Shape of the Wound
Restorative Justice in Potential Spaces: A Review of “Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture” (Exhibition, Sullivan Galleries, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2012)

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THERE REMAINS A FIFTH CONSTELLATION which God used for embroidering the constellations on the whole of heaven.

(Plato in Tarkowski, 2012)

Unlike the curators of most art exhibitions, organizing members of the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) project displayed every single object that was submitted in response to their call for proposals. And unlike most traditional art exhibitions, it is the proposals themselves that are the art on display. As proposals instead of realized projects, these works are ideas, possibilities, best guesses, regrets, hypotheses, steps, experiments, and beginnings. This review is situated within the complex sets of potentials I found in this exhibition of proposals.
Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture, at the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, 2012), displays over 70 proposals to memorialize acts of torture committed by officers of the Chicago Police Department. These works, created by artists and non-artists, represent multifaceted sets of knowledge: some speak to the history of more than one hundred fully documented cases of torture committed between 1972 and 1991 by Chicago police (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, n.d.). Other pieces tell the first-hand stories of survivors, in their own words, their own images, and their own voices: the sound of men speaking deliberately-paced testimonials resonates softly through the white-walled gallery spaces, and ghostly photographs of the everyday objects used as weapons to force false confessions are carefully printed life-size by artist T.W. Lee (2005), in richly detailed images on finely textured paper, as if the actual makeshift weapons beyond the photographic surface could be held by a viewer who reached out to touch them.

But where I had expected to be immediately overwhelmed by the horror of the violence and injustices represented, the sum effect of Opening the Black Box transcends its own grim depictions. Though these works are called memorials, there are no gravestones on display. Instead, the objects are active and activating. They compress and expand history, memory, and the affective reality of events into provocative aesthetic objects, and manifest a pervasive sense of impermanence and delicate care. In effect, these proposals are not even memorials at all, they are curricula, catalyzed by atrocity, but pitchèd towards futures of vision, repair, and reparation. And so, in this review, I situate my interpretation of Opening the Black Box in extant discourses of restorative justice praxis where violence and wrongdoing are crimes against actual human beings, not abstract regulatory infractions, and justice is served in repair to the people, not through arbitrarily-shaped punishments of the state. Further, this exhibition enacts the related paradigm of transformative justice, where the restorative process acknowledges the institutional and structural forces that gave rise to the harm done, and seeks positive transformation of social systems (see, e.g., Sullivan & Tifft, 2006; Weitekamp & Kerner, 2012).

This review is structured to reflect its two purposes. First, I begin with an overview of the exhibition in order to discuss the content of Opening the Black Box and its unique pedagogical dimensions. Secondly, I draw on critiques of restorative justice praxis to interpret the exhibition as a representation of a restorative epistemology, and to begin to express its transformative potential. Within this, I employ two related ideas from D.W. Winnicott (2009): transitional objects and potential space. The art objects in this exhibition transition between the experienced and the envisioned, while the collection altogether both creates and occupies a potential space for a curriculum of restoration.

Police torture in Chicago through the conceptual art exhibition

Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, 2012) begins in a long, white hall. Before I even encounter the title wall, I see a timeline that begins in 1972 and stretches to the present day. Stories of forced false confessions and police brutality are interspersed with reproductions of court documents and newspaper headlines. I learn that, under the command of—and at the actual hands of—Jon Burge, over one hundred African American men were tortured by Chicago police. The stories amassed on the introductory walls are told through chilling documentation, including maps of places where
prisoners of Jon Burge scrawled messages pleading for help on the walls of interrogation rooms, and evidentiary diagrams captioned in survivors’ own handwriting, for example:

Are you going to tell us where A.D. is? Then he turn to face me forcing the barrel into my mouth… I honestly didn’t know A.D. where about’s. And I try to indicate this fact by trying to speak with a shotgun barrel in my mouth [sic] (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, 2012).

Detective Jon Burge was convicted in 2006 of related crimes of obstruction of justice for lying about having committed acts of unspeakable brutality, and other modest victories towards justice for victims have come about in the course of work by activists, lawyers, and community members. However, of the 26 police detectives who are alleged to have committed acts of torture, 25 have never faced any form of prosecution, while 20 men who were tortured into confessions by Chicago Police are living behind bars right now (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, 2012). And so, in this long, white hall, viewers learn that Opening the Black Box has two purposes: it is meant to bring the staggering details of these well-documented cases to light, and it is meant to rally a community of participants to lend their imaginations towards envisioning both concrete reparations for victims and expansive constructs for rethinking transformative justice. Where lawyers and activists have for years pursued these cases, an important implication of this exhibition is that it stands at the time of transition between the approaching end of what the law can offer as restorative justice, and the potential beginning of new healing possibilities, posed in the form of art.

The end of the introductory hall is marked by what looks like the official flag of the city of Chicago. This work by C. M. J. (2011), is a flag indeed, made of mechanically woven fabric with mechanically printed images, reinforced on the left with grommets for flying on a pole. Graphically, the image is two pale blue stripes on a field of white, and five red 6-pointed stars in a row across the center. This is a proposal by the artist to add a fifth star to the four-starred Chicago flag. In a label below the object, C. M. J. offers that the new fifth star might stand for “unity, integrity, community engagement, perseverance, moral clarity, and probity.” The elegant gestures of this object’s formal appearance and resonant meanings set the tone for the exhibition to come: the objects on display fulfill the call for proposals to memorialize acts of torture, and they also each enact meanings as conceptual art.

It is worth pausing here to mention the qualities that define the unique aesthetic conduct of conceptual art, since such qualities are what lend these works their interpretive resonance and their potential to catalyze restorative justice. Conceptual art occupies a transitional space between the realm of objects and the realm of ideas (Osborne, 2011). Fundamentally theoretical, conceptual art is concerned with asking questions and with communicating on multiple levels at once, and it privileges the aesthetic expression of ideas over even the art object itself. This means that some works of conceptual art are not actually even physical objects. An example of this from Opening the Black Box is Lucky Pierre’s (2012) first action from 100 Actions for Chicago Torture Justice. The following directive is printed on a piece of white paper:

ACTION #1: Think about torture. Create an action to address torture. Use facts. Use metaphor. You can even use humor. Be as general or specific as you’d like. Write the action down. Think about performing the action. Complete the action.
And so this art “object” can be said to exist right here on this page just as much as it exists in the gallery. It is the idea that matters, and the provocation.

A wall within the exhibition labeled “pedagogy” presents artwork created by students, and a black binder full of lesson plans, syllabi, and other curricula that integrate specific histories of police brutality and variously iterated themes of paths towards justice. Including such classroom pieces in an art exhibition helps point to the way that curriculum, too, is conceptual art; the creative work of curriculum is not necessarily an object, but is comprised of sets of knowledge, designed to provoke transaction with the experience of its participants, and organized to support the pursuit of meaning. Following Schubert’s (2008) suggestion that we consider how works of art serve as curricula for our lives, we may consider that every work of art in Opening the Black Box is its own individual curriculum, as is the exhibition as a whole. CTJM organizers emphasize conceptual art in the exhibition by displaying proposals for memorials, not memorials themselves. And yet these theoretical provocations presented are not ideas alone, they are justice work, which is meant to be acted upon. Walking through these galleries I ask myself, “But what action does this work propose that I take? How? Where? Should these be different from the actions of others? For the benefit of whom? For the transformation of what?” As in Lucky Pierre’s (2012) piece quoted above, the pervasive pedagogical instruction of Opening the Black Box is non-specific and exists in the interpretive slide between the imagination and the operation: “Think about performing the action. Complete the action.”

The potential inspired by the conceptual questions of the exhibition accumulates as I enter the four main galleries of art objects. The galleries are airy and light-filled, as are the objects themselves. A profound sense of fragility, quiet, and impermanence pervades the spaces. These qualities resonate with a sensory connection to the vulnerability of the human body and the affective dimension of wounding, and yet such fragility also relates a state of heightened potential; the impermanence is on the cusp of change. We see names etched on panes of one-way mirror and photographs of empty interrogation rooms. Brenna Conley-Fonda’s (2012) delicate drawings, crafted in contoured lines of hair glued directly to the wall, outline images of handcuffed figures, crumpled over. Whose hair is this made of? How was it taken? Rebecca Keller’s (2012) similarly tactial Soft Prod, is the form of a torture device rendered in buttery-colored satin filled with airy batting; it towers to the ceiling and folds over limp, echoing Conley-Fonda’s folding figures. Again I linger in wondering what such objects propose. What dimensions of whose experience do they suggest memorializing?

These questions begin to speak to the indeterminate nature of the knowledge represented in Opening the Black Box. In the space of one long hall and four galleries, exhibition organizers offer a clear image of the cases of Chicago Police officers using torture to force the confessions of over one hundred black men. And yet, because the main galleries are filled with art-based proposals, there is a multiplying confluence: what has actually happened comes into dialogue with what might be thought, felt, and done about it. In the next section, I draw on critical discourses of restorative and transformative praxis in order to explore more examples of objects from this exhibition and its many intersections—concrete and complex, past and future, real and envisioned—with help from Winnicott’s (2009) concepts of transitional object and potential space.
The restorative and transformative functions

To discuss both reparations for individual victims and systems-level social change, *Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture* (Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, 2012) enacts aesthetic forms of both restorative and transformative justice paradigms (see, e.g., Sullivan & Tifft, 2006; Weitekamp & Kerner, 2012). As restorative actors, the objects propose specific reparations for specific victims and call for the city and its agents to finally fully acknowledge the crimes committed by Jon Burge and officers of the Chicago Police Department. It is important to notice that, though this exhibition of art objects occupies and activates an imaginative space, the concrete list of reparations created by the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) collective of artists, educators, lawyers, and other justice workers is not speculative; it is researched and particular, and it is meant to result in direct restorative action. The draft city ordinance on display details the harm done and the parallel reparations proposed including, for example, the prosecution of implicated members of the Chicago Police department and the provision of psychological counseling for survivors, among other terms.

And yet, an important critique of restorative justice praxis is that the victims of any given crime or wrongdoing cannot ever actually be restored to their previous wholeness (Sullivan & Tifft, 2006). The brutalized psyche is not retroactively de-traumatized by an apology, and the complexities of damage to the life of a wrongly imprisoned person are likewise never fully untangled and righted. Considering the limitations of restorative justice practice and the need for systemic interventions, some call instead for transformative justice, aimed at addressing larger social change, in recognition of systems of oppression (e.g. Hereth, Kaba, Meiners, & Wallace, 2012; Liebmann, 2007). While I agree with this critique in the context of interpersonal practice, I am also interested in noticing the ways that *Opening the Black Box* as a set of knowledge reflects both the restorative and the transformative potential of cultural production and aesthetic encounters. What relationships need transformation? Though restorative justice discourse in education has largely been focused on the practice of conflict resolution between individual students in schools (e.g., Macready, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008; Hopkins, 2002), some move towards envisioning restorative theory as an epistemological orientation, whereby links are revealed, for example, between aesthetic narrative, research, and restorative practices (see, e.g., Oziewicz, 2011; Rundell, 2007; Stanfield, 2006), and wherein justice is thus extended to include coming to understand the restored world. This means that in addition to the important ways that *Opening the Black Box* reveals concrete evidence, it also extends into important interpretive dimensions that create a provisional bridge between what is and what can be imagined.

Suggesting that a bridge to transformative justice is provisional and fluid is not a statement of agreement with critics (e.g., Ashworth, 1993; Daly, 2006) who dismiss restorative and transformative practices for lacking fully generalizable methodology, concrete outcomes, and settled notions of what constitutes resolution, repair, or beneficence. On the contrary, a truly human approach to justice, which is predicated on considering the particular needs of every individual case, requires an adaptable method. *Opening the Black Box* is indeed fundamentally unsettled. The exhibition itself is over—it closed on December 21, 2012—and the objects I discuss here are no longer viewable. However, for CTMJ, the project is long from finished; community events preceded the exhibition and new events are planned, along with new proposals and installations, on a continuous and growing basis (S. Ross, personal communication, January 3, 2013).
Further, the knowledge the exhibition represents is unsettled and as fuzzy as any human struggle to understand. Tensions arise from the adaptable interpretability of art. For example, the framing text for the exhibition explains that all of the men who were tortured by Chicago police are African American. It follows that an important matter for analysis through art proposals is that torture by Chicago police has been an overtly racist practice. And yet, the construct of race is largely difficult to directly apprehend within the proposals on view. No objects speak conclusively or directly to the pressing problems of white supremacy. Though crucial to the meaning of the injustices of these incidents, race is largely invisible in the objects. What would it mean for race to become visible? What would speaking directly or conclusively entail in a conceptual art object? Is there a single piece in all of these 70 proposals that does not comment on racism? Is there a single piece that does? What are the pedagogical implications of this highly unsettled communication?

These works are even ontologically unsettled. As conceptual art proposals for memorials in the form of objects or actions, there is a level on which the art we see does not even exist; it is only a potential, a proposal, and not even made, let alone settled, much in the way that Flavio Rodrigues’ (2012) piece, I AM A MEMORY, which serves as an epigraph to this review, evokes a person we cannot see, but who exists. Or does it evoke person who we can see in our minds, but who no longer exists? I suggest that, in the case of these tensions, we receive both meanings at once, a “transitional phenomenon,” as Winnicott (2009) describes.

Even those of us who are unfamiliar with the work of D. W. Winnicott will be familiar with his concept of the transitional object: the very first soft toy or blanket loved by the infant. Winnicott (2009) describes this object as transitional for two reasons: it exists as the child is embarking on a transition towards the formation of a mind of her own; a mind that can conceive of a separateness of mind in her mother, and a separateness of objects that are “not-me.” Still in early midst this shift, the object is secondly transitional because it is both real and imaginary, both found and created, both me and not-me, both a projection and an introjection. Meanings of individual objects in Opening the Black Box exist partly on the wall, and partly in the ways we imaginatively construct their possibilities for reality, and the sum total of these potential objects mix, inform, conflate, inflame, and otherwise transact with one another as transitional phenomena.

An example of such a transaction is a sculpture in Opening the Black Box by Christine Tarkowski (2012), made of black and grey liquid resin dripped over white spheres, like blood, or like mascara running down the face of a crying figure. The resin drips look frozen in time, and speak harmoniously with so many other objects’ plays on time: references to the years spent wrongly imprisoned, the months that make up those years, the weeks that make up those months, the days, the hours, the minutes with the “black box” used by Jon Burge and his officers to electrocute prisoners. Tarkowski draws the title of her work from an evocative line from Plato’s (1971) Timeaus, describing the origins of the universe: There remains a fifth constellation which God used for embroidering the constellations on the whole of heaven. This image of a “fifth constellation” attaches back to the fifth star proposed for Chicago’s flag (M., 2011) where the exhibition begins. In this way, Tarkowski’s sculpture explains C. J. M.’s flag more deeply:

a fifth star of the flag—a fifth constellation
is used by all of the people—as by God
to restore—embroider
the constellations—probity
to the whole of Chicago—*the whole of heaven*.
And we imagine the details of such a reality (*and unreality*).

Matt Nicholas’ (2012) installation is a collection of paper boats on the floor of the
gallery, titled *Voices Parade*. His little white forms collect up in the corner, and Nicholas
indicates that the boats are made of water-soluble paper. The poetry of his image evokes a quiet
sadness: these boats, as a “parade of voices,” would dissolve in water, and disappear, and so
cannot live out their ostensible design. Do our voices dissolve? Mean nothing? And yet, these
boats are *not* on water, they are firmly here before us, speaking, despite their simultaneous
theoretical dissolution.

The restorative function of the transitional object lies in its capacity for creativity: to
imagine a bridge between what is here and what has dissolves, or between the shape of the
wound and its healed form. Winnicott (2009) says that to create, as in a work of art, is to
traverse the plane of transition between the inner world and the outer world by bringing
something of the inner world out, and simultaneously, something of the outer world in.
Simultaneously. So, to create is to exist in the state of transition between real and imagined, me
and not-me, individual and society, and so forth. Where creativity is the ability to make
something that was not there before, experiencing aesthetic objects is just the same: to *make*
something that was not there before. The objects in *Opening the Black Box* provoke a specific
order of making: they perpetuate illusions at the transition between injustice and justice. Such
illusions are platforms for the otherwise impossible.

In her critique of restorative justice, Annalise Acorn (2004) describes the limitations of
the practice in the ways it “sentimentally links love to justice, and fails to come to grips with the
satisfaction some people derive from dominating others” (Acorn in Braithwaite, 2006, p. 425).
Properly agreeing with the latter point perhaps falls outside the scope of this particular review,
but the former idea raises an interesting question in the context of *Opening the Black Box*: what
is the relationship between the loving nature of these objects and their potential for justice? In
spite of the horrors it evidences, the exhibition resonates with vulnerability and care. It evokes a
connecting sense of closeness and deep quiet, and the objects warm the spaces with intimate
materials of hair, cloth, blanket, and salve (Duignan, 2012). The links of love to justice in these
objects are affective and “sentimental,” as Acorn fears, in that they convey tender feeling. It is
precisely such love, Winnicott (2009) explains, that opens a *potential space* for creativity and, by
extension, for the enactment of justice.

Winnicott’s (2009) potential space is the space that exists between the mother and the
baby, echoes of which appear between the baby and the transitional object. Bion calls this
dialogue of touch and look a “reverie” that provides the potential space for the foundation of the
mind (Bion in Waddell, 1998). We all revisit such reveries as adults in experiences of
transitional phenomena like love or aesthetic experience, where, again, we lose sense of
distinction between me and not-me, real and imaginary, past and future. *Opening the Black Box*
enables such a potential space for reverie experience through the use of conceptual art objects,
which function as transitional objects: invisible and visible, present and potential, on history and
on possibility. Further, the potential comes in the content of these objects, which speaks at once
to the shape of the wound and its restoration but through a mysterious and continuous sense of
tender attention.

*Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture* tells the difficult stories of unthinkable
police brutality in Chicago, and reveals the institutional injustices that perpetuated these crimes
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and contribute in a host of other ways to mass incarcerations and broad systemic oppression. The exhibition as justice work is a powerful method, especially where conceptual art is the communicative medium. Viewers engage in participatory understanding of the multifaceted image of each proposal, and become present with the unsettled knowledge in transition. We begin to imagine that justice may become transformative in movement through the transition between the world we have found and the one we will create.

Notes

1 Thanks are extended to Flávio Rodrigues for permission to reproduce this image.
2 I would like to acknowledge Sara Ross, one of fourteen principal organizers of Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture, for conversation that assisted me towards understanding the exhibition.
3 Properly conveying all of the details carefully amassed and presented by the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Project falls outside of the scope of this review essay. Readers are encouraged to explore the web archives of these cases at www.chicagotorture.org. This website also details further information about the charrettes, community conversations, and other events that have accompanied the version of the exhibition I discuss here, as well as plans for further works towards justice for victims of torture by the Chicago Police Department.

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