

# Johanna Tiedtke's Wall Pieces: Rescuing Silence

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1. What if silence were rendered as material, and what if that material accumulated over time, like sediment? And what if there were persons who worked as archeologists or archivists of silence, finding it in unexpected places, distinguishing between the silence of attention and the silence of repression, the silence of omission and of commission; silence among the living and silence of the dead? Our sense of transparency and invisibility would be altered; our understanding of the mute world of dreams and graves, of rooms and their objects, paintings, and chairs, of history itself, would be reconfigured, and the abstract noun, silence, would be given a new taxonomy to locate and define the myriad ways in which it has occurred through the ages. The composer John Cage came to believe that silence didn't exist, except as the opening through which we might learn to listen. "*We should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn what other people think.*"
2. My meditation on silence was occasioned by thinking about Johanna Tiedtke's visual work; specifically her works made, in a variety of mediums, directly on existing walls. Of course most visual artworks—paintings, sculpture, photographs—are, by definition, silent, but very few might be said to be *about* silence; silence as the primary condition of temporality. Tiedtke's work, with its meticulous inscriptions and delicate shifts, its concentrated attention to the vagaries of passage, its apparent desire to capture, instantiate, and somehow materialize or embody the temporal trace, seems to have silence as a central metaphor or trope.
3. You cannot glance at her work. It does not allow for the quick scan. This suggests a relation to the acts of reading or listening, where in order to know the poem or the piece of music, you must read or hear it through from beginning to end. The so-called "time-based" mediums, which include of course film, can be fully apprehended only by making, by taking,

time for them. In a similar way, with Tiedtke's work, you must read slowly, like a somewhat difficult text, to allow time for it to give up its visual secrets in increments. It insists that you stay, pause, wait; see, and then see more. This demand is for a form of attention, as if you were being asked to enter a chamber denuded of distraction, where the eye's seeing and the mindheart's listening conjoin. As if the work were asking us to *see the silence*.

4. Children of course are most vulnerable to and aware of the partly scrutable and intermittently comprehensible. They hear things they don't quite understand and they see things they cannot entirely interpret and they know that these hearings and seeings, with their gaps and elisions, are part of larger pictures, a more complex and coherent syntax, where meanings inhere and are in turn attached to the world. But this incomplete picture, these unresolved sentences, allow children to imagine missing links, and these imaginings in turn create a new fabric or structure that is, at least to an extent, free from the obdurate empirical precision of the actual, present real. Children *fabricate*; they stitch what is real—the brute fact—to the thing that isn't quite real, except in their imagining. Ludwig Wittgenstein: "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."

5. History bears constant witness to the *unimaginable* and incomprehensible: intentional acts of misanthropy, cruelty, violence, brutality, rupture: events that sometimes enter the present, first as news, and then, later, transformed through imaginative acts of retrieval and invention: memoir, fiction, poetry, photographs, paintings. These creations salvage some hope from the wretchedness and accumulated suffering of the world, with all their attendant

silences. These human artifacts have offered to the future a mitigating thread of perseverance, a sign of preservation. They offer solace and consolation by transforming horrific acts into acts of care, sometimes described as "beautiful," the ultimate condition of the aesthetic. In the face of forgetting's silence and history's blunt indifference, is the counter will to retrieve, to make manifest: in short, to survive. Johanna Tiedtke asks, *to what extent can trauma and beauty help each other?* It's a question that haunts most of Western modernism. As the Irish poet W. B. Yeats wrote ("Easter," 1916): *A terrible beauty is born*. Beauty, to be meaningful, might have to acknowledge the terrible, else prove itself to be a decorative, cosmetic lie.

6. What phrases did the girl Johanna, born in 1981, hear as she was discovering the form of life called language? *Wall of Shame? Cold War? Iron Curtain?* Fragments of speech without a signifying chain, without known references. Were these real, tangible objects to be seen and touched, or were they mere fictions, figures of speech? Children want to know what things are called, and they want to know why. If there is a wall, where is it, in which house, part of what room? As an adult artist, Tiedtke now makes dense palimpsestic works, their layers partly erased or occluded, intricate, and mysterious, sometimes luminous, sometimes dark, which are often composed directly *on a wall*; the wall of her studio, for example. The artist's hand touches the wall, feels its dry placid innocuous and indifferent surface, devoid of surface detail except for the accidental marks, small incursions, remnant abrasions, left behind by other occupants, other times. Maybe there's a light socket. In Tiedtke's collaboration with Daisy Atterbury, a transparent billboard or wall rises up with the phrase *If You Can't Feel It (It Ain't There)* written on it. Here there is a direct connection between the tactility of the

material world of things—how they *feel* when you touch them—and the affective feelings that arise when we see a painting or read a poem.

7. Silence cannot be copied because it has no original. Each instance is unique, framed by the noise of the world, birds and bombs, voices and machines, contingent always on the actual space or place in which it occurs. Silence can exaggerate; it can be *pregnant* with the unsaid, and the unsaid easily registers as the forgotten or omitted. Indeed, history is *pregnant* with all that has not been mentioned; with the shame of omission, of turning away. We live on these stepping-stones on which we cross the terrains of life, but all around us are depths and breaches, quicksands and currents of uncountable and unaccountable histories that have never been submitted to the human desire to leave physical marks of presence. Johanna Tiedtke's aged great-aunt, suffering from dementia, makes an embroidery. This embroidery is the emblem of her presence, even as it attests to her increasing absence. Her mind may no longer give forth thoughts, but her hands remember how to sew.

8. Much of our new world of images is made up of codes and pixels. Pixilated codes, the digital revolution that has dispensed with the messy procedures and materiality of film, with its light exposures, its anxious waiting: was it the right exposure? Is this the right duration from which the image will emerge? Now our sense of passage contracts, then and now, here and there, collapsed into an apparatus of a continuously invasive but strangely immaterial present: a present without presence. But this eclipse cannot yet prevent us from inhabiting our own bodies. The technosphere has not yet eradicated the ways in which our living bodies have knowledge we may not ascertain by direct cognition but which we nonetheless

have inherited: physical traits and inclinations that contribute to our identity but which we have not chosen; the *habitus* of which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote. Our sense bodies bear witness and endure through the temporal and cultural spaces they inhabit.

9. The walls on which Tiedtke works are part of an existing structure, a wall of her studio, for example. She works directly on the wall, and then, when she is finished, she physically extracts the piece from its original architectural habitat. These gestures of radical intervention, surgery, are totally different in character from the register of meticulous attention and care she has lavished on the surfaces of “her” portion of the wall.

But the works would be far less powerful without these deliberate acts of physical aggression. They suggest something fundamental about the human will to make and leave marks; they remind us not so much of Marcel Duchamp's initial gesture as of the earliest cave paintings. More disturbingly, they remind this viewer of another historical event, in which a wall was erected to prevent passage not only of persons, but of *ideas*. This wall was a real thing in real space. The *demolition* of the Berlin Wall began in 1989; Tiedtke was eight years old.

Johanna Tiedtke's wall works strike me as acts of redemption, in which the brute obdurate barrier “wall” is transformed by demonstrations of intensely felt, haptic specificity, inscriptions of individuated passage, that register their own memory, the memory of their fabrication. This is what we witness when we stand in front of them.

As with her great-aunt's embroidery, Tiedtke's wall pieces suggest that it is possible to make something strong, enduring, complex, and beautiful from the remnant, silenced memory of the dispossessed.