Memory and Imagination:

How do artists remember the past while re-envisioning the future?
Peacebuilder as Artist

“We must envision our work as a creative act, more akin to the artistic endeavor than the technical process... The wellspring lies in our moral imagination, which I will define as the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not exist yet.”

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Artists and peacebuilders, using their “moral imagination” approach this question in different ways. There is a delicate balance between forgetting and remembering; dwelling negatively in the past and looking positively towards the future. What follows are snapshots, interpretations of these tensions...
Creating a Safe Space

“Psychological restoration and healing can only occur through providing the space for survivors of violence to feel heard and for the details of the traumatic event to be re-experienced in a safe environment.”

"A remembering process should be a chance for the victims to confront and defeat their fears, for the perpetrators to acknowledge and understand their actions and for all members of a society to embark on a deep process of social awareness that examines the causes and consequences of violence."

Performing “Social Memory”

“We know from myths and stories that Peru’s indigenous populations see themselves as the product of conquest and violence... Yuyachkani understands the importance of performance as a means of re-membering and transmitting social memory.” in order to change this “worldview”.

Building Dialogue

“...the [Yuyachkani] performances enter into dialogue with a history of trauma without themselves being traumatic. These are carefully crafted works that create a critical distance for ‘claiming’ experience and enabling, as opposed to ‘collapsing,’ witnessing.”

Interacting with Traumatic Memory

“Traumatic memory often relies on live, interactive performance for transmission...Bearing witness is a live process, a doing, an event that takes place in real time, in the presence of a listener who ‘comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event.’”

-H.I.J.O.S are the children of the disappeared, who organize political and social performances to bring about justice in Argentina.

Transforming Traumatic Memory

H.I.J.O.S. use “the transformation of cultural materials...to reappear those who have been erased from history itself.”

H.I.J.O.S. repossess the images and recontextualize them...the children represent themselves as the conduit of memory.”

Crafting a Legacy

The NAMES Project Foundation's AIDS Memorial Quilt has a number of goals:

- Provide a creative means for remembrance and healing
- Effectively illustrate the enormity of the AIDS pandemic
- Increase awareness of HIV and AIDS throughout the general public
- To raise funds for community-based AIDS Service Organizations (ASO's).

-www.aidsquilt.org
Reconstructing the Past

“It is spontaneous and rhythmic. There is harmony in both the song and work that begins. Prints are torn up. Each group gathers around a body tracing, others go back into the rubble to scavenge. The artists collage onto the paper, there is laughter and discussion, disagreement and debate. Everyone understands the purpose of the art form that is being created. The resulting collage emerged three months after the fire, months of despair and mourning, months of displacement and anger, months of nightmares and trauma. The act of collaging is reconstructive. It is sticking bits and pieces of fragments to make a whole. It is finding beauty in damage and loss. It is a metaphor for reconciliation.”

Collage as Metaphor

Students from Artist Proof Studio after a devastating fire destroyed their workspace.
Imagining an Alternative

“Art lives to let us have different versions of vision and imagination, different versions of who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and what we might be.”

Redefining the Present

“The Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe series was my way of questioning a very common and potent icon of the ideal woman in Chicano culture. At a time in our history when we were looking to our past historically and culturally I wanted the Guadalupes to prompt a reconsideration of what kinds of new role models Chicanas need…”

-Yolanda Lopez, in Contemporary Art in Multicultural Education.
Suggesting a Different Future

“It is important to me that I reflect the historical times in which I live. I am obsessed by where the world is going and what we will gain or lose along the way.”

-Masami Teraoka in Contemporary Art in Multicultural Education.

Geisha in Bath, 1988 is part of Teraoka’s AIDS Series. He mixes American Pop Art and traditional Japanese woodblock prints to suggest how the world could be different.
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Working through this question artists and peacebuilders:
• Create a safe place to remember and revisit trauma
• Engage in performances that illustrate “social memory,” build dialogue, interact and transform “traumatic memory”
• Craft a legacy that reconstructs the past
• Use art as a medium to imagine alternatives, redefine situations and offer new visions for the future
Photo Credits


Slides 6 & 7: http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/cuaderno/yuyachkani/index.html


Slide 9: www.mediamouse.org/static/photos/graffiti007.jpg

Slide 10: http://www.arthrob.co.za/06june/news/guilt.html

Slide 12: http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/Silka/vrc/portfolios/stompie_images

Slide 13: Liz Canter, 2006


Slide 15: www.java.net/~artbeat/aids.html

Slide 17: Liz Canter, 2006