Kenyon Farrow, Coco Jervis, Emily Metzner, Cameron Lefevre, Josh Thomas, Walt Senterfitt and Maxwell Simon opened my eyes wider around what AIDS activism needs to be. They worked with an urgency around race, class, gender and sexuality that articulated that the AIDS crisis not over, and social justice was the effective way to reduce the harm of HIV. Without hesitation they could string sentences together about prison and HIV rates, water scarcity and infection rates, gender determination and harm reduction. And they did it while being cynical, informed, funny, honest, sometimes drunk, and always generous. If someone had a question, explanations came. If someone disagreed, a conversation ensued. If someone thought someone was talking shit, it was stated. And everyone walked away smarter, witnessed, and committed.

It was this informal way of learning and sharing ideas that I wanted to replicate with Charles for the salon. What would others hear when we spoke? What would others glean from the questions I asked, and the answers Charles would share?

In the week leading up to the salon, I went to visit Charles to talk about what we were calling our “live interview”. I wanted a sense from him what was off limits, if anything, to ask. “I trust you. I wouldn’t do this otherwise,” he said. And with that we chatted in his house, arranging to see each other next at the gallery on the day of the salon. We agreed not rehearse or have pre-determined questions and answers. Instead, we would rely on--and feed off --each other.

The salon was on an extremely warm spring Sunday afternoon. It featured readings from Ella Boureau, Riley MacLeod, presentations by Aldrin Valdez, Ariel “Speedwagon” Federow, Camilo Godoy, and a performance of Portuguese Fados from Ryan Green. We set up the stage at the back

of the gallery, an all white narrow space, sunlight flooding in from the skylight above. The gallery's cooling system was broken so the packed audience sat where they could, some leaning against walls or each other. Flush faces, and sweat pools gathering on collarbones greeted Charles and I as we stood in front to talk. We decided to keep it simple: we had 10 minutes; we'd stand beside each other in front of a table and take turns thinking in the moment, thinking together, and thinking our present selves against all else. No mics, we projected our voices, and dove in.

I was happy to see the poet Thomas Devaney in the front row. I knew him through working at Visual AIDS with Amy Sadao, his partner. Seeing Tom inspired me to ask at the last minute if he would take notes. A funny thing can happen when you ask a poet to take notes--they may create something beautiful. In my mind, I was hoping for some sort of transcription of what we said. Instead, Tom did something else, something directly in the spirit of the conversation at hand: he captured something of the scene, the exchange. Instead of falling into the trap of trying to quote us, he wrote into what he was hearing, and also some of the spaces in-between that too. At the end of the performance Tom gave me his notes. Two years later I found them and typed them up and sent them to him and he made some slight edits and adjustments and sent it back to us. Years later, now that the "live interview" is but a memory, what remains is the lacuna of our collective poetry.

Or as Tom says, "the poem is the artifact."

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