

# Heads or Tales:

## Michael Awad and Evan Penny's Conversation

By David Clark

*A face is a field that accepts some expressions and connections and neutralizes others. It is a screen and a framework. To be confronted with a face is to envision a certain range that could be expressed on it and to have available a certain range of things one could address to it. One sees what one might say, what one should not have said.*

– Alphonsa Lingis, "Face" from  
Dangerous Emotions, p.43

A conversation is an uncertain undertaking. It is an improvisational encounter structured by a complex physics of language, emotion, and will power. It unfolds from moment to moment, from idea to idea but it is largely unscripted. We don't always know where it will lead; towards empty ritual or perhaps a wide-ranging journey of discovery. Threads develop, ideas bifurcate, trains of thought lead to new contemplations, or we simply go over old ground. Always; however, things are left unsaid. Subtle harmonics accompany the main themes of the conversation in the pauses, gestures, glances and intonations. In the frozen moments captured by photography and sculpture we glimpse with microscopic acuity something of the nature of these moments, but sculpture and photographs are often mute and paralyzed. An encounter with them is an encounter with our own unfolding perceptions and interpretations set against the unchanging immobility of glimpse with microscopic acuity something of the nature of these moments, but sculpture and photographs are often mute and paralyzed. An encounter with them is an encounter with our own unfolding perceptions and interpretations set against the unchanging immobility of form – a one-sided conversation. How can photography or sculpture enter into conversation? How can they depict the dynamics of conversational flow. This is the problem that Evan Penny and Michael Awad have tackled in their collaboration; "Panagiota: Conversation" – work that is both about conversation and is a conversation between photography and sculpture.

Starting with the question "What would happen if Michael turned his camera's attention from the urban space to that of the body—the person?", the two artists

embarked on a series of exploratory photo shoots with friend and fellow artist Panagiota Dimos, also known as Penny Dimos.

Michael Awad photographed Penny Dimos using a custom made camera built from old aerial reconnaissance equipment. The camera – that he has used extensively in his striking documents of the street life of Toronto – records an image over time as a moving shutter pans across the photographic plane. As the shutter made its journey from one side of the picture plane to the other, Michael, Evan and Penny Dimos talked. The formalities of the portrait: the stiff considered posture that usually accompanies a self-conscious pose that surrenders the body to a frozen moment in front of the camera lens, were suspended for this photograph. Penny's sways and gestures in and out of phase with the progression of the shutter result in an image that is smeared and elongated. The camera records movement and stillness in monstrous distortions. The utterances and gestures of the conversation are just barely discernible in Penny's contorted features as a remarkable record of the drama of conversation emerges.

From these photographs Evan Penny extrapolated the impossible physical presence of this photographic trace. His sculpture is an honest representation of the photograph as well as an impossible proposition of what this moment could have been in space. Evan Penny's previous work has moved cautiously from the solidity and monumentality of sculptural representation to a sculptural project that captures the uncanny paradox of an unreal reality. His work has increasingly attuned itself to the rethinking of the photographic index that has happened in the digital age. His anamorphic distortions of three-dimensional human forms are unprecedented representations of the figure that have been distorted by the permissions of digital imaging. By bringing back the bodies into the real space of a sculpture, Evan Penny's work enacts a kind of return of the repressed. The work insists on the realness of the corporal that has been lost in the dizzying array of virtual representations and simulations offered up in our digital milieu. What do we still recognize of ourselves in this hall of mirrors is a question that he poses.

What is different in this new project for Evan is the introduction of duration as a formal consideration in the work. Previously his works have been grounded by a sense of encounter with a person. Even if that person has been inexplicably trapped in a strange warped space, we still sensed the completeness and integrity of that person. Now we see the subject as they move through time and it is troubling.

Michael Awad's previous work has documented the social space that is traversed by the passerby, a space that is delimited and framed by architectural design and urban planning. This new project has drawn him into the charged interpersonal space of conversation. The objective mechanical eye of his street photographs has been turned to another scale, the micro-linguistics of body language and the simple intimate human interaction. In doing so he has also taken up a different role in the work; he is also implicated himself as the off-screen voice in the conversation.

Michael Awad's work with scanning cameras has peeled away layers of reality from the monumental 'now-time' of the photographic moment to reveal forms and patterns that we are unable to grasp in memory. His work introduces the index of time into the visual frame in a way that distorts our perception of tangible reality. Awad adapts scientific tools and turns them towards the everyday not to provide evidence for the project of science but instead to show us the inadequacy of our representations of the world.

A vestal characteristic of the photographs that Evan Penny has carefully inscribed into the sculpture is an artifact of the moving shutter camera that creates subtle vertical bands across the image. These bands reinforce a connotative association of these images as geological. The artifact modulates the surface of the sculpture and creates a subtle index of time passing in discrete intervals. This feature of both the photographs and the sculpture speaks of the mechanics the camera. It is also a detail that sets this work apart from the sheen of the photographic instant and the tell tale sign of the human hand on the sculptural surface. Both these artists have denied these characteristic signs of photography and sculpture in their previous work.

What is registered in this collaboration – Michael Awad's photographs and Evan Penny's sculpted interpretation - is a graph, a scroll, an index of gesture and movement liberated from the static atomism of photographic codes. It is a dissection of the ebb and flow of conversation as well as an embodiment of the flow of time through our fragile existences. All that is solid does melt into air in these fleeting photographs. But these fleeting moments are given a kind of geological presence in the relief sculpture that captures the threads of continuity and movement between moments in time. The time of the utterance, the speech act, has rippled through both these works. Time has made liquid the solidity of the photographic instant. The sculptural form, so used to its stately objecthood, now trembles under the influence of time passing. Here is the stuff of interesting conversation.