

Bear witness to both your challenges and triumphs

Paying attention to our daily joys and sorrows is important — and so too is making space for other people's stories

Enuma Okoro NOVEMBER 24 2023

The words “Tell It Like It Is!”, written in large black script, glare from a wood-framed electric sign box. It is a work from a lightbox series by American multimedia artist Sam Durant, in which he repurposes slogans and phrases from political and social movements around the world and gives them new life and expanded meaning through a format normally reserved for commercial signage.



Sam Durant's 'Tell it Like it Is!' (2020)

Without the original protest or demonstration context of the slogans, viewers are confronted with the power of language and how we can make meaning arbitrarily and selectively. As I thought about the idea of bearing witness, whether speaking about social or political events or personal issues, I was struck by Durant's work. In the US, the phrase has been spouted by politicians promising to be hard-nosed truth-tellers. To “tell it like it is” means to not hold back to make other people comfortable or to play it safe.

But language is a tool we often wield without full acknowledgment of its power. Words can have histories layered in them and when we speak we may be bearing witness to narratives of which we aren't fully conscious. Durant's work, for me, is a call to have the courage to see, think and speak with heightened awareness and intention, to remember that we make meaning with language and that our words can often be more politically charged than we even are aware.

To tell it like it is always depends not only on who is doing the telling, but also on how the teller perceives. How do we faithfully bear witness when what we believe to be true may not necessarily be the whole truth? We are always working with the limited information we have, and from the perspective we hold. As we speak what we know to be true from our own vantage point, we must also remember that there will always be another voice who wants and needs to tell it like it is.

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