

## ***Gregory Sholette: Squatting Bruce Barber's Sentences on Littoral Art***

From the book: *Littoral Art and Communicative Action: Bruce Barber*, edited by Marc James Lèger, Common Ground publishers, Canada, 2013.



Bruce Barber squatting an art space.

### *Sentences on Littoral Art by Bruce Barber*

1) Littoral describes the intermediate and shifting zone between the sea and the land and refers metaphorically to cultural projects that are undertaken predominantly outside the conventional contexts of the institutionalized art world.

*Barber's elegantly reduced lines form a recipe written in the spaces between art practice and art theory.*

2) Littoral projects are lifeworld affirming as opposed to system reproducing. Littoral artists work between the private realm and the public sphere.

*They are text-acts for inciting new forms of agency, as much as they are a prescription for survival. But survival is not enough.*

3) Littoral artists recognize their position as political subjects and act accordingly.

*Are you familiar with Marcel Broodthaers and his cooking metaphors?*

### *The Mussel*

*This clever thing has avoided society's mould.  
She's cast herself in her very own.  
Other look-alikes share with her the anti-sea.  
She's perfect.[1]*



Marcel Broodthaers *Casserole et Moules Fermées*, 1965.

#### 4) Social actions may (re)produce cultural judgements.

*Barber's littoral artist is like Broodthaers' mussel: she generates not only her own shell, but also its content. Unlike Broodthaers' mussel however, the littoral artist de-shells herself, waging war even on her own fragile structure.*

#### 5) Cultural interventions may lead toward social change.

*Coming of artistic age in the mid to late 1970s Barber would likely acknowledge that 60s conceptual art merely criticized cultural institutions, doing so with a gleeful seriousness secretly indebted to Cold War competitiveness (after all, the Soviet version of "idea art" was strictly underground at the time). He would also likely admit that even the most critical contemporary artists in the post-1980s world of enterprise culture have been forced to rethink the concept of the institution. Why? Because no matter how flawed the institution may be within a neoliberal landscape dotted with social ruins, it represents a last vestige of collective meaning that transcends the local. And this leads inevitably to potentially useful contradictions. (By useful I mean "political," a recipe for doing art politically.)*

#### 6) Public, community-based art is essentially political.

*Which is to say some things remain clear. For instance, the museum, the university, and the art world still act strategically. They seek to enclose defined spaces with clear ideological and class boundaries. But littoral politics is different. It is at least in part a question of tactics. In Michel de Certeau's well-known formulation this means not*

*owning or holding space either inside or outside the institution because while life on the periphery is harsher, less forgiving, it is also more clever. According to de Certeau, survival in such situations requires “simulations, tricks, and disguises.”[2] For the littoralist this is a ticklish first step towards becoming a political subject within a particular counter-narrative.*

7) The political positions that artists adopt should be followed ethically.

*Although all manner of local flora and fauna evolve tools to survive this interstitial precariousness I suspect Barber would insist the littoral artist must go further. The littoralist must come to understand the ideological topology of the perimeter itself, its precise contours and stratifications, and its uncanny psychogeography – to use the terminology of SI, one of Barber’s early influences. Still, this is not enough. We know this because Barber is moved to invoke Marx’s challenge regarding our collective future.*

8) Littoral artists acknowledge Marx’s injunction in his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, that it is not up to philosophers (artists) to simply interpret (represent) the world; the point is to change it.

*More than the tactical practice of everyday life is at stake in Marx’s provocation, though admittedly things do not always go as planned. “Littoral art is only as good as the social processes it sets into motion” Barber writes in his “Paragraphs on Littoral Art.”[3] Fair enough. And yet the concluding line of the Paragraphs mysteriously states: “I do not think that littoral art merits the reader’s attention.” As invoking Melville’s character Bartleby the Scrivener it seems that Barber would also prefer not to? But prefer not to what? Prefer not to be the artist?*

9) In Littoral art projects social interactions should be coordinated with less emphasis on egocentric calculations of success for each individual than through co-operative achievements of understanding among participants.

*He dreams of a politicized practice where theory and practice are so neatly conjoined that no one knows where one leaves off and the other begins. Not even Barber himself knows. His dream is of praxis, pure and simple.*

10) Social and cultural actions can be strategic, exemplary, instrumental or communicative. Communicative actions attempt to lessen provocation and encourage dialogue. They are the result of the conjoining of theory and practice into a political praxis.

*In 1984 Barber produced a series of exhibitions entitled “Reading Rooms.” Over the next few years the artist transformed gallery spaces into compact libraries where audiences were invited to reflect on how they “consume” information encountered in the day-to-day onslaught of the mass media spectacle from corporate advertising and newspaper journalism, to films and images about the Vietnam War.*

11) In Littoral art projects no one individual should assumed absolute control of the communicative process; rather it should be, in the best sense possible, participatory and democratic.

*“Reading Rooms” simultaneously insisted that art should have a definite political role, much as Walter Benjamin contended that the revolutionary artist should be a producer engaged in social transformation rather than merely an artist who holds a mirror up to society. But transformation also occurs within the artist’s being, and one of Barber’s early essays, written about the same time as he created “Reading Rooms,” reveals a significant shift in his thinking on theory and practice. It took him away from 1970s avant-garde provocations and pointed him towards defining something unpredictable.*

12) Public art projects are aimed at stimulating dialogue and participation within a specific community to engender (or engineer) conscientization, and possibly, social change.

*“Notes Towards An Adequate Interventionist [Performance] Practice” was written in 1984.[4] It reads like an early sketch of Barber’s “The Gift in Littoral Art Practice” from about ten years later (the first essay reprinted in this volume). “Notes” clearly owes a debt to Barber’s community of influences at the time, including Lucy R. Lippard, Carole Condé and Karl Beverage, Art and Language, and Art Workers’ Coalition, among others. But this text attempts something that seems unique in the early 80s. Barber begins on familiar enough ground offering his own genealogical outline of anti-capitalist performance art moving from the revolutionary nihilism of the Dadaists, to the agitational actions of the Situationist International, and concluding with what he calls the critical interventions of Guerrilla Art Action Group and Adrian Piper. It’s a useful topology though it is not really what he is after when all is said and done.*

13) The interaction between marginal groups and their integration in such projects can lead to extraordinary results in which artistic, social and environmental objectives overlap.

*The real stuff comes in two moves. First Barber brackets the word performance this way: [performance]. It’s as if he wishes to mark the printed name itself with his disapproval as performance art becomes rapidly de-politicized upon entering the mainstream art world. It’s not that Barber’s denunciation is so extraordinary per se; certainly Lippard and others expressed similar woes. Rather, it’s the way Barber tries to incorporate critique into the graphic material of his essay. This is what strikes me because his approach is familiar. It is that of an artist with a stake in critical theory (as opposed to a theorist with a stake in art). Like a synaesthete who blurs sensory categories together, the littoralist approaches critical discourse as if it were an artistic medium.*

14) Littoral art helps to stimulate dialogue and elevate the standards of conversation between different communities and disciplines whose paths would normally not cross.

*The second move in this essay has broader implications. Barber grapples with something that has become central to contemporary writers on social practice art, including among others, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Marc James Léger, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Tom Finkelpearl, Gerald Rauning, Suzanne Lacy, Ted Purves, Nato Thompson, Pablo Helguera, Shannon Jackson, Beverly Naidus, Yates Mckee, Arlene Goldberg, and myself. Writing about Adrian Piper’s “Funk Lessons” (1982-84) in which the African-American identified artist introduces the “grammar” of black pop culture to a mostly*

*white audience, Barber states: “Here is a work that transcends the interventionist model of the Situationists, a [performance] that weds theory to practice and can assist in the positive critique of the passive consumption and reproduction of the dominant ideologies.”[5] A decade later, just as the search for a “positive critique” of consumer capitalism emerges as the sine qua non for a new generation of critics, Barber builds on this insight with his concept of littoral art.*

15) The littoral artist may use any form and employ any materials, techniques or procedures to reach his/her objectives.

*Rather than accumulate a well-earned share of cultural capital Barber became a giver of gifts, a teacher, an experimenter.*

16) Littoralist art is more about giving than taking.

*Or more concretely he became something of a naïve optimist rehearsing a future of inclusivity, generosity, and horizontal conversation despite the near-impossibility of success. Welcome nonetheless is this gift of radical confidence.*

17) Within littoralist art practice, donative art strategies extend the language of the altruistic gift into a more politically efficacious education about the nature of gift giving and reciprocity.

*Still, just what does the littoralist artist donate? Is it a license to unmold oneself, to cast-off one’s shell? Or a gift of resistance?[6] And is Barber satisfied with the recipe he gives away line by line by line? Is it generating the desired effects? Or does he still prefer not to, perhaps growing fearful of fathering some newfangled artistic law (even if its ultimate decree is that of self-renunciation)?*

18) Littoral artists acknowledge their debt to history and respond positively to successful models presented by the historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes of the more recent past.

*Russian theorist Viktor Shkolvsky insists that time erases us “like the teacher in an elementary school erases an incorrectly solved problem on the blackboard.”[7] I suspect something similar motivates Barber, motivates him as it unsettles him.*

19) Littoral art projects can provide a powerful incentive for social integration as opposed to individual competition.

*Perhaps Occupy Wall Street explains this ambivalence best. The mostly youthful OWS activists looked at their jobless future and collectively blurted out: “we prefer not to.” They sought to literally lose their collective face by erasing all debts up to and including past vanguards, rearguards, Leftwings, and Rightwings. In other words, theirs was an attempt to generate a field of zero value for the future by giving away their own historical deficit to the past. But debt remained.*

20) Littoral art can provide an alternative to capital accumulation and power as an indicator of success.

*And as debt abides so does accumulation. (Even an erased blackboard can be re-inscribed with new imperatives just as Nietzsche's worn-down coins are endowed with meanings that may or may not reflect their original stamped impression.)[8] But nothing prevents a debt from changing hands. In Melville's story Bartleby is debt made manifest. He becomes an obligation that confounds and finally undoes business as usual. Barber as much as OWS grasp this, seeking a way forward that is not obliged to the past.*

21) Political correctness cannot rescue a bad idea. It is difficult to subvert a politically correct position.

*Rescue versus subversion? The littoralist has devised a third way.*

22) Littoral projects may become art if they are concerned with art and enter the fields of discourse associated with art theory and criticism.

*Between 1998 and 2005 the artist's "Squat" installations literally put everyday life and work on display as contemporary art. In other words, Professor Barber squatted the very system that validates him. These were acts of asymmetrical warfare that nevertheless complied with the decorum and conventions of dominant ideology by using what Benjamin Buchloh once described as an aesthetic of administration.[9] The bivalves never stood a chance.*

23) Some successful littoral projects may begin from a position of naiveté.

*Squatting the very system that validates one's place in the world is also Barber's answer to revolutionary failure (think of Bartleby's dispassionate refusal to perform his duties while nevertheless remaining physically affixed to his place of work).*

24) Surveillance is a form of control. Observational techniques represent methods of social control.

*In Melville's story we never come to know the thoughts of the scrivener. We do not even know if he has thoughts. No cause, only effect. It is Bartleby's bewildered boss who narrates the story for us, and who at one point finds himself using the scrivener's own dreaded term "prefer" – as though the very grammar of internalized capitalist discipline could be infected by Bartleby who is an expressionless, mechanical spectre of a man.*

25) Littoral artists should attempt to understand the effects of their actions and interventions in the public sphere and learn from their mistakes.

*After trying to deal with his employee's intransigence first through reasoning (Barber's Readings Rooms), and then by offering Christian charity (Barber's support for the anonymous Free Food group in Halifax), Bartleby's boss cries out in despair "rid me of this intolerable incubus" (Barber's Squat projects and use of bureaucratic aesthetics). At this point the employer abandons his place of work.*

26) Artists may perceive the littoralist projects of others to be better than their own, but they should strive to approximate success at every level of their social engagement.

*Left behind in the empty space Bartleby is evicted by a subsequent tenant.*

27) Littoral projects may engage directly with an institution.

*He is institutionalized.*

28) Once the immediate objectives of the project are established, the course of events should be allowed to unfold organically. There may be many side effects that the artist cannot imagine or control. These may be used to stimulate and/or assist the development of new work.

*Refusing to eat, Bartleby lies down and perishes. (The debt however, lives on.)*

29) The process is social and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.

*Is it unnatural to practice littoralism?*

30) There are many elements involved in a littoralist project. The most important may not be the most obvious.

*The littoral artist always requires a research plan, we are now back to the recipe.*

31) If the artist uses the same methodology in a group of projects but changes the techniques and materials, one would assume that the artist's work has privileged the method.

*By unmolding herself does the littoralist not only come to terms with the ambiguous zone she inhabits, but also with what resides on either side of it? And yet, is there not an art world haunting this spectral in-between-space today much as the littoralist haunts her anti-sea?*

32) Banal ideas cannot be rescued by privileging the aesthetic values that may reside in the work.

*Littoral art does not have to be pretty. It might squat grotesquely like an insurgent, or [perform] self-effacingly like an unemotional refusenik.*

33) It is difficult to bungle a good littoral project.

*Even a bungling littoralist is interesting.*

34) When an artist displays his/her craft too well, it may result in the loss of the social importance of the work.

*Dear guileless unmolded creature...*

35) These sentences comment on littoral art but are not art.

*...is the littoral also a space between us?*

## NOTES

1. Marcel Broodthaers, “*La Moule / Cette roublarde a évité la moule de la société. / Elle s’est coulée dans le sien propre. / D’autres, ressemblantes partagent avec elle l’anti-mer. / Elle est parfaite,*” in the preface to the catalogue *Marcel Broodthaers* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1980). I chose to approach the introduction this way to pay homage to Barber’s attempts at combining theory and practice, as both artist and thinker, in part because of the definition of littoral which my dictionary indicates as: “Ecology of, relating to, or denoting the zone of the seashore between high- and low-water marks, or the zone near a lake shore with rooted vegetation: limpets and other littoral mollusks.” Think of Broodthaers, who was both a poet and a visual artist and who, like Barber, managed to slip between those two definitions and practices through his work
2. As de Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this is the routine executed by certain fishes and plants in the primordial realm of coral reefs. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) xix and xx.
3. See in this volume, Bruce Barber, “Paragraphs on Littoral Art” (1997, 2004).
4. See Bruce Barber, “Notes Towards an Adequate Interventionist [Performance] Practice,” *Reading Rooms* (Halifax: Eyelevel Gallery, 1992). 106-116; available online at <http://www.brucebarber.ca/readingrooms/adequateintervention.htm>.
5. Barber, “Notes Towards an Adequate Interventionist [Performance] Practice,” 114.
6. See Gregory Sholette “Gifts of Resistance,” *Periferic 8: Art as Gift, Biennial for Contemporary Art*, ed. Dora Hegyi (Iasi, Romania: Vector Association, 2008) 129-137.
7. Viktor Shkolovsky, *Energy Of Delusion: A Book On Plot*, trans. Shushan Avagyan (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1981) 296.
8. Truth is made up of metaphors, writes Nietzsche, “metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.” *Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin Books, 1954) 46-7.
9. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* #55 (Winter 1990) 105–43. For a different interpretation of this “Bureaucratic Turn” see Chris Gilbert’s *Art & Language and the “Institutional Form in Anglo-American Collectivism”* in the book *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, 2007, Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (eds.), University of Minnesota Press, 2006.