

Considering Forgiveness

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with Carin Kuoni

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VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS
THE NEW SCHOOL

The first in a series of books expanding on the Vera List Center's annual cycle of public programs, this volume is published in conjunction with the theme "Considering Forgiveness."

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**THE VERA LIST CENTER
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Julia Kristeva's text has been excerpted and adapted from the essay "La haine et le pardon, ou De l'abjection à la paranoïa." In *La haine et le pardon. Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse III*. Paris: Fayard, 2005, pp. 357–73. The book is forthcoming as *Hatred and Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia University Press). Translated from the French by Jeanine Herman. © 2008 Columbia University Press. Adapted and reprinted by permission.

Mark Godfrey's text is based on a chapter of the same title that appeared in his book *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). © 2007 Yale University Press. Adapted and reprinted by permission.

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COVER: Bartolomeo Manfredi, Italian, 1582–1622, *Cupid Chastised* (detail), 1613, oil on canvas, Charles H. and Mary F.S. Worcester Collection, 1947.58, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. Full image p. 238.

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

Incomprehension and anger, on a personal as well as global level, provided the impetus for a series of public conversations at The New School on the subject of this book—forgiveness.

In response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States government had launched a military, legal, and political “War on Terror.” Rather than confront the conditions that foster terrorism, it invaded Afghanistan and pushed through the U.S. Patriot Act. A reinvigorated U.S. Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs followed up with a “War of Ideas,” and, in March 2003, America invaded Iraq. The war left the U.S. a deeply divided country and Iraq a battleground. And after showering goodwill on the States in the aftermath of 9/11, it is fair to say that the international community turned its back on the U.S.

How was the Vera List Center, founded to investigate the intersection of art and politics, going to speak to that moment, in the year 2005–06? Forgiveness, the antithesis to revenge, provided the unexpected, open lens through which wars past and present, conflicts personal and public, and the immediacy of traumas and their aftermaths could be considered in panel discussions, lectures, and public conversations. Gathered under that thematic umbrella, our project became at once reactive to the “histories of the present” and speculative, aiming to further understanding.

This book, *Considering Forgiveness*, developed from these dialogues. It is itself an investigation of forgiveness, proposing it as the most elemental form of discourse: addressing the other.

Each contribution in the book has a different moment of origin. Some developed from the public programs at The New School, while others were solicited since. Each categorically declines to either grant or ask for forgiveness. And yet, *Considering Forgiveness* suggests that at moments of deep upheaval and paralyzing discord the very notion of forgiveness can be generative. Forgiveness emerges within these pages not as an agenda offering closure, but as a strategy and a form of awareness, a legal, sociological, psychological, anthropological, theological, and ethical concept that in its most basic form demands engagement. It becomes useful when attempting to identify a common ground, particularly in communities that are utterly polarized. What strategies facilitate and sustain an encounter between opposing factions? What are the specifics of each situation, and how can one local paradigm become relevant to another? What institutional or political construct can accommodate the ethics of individuals?

Eighteen contributors shaped this book and reflect on forgiveness in their fields, among them sociology, film and media, pedagogy, psychoanalysis, fine arts, architecture, human rights, and environmental activism. One is artist-in-residence at New York’s Department of Sanitation. And each voice renders, directly or less so, that field’s goals and ambitions, and its distinct mode of speech. Seen together, they mirror many contingencies and activate a web of complementary conditions.

Accordingly, *Considering Forgiveness* touches on a range of subjects, including land occupation and statehood; environmental stewardship—or the lack thereof—and land reclamation; the physical and media sites of political events and movements; tensions between state-sponsored memorialization and personal recollection; the Holocaust; Western law and alternative judicial approaches; the contemporary death penalty; and the sufferings of the contemporary body and the body politic. Such juxtapositions, not yet customary, reflect a world of increasingly intertwined political and cultural systems. In a parallel occurrence, traditional modes of information distribution and knowledge production have evolved; the carriers of meaning are as often images as they are words. Rather than remain within narrowly defined disciplines, individual practitioners cross over and contribute to visual culture. The book reflects such developments by offering equal space to visual and text-based contributions.

What emerges is an appreciation of physical and mental paradigms: body and land are most immediately the sites of violation and of redemption, and the individual is informed and scripted by customs, authority, and desire.

Over the last few years, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics has benefited from a growing number of sophisticated artistic strategies that address or incorporate the political. The center's public programs thrive on the live encounter of speakers from different backgrounds—artists and non-artists alike—with the public and the specific political moment. In this book, a different energy emerges when the inherent openness of the image is met by the precision of language. Here, the immediacy of the spoken word has yielded to a hybrid text in which language is as often an aesthetic dimension as it is a signifier.

Symptomatic of this quality is the collage by Andrea Geyer reproduced in the book's endpapers. It simultaneously encapsulates and reviews a two-day exhibition Geyer curated for the Vera List Center in late 2005, "*I beg your pardon,*" or *the Reestablishing of Cordial Relations*, and thus fittingly both spans the genesis of the book and brackets all other contributions. Like much of Geyer's work, these entry pages figure as the material manifestation of knowledge, constructed as they are from documents—installation views of the exhibition as well as original checklist entries—personal impressions and, through graphs and keywords, a subsequent critique of the show. As such, they subvert conventional notions of time and operate on a level of consciousness that simultaneously anticipates and assesses expectations. Throughout the book, the reader will encounter traces of Geyer's endpapers and discover the path that some of the artists developed from original exhibition piece (reproduced in Geyer's contribution) to printed book page.

The bibliography functions as a similarly constructed vessel. It is the knowledge of forgiveness as accumulated by all contributors, and as such is a personal marker as well as a fairly comprehensive statement of our times.

Two considered, precise voices called this book into existence. Matthew Buckingham was one of the artists who participated in the exhibition *I Beg Your Pardon* and, in turn, invited all the artists assembled in the book. I am most grateful to him, as I am to Andrea Geyer for the original show. Aleksandra Wagner was there initially with the class "A Sociology of Forgiveness" that she taught at The New School for General Studies. The

collaborative programs that ensued among teacher, students, and the center rendered palpable the potential of any class: to be the source of extended debate. If the book has the feel of an act that is both fueled by faith and by speculation—and we hope it does—it owes it to the labor in which solicitation was followed by encouragement, receipt by feedback, feedback by more feedback. We want this to be the foundation of all future Vera List Center books, and our deep gratitude lies with Aleksandra Wagner who conceived the first.

Many others helped the book along. If of anyone, I should ask the book's designer, Paul Carlos of Pure+Applied, to grant us some of the subject now being considered. Our delivery dates proved to be mercurial and yet, he and his outstanding students Jonathan Correia, Zan Goodman, and Ben Wiseman gave us a design that is beautiful and original, and sensitively links poem to photograph, journal entry to sketch, academic treatise to film still. In her generous way, Colleen Macklin, Chair of New Media, had introduced us to Paul Carlos, her colleague at Parsons The New School for Design.

I would also like to thank Maria Hooper, an exceptional collaborator who shepherded the project through its many stages and led the quests for illustrations, bibliographies, biographies, and everything else that makes up a complete book. Rebecca Koppelman, who had assisted on some of the forgiveness panels, readily lent a hand when we needed her. At Columbia University Press, Jennifer Crewe was most helpful in facilitating the inclusion of Julia Kristeva's text here. At Yale University Press, Gillian Malpass generously supported our wish to reprint an edited chapter of Mark Godfrey's book, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*.

Stephen Hoban is the masterful copy editor of the book, and both Aleksandra and I thank him for his care and thoughtfulness. Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) made sure that the book reaches the reader, and I thank Sharon Gallagher for early words of support and final dissemination.

Small and nimble, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics is still part of a large body, the intricate and idealistic New School. I thank Linda Dunne, Dean of The New School and Francisco Tezén, Director of Development, for their exceptional support. The Institute for Retired Professionals at The New School, under the direction of Michael Markowitz, provided additional support. A truly outstanding advisory committee offers assistance and guidance for all of the center's programs, and did so again for this book. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the leadership of James-Keith Brown, chair of the committee, and the generous support of Frances Beatty Adler, Ronald Feldman, Mildred Friedman, Agnes Gund, Elizabeth Hilpman, and Peter Norton as well as the ad hoc book committee members Lisa Ivorian Jones, Norman Kleeblatt, Joshua Mack, and Sina Najafi. It is a joy to work with them.

The contributors to this book are outstanding intellectuals; they are also possessed by a sense of mission and responsibility—only this can explain their immense generosity. On behalf of The New School and the Vera List Center Advisory Committee, I would like to thank them deeply.

Friendships have been founded on this book, and love has grown. My personal gratitude goes to John G. H. Oakes.

Carin Kuoni

Director, Vera List Center for Art and Politics

Introduction: “I Was Born in an Unforgiving Country.”

In September of 2004 I met with twenty-five students of different ages in New York City. The occasion was the class “A Sociology of Forgiveness,” initiated by me and offered for the first time at The New School for General Studies. I was the instructor.

This class title—dangerous because it academically legitimizes a suspicious subject—is not usually found on undergraduate curricula in the United States, or elsewhere. Still, given the lack of conventionality that marks the School I have come to call mine, its presence in the catalogue did not strike me as extraordinary. I did question why I would want to engage (and invite others to do so) with a word weighed with multiple meanings fraught with difficulty; with a concept carrying limited legacy; with a term that has been kicked out of many glossaries, private and public, scientific and otherwise, yet that remains present as a residue, even when carefully transcribed; with a *structure of feeling* that has become so in vogue? Last, but not least, came a question our disciplinary practices continually force us to ask: what does this have to do with sociology?

The answers, such as they are, did not come quickly or easily. They emerged during exchanges with students and colleagues, yet at the same time from my belief that an interrogation of the term “forgiveness” was long overdue, and could best take place in the making of a book dedicated to the task and involving diverse, even contradictory, points of view. You now hold it in your hands.

From the outset, my hopes were never to prescribe forgiveness—this, indeed, cannot be done. Nor were they to educate on forgiveness—such militancy already has a history, and there is little in it to recommend it. Rather, if viewed within the segment of a sociological tradition born at the intersections of biography and history, forgiveness arises as an improbable, but nevertheless potent, tool for discernment. What is to be discerned is the vast, at once social, personal, historical, emotional field that gives any concept its meanings, the field that further supplies these meanings’ unintended consequences.

Moved from the sacred to the secular, never disentangled from its conceptual and emotional antagonisms, forgiveness has, more recently, found its place in discourses ranging from the religious to the legal, from the political to the psychoanalytic, from the literary to the philosophical and the autobiographical, from the financial to the artistic. These found places, however, remain contested, the term itself elusive. Forgiveness liberates as much as it challenges. In its lazy renditions, it gives hope even as it raises

suspicions. It promises even as it provokes the revolt of those who have never been promised anything, at least not when it mattered. Always arriving too late, forgiveness forces the fear of manipulation, and the thought that there might have been something we have, by choosing to forgive, also chosen to abandon.

According to the skeptics, forgiveness today has become an imperative, its enactors forsaking the complexity of nuanced reflection. An *instead-of* politics. A *panacea* capable of covering up the very wounds it is supposed to heal.

According to the proponents, we have never taken a full measure of the promise of forgiveness—of our ability, as well as our need, to start anew and to grant new beginnings to others.

According to the dominant ways in which our practices of living are carried on, forgiveness is in a crevice between loyalty we would want to maintain in relation to our sometimes forgiving selves and loyalty to our communities, which are often the most intransigent agents of the unforgivable. This crevice embodies the limited and limiting dichotomy to which struggles with forgiveness have too often come to be reduced, leaving us between positions which render forgiveness as a unique and private matter, and those which demand that it become a global, social and political solution.

What have we failed to do, while embracing forgiveness? What, if anything, have we failed to think through, while rejecting it?

The difficulties these questions pose must be imagined in a world so diverse that one community's need for settling old scores may not exist in the affective memory of another's. They must be situated in spaces public and private, simultaneously shaped by ideas and practices of secularism and limited, as well as expanded, by less than secular realities. Can there be a forgiveness that interrogates its claims on sincerity, rather than silently counts on their erosion? Can there be a forgiveness that ceases to be an exceptional virtue, becoming a possibility instead? Can there be a process that would make continual demands for acknowledgements of what has been done, before any other process, including that of forgiveness, can be expected to start?

The persistence of such questions is the reason why this book's title rests as much on *considering* as it does on *forgiveness*. Implying a modification of the noun to which it is attached, the act and the state of considering—not the forgiveness itself—here perform the task of critical reconsideration, an implicit review, as well as a critique, of our uncertain modernity. Whereas forgiveness alone does not grant any measure of short-spanned, post-biblical attention, an act of *considering forgiveness* might yet. Precisely here lies the politics of this project. It is the politics of time: personal time, over which forgiveness—a process, not an event—may or may not evolve; historical time, within which forgiveness may acquire new modalities; time of, and for, interpretations. It is in these considerate, slow, yet always urgent times, that this book aims at doing justice to the term, so that the concept and the processes that lie beneath it can be more critically returned to addressing questions of justice.

An unusual community assembled between the book's covers speaks in voices that represent the fields of their daily, intellectual and artistic engagement. They articulate issues that have mattered to them long before this work took shape. It is to them, therefore, that the book owes its reflective scope, an expanded vocabulary made of always painful, but equally

necessary, moments of the co-existence of forgiveness and hatred, accusation and indifference, memory and forgetting.

I was born in an unforgiving country. I still live in one. The two are not the same. Distances between the two cities which have shaped my early youth and my adulthood sometimes appear so vast that looking for a common denominator could only be described as a hopeless endeavor. Yet, in 1993, in the then-besieged Sarajevo, a sentence was uttered which I recalled in 2001 of New York: “Sarajevo is the first city of the twenty-first century.” The author of this unlovely pronouncement, a theater director, Haris Pašović, clearly played with shapes of things to come, asserting the grim commonalities to be shared in global urban futures. The message had an echo, just as it had a very limited popularity. On the intricate maps of human denial, the most enduring of survival strategies is that destruction, forgetting, illness, death—any form of dissolution—always happen to others.

So does forgiveness: an act we cannot contemplate, let alone perform, in solitude. I take this book to be an exit from solitudes, those that would indicate that there is none to share the world with, and those that suggest that we do not know—or that we insist on not knowing—our own and the others’ pasts.

Editor’s Acknowledgments

Without contact with many people and their thoughtful responses, this book could never have been made. To its caring host, Carin Kuoni, to all involved in the work of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School, and to the authors—I extend my deepest appreciation. Another volume could be published as an accompaniment, made up of our doubts, refusals and other forms of creative challenge. I may have started with the title of an instructor; appropriately, I end as a student. It is as a student that I would like to thank Stanley Aronowitz, for his ways of telling me how to think things through. And, it is as a former citizen of Sarajevo that I want to thank Zdravko Grebo, for his ways of addressing the meanings of thoughtful perseverance and compassion.

Gina Luria Walker, then the Chair of the Department of Social Sciences, Bachelor’s Program at The New School for General Studies, was the first to list “A Sociology of Forgiveness” on the pages of the Fall 2004 catalogue. Julia Foulkes underwrote its subsequent renditions. I owe them gratitude for the risks taken and for the generosity of their spirit. No less do I owe to the women and men whose ambition to interrogate what a “discipline” of forgiveness might be about is every teacher’s dream, and to the guests who spoke to us about their own experience and research: Kathy and Chesa Boudin, Belinda Cooper, Menachem Daum, Terri Gordon, Indira Kajošević, Beverly Schneider, and Lars Waldorf.

I offer this record to my daughter, Victoria, and to her friends born in this country at the turn of this century: may it inform the numerous ways in which they will be able to live their lives.

Aleksandra Wagner

New York City, January 20, 2009