Visionary Barricades: Art Class as Memorial Faculty

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ABSTRACT
With the ad hoc artifact of the barricade as a framing motif, I discuss practical, political, and artistic uses of found material by communities living in enclosure. Beginning with the street memorial, I move to briefly describing a number of projects undertaken in my urban high school art classroom and intended for public display, all of which responded to current events and many of which used found materials.

KEYWORDS: Barricade, Found Objects, Street Art, Public Art, Art Education, Anarchism, Anti-Form

A Brief History of Tactical Repurposing

The formless ethos of fugitivity, expressed in tactics of both military and cultural resistance by groups lacking power and capital in zones of colonial enclosure, like the Gaza Strip, a South African bantustan, or a neighborhood in Chicago abandoned by capital, can be summarized in the barricade. Catherine Malabou (2023) states that "Anarchism always assumes a retrospective glance." "To come back," she continues, "amounts to inventing" (p. 218). A structure that serves a simple and consistent purpose in urban conflicts, the barricade requires remembering what is at hand, and what can be creatively repurposed. This is done in the service of mutual aid, which, following Kropotkin, Malabou describes as "the social response of nature" (p. 219) to the evolutionary struggle for survival. Mutual aid is the direct and local provision of essential needs, of food, shelter, care, and security, in lieu of official neglect and in opposition to official extraction. In this essay, I hope to show how my students and I collaborated on expressive projects that echoed the guerrilla barriers that attempt to reverse the repressive terms of enclosure.

In his history *The Insurgent Barricade*, Mark Traugott (2010) locates the origin of barricades in 16th-century Paris, but notes that their importance began with proletarian uprisings in 19th century Europe. As formerly rural populations recently displaced into cities, urban workers were reinventing forms of pastoral social life within congested

quarters populated by the output of industrial production—including an abundance of barrels, the root of the word "barricade". Barricades were crucial to Europe's liberal republican revolutions of 1848, as well as in the Paris Commune of 1871, in which anarchists formed a sizeable contingent. Radicals built barricades in the 1905 Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the Warsaw revolt against the Nazis, and the student-led uprising in Paris in 1968. Barricades became more widely documented outside of Europe after this period, appearing in conflicts in Nicaragua, Argentina, Tunisia, Iraq, and Haiti.

It is worth mentioning that the improvised guerilla ethos of the barricade has been appropriated to serve a wide range of interests. A range of militant factions, including the Islamic State, have made use of found materials in concocting improvised explosive devices as a tactic of insurgent warfare. And counter-insurgency forces have learned much from popular uprisings, not only in the use of steel, razor wire, and concrete barricades, but also in tactics of "kettling," extemporaneous formations of armored police used to contain and intimidate protestors. And reactionary movements, like the secessionist landed bourgeoisie in America, made use of battle tactics borrowed from conflicts with Indigenous groups (after denouncing them in the Declaration of Independence), famously dressing up as Natives when throwing tea in the Boston Harbor. This incident also recalls the regalia of avowed patriot Jacob Chansley, known as the Q Shaman, who stormed the U.S. Capitol along with hundreds of rioters in January 2021, and the improvised battle gear sported by attendees at the Unite the Right rally in 2017.

In a less combative vein, Cubans have coped for decades with the poverty enforced by the U.S. trade embargo by sharing resources and skills, engineering everyday machines from available materials, including homemade fans, motorized bikes, battery chargers, and radio antennas (Oroza, 2012). This could also be seen in the wider Latinx homemade aesthetic of rasquachismo, which Charlene Villaseñor Black (2022) defines as "a DIY aesthetic… that employs recycling and repurposing and valorizes color, baroque excess, and creative reuse" (p. 2). This aesthetic is exemplified in Chicanx low-rider car culture (low-rider cruising was finally re-legalized in California in October 2023). Such ingenuity is common among people caged in prisons, jails, and asylums; the incarcerated artist Angelo worked with the artist collective Temporary Services (2020) to create a booklet documenting some of these prison contraptions, entitled *Prisoners Inventions*. Many artistic installations have recalled the formlessnesss of barricades, starting with Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the Italian Arte Povera

movement, and later artists including Doris Salcedo and Thomas Hirschhorn. Others sought to find ways to inexpensively make urban terrain more hospitable for unhoused people, as in the warming tents that Michael Rakowitz designed in his *paraSITE* project, or the portable storage and shelter units created by Krystof Wodiczko. Assemblages by both professional artists and everyday people in constrained circumstances are linked to the barricade as acts of para-architecture. These makers conjure an ad hoc fortress or domestic space in reaction to a pre-existing denial of safety or comfort for practical and/or aesthetic purposes. In my own under-resourced art classroom, I tried to infuse this spirit of recalcitrant ingenuity into our creative work.

Public Remembrances

As a White teacher making non-functional public artworks with Black and Brown high school students on the southeast side of Chicago for many years, I sought to avoid irresponsible appropriation and to reconceive recognizable objects in order to gesture at forms of mutual aid, collective remembrance, and solidarity against forces of repression. Making use of memory, sometimes following the tradition of the street memorial as a site-specific para-architectural monument and marker, was what for me linked my projects to more direct acts of historic resistance.

Figure 1. *Image of Altarventions guerrilla project installation, January 2010: papier-mâché sculptures on plywood base with candles and laminated label, placed outside a suburban elementary school in the snow beneath a tree.*

Figure 2. *Image of Altarventions guerrilla project installation, January 2010: papier-mâché sculptures on plywood base with candles and laminated label, placed outside a suburban transit station in the snow.*

In the winter of 2009, artist Mike Bancroft and I had our students create papier-mâché images in black and white to remember someone they lost, and we assembled these into altars. In January 2010 we drove up to the near northern suburbs, and placed these altars, accompanied by lit candles and a laminated message, at strategic public spots in wealthy majority-white areas (Figures 1-2). One year later, Mike and I worked with my students to create a monumental sculpture of stacked translucent 50-gallon barrels cast from packing tape and plastic wrap. We lit them from within and adorned them with stuffed fabric organs and ceramic bones, and accompanied them with an audio track and signage. This monument was placed in a community garden near the school where I taught, whose soil had been made toxic by unremediated byproducts of the area's earlier industrial heyday (Figures 3-4).

Figure 3. *Image of Brownfield Towers installation, January 2011. Image shows a tower of translucent barrels with lights inside, festooned with fabric intestines and ceramic bones. Night view in a community garden space in South Chicago in the snow.*

Figure 4. *Image of Brownfield Towers installation, January 2011. Image shows a tower of translucent barrels with lights inside, festooned with fabric intestines and ceramic bones. Daylight view in a community garden space in South Chicago in the snow, including a laminated informational placard attached to the chain link fence.*

Temporary Structures

One of our projects that both recalled the barricade and addressed the issue of housing was the very first collaboration we undertook with Mike Bancroft (Figures 5-6). For this 2008 project, entitled *Piñata Factory,* my students made hundreds of piñatas using balloons with forms inspired by the hybrid biological creations of artists like Natalie Jeremijenko, Brandon Ballengée, and Eduardo Kac. Mike and I went out on a bitterly cold weekend in Chicago, and at three locations underneath the Kennedy Expressway, threw these piñatas over a chain link fence that had been set up to prevent unhoused people from finding shelter under the overpass. We also left packaged foil blankets at the bottom of the fence, emblazoned with a Piñata Factory logo. We were able to get some coverage for this project on the local NPR station.

Figure 5. *Image of Piñata Factory installation, December 2008. About 40 or 50 colorful round papier-mâché sculptures can be seen piled behind a chain-link fence blocking access to shelter in an underpass beneath the Kennedy Expressway in Chicago.*

Figure 6. I*mage of Piñata Factory installation, December 2008. This is a detail of the same installation as above, in which foil packets labeled with the logo "Piñata Factory" and containing plastic blankets can be seen at the base of the fence.*

Back in 2005, the Plan for Transformation was well underway. This was a rehabilitation plan the Chicago Housing Authority had introduced in 2000 that involved the demolition of all high-rise public housing in the city. As a class, we heard from current and former public housing residents, journalists, faculty members, and a representative of the CHA (Figure 7). We made drawings that memorialized the fallen buildings (Figure 8), and created floorplans for possible new residences (Figure 9), which we showed at a month-long exhibition.

Figure 7. *Image of my high school art classroom in fall 2005, with my students watching and listening to a presentation by Chicago public housing resident, journalist, and organizer Beauty Turner.*

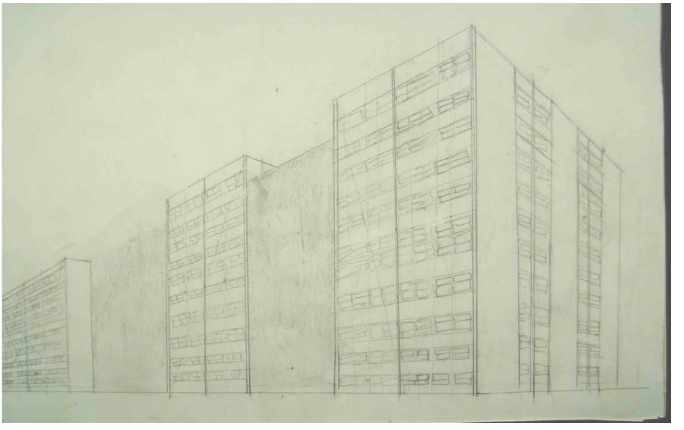

Figure 8. *Student's two-point perspective pencil drawing of Chicago's now-demolished Cabrini Green public housing project, fall 2005.*

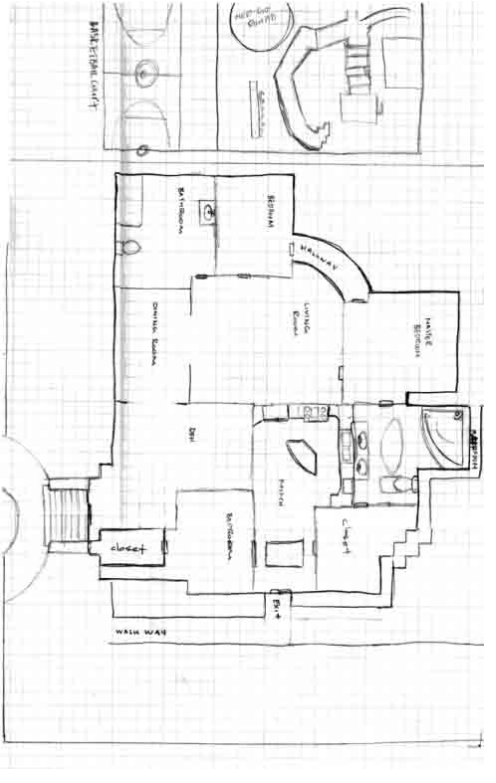

Figure 9. *Student's overhead plan-style drawing of an imagined ideal public housing space, fall 2005.*

We returned to the theme of housing in 2013, again informed by Rakowitz and Wodiczko, when we created an inflatable set of house-like structures, with information printed on flyers and painted directly on the structures that informed viewers about a planned multi-million-dollar lakefront real estate development that could affect property values in the neighborhood. We placed these tents outside for an end-of-the-year festival day where kids could crawl around in the tents, and adults could take some information (Figures 10-11).

Figure 10. *Image of multiple inflated tents (that could be entered and exited), on display on the side of Bowen High School, in spring 2013, intended to share information about the Lakeside plan, for a large nearby residential development project.*

Figure 11. *Detail of one of the inflated structures above, with messages painted by students on the roof, including "125,000 homes," "Use the $ for something important," and "Don't make us leave!"*

Sonic Guerrillas

Homemade musical instruments have been an important element of folk culture throughout the Black diaspora. Informed by my collaboration with artist Matthew Steinke, we studied and emulated the history of jug bands in projects creating "canjos" (banjos employing cans as resonators) in 2006 and 2007, using large cans from the cafeteria along with lumber and guitar strings to create instruments with percussive and melodic qualities (Figure 12). Again connecting with Matthew, we then learned from the scrap-based electrified *likembe*, or thumb pianos, that were played in Congo by bands such as Konono No. 1 (Perry, 2010; Stanton, et al., 2012), and took apart rakes and soldered piezo pickups to create our own versions of this invention as a smaller amplified *mbira*, which we played and recorded through a small amplifier (Figure 13).

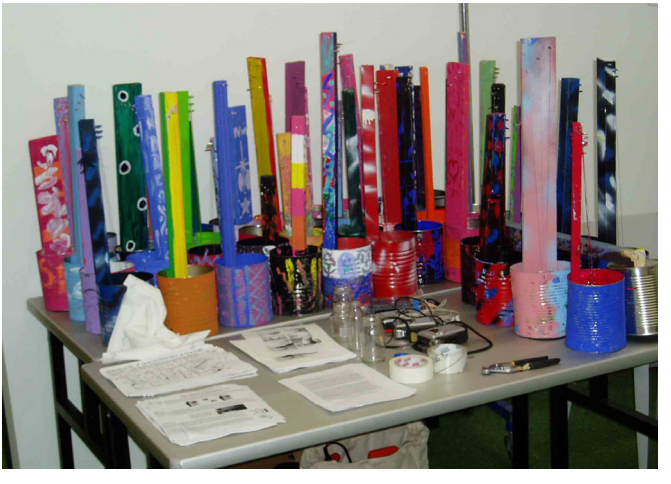

Figure 12. *Image of a collection of canjos (string instruments made from cans, wood, and guitar strings) on a display table at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago in spring 2007, accompanied by information sheets, contact mics made by students, and portable cassette tape recorders.*

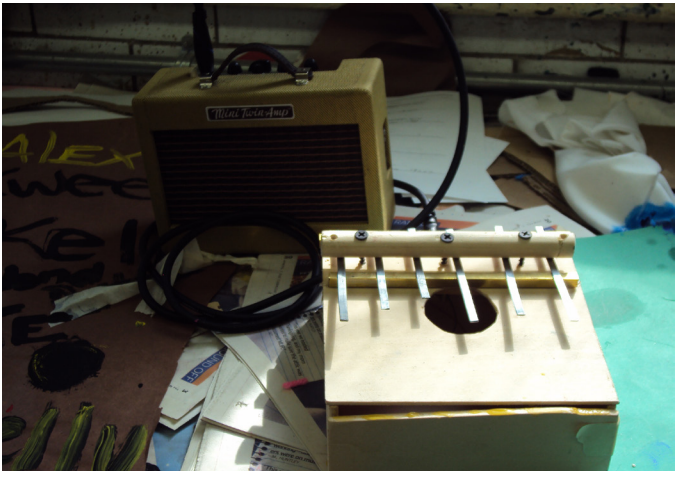

Figure 13. *Image of a not-yet-painted student-made amplified thumb piano, or mbira, attached to a miniature amplifier, from spring 2011.*

For a 2012 learning unit and installation related to the War on Terror, as well as military recruiting in high schools, my students created wooden facsimiles of automated artificial limbs and drones, and used ceramics to emulate various possible examples of IEDs, the improvised explosives mentioned earlier that were commonly encountered by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Figure 14). We also created examples of camouflage and created collages modeling the many varieties of hijab worn by Muslim women in different societies, images of which often appeared in Western pro-war propaganda. At the exhibition we met with American veterans who were disillusioned as well as traumatized by their experiences of occupation and combat in the Middle East.

Figure 14. *Image of an installation of student work at the Southside Hub of Production (SHoP), featuring colorful wooden models of limbs, drones, and camouflaged IEDs, from fall of 2012.*

Police Barrier, Do Not Cross

Lastly, we also created numerous posters that directly objected to violence locally and nationally, often in response to police brutality and racist attacks (Figure 15). A Chicago police commander named Jon Burge, who graduated from the high school where I taught, was publicly known to have personally overseen the tortured confessions of well over 100 young Black men over the course of decades, many of whom had been released from prison based on their testimony regarding torture. He had been protected by State's Attorney Richard M. Daley, and later shielded by the statute of limitations, but was finally indicted for perjury in 2011. My students decorated prison jumpsuits with patches about justice and grief, which were worn in front of the courthouse where Burge was tried by activists with the anti-carceral group Tamms Year Ten (Figure 16). The following year my students also learned about Burge, and created a public display of papier-mâché masks to honor his victims, loosely modeled on European torture masks (Figure 17).

Figure 15. *Student-made multicolored poster from fall 2009, using spray-paint stencils and rubber block prints. The poster is on white paper and features a black night stick, with gold badge prints reading "No more beatings" and orange and brown text reading "Stop police brutality."*

Figure 16. *Activists with the group Tamms Year Ten, wearing orange jumpsuits with student-designed patches at a rally accompanying the first day of the spring 2011 perjury trial of Captain Jon Burge.*

Figure 17. *Student-designed torture masks for a spring 2012 display at the Southside Hub of Production (SHoP) that shared information about torture experienced for years by Black Chicago residents at the hands of officers reporting to Captain Jon Burge.*

Scrap cardboard, Styrofoam, and paint were the materials we used to construct an eight-foot battle robot with a taser and a nightstick for arms, and a security camera for a head, as part of a public show I co-curated with another art teacher in 2008 entitled "School as Prison" (Figure 18). Styrofoam and artificial hair and various other found objects were used for a project remembering and discussing the legacy of Michael Jackson after his death in 2009 (Figure 19). And we used lots more cardboard and paint for freeform memorials that students created for an exhibition in a vacant lot that took place in 2012 (Figure 20). Drawing materials, paper, cardboard, and paint were used to create maps and icons of the neighborhood for another exhibition we mounted in 2011 (Figure 21).

Figure 18. *Installation of our collaboratively student-made school surveillance robot, from the Hyde Park Art Center education center mini-exhibition "School as Prison," spring 2008.*

Figure 19. *Student-made Styrofoam bust of Michael Jackson, using Styrofoam, artificial hair, and scrap fabric, fall 2009.*

Figure 20. *Student-made memorial sculpture, made of cardboard and papier-mâché, painted with tempera and acrylic, with a cross and the words "RIP Abel" modeled three-dimensionally, from spring 2012.*

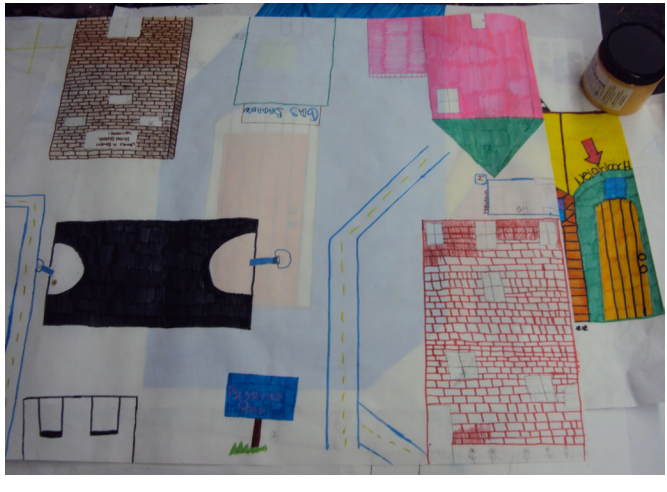

Figure 21. *Student-made collaborative map of the neighborhood surrounding Bowen High School, displayed at the Southside Hub of Production (SHoP) in Hyde Park, spring 2011.*

In 2007, six Black teenagers were arrested in Jena, Louisiana for their participation in a fight stoked by racial tensions instigated by nooses being hung on a tree at the local high school, and our students printed postcards that were mailed to local and Federal officials related to the case (Figure 22). We learned about the history of assassinated Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton and created posters and cards related to the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin for a 2013 pop-up exhibition on police violence (Figure 23). These recalled many of the posters made in May '68, which also drew on the contemporaneous visual culture of the Black Panther Party and the work of Minister of Culture Emory Douglas. My own personal artwork often made use of the memorial form, including a piece dedicated to a student who died violently (Figure 24).

Figure 22. *Student-made Jena 6 postcard print, featuring the words "Jena 6" and a felled tree, fall 2007.*

Figure 23. *An array of student-made postcard-size prints hanging on strings in the window of the pop-up exhibition "Black and Blue," from spring 2013. Prints show images of police brutality, and convey messages such as "Fred Hampton," "The right to remain black and blue," and "Don't just convict anybody."*

Figure 24. *A collaborative piece responding to the gunshot death of a student, with a miniature figurative sculpture on a life-size plywood cross that I made, accompanied with a remembrance drawing by one of the deceased student's friends.*

Tangible and Incorrigible

Physical expressions of grassroots resistance comes in many forms, with the barricade as one particularly significant example. I want to acknowledge that the examples from my classroom were led more by me than by my students, and were inspired by artists and motivated by budget limitations rather than channeling some grassroots organic force of political critique. Nonetheless, students were energized and motivated in working on these projects, which had clear links to some of the histories, struggles, and expressions of their families and communities. I am hopeful that this series of projects gave my students a sense of the many distinctive strains of socially-engaged material culture that creates a loose visual thread connecting the experiences of poor and colonized communities throughout history and around the world.

Writing about barricades in 2015, David Gissen stated that "the detritus of contemporary urbanization offers the material with which to pose another world" (p, 362). Through finding new uses for mundane heirlooms left behind by ancestors, corporations, and institutions, people may undertake an anarchist aspiration to build up and celebrate local assets. The key lies not in trying to restore a dismal and decaying past, but in seeing in the past some sparks of what could ignite an overhaul in contemporary circumstances, transcending mere survival. "In any case," says Malabou, "anarchism wouldn't take being restored to itself, since its past exists only in the future" (pp. 219-220).

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