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Fundamentals of Conflict
External Activity Report #1

"Gifts, Stories, and Community-Based Art" with Anne Beffel

Anne Beffel met with students and faculty last week for an informal luncheon discussion of community art as part of PARC's "Conversations in Conflict" series. Beffel, a painter by training and an Associate Professor at the College of Visual and Performing Arts, presented her *Apologies at the World Financial Center* public art project in New York City and briefly discussed some of her other projects, including *Apologies at the Monastery, Apology and Consumer Culture*, and her *Mirror Project*. Beffel does not claim that art resolves conflict; rather she hopes that her art inspires people to take pause; reflect on the objects, spaces, and messages they encounter in daily life; and engage in "a kind of constructive conversation" or "personal narrative sharing."

Tidwell's chapter on "Communication and Conflict Resolution" provides valuable insight into the use of language and symbols like those used in Beffel's work. Tidwell views communication as an important element of both conflict and its resolution, as both a constructive and destructive force, and as a "unique interaction between perception and language."

Tidwell observes that communication is personal and subjective. He argues that the process of receiving, perceiving, and assigning meaning to communicated language, gestures, and symbols occurs "largely in the head of the receiver." Each person's "totality of meaning" is the sum of his or her perspectives and experiences; this meaning can be shared, creating a bond with others who share similar meanings, or not shared, creating a division and barrier between a person and those who do not share the person's meaning.
Beffel would likely agree that the most important element of communication is symbolization, as Tidwell says: “Symbols act in lieu of something else; they stand for something. The words ‘I love you’ stand for my inner state, my affective disposition towards you. The words also carry the message that the speaker is a symbol-using animal, and understands, at least on some level, the principles of English grammar, and is enculturated within a culture that has some access to a given language” (Tidwell 89).

Symbols are often used to express conflict in a way that is widely understood, according to Tidwell. I would argue that symbols are also used to express the progress and/or resolution of conflict – symbols can represent truth, pain, healing, reconciliation, and progress.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York City, Anne Beffel struggled to assign meaning to what had happened. She reflected on the socio-political context of these horrific events and the years preceding the attacks, recalling a particularly unapologetic moment in time for American people and politicians. She felt a “tangible need for apologies,” a need to say “I’m sorry.” Considering her own encultration and personal context, she half-jokingly attributed her apologetic attitude to her Catholic upbringing.

Interestingly, Beffel was feeling apologetic even before the World Trade Center collapsed. She had begun planting the seeds for her Apologies project earlier on, had submitted proposals, and was waiting to hear back from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council when it literally exploded with the World Trade Center on September 11th. Following the attacks, in spring of 2002 she was invited to live at the World Financial Center and to install her artwork in the building.

With painstaking attention to detail, Beffel chose to inscribe the words “I’m sorry” in clear glycerine soap bars – the words and the medium symbolic of Beffel’s inner apologetic
state, of her affective disposition towards America. She inscribed the words in the soap so that as one used the soap, the words lessened and eventually melted away, washed down the drain. Beffel displayed the soap bars in large glass jars situated on small wall shelves outside the World Financial Center’s restrooms. Above the jars of “I’m sorry” soaps, she hung short apology stories from various people she had encountered and stories she had read. The stories represented a mixed sample of apologies accepted, rejected, forgiven, and never said aloud. Beffel hoped the symbols (the objects, the words, and the narratives) would prompt people to reflect and ask questions about apologies — *when is the right time for apologies? Can you apologize for someone else? Are there some things that are beyond apology?*

As an artist interested in viewer-participation interactions with everyday objects and symbols, Beffel studied people’s reactions to the soap display. People walked by, picked up the soaps, often paused to read the stories, and took the soaps with them. Beffel learned that people assigned various meanings to the soap symbol: some used the soap as soap; some used the soaps as paper weights to remind them NOT to apologize too often, some kept the soap as meditative or almost religious objects. While people assigned different meanings to the symbol of the soap, the words, and the stories, the installation did succeed in giving many people pause at an everyday moment in their lives (using the restroom) over an everyday object (soap) and an everyday phrase (“I’m sorry”) that we tend to use quite often in America.

The most striking aspect of Beffel’s presentation and work was the simplicity of it. I am amazed that such a simple symbol – words on soap, and stories – could be so meaningful and powerful for so many people. Beffel’s exhibit captured so much meaning, so much emotion, and so much response from people. In many ways the simplicity of the project was what made it so
powerful and allowed for such deeply personal reflection and interpretation. People responded to the soap, to the "I’m sorry," to the stories of apologies.

Beffel’s work demonstrates the power of communication, through symbols and language, to express conflict and to express the process of moving through conflict to conflict resolution and healing. In the field of conflict resolution, it is easy to lose ourselves in the theories and the academics of the art of conflict resolution, and to focus on formal, structured mechanisms for managing and resolving conflict. We forget that conflict resolution is both an art and a science.

We forget that dealing with conflict means dealing with the people conflict touches and addressing the human need to process that conflict through shared symbols and language and culture.

Beffel reminds us of the power of simple, real, meaningful human communication. Art has the power to convey symbols in a unique way that allows each person who encounters it to pause, reflect, communicate, heal, and move on. While Beffel does not claim that art resolves conflict, I beg to differ – her art stimulates reflection and constructive conversation that facilitates communication and healing. And at a moment in time when Americans, and New Yorkers in particular, need apologies and healing, Beffel’s art speaks to them.