Memories for the Future:
A Site Specific Installation

Suggested Citation

Abstract
Artist Michael Barrett, a former Marine, polished nearly 7,000 pennies – one for every war casualty between 2001 & 2014 – as part of his Memories for the Future exhibit in the Clark County Government Center Rotunda Gallery. Over the eight-week time span, Barrett's mission was to create a tangible, yet fragile symbol of recognition, mirroring the circular footprint of the Government Center Rotunda. Using a Kevlar ballistic apron, a book, metal polish and 6,805 U.S. pennies, Barrett individually polished each penny, while creating a spiral mosaic on the rotunda floor.

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Memories for the Future

Memories for the Future was a site-specific performance that I choreographed for the Clark County Government Center, Rotunda Gallery in Las Vegas, Nevada to honor United States service members who died in recent conflicts. The Clark County Exhibition Program is an extension of the Parks & Recreation Department and is funded, in part, by grants from the Nevada Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Over eight weeks, the grueling endurance performance offered a one-time ephemeral learning experience between the audience and myself.

In 1970, artist Robert Filliou published *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, where he established the possibility of common ground between performance tactics and pedagogy as skills to teach and learn. In his publication, he states: “Artists should not try to influence anyone. We must speak power to power” and promote a world full of artists where work is a poetical game of research—“Art and life should be essentially poetic” (Filliou, 1970, p. 43).

If performance artists’ cultural perspectives enable them to critique cultural inscription through performance art production, could performance art pedagogy make personal agency attainable for audiences (Garoian, 1999)? Questions such as this point to my development and focus on my history of the pedagogy of performance art.

History

Drawing from my experience as a U.S. Marine and testicular cancer survivor, I began utilizing performance as an educational tool for helping others understand and engage cycles of physicality, gender, and identity. Over time, this educational platform has grown to include durational performances and complex, large-scale installations in which I compose physically intense actions in relationship to specific architecture. Past examples of this postmodern pedagogical practice include didactic performances at the Tower of London;
Omaha Beach in Normandy, France; the execution site of Joan of Arc in Rouen, France; Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany; the Roman Colosseum; and the house of Anne Frank in Amsterdam.

In this paper, I continue this thread by presenting Memories for the Future as postmodern pedagogical practice and argue performance artists engaged in the practice have significant implications for teaching, learning, and understanding (Garoian, 1999). As a former U.S. Marine and cancer survivor who has personally witnessed loss and tragedy, I recognize and comprehend the potential healing nature performance pedagogy may bring to the current dialogue within contemporary society.

**Concept**

After my first visit to the rotunda gallery, I knew Memories for the Future must root itself within the footprint of the spiraling interior. I began by conceptualizing the performance as a series of questions. Channeling historical performance artists Marina Abramovic and Joseph Beuys for inspiration, I utilized the following questions to better understand a collective healing as a process one could weave gesture, space, and education into a social bandage. What is public space? What is the notion of personal/individual space? What is interpersonal space and space in-between people? What is the space we share collectively? What is monumental space? Is it bigger than life, individuals, and illustrious figures?

A stated goal of my performance was to avoid commentary about war itself, but rather to serve solely as a memorial to those government employees who paid the ultimate price. The intention of this project was to begin a process of national reconciliation, by separating the issue of the service of the individual men and women from the issue of US policy in the Middle East. Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan have been two of the longest and most controversial wars in the history of the United States. With Nevada having lost fifty-five of its residents during these foreign conflicts, Memories for the Future touched the Clark County Government Center on an extremely personal level.
The performance was scheduled for eight work weeks, from March 31 through May 23, 2014, and included five, eight-hour workdays, Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., totaling 320 hours over the forty-day period. During the eight-week time span, my mission was to create a tangible, yet fragile, symbol of recognition mirroring the spiral footprint of the Government Center. Acting as a guide, the circular pattern located on the marble tile dictated the center and starting point of the spiral, coinciding with the thirteen sandstone streamers above representing the United States flag.

**Technique**

Human actions can be understood as ontological metaphors, through which we define the way we see and feel the world as ideas and substances (Torrens, 2014). Memories for the Future required one ballistic Kevlar apron per day; 6,803 U.S. pennies, dated between 2014 and 2001; a book listing the names of U.S. casualties; and a bottle of Brass-O metal polish. I polished each individual penny and placed them within a collective group, creating a spiral mosaic on the marble floor. While crawling on my hands and knees, I gave my sole attention to each penny and carefully acknowledged each for its importance to the makeup of the larger picture.

Through art and symbolism it becomes possible to develop a better understanding of the ever-present form (Venefica, 2015). The spiral was chosen as a central symbol of the final conceptualized piece. Further, Susan Buchalter (2012) describes the spiral symbol as representing a path leading from outer consciousness (materialism, external awareness, ego) to the inner soul (enlightenment, unseen essence, nirvana, cosmic awareness). Slowly, crawling along the mosaic twists and turns, the viewer finds the spiraling path continues. As it travels around the form and returns only to be slightly distanced from previous trip, it moves the artist and viewer both physically and conceptually. While negotiating the path, I embraced Buchalter’s description by mapping the movement and distances between the inner (intuitive, intangible) world and the outer (matter, manifested) world with archetypal
rings, marking the evolution of humankind on both an individual and collective scale (Buchalter, 2012).

I approached the physical task of sorting the pennies, creating the aprons, and designing the books for the performance in the same manner as I approached tasks while enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. My philosophy embraced the possibilities of thinking through the body. A form of art as interrogation, because it was through my military training and duties that I tediously cleaned, mended, and categorized government communication equipment in preparation for education, inspection, and deployment. While Memories for the Future was not intended to instruct audience members about bodies, or about particular techniques, the performance art became a means through which a person could heal through and negotiate the lived experiences of the body (Davies, 2008).

From past performance and military experience, I knew that performing live over an eight-week period of time could pose a physical challenge and even damage my body. Prior to the starting date of the performance, I began attending daily yoga and muscle endurance classes to ensure my body was prepared for the grueling requirements. Because the project was both tedious and strenuous, I continually reminded myself that even though the formal opening of the performance was not imminent, the informal aspects of the performance began during the preparation period.
In addition to losing over ten pounds as a result of my daily work, my knuckles bled from rubbing against the handles of the shears I used while cutting the Kevlar and designing the aprons. Even though it was a difficult material to work with, I chose to use the heavy spun fabric as a tool for implementing and extending the installation's narrative. My decision to work with and endure the difficulties inherent in ballistic grade Kevlar was based on its history as a well-known component of personal armor, found in combat helmets, ballistic facemasks, and ballistic vests (Dupont, 2011). Although the extreme steps I took were physically taxing, this embodiment of the process was an important part of the installation.

**Process and Development**

To assist in the process, I referred to the performances and endurance work of Abramovic and Beuys. In doing so, I was quickly reminded my performance work and personal life were incapable of existing as separate entities. Struggle and loss helped develop a better understanding of the progression and sustainability required for transcendence and functioning as a hybrid being in tune with its surroundings. According to Bronwyn Davies (2008), body-landscape relations, and enabling pedagogies, has shifted toward this theory of place in pedagogical settings:

> Art should be part of our lives. I don’t want it to be something that people go to and sit there for an hour then leave again and do something else. I want it to be part of everything, more organic. I don't want it to be so structured that when they leave they say well now we're done with art for the day and we should do something else, rather it should feed into all those other things. So, I try to make that kind of atmosphere where it almost seeps in. (Davies, 2008, p. 16)
Pedagogical encounters can be described as “wholly absorbing...bursting with fresh and exciting ideas that leap into the classroom, and indeed into daily life. Issues of relationality, art, indeterminacy, difference, and co-creation take on new significance” (Davies, 2015, p. 16). During the early stages of preparation, I developed an eight-week live/work schedule to assist while reading and polishing the 6,803 names and pennies. The average time and numbers below are the result of my live/work schedule over the duration of the performance.

**Time Management**

(Average time polishing pennies)

- 6,803 pennies polished over 320 hours.
- 850 pennies polished per week.
- 170 pennies polished per day.
- 21 pennies polished per hour.
- 5 pennies polished per 10 minutes.
- 1 penny polished per 2 minutes.

(Average time reading names of casualties)

- 80 pages read over 320 hours.
- 10 pages of names read per week.
- 72 lines of names read per day.
- 34 lines of names read per page.
- 9 lines per hour.
- 2 lines of names read per 14 minutes.

Figure 5: Wide angle perspective of the forty aprons.
While performing, I read two pages per day and of those pages, I read two lines every time I finished polishing a total of five pennies. After reading two pages, the book was marked with a red “blood stripe” (satin bookmark) indicating the pages read during that specific day and returned to the stand and corresponding apron housed at the base of the stairs. Unfortunately, due to the increasing number of casualties in the Middle East during my performance, five additional names were added to the back of each book.

Memories for the Future, like most ritualistic installations, requires the viewer to really see. It likens the body to another set of eyes, equipped to see much of what is usually invisible. These alternate forms of knowing and bodily awareness often elude much of Western society. Performance affords bold participants and observers the opportunity to journey into the rich terrain where metaphor and juxtaposition of the body regularly converge in space (Kerr-Berry, 2002). In this case, the performance offered the public a gift of hope to comfort and inquire, especially in a fast-pace, egocentric, and potentially scary world.

Symbolic References
In the following section, I breakdown and describe the symbolic references interwoven throughout Memories for the Future. I begin with the materials used during the performance and then segue into the architecture of the Clark County Government Center, concluding with a discussion of the process.

Pennies.
How does one put a price on life? What is a fair value? What is the market price?

There is none, as it is impossible to measure ones’ worth. Instead let the least count as the most. Let one represent many. Let the small stand for the great.

The gesture of leaving coins behind on a veteran's headstone is a tradition that has become a historical past time. The symbolism is steeped with significance. A quarter means the visitor...
I returned, again and again for two months, not to honor death but to celebrate lives lived.

was there when the veteran passed, a dime means the visitor served with them, a nickel means they trained with them, and a penny simply marks a visit. For Memories for the Future, 6,803 pennies dated between 2001-2014, were sorted from a collection of nearly forty thousand. Each penny received the same treatment as my physical body and was cleansed before becoming part of the spiral mosaic located on a large marble slab. I documented the patina, residue, and dirt removed from each penny on the front of each apron as a memory of the event. The repetitive action created a timeline and encouraged a story to develop on an individual and collective scale, meaning more than just the spiral grew as the performance continued.

Spiral. Mirroring the footprint of the Clark County Government Center, the spiral was a major component within the concept of the performance. The size of the spiral was associated with the fluctuating number of pennies and the increasing count of U.S. casualties during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the form grew larger, continued to travel around, and eventually returned to a similar perspective point—the overall piece became slightly distanced, a little older, and a little wiser. This distance provided the necessary space to investigate, compare, consider, and digest the differences and similarities between the repetitive journeys. The notion of embarking on a strenuous journey around the mosaic, only to return to the same vantage point over and over again, echoes the writing of bell hooks (1999): “I have not yet found words to truly convey the intensity of this remembered rapture—that moment of exquisite joy. I do know that I return again to that place, to that moment—to the rapture” (p. xvi). I returned, again and again for two months, not to honor death but to celebrate lives lived. The repetitive movements of the spiral journey were not only reflected in the growing structure on the floor, this spiral grew out of the rituals of my body as well.

Body. Consider the decoding of body language. Starting each day with a purification ritual, my body was rinsed, soaked, and washed in a therapeutic tub before entering the memorial ring and beginning the polishing process. Here, we observe gesture and visual clues that enable us collectively to understand the implicit as well as the explicit meaning of
what is being “said” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 9). Over the eight-week time span, three alternating body gestures were performed.

Kneeling: A humbling gesture used while purifying the coins.
Standing: A reflective gesture used while reading the names of U.S. casualties.
Lying down: An enlightening gesture used to gain insight into the true nature of the world.

These three positions were repeated thirty-four times per day and specifically selected for their close association with the practice of yoga. In pursuit of a better practice, metaphor was appealed, analogies were drawn, cadence and tempo of the action was controlled, innuendo was employed, and simile was used to illustrate meaning and create an expressive form (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Each gesture played a unique role in the outcome of my performance, as did the movements in-between the three gestures.

These gestures did not happen in isolation, in addition to the movements of my body, I chose to enrobe myself with Kevlar, a fabric with a deep symbolic and metaphorical significance.

Aprons. I put on a new ballistic Kevlar apron at the beginning of each day. Similar in design to a flak jacket worn by military personnel, the aprons reached down to mid-thigh, and covered both the front and back of my torso. The sides of the apron were connected by Velcro and could be adjusted in response to the level of activity required. Similar to military sentries on guard duty, all forty aprons solemnly stood in a ring formation encircling the performance space. This circular design was effective in creating a memorial within the ring of aprons, carving out a sacred space within the building. Additionally, the formation of aprons served as a sign of complete commitment and unity. Over the duration of the performance, followers witnessed the evolution of the ring through the growing number of residual markings created on the aprons while polishing the pennies. The markings not only served as a timeline for the audience, but also provided important documentation of the actions the aprons had witnessed.
Books. I created a series of books to hold the names of the 6,803 soldiers, reading these names was one of the major components of the three positions carried out in the performance. As I read the names of 6,803 U.S. casualties that were printed in forty books, I stood over the spiral mosaic, my physical position reminiscent of a reflective gesture. During each of the thirty-four daily cycles, two lines were read, totaling two pages per day. The names printed in the books were listed alphabetically, rather than being associated with date, rank, or military branch. My intent was to humbly acknowledge the individual Americans who lost their lives while volunteering their time and energy on a collective, rather than individual, scale. These gestures made up my artistic performance, and while they were important to the overall conceptualization of the piece, they were not completed without challenges.

Challenges
Over forty days, my average time traveling around the spiral was three and three-quarters of an inch every fourteen minutes. In addition to the numerous physical requirements, I was also forced to overcome a series of mental challenges associated with durational pain, as well as the demand of the audience and their constant desire for understanding.

Going in, I knew there were inherent risks and potential hazards associated with presenting performance pedagogy in Las Vegas. While the city has a vast history of performing arts and theater for the stage, it is relatively virgin ground when it comes to this type of performance art. My first performance at the Las Vegas CAC in 2008, titled Punch Line, was dubbed “an introduction to performance art” (Peterson, 2013, Para. 1), so it came as no surprise when audience members were caught off guard and often insisted on responding with action.
Beginning in the first week, a woman stood over me while I was on my hands and knees and announced to the entire building, "Jesus Christ was the way to happiness, not whatever ritual you are attempting to create.” During week 2, a man knelt down beside me and actually proceeded to give me chest compressions, while making a comment to his partner about the “importance of medical safety in the workplace.”

During week 4, which marked the halfway point of Memories for the Future, an elderly woman was extremely intrigued by the work. During her explorations she kicked one of the apron stands with such a force, it caused a sixteen-inch piece of steel rebar to fly out of a twenty-four inch base. Moving across the room in a manner similar to a projectile, the steel landed inches away from the spiral mosaic. On day 35, a man dressed in a business suit, paid a visit to the space and decided, he too, needed to begin a journey for enlightenment and mirrored and mimicked my movements while standing on the outside of the memorial ring.

After a series of several incidents, I approached the director of the Rotunda Gallery about providing additional educational opportunities for the public. This led to the creation of a brief documentary video that was featured on Clark County’s website and displayed on a monitor just outside of the memorial ring (this video can be viewed at the end of the article).
The gallery director also arranged an interview with KNPR to help us inform the public about performance art. The documentary video and the article, written by Scott Dickensheets, are credited as playing roles in assisting the public come to a better understanding about performance pedagogy:

It's not really that confusing: “Memories of the Future” is Barrett’s homage to the soldiers who’ve died in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. A former Marine, Barrett has collected nearly 7,000 pennies minted between 2001 and 2014, each one representing a military casualty. On hands and knees, he uses a Kevlar apron (they ring the rotunda on skeletal metal stands) to reverently polish each penny — our smallest, least significant monetary unit, presumably corresponding to the smallness of a single life in the vast sprawl of a military operation. Then he adds it to the spiral pattern growing on the floor. By focusing intently on the ritual cleaning of each penny, he’s emphasizing the individual loss, rescuing it from its neglect and anonymity. That, in turn, makes “Memories for the Future” about the human cost of conflict without shading into anti-Iraq War propaganda. This may or may not be a selling point for you, depending on your feelings about the war. (Dickensheets, 2015, para. 3)

While the attempts to further educate were not completely successful, the “physical” interactions did cease to occur, allowing for an increased sense of comfort while performing.

**Conclusion**

The challenge of the postmodern artist is to “cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national and international class realities” (Garoian, 1999, p. 19). With this being my longest performance to date, the cognitive endurance required was something that I did not prepare for and inevitably came as a learning experience. The monumental demand over the 320 hours took a toll on my back. Weeks after completing the project you cold see the mesh pattern of the Kevlar fabric imprinted upon my knees. To date, the callouses acquired while rubbing my bare feet on the marble floor remain and the tick-tock of the timer diligently haunts my sleep.

I pushed through these difficulties and obsessively anticipated the next challenge. I remained mindful of “whom” the performance was for and “why” it was important to continue on with these ritualistic and repetitive tasks. No matter how difficult it became, I knew it was too easy to quit. This project reminded me how easily you start to believe no one cares, and how effortless it is to say, \textit{it is not my problem}. Despite my project, the world continued to spiral. It was during my own physical and metaphorical spiral I began to
internalize how much one person can make a difference. At the end of my time, I completed 6,803 gifts of sacrifice and loyalty for viewers to draw, learn, and grow from.

As I reflect, I realize that Memories for the Future was not really about war or foreign policies, rather, it was an act of giving. Through this performance I attempted to educate future generations about ways we can carry on and mentally, physically, and spiritually heal over time. Marcel Mauss (1967) defines a gift as an object or service that is given within a web of social interrelationships. Similar to Mauss, I believe that a gift always embodies traces of the person who gave it, suggesting that the gift is always connected to the giver. “One must give back to another person what is really part of their nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of their spiritual essence, of their soul” (Mauss, 1967, p. 16).

**to see a youtube video visit this website OR view the embedded file below**
References


**About the Author**

Michael Barrett is an Art and Visual Culture Education PhD student and assistant instructor at the University of Arizona. Over the past 13 years, Barrett has performed in England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and the Netherlands. He was recognized by Las Vegas Weekly and Las Vegas CityLife publications as "One to Watch" in 2013 and in 2009, the San Francisco Foundation acknowledged his work as a recipient of the Murphy and Cadogan Fellowship. Barrett recently completed a 320-hour performance, over two months, in Las Vegas and presently holds a Guinness world record.