

### **The Work of Michael Piazza**

Thursday, March 6, to Saturday, April 19, 2008

The Gahlberg Gallery would like to thank the organizers of Michael Piazza's posthumous exhibition; Brian Dortmund, Jim Duignan, and Bertha Husband for their hours of work in excavating, documenting and interpreting Michael's work for the exhibit. And a special thank you to the writers, Jim Duignan and Bertha Husband, for their assistance in developing this exhibition catalog.

Barbara Wiesen  
*Director and Curator*  
Gahlberg Gallery

The organizers, Brian Dortmund, Jim Duignan, and Bertha Husband would like to thank Laura Piazza and Michael's sons, Sam and Franklin Piazza, for their support and assistance in this exhibition. And special thanks to Jamie Hale, Nikki Nudo, Mike Omens and John Patrick Workman for organizing, cataloging and documenting the vast amount of personal effects, sculptures, correspondences, photographs and archived materials.



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## **The Work of Michael Piazza**

**MICHAEL PIAZZA**  
**JUNE 2, 1955 – APRIL 30, 2006**



### **An (other) explorer of sorts**

I always entertain great hopes.  
— Robert Frost

He traversed across Illinois guided by the lights of prisons, which were to be the attention of many of his projects<sup>1</sup>. Each of us had prepared a lecture for the University of Missouri's Center for the Humanities *What is a City* conference<sup>2</sup>. We drove out Interstate 57 from Chicago, and exited the state just to the right of Cairo. The highway was a place for us to catch up and reimagine things. As usual the dark of sky and the hum of the tires hypnotized me. Michael Piazza and I fit a lot into that drive; we espoused the policy flaws of our host institutions and waxed with slight anxieties to our uninterrupted conversation on public art, mechanics and our kids. We joined forces pondering the limits of possibilities as that light gray Subaru, which had been capable of extreme weights and fragrances, brought us back to driving from time to time ... that night ... as only that automobile could.

The *Natural Bridge Road*, as did many of his others projects<sup>3</sup>, satisfied Michael's need to bring people toward a center, to better understand each other's worlds and their participation in it through conversation, and maybe, collaboration. He saw the effect of one generation on another and how in this case, the road became the point of contact and contention. That aspect of his work has illuminated city streets, detention center

hallways, parks, classrooms, community centers, public buses, plazas, galleries and alleys; all sharing in becoming a platform for a more democratic and civic engagement. His *Natural Bridge Road* project could rewrite local lore by creating introductions between people and social institutions, the documentation served to reference an (other) grand apparition. One pursuit his work sought was to provide a kind of simple witness through testimony and interaction. The *Natural Bridge Road* exposes a socially engaged model of working that Michael authored for himself, and would come to engineer, as a practice in Chicago. The city was his to use and to imagine, his professional and personal pursuits embraced its conversations, its photographs, writings and obscure history.

There was a morning in October some years back, when a group of us, including Michael's sons, set up tents in Columbus Park on Chicago's far west side. We laid out projects we had initiated during the past year at the Austin YMCA, Westside Alternative High School, Austin Town Hall Cultural Center, Art Institute of Chicago, Zawadi Project and other locations with local teachers, students, musicians, our students, artists and friends. There was a spontaneous gathering that turned into a situation that seemed timeless, like a



Unknown date and title

“Happening” or a rally, and yet, decidedly fresh as conversation operated as both subject matter and primary source of documentation. Dialogue followed Michael as it maintained a draw that brought him toward his subjects, excavating the stories and context that he saw as a way to create a better place.

For the past two years I have been looking through photographs of Michael, his projects and an unorganized catalog of correspondences, drawings, and documents from his last 25 years: cassettes of talks, Axe Street Arena archives, Panic magazines, Carlos Cortez prints, Nicaraguan posters, handcuffs, pamphlets and political propaganda filled boxes that seem to expand as items are identified. There was a written request to reenact an exhumation in Texas and the letter to Buckminster Fuller that made me smile and helps shape a

clearer sense of his intentions for historical interrogation. I found a photo I took of him planting plastic flowers in an alley as we set up a small radio transmitter for his *Purchased Garden Displacement* project in the Austin neighborhood but I was looking for a 8mm videotape of him reading Marx’s complete Communist Manifesto from the interior of an old woman’s library which Celeste, Nikki and I lived in back in 1992. My photographs of him remind me of those times: moments of huge bids on old books, risks to personal safety and the summer evenings standing on Albany Street mapping out big plans. However, it is the memories — the ones I have with no record of — that I am most drawn to. How he cooked books like hot dog soup in large pots and drilled into them, he laid them open across the floor marking new passages, laser book lights, electrical cord spines, literary agitators, he

orchestrated large scale works with a maniacal posturing of component parts<sup>4</sup>, assembled elements to a history that no one ever questioned, presupposing an ending perhaps, adjusted, not necessarily in his favor.

This started when he walked through the gate at University of Illinois at Chicago and inaugurated our first place to hold court, smoking and gesturing with those cigarettes, drinking coffee around old tables and worn chairs splattered with paint and gathered from different buildings, those stories circulating through the top two floors at Van Buren and Peoria.

Michael was occupied in the workings of his *Natural Bridge Road*<sup>5</sup> as we drove into St. Louis late, exchanging simple strategies for a metaphorical road with the Beat poets: Michel de Certeau, Edgar Allen Poe, Mike Davis, Iggy Pop and Marc Auge.<sup>6</sup> We talked about points of contact and ways of generating incidental conversations. Michael’s references to travel were extensive and had always maintained a sensitive, comprehensive set of interpretations, which could reach, well back in literary time. His road was a place of encounter and hope and served Michael’s process as a mystical detournement, situating an actual place and an ideal place alongside one another. He had enough poet in him to exercise judgments of interpretative times and places, the kind of locations that could open up experiences, the kind of experiences Maxine Greene wished for.<sup>7</sup> His road was real and unresolvable, an ancient device for portioning off, communication, expansion and flight. It was a chart, a map of the battle lines being drawn and the visibility of economic borders, now endless. Michael Piazza was an explorer. I often thought he was born 200 years too late, but this time was his time too as political exchange, integrity and revolution were necessary ingredients to a lived and spirited life than ever before. He was a man who sought change inside structural conditions that would resist any effort. Children and the

elderly, the self actuated and impaired, his friends and housemates, colleagues and animals, those you assumed he knew and everyone he heard of, were his partners. He carried their work with him, their stories and worries. He wondered and wandered, dreaming for others with a kind of completeness, which was the draw of pure inspiration.

Michael’s work is always easier for me to describe than Michael himself. But, here I find myself breaching that divide and seeking to articulate our time together, outside of my own head. Our friendship was saturated with moments of thinking quietly close; this was our work with all that dialogue, scavenging and idiosyncrasy. I admired him like few others.

I walked into his studio one day in 1991 to take the first of many photographs of him. It is black and white and square, he stands there looking straight at me with his arms folded and a bit of a smoke left, smirking. Michael Piazza died in the middle of the night 15 years later on April 30, 2006, his heart, unable to withstand another May Day.

Eyes, 1996, laser pointers and book





Top: *r dondruza*, 1993, placemats with literary passages, table, knives, glasses

Bottom: *A Collage a Day*: 1/1/06 - 4/30/06, 1 of 120 collages

<sup>1</sup> *Examine Correctional Course 2000, 1st Annual Youth Bike Rally booklet* which was part of a *Correctional Course Series* organized by Michael Piazza. The booklet produced by Temporary Services is available at [www.temporarieservices.org](http://www.temporarieservices.org)

<sup>2</sup> *What is a City* conference was hosted by The Humanities Center at the University of St. Louis. Michael's lecture was of the *Natural Bridge Road Project* and he was there meeting with members from the MTA who had invited him to look over renderings of his project for the bus stations and kiosks.

<sup>3</sup> Projects like the videos *Garden Stories* and *Urbs in Horto*, both collaborations with Jim Duignan, marked a pursuit of designing a quieter condition for community residents to come together. *Garden Stories* explored Austin women's many relationships with their gardens, which was an individual piece for the *Austin Walking Tour* project, a weekend long festival of participation and in conjunction to *Version 04 'Invisible Networks.'* *Urbs in Horto*, a day-long project on Oct. 12, 2003 of radical culture that brought 100 or so contributors over the previous year to use *Columbus Park* in Chicago as a natural site for thoughtful inquisition and exchange.

<sup>4</sup> From my eulogy of Michael Piazza describing the many individual pieces that were contained in any one of his installations.

<sup>5</sup> *The Natural Bridge Road Project* was developed in St. Louis, MO.

<sup>6</sup> "*The Practice of Everyday Life*" by Michel de Certeau was part of Michael Piazza's project *Illuminated* from 2004 and included in *Reelings – Readings – Re-Readings*, which was a bibliographic listing that adjoined the piece.

<sup>7</sup> *Maxine Greene's* essays, *The Art of Being Present: Educating for Aesthetic Encounters* and *A Light in Dark Times: Teaching as Possibility* represented the writers work in both our collections of primary course readings.



*Purchased Garden*, ROCK Road MetroLink Station, St. Louis, MO, 2004

### Happy Birthday, Martha Washington

"... if we were conscious, coincidence-collectors we would soon find ourselves transferred into a serial Wonderland universe."  
— Arthur Koestler

Reading is its own society. Readers, regardless of their native language, nationality or generation acknowledge a shared belonging. When Michael Piazza and I first met in 1984 at NAB Gallery, Chicago, we immediately recognized each other as fellow readers whose choice of reading was an important component of our visual art, and soon found that we even took from many of the same sources. From Surrealist texts, we had developed an interest in those seemingly mysterious connections that are popularly known as coincidence, but which

seem to follow some poetic law of chance. Also from Surrealism, we took an interest in the sublation of apparent oppositions, for example, dream along with reality, or poetic imagination along with Marxist politics. Because of these deep connections, our meeting led to more than 20 years of collaboration, starting in 1985 with two events that we initiated: the "Artists Call against U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean" at NAB Gallery; and the founding of the artists' collective, *Axe Street Arena*, Chicago (1985-89).<sup>1</sup> If I now think back to our first meeting, it seems to me that although our interests were similar, we had up to that point developed different strengths from our reading and experience. Mine, I believe, was in the political realm; and Michael's was in the poetic. While we shared a fascination in numerology, it had little influence on my work of the time. I remember once telling Michael



*Work for August, O.P.M. Preparations for Madness, Book V, Axe Street Arena, 1988*

"This thesis admits a choice between two modes of discussion: We may ascend or descend." — E. A. P.

that I was born on George Washington's birthday. He grinned and said, "Well, well, I was born on Martha's."

Michael's work in the 1980s was very much based on the laws of seriality. A word needs to be said here about seriality. In the early 20th century, the Austrian scientist Paul Kammerer set out to attempt to prove what he called the law of seriality. Kammerer believed that what we consider to be isolated coincidences or series of coincidences are in reality manifestations of a universal principle in nature. Kammerer was certain that alongside the causality of classical physics there is another basic principle that tends always toward unity, a force of attraction that instead of acting on all mass, like gravity, acts selectively to bring like and like together in space and time. Einstein thought highly of Kammerer's theory and called it "original and by no means absurd."

In September 1984, Michael presented his exhibition, "O.P.M. – in Light of Antinomy" at NAB Gallery. This was a collection of poetic constructions and paintings that were based on a dream he had of an island in the Buffalo Bayou, an area now incorporated into the city of Houston, TX. "O.P.M" stands for "on prime meridian," the zero degree longitude that runs through England and Spain, the two colonizing countries of Texas. In the original dream painting, there are several figures wearing cardboard box coverings, with holes so their arms are free to work, though they cannot see. Michael referred to these as "penance boxes" and the image has often reoccurred in his work. Between Aug. 22 and 24 in 1984, Michael visited the island of his dream to document the reality for his coming exhibition, only to find that it had been turned into a cement factory protected by a chain link fence — an image that also would recur in later work.

A year later, on Aug. 22, 1985, Michael read in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the Don's letter to Dulcinea, dated 22nd of August. According to



*Tiebreaker, 1992/93*

Michael's notebooks, Aug. 24 is the date Quixote enters the cave in the Sierra Morena and plunges into madness. Also, Aug. 22, 23 and 24 are the dates of Leonora Carrington's descent into madness in Spain, in her book, *Down Below*. Further, Michael notes, that in his novel, *Hopscotch*, Julio Cortázar writes, "The 24th of August was one of the three days in which the earth opened up." So, in this seriality he found the occurrence of the dates in August, a place in Spain on the prime meridian, and reoccurring instances of madness. Perhaps he thought that if the cosmos wanted to perform miracles of connection and re-connection, the least he could do was to seek to be aware of them. This was the basis for the works in the

1988 exhibition at Axe Street Arena, "O.P.M. — Preparations for Madness, Book V." On Aug. 24, 1988, before the exhibition opened, Michael traveled to Spain to consciously place himself in the series.

We cannot reconstruct these exhibitions. Many works have been lost, destroyed, sold or given away, but we do have some of the works from which we see objects such as plumb lines, maps and plastic tubing, all elements which would reoccur in future works.<sup>2</sup>

"In what way," writes the critic, Guy Brett, "can artists be present when they are no longer present in body and only the objects they



made remain: How can they exert a spiritual, a creative, an emancipatory force?" For an artist whose life's work has been cut tragically short, this question becomes urgent.

Two pathways occur to me. One is the posthumous recognition that comes as a result of the respect of fellow artists and collaborators in his lifetime, and most artists probably desire this. But there may be another, more subtle reminder: As the essence in a highly diluted preparation eludes clumsy chemical analysis and thereby becomes invisible to all but the suffering body treated by the homeopath, the silent trace of a life now departed, whether anonymous or heralded, may still perform its secret task and can be relied upon in an emergency.

— Bertha Husband  
Jan. 1, 2008

<sup>1</sup> The other members of Axe Street Arena were: Tim Andrews, Jim Koehnline, Mari Jo Marchnight, Laura Piazza and Rebecca Wolfram.

<sup>2</sup> Many of these elements also appear in Michael's and my more recent collaborations, under the name of paralipomena.

Left: *re reader read on (jump rope)*, 1992/93

Right: *Michael's studio*, May 2006, by Jim Duignan

Cover: *Suitcase Archive*, 2006, by Jim Duignan

Inside cover: *Michael Piazza portrait*, 1991, by Jim Duignan

