



Wall at WAM

Actions Speak

by Artist Collaborative **THINK AGAIN**

(David John Attyah + S.A. Bachman)

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM



Installation view

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Can a picture in a museum—even a 67-foot mural—counter political indifference? Can it provoke us to consider the ways silence amidst a discourse of brutality (whether state-sanctioned, media-driven, or personally inflicted) disconnects us from the individuals (living halfway around the world or in our own neighborhoods) whose bodies are affected? THINK AGAIN believes it can.

David John Attyah (Los Angeles) and S.A. Bachman (Boston/Los Angeles) co-founded the artist-activist collaborative THINK AGAIN in 1997. During the last decade, their projects—billboards, outdoor projections, site-specific installations, postcard interventions, and artist books—have expanded notions of art used for community action and contributed to the contemporary practice of socially conscious art. THINK AGAIN's work is in conversation with multiple traditions and artists: cultural critics (Sue Coe, Jenny Holzer, Emily Jacir, Raqs Media Collective), agitprop artist collectives that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gran Fury, Group Material, Lesbian Avengers, Silence=Death Project), and post-colonial critics (Alfredo Jaar,

Coco Fusco, Laylah Ali). THINK AGAIN is committed to working both inside and outside of the traditional art sphere. Previous projects have explored issues including the flow of international labor, the treatment of immigrants, the cultural value of sexual liberation, the logic of militarization, and the dynamics of economic inequality, gentrification, and displacement.

In 2007, THINK AGAIN was commissioned by the Worcester Art Museum to create the 7th project for the *Wall at WAM*, a series of temporary projects sited on a second-story, 17- x 67-foot expanse in the Museum's Renaissance Court, one of its most public spaces. The *Wall at WAM* affords leading young artists from around the world unique opportunities and challenges posed by its monumental scale, ephemeral nature, and moving juxtaposition of past and present. THINK AGAIN responded with a multi-media project that focuses on the connections between political brutality and public policy, and reconsiders ongoing social problems like HIV/AIDS and violence against women. Entitled *Actions Speak*, the project is a hybrid of text, photography, drawing, etching, sculpture, digital

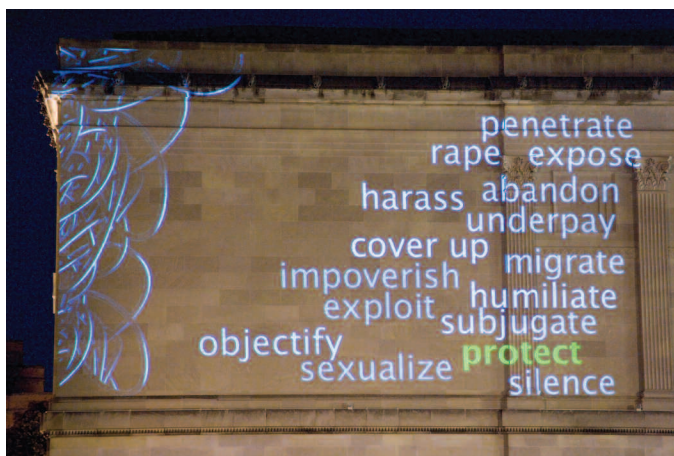
design, and projection. It is the first in the *Wall at WAM* series to be realized by an artist collaborative and to utilize both the Museum's interior wall (for an inkjet mural) and exterior façade (where a projection is on view after dark during public evening hours). With *Actions Speak*, the artists seek to promote dialogue between art and public response, between global reality and local action. Set amidst the Museum's historic mosaics and within the context of human history as told by artists throughout the ages, THINK AGAIN's mural expresses a message of critique and possibility for contemporary times.

Actions Speak embodies the interdisciplinary positions from which both artists come to their collaborative artwork: Attyah's background is in art, cultural anthropology, and public health; Bachman's is in photography, sociology, and media studies. Their collaborative process insists that the labor in its entirety, from research to creative problem solving to production, is a shared enterprise. Not surprisingly, this produced a project equally complex and multi-layered.¹ Critic and art historian Claire Bishop has observed that the best collaborative practices address the "contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention" and reflect this tension both in the "structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception."² Because its inventory of brutal acts intentionally encompasses those of individuals, governments, and the media, *Actions Speak* elicits responses from viewers through their experiences both as individuals and social constituencies. Posing questions and igniting critical thinking (rather than coercing) is central to THINK AGAIN's practice. Here, as in other projects, it is one of engaging every viewer as "a subject of independent thought, which is the essential prerequisite for political action."³

The mural's iconography—a mass of paper bones entangled in the cords of monumental microphones—links political discourse directly to individual bodies. The microphone is a signature image for THINK

AGAIN and operates as a metaphor for political possibility and action, on the one hand, and apathy and censorship on the other. Depicted in contrasting states of inoperability (encased in a condom or encrusted in lipstick) and usefulness, the microphones embody a range of possible interpretations from silence and media spin to empowerment and empathy. The artists explain that "for those who have worked with the HIV community, the domestic violence community, and at-risk teen populations (not to mention feminists, queer rights activists, and the bulk of the population who is sexually active), the condom is a symbol of self-empowerment, harm-reduction, and protection. And although some may read the condom as phallic, the fact is that the condom is the primary way women in our society take control over and exercise discretion over their reproductive lives."

The microphone cords' complicated relation to the femur bone—a proxy for the human body—raises the questions: What is the direct effect of policy on individuals? Who gets to speak and who lives with the consequences? Words raining down on a field of ash and salt begin as a mix of brutal acts committed by individuals and governments, and evolve to elements of discourse used to distort, minimize or justify violence. THINK AGAIN created an image "that underlines the gravity and repercussion of words." Their message to viewers during the days leading to and months following a U.S. presidential election is that "once the microphones are turned off, our actions—as both a nation and as individuals—speak."



Actions Speak, façade projection



Installation in progress

"The key for us," Attyah and Bachman explain, "is that viewers come away from the image not with a political opinion, but with an analytical frame—a critical strategy that can be used to evaluate political claims. In this case, whether an individual is watching Dick Cheney, Ben Bernanke, or Barack Obama speak into the microphone, the analytics stand: Do one's actions speak (as loud as their words)?"

The mural's themes migrate from inside the Museum to a corresponding projection on the Museum's façade. Street-side, the projected image of microphone cords dangling from the building's rooftop and an open microphone (as though awaiting a speaker) accompany text from the mural. The brutality words accrue one by one until they cover a corner of the façade. Then, as if to counter their cumulative effect, single words of empowerment and imperatives for positive action emerge—"acknowledge," "elucidate," "protect," "denounce," "vote"—highlighted by a shift in the color of text from white to bright yellow. Complementing their temporary modification of the Museum's interior, THINK AGAIN's alteration of the façade achieves what artist Krzysztof Wodiczko has characterized as the enduring cerebral effect of projections: although the image/text is temporal in nature, the more lasting projection is a mental one, with the projection site (the Museum architecture) being forever changed in the minds of those who experience *Actions Speak*.

With *Actions Speak*, THINK AGAIN's art production moves beyond categories of "agit-prop" and "political art," and builds upon the socially-engaged practices of artists as distinct

as Diego Rivera, Hans Haacke, and Martha Rosler. Though THINK AGAIN's work generally appears first in public and then later within institutions (via exhibitions), Attyah and Bachman "recognize that all institutions have the capability to neutralize critical action. Certainly, institutions of culture such as museums are often charged with aestheticizing critical discourse. Conversely, street interventions can be swallowed up by institutions of advertising and public information (transforming political critique into urban style, for example). For THINK AGAIN, this is the key conceptual challenge, to produce images that break through institutions that manufacture complacency, often by acknowledging the logic of the institutions themselves."

The mural and projection constitute both aesthetic and social interventions in the most public space(s) of the Museum, with the interior Renaissance Court and the exterior site of the Lancaster Street façade functioning as formal (architectural) as well as social (institutional) frameworks.⁴ The project's multi-layered aesthetic, incorporating varied types of visual information (from the graphic to the subtle, from image to text), is intended to be accessible both to visually literate and non-art constituencies and to accommodate diverse interactions and vantage points—from brief encounters by those in transit passing through the Renaissance Court (or driving by the projection), to sustained contemplation at the balcony level or on repeat visits.

Actions Speak begins from a position of communicability founded on the possibility of inter-relationships: between image and viewer

response, between the Museum's interior and exterior spaces, as well as across disciplines, belief systems, and ideologies. Attyah and Bachman did not presume to know who exactly would comprise their audience for the Worcester project, even with access to demographics for this mid-size city and the Museum's visitors. And in fact, they purposely broadened the potential subject "pool" with a public, outdoor component.

If one thinks about the Worcester Art Museum's audience as representative of the "public" or even as a "community" (by virtue of a shared interest in visual culture), THINK AGAIN's wall project problematizes any simple understanding of these collective identifiers. To the artists' credit, *Actions Speak* elicits feelings of unease and tension among viewers even as it forges senses of solidarity and belonging. The content of *Actions Speak* is not inscribed in the image and text but rather resides in each subject's examination of his or her responses to them. The project acts as a catalyst for asking viewers if their reactions are in response to witnessing the powerful 17-foot cascade of over 150 words—"bruise," "rape," "drown," "pulverize," "detonate," "incarcerate," "slander," "censor," "stigmatize"—flowing down the wall of the Museum *and/or* to the reality of the brutal actions that they symbolize? Do feelings generated by the unexpected image of a giant condom-covered microphone in a museum setting also translate as a citizen response to the near universal silence about HIV during the Bush years? Can the simultaneous seduction and repulsion fostered by seeing a microphone smeared in lipstick awaken viewers to their empathy or apathy to daily incidents of sexualized violence locally and globally that are rarely the subject of media attention?

Although intentionally temporary, the *Wall at WAM* projects often accrue meaning over the brief time they are on view (typically one to two years). The significance of *Actions Speak*, which was conceived during the final year of the George W. Bush administration and debuted one week before the 2008 Presidential Election, will continue to evolve over the unfolding events of Obama's first year. Only days after he took office, the rhetoric of violence and justified brutality that character-

ized Bush's detention policies for eight long years was reversed by the executive actions of President Obama, who employed the microphone as a catalyst of change by speaking these words, "We don't torture."⁵

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

1. The production phase of the mural image demanded the technical talents of a team of assistants resulting in a digital composite of nearly 20 images, which was commercially printed with inkjet technology.
2. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006), 183.
3. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *OCTOBER 110* (Fall 2004), 77.
4. The artists explain that the mural's field of salt crystals was intended to echo formally the white tesserae in the Roman mosaic below while the warm palette of the etched bones was in response to the colors of the mosaics and the architectural light in the Court.
5. Scott Shane, M. Mazzetti, H. Cooper, "Obama Reverses Key Bush Security Policies," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/us/politics/23obama.html

About the Artists

David John Attyah (b. 1967) resides in Los Angeles and is on the faculty of Glendale Community College in Los Angeles. S.A. Bachman (b. 1957) resides in Boston and Los Angeles and is on the faculty of The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Since 1997, THINK AGAIN's public projects have occurred in Boston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, and are documented in the monograph, *A Brief History of Outrage* (2003). Their exhibitions include the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Exit Art (New York City); Track 16 (Los Angeles); Arizona State University Art Museum; Maryland Institute College of Art; G-A-S-P (Boston); and Outpost for Contemporary Art (Los Angeles).

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All Photography: Stephen Briggs



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Wall at WAM: *Actions Speak*, 2008, inkjet on paper, 17 x 67 feet

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actions speak

