

BRING
THE
WAR
HOME

ST. NORBERT COLLEGE - 1969 / 2015

Bring The War Home
Restaged

1969/2015



Bring The War Home ***Restaged***

A Collaborative Project by:

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St. Norbert College
Bush Art Center - Godschalx Gallery
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Bring The War Home – *Restaged*

Brandon Bauer, Assistant Professor of Art with students Tania Hernandez, Melissa Kurth, Amanda Mura, Rebecca Ratajczyk, Dayna Semour, Stephen Sheperd, & Sadie Smith for ART 380 - *Contemporary Photographic Strategies* (Fall 2015)

For this project we restaged and re-photographed an archival image of a Vietnam War protest that took place on the St. Norbert College campus in 1969. The project was inspired by class discussions about conceptual strategies contemporary artists use, including narrative approaches, staged documentation, and ideas of the cinematic in contemporary photography. In the course of these discussions, we looked at a series by African-American artist Carrie Mae Weems titled '*Constructing History*', in which Weems worked with art students to recreate several famous press photographs from the 1960s. The idea of recreating the past to connect with it through a project like this was exciting. As a result, we decided to engage in a project that would explore the history of St. Norbert College in a participatory and interactive way.

We began our project by searching the college archives for a photograph to recreate. In this search we discovered a number of images from the late 1960s of Vietnam War demonstrations on campus. We discussed various images and decided we wanted to use one with a clear connection to the campus both past and present. For this reason, a photograph was chosen of a large group of students gathered in front of Main Hall, a prominent building on our campus. We analyzed the photograph in detail. Central to our discussions was whether or not we wanted to stay true to the original image or use it as a starting point to address concerns of the present day. Ultimately, we chose to recreate the image in detail aiming to better understand the social context of the original event in the process.

Coincidentally, the day we set aside to restage and re-photograph the archival image occurred on a day in which the St. Norbert College Center for International Education convened a faculty panel discussion titled "Making Sense of the Senseless" to address the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris which had taken place only days before. Several students and faculty joined our event after the panel and their participation brought additional meaning, connecting past peace activism on our campus with conflicts we face today and expanding our perspective of the project.

Through this project we found an opportunity to look deeply at an image, consider and discuss the social history surrounding the moment from which it was captured, and found a genuine connection to a past event on our campus in the context of current events. Through the support of this project by students and faculty across campus, our community came together. This act of restaging a peace vigil became a momentary yet meaningful response to acts of terrorism occurring in our world today.

Restaging the Archival Image

Brandon Bauer

Constructing History – Developing our Project

This project was inspired by class discussions about conceptual strategies contemporary artists use including narrative tableau, staged documentation, and ideas of the cinematic in contemporary photography. In the course of these discussions, we looked at a series by African-American artist Carrie Mae Weems titled ‘*Constructing History*’. In this series, Weems worked with art students to recreate several famous press photographs from the 1960s. These included photographs related to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy; Civil Rights leaders Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; and events such as the 1970 Kent State shootings in which the National Guard killed four students during an antiwar demonstration. Instead of faithfully recreating the images, Weems makes explicit the constructed nature of her recreations. The central subject of the reference photographs is isolated and placed on a pedestal, with the rigging and lighting surrounding the subject visible in the frame. In the construction of these familiar and historic photographs, Weems attempts to become the author and narrator of the recreated history she is presenting. As Weems has said of the work:

*Through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present – to the now, to the moment.*¹

Our class discussions about the ‘*Constructing History*’ works were animated. The students were captivated by the concept of recreating the past as a way to connect with and understand history. They were particularly intrigued by Weems’ *Suspended Belief* piece in which she recreated a photograph related to the Kent State shootings. I asked the students if they would like to create a class project focused on restaging an archival photograph and they all agreed but seemed unsure about how to attempt such a project. Based on our discussions, I proposed creation of an image specific to our campus, suggesting we begin by looking through the online collections of the St. Norbert College archives to locate source materials. We aimed to see how students on our campus had responded to historical events in the past.

We searched the archives as a class using key words such as “protest” and “demonstration”. During this process, we found a number of images of Vietnam Era antiwar protests on our campus. The photographs opened us to another time on our campus and spurred in-depth discussion of students’ impressions of the images and their personal relationships to the era. We focused on a group of photographs taken in

¹ Carrie Mae Weems: *Three Decades of Photography and Video*, (Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012). 8.

front of Main Hall, a recognizable building on campus both then and now. These included photographs of large groups of people assembled, a large bonfire in the foreground with people gathered in the background, and a solitary image of a woman kneeling on a blanket with four crosses and four flags in the ground in front of her with a sign leaning against the flagpole reading, “Will you let your son die?”.



**Carrie Mae Weems, *Suspended Belief*, from the series *Constructing History*.
Archival Pigment Print, 61 x 51 inches, (2008).**

These photographs in front of Main Hall were all potential rich sources for a reenactment project. As we discussed which image to choose for our project, some practical considerations emerged. Would we be permitted to create a bonfire in front of Main Hall? Did we want to recreate a solitary image, such as the image of the woman with the flags and crosses, or should we attempt to recreate an image of a larger gathering of students? These were all important considerations we discussed as we decided upon which photograph to choose for our reenactment.

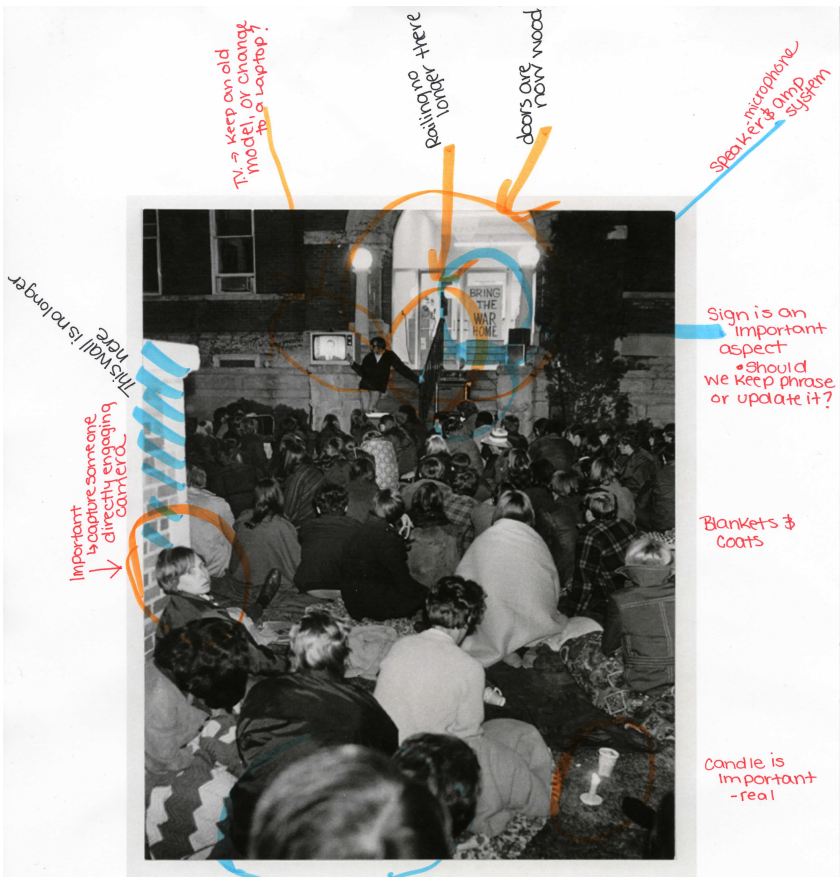
The image we chose contained a richness of detail with explicit referential markers of the era and its own intriguing quirkiness. It depicts a gathering of students

facing a man holding a microphone to a television on the steps in front of Main Hall. The man with the microphone stands looking toward the television with a nonchalant pose. All of the students have their backs to the camera, facing the person with the microphone with the exception of one woman in the lower left side of the frame who is looking directly at the camera while leaning on a brick wall. On the doors of Main Hall a banner hangs with the words “Bring The War Home”, a slogan that became a hallmark of the more militant later years of protest against the Vietnam War. There is an interesting disconnect between the casualness of the figure holding the microphone, and the urgent and bellicose language of the slogan behind him. The strangeness of the re-broadcast of the televised content through a microphone to those assembled was intriguing. It may have been a practical solution given the technology of the era but through our eyes it seemed odd to gather around a small TV with the imagined distortions of the sound of the television being amplified through a handheld microphone.

As a class, we examined the image very closely. We dissected it, asked questions about it, and analyzed it. An active discussion ensued about how to restage the photograph in which we questioned what in the image was essential and how closely we wanted to stay true to the source. We discussed whether or not to keep to the slogan “Bring The War Home” or if we should update it to reflect concerns of our day which have sparked protest and student activism on campuses across the country in recent years such as climate change, civil rights, campus sexual assault, and wealth and social inequalities. One student expressed a desire to make a direct connection to current issues while a majority of the students wanted to stay true to the source image in attempt to explore and come to understand its specific history. Spirited discussion continued in the weeks that followed as we developed our project.



Antiwar protest in front of Main Hall, St. Norbert College (1969). From the St. Norbert College Archives.



Vietnam War Protest - 1969, Main Hall, St. Norbert College

- What was Main Hall used for in 1969?

- Update all aspects of the photo or keep true to original?

- Can we put a sign on door? OK to re-stage photo?

- "Bring the war home" sign

- TV on mini-tel

- Speakers (power? 60's playlist?)

- Candle

- MTA prime

- microprint

Table

sign for participants to sign

- The pro

- Commas

- clap band

Project Notes (2015).

CALL FOR EXTRAS!



**BRING
A
BLANKET**

**WEDNESDAY
NOV. 18TH
1:00 PM**

SNC MAIN HALL 1969 **"BRING THE WAR HOME" RESTAGED**

A project of the ART 380 Contemporary Photographic Strategies course exploring the idea of restaging archival images as a way of connecting with and understanding history. Meet in front of Main Hall Wednesday November 18th at 1:00pm to take part in the photo shoot. The final work will be exhibited in Spring. Bring a blanket!

EMAIL FOR MORE INFORMATION

sncwarathome@gmail.com

Poster created to "call for extras" (2015).

Bring The War Home – Understanding Historical Context

“Bring The War Home” is a unique marker of the later years of the Vietnam War. It is a phrase that was not recycled by subsequent antiwar movements the way other slogans have been. For example, “No Blood For Oil” a slogan that originated during the 1991 Gulf War was reused extensively on protest signs and in political graphics in the early days of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.² “Bring The War Home”, on the other hand remains uniquely tied to its time and to the later years of the Vietnam Conflict. As a class we discussed the phrase in-depth, at first attempting to answer the question of whether or not we planned to use it for our reenactment or if we should update it. Once we decided to keep the phrase, we began researching its origins more substantively. As our discussions continued, several of the students made connections to a course they were previously enrolled in on campus titled, *Vietnam In The Western Imagination*. This sparked deeper insight in our exploration of this period and its relationship to events on our campus.

The American anti-Vietnam War movement has been described as “the largest and most influential of all antiwar movements in the nation’s history.”³ Wisconsin was at the epicenter of the student antiwar movement in often militant, contentious, and deadly ways. For example, the 1970 bombing of the Sterling Hall Army Math Building on the campus of the University of Wisconsin – Madison which resulted in the death of a physics researcher and the injury of three other individuals⁴ was viewed as part of the shift toward the more violent phase of the later antiwar movement.

The specific slogan “Bring The War Home” depicted in the photograph we chose to restage represented this new phase of militancy embraced by the antiwar movement. John Jacobs, a leader in “The Weathermen”, or the Weather Underground as the group is also referred, created the slogan to signify a strategic shift toward more militant activity on the part of the antiwar movement. The Weathermen were a militant faction of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organization who took their name from a lyric in the Bob Dylan song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. SDS was one of the leading antiwar student groups and by the late 1960s the Weather Underground faction took control of the national leadership. In the fall of 1969, this slogan was proposed as a rallying cry for a national action that became known as the “Days of Rage”, a demonstration that took place in Chicago in October of 1969.⁵ It is interesting to see the use of this slogan at St. Norbert College. If the dating of the photograph from the archives is correct, it was used shortly after its adoption as a rallying cry for greater militancy and direct action as a political strategy, and shortly after the Days of Rage actions in Chicago.

² James Mann, *Peace Signs The Anti-War Movement Illustrated*, (Edition Olms, 2004). 20.

³ Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds*, (SR Books, 2004). 1.

⁴ For a detailed account of this event, the book: *RADS: The 1970 Bombing of the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and its Aftermath*, by Tom Bates, (Harper Collins, 1992) still remains the most thorough chronicle.

⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS*, (Vintage Books, 1974). 579.

Our research pointed to a campus climate at St. Norbert College and an approach to the issue of the Vietnam War by its student activists that was in contrast to the direction proposed by the SDS national leadership under the influence of the Weatherman faction. As described by the St. Norbert College ROTC, Vietnam Era tensions on campus flared up along with other campus revolts around the country. This included property damage from a small fire set in an ROTC supply area, as well as an ornamental cannon that was pushed into the Fox River. Even with these acts of vandalism by the student protestors, the SNC ROTC recounting of the era states:

*The attitude of the college during these years appeared unique for the times. Unlike many schools and much of the United States population, St. Norbert College made distinction between national policy to conduct the war in Vietnam and those who were assigned to wage the war.*⁶



SDS, *Bring The War Home* (Statement). Cover Image (1969).

⁶ St. Norbert College, Military Science, *The Vietnam War Era, 1960-1973*, www.snc.edu/militaryscience/history/1960-1973.html

In other words, while there were elements within the antiwar movement in the Vietnam Era that held soldiers equally responsible for conducting the war along with policy makers, the students at St. Norbert College attempted to concentrate on peaceful perspectives. In 1969, the same year that the photograph we were to restage was taken, the editors of the St. Norbert College yearbook dedicated it to the ROTC with the following as part of the inscription:

*It is unfortunate that the universal desire for peace is so often so easily (and illogically) changed into bitter hatred and open criticism of the military community. Unfortunate because there is nothing more precious to those who have been in combat than peace.*⁷

In the climate of increased militancy and violence on the part of the antiwar movement, this attitude may have seemed a departure from the mood of the times but it was not a completely unique position. Such perspectives were also present during the Civil Rights struggles of the era as exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his memoir reflecting on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King discusses the central principles of nonviolence in social actions including a focus on the defeat of injustice not people. He discusses the strategies of nonviolence in context of their proposed goals, writing: “The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.”⁸ King himself by 1967 came out strongly against the Vietnam War linking the Civil Rights movement with the peace movement. In a speech on April 30, 1967 titled “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam”, King stated:

*And as I ponder the madness of Vietnam and search within myself for ways to understand and respond in compassion, my mind goes constantly to the people of that peninsula. I speak not now of the soldiers of each side, not of the military government of Saigon, but simply of the people who have been under the curse of war for almost three continuous decades now. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know these people and hear their broken cries.*⁹

The St. Norbert College ROTC history of this era acknowledges the student activists on campus for this same distinction. In holding to this principle, the student activists

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, (Harper & Brothers, 1958). 102.

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam*, April 30, 1967, (The Pacifica Radio / UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project).

recognized the dignity and humanity in those whom others may have viewed as their adversaries, whether it may be the soldiers fighting the war or the people of Vietnam. In this way, these student peace activists did service to the namesake of the college who also sought peace and reconciliation in his time. This principle is an essential part of the stated mission of the college to “seek peace and reconciliation in the spirit of St. Norbert”¹⁰. The college was recognized for this in statewide news media. On October 15th, 1969 a national “Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam” was called as a general strike, teach-in and series of demonstrations across the country. St. Norbert College, as reported by the Green Bay Press Gazette, was “possibly the only school in the nation to cancel classes for a daylong open discussion.”¹¹

Beyond St. Norbert College, there was much opposition to the war in Vietnam by those of the Catholic faith. Pope Paul VI made many efforts to support a peaceful solution to the Vietnam Conflict through the United Nations and in direct talks with U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. In September of 1966, the Pope released an encyclical titled *Christi Matri*, in which he exhorted, “with piercing cry and with tears” an end to the “bloody and difficult war”.¹² Within the context of the stated mission of the college and Pope Paul VI’s passionate and stated opposition to the war, the use of the phrase “Bring The War Home” seems less of a move toward militancy by the St. Norbert College peace activists and more of a sincere desire to simply bring the troops home and end the conflict. Other elements of the image, such as the candle in the lower right side of the frame, paint a more vivid picture of this era of activism on campus when considered along with the other solitary and prayerful images in the SNC archives. It points to a campus seeking peace, reconciliation, and an end to the war in Vietnam without a move toward the more militant and violent actions that shook other campuses in Wisconsin and around the nation.

We Gotta Get Out Of This Place - The Music of the Vietnam Era

I am from the generation that grew up in the immediate shadow of Vietnam. As I came of age, I saw the ways this legacy was wrestled with personally, having family who served in combat, and was witness to the various ways our culture wrestled with the legacy of the Vietnam War through popular media. Music of this era was often used as critical shorthand about the war and the social upheavals of the time. I was in high school when, in a victory speech at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush declared we had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all”.¹³ Yet despite this pronouncement the shadow of Vietnam still lingers, and

¹⁰ St. Norbert College Mission Statement: www.snc.edu/mission/statement.html

¹¹ Green Bay Press Gazette, *750 Gather for Local Moratorium Events*, (October 15, 1969), Retrieved from the St. Norbert College Archives

¹² Lawrence MacAndrews, *What they wished for: American Catholics and American Presidents, 1960-2004*, (University of Georgia Press, 2014). 54.

¹³ George H.W. Bush, *Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council*, March 1, 1991. (The American Presidency Project, University of California – Santa Barbara).

its echo still continues in debates surrounding the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in discussions about conflicts that appear on our near horizon.

Music has been at the heart social and political struggles throughout history, and the Vietnam Era was no exception. For our reenactment I put together a mix of songs we played in the heart of campus as we gathered that I felt would call to mind the era we were restaging. I am not a music historian but, as an artist I have an interest in the ways cultural ephemera, like popular music, can speak critically about the time from which it was created. Sound is an important element in my artistic practice in many ways. I incorporate sound in my video and installation work, as well as in specific audio projects I have created. Recently, I have been creating playlists as a part of the research phase for work I develop. The playlists I create either evoke a mood I am trying to capture, or reference the material in a direct way. For example, I created a soundtrack of music that related to the nuclear abolition movement in the 1980s, for my project *The Euromissiles Crisis*. The project was a portfolio of twenty-two images that chronicled a historical narrative of the Euromissiles Crisis and the nuclear abolition movement that arose in the United States in response, from the late 1970s through the 1980s. This mix was later released as a part of the Interference Archive's 'If A Song Could Be Freedom' mixtape series that was published in conjunction with an exhibition that examined the social context for landmark recordings, and the relationship between music and grassroots political movements.¹⁴ Interference Archive is an open stack archival study center and exhibition space based in Brooklyn, NY, whose mission is to explore the relationship between cultural production and social movements.

Much has been written of the music of the Vietnam Era, of the ways music became a soundtrack to the war, as well as becoming a powerful medium for the counterculture. There are many direct and indirect references in music from the time to the conflict. Interestingly many songs in the Vietnam Era; folk, country, R&B, and Rock songs, were heard both at home and abroad on the battlefield, but often took on different meanings, depending upon their context. Doug Bradley and Craig Werner explore this idea in their book *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, as they state: "no one listening to the Jimi Hendrix Experience's 'Purple Haze' in a college dorm room was likely to associate the title with the color of the smoke grenades used to guide helicopters into landing zones."¹⁵ This was true of many popular songs in the 1960s and early 1970s. Their prime example is the song *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place*, which they refer to as the "Soundtrack of the Vietnam War". The song was originally written by two American composers, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, but was adapted by the British rock group The Animals into an anthem of the working class experience in the north of England. Even so, the song became a

¹⁴ Interference Archive, *If A Song Could Be Freedom Mixtapes*, <http://interferencearchive.org/if-a-song-could-be-freedom-mixtapes/>

¹⁵ Doug Bradley and Craig Werner, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015). 3.

powerful anthem of discontent among American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, as they connected to the sentiment alluded to in the title.

In choosing music to include on the mix, I knew I wanted to create a playlist that touched on some of the diversity of the creative musical output of the era. From folk songs by popular artists, to songs directly addressing the Vietnam experience, to songs capturing the mood of the counterculture and antiwar movement, as well as songs that tapped into the general mood of the era, but in a similar way as the song *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place*, did not make explicit references to the war in Vietnam, but in their allusion, became powerful anthems of discontent tapping into the zeitgeist of the time.

American folk music has a rich tradition of protest songs and during the folk revival of the 1960s many popular artists engaged with this tradition. Some prime examples are Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A Changin'*, Phil Ochs's *I Ain't Marchin' Anymore*, and Barry McGuire's *Eve of Destruction*, which reached #1 on the Billboard top 100, September 25th of 1965, yet was slammed by critics and banned by some radio stations. Even so McGuire's single sold millions and stayed in the top 20 for two months.¹⁶ With the song's opening lyrics: "The Eastern World, it is exploding / Violence flarin', bullets loadin' / You're old enough to kill, but not for votin' / You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin'..." – these lines made an incisive critique about the discrepancy between the voting age and the draft age in this time of conflict. John Lennon's *Give Peace A Chance*, written spontaneously and recorded during his 'Bed In' protest – performance art, honeymoon, media event, with his wife the conceptual artist Yoko Ono in June of 1969. This folk chant song quickly became an anthem of the antiwar movement. By November of 1969, this song was sung by a half a million demonstrators in Washington DC during the Vietnam Moratorium Day rally.¹⁷

There were many songs written with direct references to the war in Vietnam, including classics like Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, with these opening lines: "Father, father / We don't need to escalate / You see, war is not the answer / For only love can conquer hate", echoing not only the antiwar sentiment, but the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. as well. Other songs like Country Joe McDonald's *I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag*, has been called "the most memorable antiwar anthem of the Vietnam Conflict".¹⁸ Country Joe wrote many songs directly addressing the Vietnam experience, some poetic, and others like *I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag* demonstrate his absurd and biting critical humor. The song *Fortunate Son*, by Creedence Clearwater Revival has a very specific critique about class, and of who pays the cost of war with their lives. The Library of Congress noted the cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance of this song and recently added it to the National Recording Registry.

¹⁶ Steve Dougherty, *How we got to the 'Eve of Destruction'*, (The Wall Street Journal, December 9, 2014).

¹⁷ Jon Wiener, *Nixon and the 1969 Vietnam Moratorium*, (The Nation, January 12, 2010).

¹⁸ James Perone, *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict*, (Greenwood Press, 2001). 40.

Several of the songs included on the playlist reference the counterculture and the antiwar movement more specifically. Songs like *Revolution* by the Beatles, *The American Ruse* by the MC5, and *Volunteers* by Jefferson Airplane speak to the general mood of discontent and the calls for change from this generation. The song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, by Bob Dylan gained notoriety for the adaptation of the lyric “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows” by the militant faction of SDS, who later renamed themselves “The Weatherman” after it. The Weatherman were the militants responsible for the “Bring The War Home” slogan, the Days of Rage events in Chicago in the Fall of 1969, and had as their stated goal, the creation of a clandestine revolutionary organization to overthrow the U.S. Government.

Included here is a list of songs played during our reenactment to capture the spirit of the era. Having these songs amplified and played on the campus grounds in front of Main Hall sparked a great deal of curiosity from passing onlookers, as well as drawing people in to participate in the reenactment.

Bring The War Home - Playlist

Give Peace A Chance – John Lennon
The Times They Are A Changin’ – Bob Dylan
What’s Going On – Marvin Gaye
Eve of Destruction – Barry McGuire
We Gotta Get Out Of This Place – The Animals
Power To The People – Lennon Plastic Ono Band
Volunteers – Jefferson Airplane
Fortunate Son – Creedence Clearwater Revival
Revolution – The Beatles
The American Ruse – MC5
Subterranean Homesick Blues – Bob Dylan
Vietnam – Jimmy Cliff
Kiss My Ass – Country Joe McDonald
War – Edwin Starr
Gimme Shelter – The Rolling Stones
Come Together – The Beatles
For What It’s Worth – Buffalo Springfield
Universal Soldier – Donovan
I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag – Country Joe and The Fish
I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore – Phil Ochs
The Unknown Soldier – The Doors
All Along The Watchtower – The Jimi Hendrix Experience

Restaging an Antiwar Protest In the Wake of the Paris Attacks

On the evening of Friday November 13th, 2015 coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris, France, including suicide bombings and mass shootings. The attacks were the deadliest in France since World War II.¹⁹ Members from the self-proclaimed Islamic State claimed responsibility, saying the attacks were in response to French airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. The news was horrifying and unsettling, and the mood on campus that following Monday was heavy-hearted as people across campus tried to make sense of the news. By 9:00 a.m. St. Norbert College President, Tom Kunkel, announced by e-mail that the Center for International Education had assembled an interdisciplinary panel of faculty members to, in the words of the president, “help the College community better understand the context for these recent attacks, the principal actors involved, and the impact of these events locally, regionally, and globally.” The panel, titled *The Paris Attacks: Making Sense of the Senseless*, was planned to run from 12:00-1:30 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th, which overlapped with the time we had announced our reenactment would be held on the signs we posted around campus. I reached out to the organizers of the panel to let them know we would postpone our event and encourage those who confirmed their participation in our reenactment to attend the panel, and the panel organizers said they would encourage those who attended to participate in our event after their event concluded.

Throughout the development of this project we discussed this act of protest on campus nearly fifty years ago in conversation with current events. We discussed the current protest movements emerging, the renewed civil rights movements represented by the Black Lives Matter protests and the movements for greater equality for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community, the environmental movement uniting around the climate crisis, the protests against sexual assaults on campuses throughout the country, and the movement addressing wealth and social inequalities like Occupy Wall Street, as well as the recent antiwar movement protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We discussed the different spaces of political engagement students find online and their curiosity about people gathering en masse to protest. With the exception of one student, not many involved in this project could envision themselves taking part in a protest gathering of the kind we were planning to restage. Mark Tribe discusses a similar experience with his students at Brown University in the context of his *Port Huron Project*, restaging historic speeches of the New Left. As he says: “For these students, the “massive social movement” that SDS President Paul Potter called for in his 1965 speech “We Must Name the System” is practically inconceivable.”²⁰ The same held true for my students, who felt activism would be more useful in direct ways, such as volunteering for non-profit organizations and for what they described as worthy social causes.

¹⁹ Tracy McVeigh and Emma Graham-Harrison, *Parisians throw open doors in wake of attacks, but Muslims fear repercussions*, (The Guardian, November 14, 2015).

²⁰ Mark Tribe, *The Port Huron Project*, (Charta, 2010). 8.



Main Hall with the flag at half-staff to honor the victims of the Paris Attacks, as we prepare for our reenactment. Photograph by Melissa Kurth.

Through this project we also explored this history on our campus in relation to the larger history of the antiwar movement in the Vietnam Era, and Wisconsin's central place in that history. The students found a lot of hypocrisy in the militancy of the antiwar movement in the later years of the Vietnam War. They expressed that they felt the protestors lost the moral high ground when they began engaging in violence, property destruction, and acts like the bombing of the Sterling Hall on the campus of the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Several of the students engaged in this project come from military families, and could not imagine attacking ROTC buildings or taking part in violence in the name of ending a war. Yet as we were preparing our reenactment, and people began to gather under the cadences of John Lennon's *Give Peace A Chance*, several of them noted that in the context of the terrorist attacks in Paris, our restaged peace event was becoming a real event and an opportunity for a genuine coming together for our campus.

As people gathered for our event after the panel discussion concluded I said a few words before we began photographing the reenactment. I expressed appreciation for the administration and faculty who hosted and participated in the panel discussion, and offered sympathy for those wounded and killed, both in Paris and the attacks in Beirut that occurred the day before the Paris Attacks. I discussed the difficulty of working for peace, both in the time we were reenacting, as well as today, while also

stressing that the two moments cannot be easily equated. Each moment has its own historical conditions, contexts and complexities. I also acknowledged that the work for lasting and sustainable peace and reconciliation in our world requires that we do not fall into the trap of seeking easy answers to complex problems, and requires that we study and understand the past to help us understand our present moment and the issues that we face more clearly. Before we began the photo shoot I encouraged everyone participating to reflect upon and connect to this history of peace activism on our campus that we were about to reenact. Tanyssa Behnke, a student participating in our reenactment, who had also attended the panel discussions, created an Instagram post that captured the mood and the moment in a concise, yet poignant way. Her simple hashtag, *#communio*, connected our gathering with this past peace movement through the Norbertine idea of *communio* – the creation of an active community of respectful dialog, at the heart of the mission of our campus. Through this restaging of a peace vigil on our campus, the event itself became a momentary yet meaningful vigil in response to acts of terrorism existing in our world presently.



Tanyssa Behnke, *Recreating a peace gathering...* Instagram Post (2015).

History Repeats – Contemporary Art and Historical Reenactments

While our project grew out of our discussions around the ‘*Constructing History*’ series by Carrie Mae Weems, her work is not the only example of historical reenactment found within current art practice. Historical reenactments have provided many artists with a rich and fertile ground to explore. Some have been fascinated by the culture of reenactment itself, while others are interested in the ways history is captured and transmitted through film, photography, transcripts and books, others have been absorbed by the power of archival images themselves, as they speak to us through history. A brief survey of some of the most innovative of these varied practices is useful when considering some of the many decisions we made in the development of our project.

Where does our reenactment of a protest that took place nearly fifty years ago on our campus fit within the numerous ways contemporary artists approach historical reenactments? Some of the most interesting and critically rich works in this genre include: Jeff Wall’s comically unsettling ‘*Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)*’ from 1992, Jeremy Deller’s brilliant work ‘*The Battle of Orgreave*’ from 2001, An-My Lê’s exploration of Vietnam War reenactments in her series ‘*Small Wars*’ (1999-2002), Sharon Hayes’s curious and incongruous *In The Near Future* (2005-2009), and Mark Tribe’s expansive *Port Huron Project* (2006-2009). Each of these projects provide an interesting take on the notion of the historical reenactment, the critical value of such projects, and the way past remains, collides, or perhaps should be again brought into our present moment.

Susan Sontag, in her powerful book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, described Jeff Wall’s monumental 7.5’x14’ illuminated Cibachrome work *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* as an antiwar image “exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power.”²¹ The work was created as Wall’s response to events in the news during the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The work is both unsettling and comedic. The dead he depicts engage with one another, laugh, and play around with brains and bloodied body parts as they sit, mired in filth and their own entrails, exposed from the wounds they suffer. This discord within the image is unsettling, how is there humor in the wake of this depicted slaughter? The image doesn’t seem to make sense, but as Sontag states:

*We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.*²²

²¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*, (Picador, 2003). 123.

²² Ibid. 125-126.



Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk* (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986). Cibachrome Transparency in Lightbox, 90 1/8 x 164 1/8 inches, (1992).

This statement by Sontag's acknowledges the realities of war lived by those caught in these conflicts. It also echoes the sentiment we discovered while researching the Vietnam Era on campus by the editor of the St. Norbert College yearbook when he stated "there is nothing more precious to those who have been in combat than peace." Wall's work speaks this grave truth- the 'dead troops talk' as the title suggests. These dead soldiers wrestle with the knowledge of their end through the various ways in which they interact, some with humor and absurdity, some stunned, pained, and spiritually broken. These dead have experienced the terror and the absurd normality of war. Sontag discussed this work in the tradition of the history painting, but within the realism of photography that Jeff Wall employs, and in a piece saturated with the sense of the broken facade of the film set between takes, the image takes on the tones of reenactment even in the absence of a specific image used as a visual script.

Jeremy Deller's remarkable work *The Battle of Orgreave*, is more explicitly about reenactment than Jeff Wall's work. In discussing the work Deller expressed his interest in the "the culture of reenactment", but finds people who participate in war reenactments as predominantly apolitical. He expressed his intention upend this notion, and to create an explicitly political reenactment with his choice to perform the UK miners' strike of 1984. Deller sees the miners' strike as being different from the kinds of battles most historical war reenactors engage in. The miners' strike was not a battle in a war, but it did represent a battle in what Deller discusses as a civil war within British society in the 1980s, pitting the conservative government of Margaret

Thatcher against unionized labor. In talking about the work, he states his intention to re-open this recent social rift:



Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, Production Documentation, (2001).

*It wasn't meant to be something that would make people feel- 'Oh, it's OK now' ... it's a healing process, it was actually meant to make people more angry, and get angry and upset...*²³

He does this, not only through the reenactment of a recent social trauma, but also by bringing the original participants back to engage in the reenactment. Of the over 800 participants assembled, many were former mine workers and former police that took part in the original conflict. In this way they were not only reenacting a piece of history, as embodiments of that history, they were essentially reliving the event once again, and opening the social wound once more. With our project, we were not seeking to reopen any social wounds. Instead, we were attempting to understand the social context from which the photograph for our project was drawn, as well as to attempt to understand it in relation to the emerging protest movements in our time.

An-My Lê's *'Small Wars'* shares an interest in the culture of reenactment with the work of Jeremy Deller, although for different reasons. An-My Lê, an artist of

²³ Jeremy Deller, *Jeremy Deller: Social Surrealism*, (Modern Kunst Nürnberg, 2012). Track 3.

Vietnamese descent, began a project photographing a group of Vietnam War reenactors in Virginia in 1999. This work was a follow up to an autobiographical series of landscapes she photographed on location in Vietnam. Lê expressed her interest in understanding the legacy of the war in Vietnam in both of these projects. She came upon the Vietnam War reenactment group through the Internet, and began a series of correspondence, in order to be given access to photograph their reenactments. The group finally conceded to be photographed on the condition that she was to take part in the reenactment as well. She describes playing a variety of roles: a Viet Cong Guerrilla, a North Vietnamese Army Soldier, 'Kit Carson' – a scout or turncoat who would inform the Americans of enemy movements, or the role she described as her favorite – the role of Viet Cong sniper.²⁴ Through their meetings and through the reenactments An-My Lê came to know the people who participated in these restaged battles. In talking about these interactions she states:



An-My Lê, *Rescue*, from the series *Small Wars*. Gelatin Silver Print, 26 1/2 x 38 inches, (1999-2002).

These men came from all sorts of professions. A few had been in the military, but rarely did they have experience in a combat situation. [...] It seemed that many of them had complicated personal issues they were trying to resolve,

²⁴ An-My Lê, *Small Wars*, (Aperture, 2005). 122.

*but then I was also trying to resolve mine. In a way, we were all artists trying to make sense of our own personal baggage.*²⁵

An-My Lê's work brings this understanding of personal history to the subculture of reenactment, recognizing that there are many complicated reasons why people choose to engage in reenactments of these historical conflicts and traumas. An-My Lê's work also looks at the typical modes of historical war reenactments, those involved in combat. Our project on the other hand reenacts a front in the Vietnam War not typically reenacted – the home front. As we discovered, the militant faction of SDS wanted to bring actual armed conflict to this front, while others, like those on the St. Norbert campus continued to seek democratic means to solve the conflict both by addressing U.S. policy and through their acts of protest.

Sharon Hayes's work *In The Near Future* has a sense of the internal being externalized. Particularly in the documentation of the work in which Hayes is photographed holding various historic protest signs in contemporary locations alone and mute, while the slogans on the signs speak the volumes of aggregated historical complaint. This work began in 2005 as a series of performance actions, holding nine different protest signs in nine different locations around New York City. The slogans were drawn from various past movements. Many of the slogans still resonate today, often in ways within her project that are much different than the ways they did in their original context. Hayes acknowledges this reverberation through time, in the life of the documentary source. As Hayes states:

*If a photograph or a film or a video or a sound clip lives or carries on into the future, it is usually because it is something other than just a document. It usually has some event-like status of its own.*²⁶

This "event-like status" of these past slogans creates interesting slippages and contortions of meaning. One of the best examples is when Hayes, a white woman, holds a sign emblazoned with the famous phrase from the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike reading "I Am A Man", a slogan originally protesting racial discrimination in the workplace during the civil rights era. This slogan, ripped from its original context, and separated from the famous images of mass protest, being held by a solitary white woman begins to speak potentially to the internal conflicts of gender identification often wrestled with by individuals alone. These personal struggles have more recently been widely debated throughout our culture, as we face new civil rights questions in our time extending rights previously denied to members in the spectrum of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community.

²⁵ Ibid. 122.

²⁶ Sharon Hayes, "Speech Acts", Interview by Robert Cook, (Frieze, no. 129, March 2010). 96.



Sharon Hayes, *In The Near Future*. Performance Documentation, (2009).

During the development of our project, we discussed our source image as an event, and much of our discussions surrounded the idea of capturing the image's essence. This speaks to the power of the documentary image that Hayes tries to recapture with her project. This notion notwithstanding, we were more interested in reenacting the image to understand the social context from which it was drawn, rather than creating a friction with our present as Hayes's project successfully articulates.

Mark Tribe's *Port Huron Project* (2006-2009), restaging Vietnam Era protest speeches by Angela Davis, Cesar Chavez, Stokely Carmichael, Paul Potter, Howard Zinn, and Coretta Scott King, creates its own historical slippages in simply bringing the speeches of the New Left of the 1960s into our era and in confrontation with the issues of our day. The work was intended to extend across multiple platforms, as reenactments, as video documentation of reenactments, as photographs and billboard displays, as an exhibition, and as a printed catalog of the project. In choosing famous speeches by seminal figures he brings their words into the present moment, but also reflects upon the ways in which history is captured, archived, and transmitted on multiple registers – in mute photographs, in transcripts, on our television screens, in art installations, in books. Tribe stated he was not trying to hold up the New Left as an ideal, but expressed that in attempting to reenact these speeches, he wanted to bring forth their spirit of urgency, utopian possibility, and felt that this past historical moment might again be “grasped intellectually, through rhetoric, and aesthetically, through embodied experience.”²⁷ Nearly fifty years later, these speeches still speak to

²⁷ Mark Tribe, *The Port Huron Project*, (Charta, 2010). 9.

some of the same rifts we continue to experience in our society, but also produce what New York Times art critic Ken Johnson described as an “odd sense of chronological dislocation.”²⁸ The specificity of the Vietnam Era may have some echoes in the era of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but one time does not directly translate into another. Each of these eras also contains their own specificities and complexities, each different from one another. This was something we discussed thoroughly as a class while developing this project. While there may have been some important connections between the war in Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were also many differences between the two periods.



**Mark Tribe, *We Are Also Responsible: Cesar Chavez 1971/2008*.
Performance Documentation, (2008).**

Our project reenacts a protest on our campus from the Vietnam Era, and investigates a historical moment within the same period as the projects by Mark Tribe and An-My Lê. Many of the slogans from Sharon Hayes’s *In The Near Future* are also drawn from this era as well. While Mark Tribe’s project reenacted famous speeches of the era, our project reenacted a small moment within this history. It is through the aggregate of these events, both small and large, that a mass movement against the war coalesced. Our project was also initiated through our class discussions of the strategies of narrative tableau, staged documentation, and ideas of the cinematic in contemporary photography, of which Jeff Wall’s work represents an impeccable example. Yet, our

²⁸ Ibid. 9.

investigation of the archival image itself, shares more with Sharon Hayes's idea of the "event-like status" of the document, and how we understand this image today, from our historical perspective. We may have not wanted to reopen wounds, as Jeremy Deller has expressed his desire to do in *The Battle of Orgreave*, yet the upheavals of the Vietnam Era, what Mark Hamilton Lytle, a Professor of History and Director of the Historical Studies Program at Bard College calls "America's Uncivil Wars", still reverberate nearly a half a century later as demonstrated by the artists discussed here, who still wrestle with the lingering legacies of this era in their work. As Lytle has commented, "the uncivil wars ended without resolving the issues over which they were fought."²⁹ In many ways it is easy to see why this era has become such a fertile ground for reenactment. The massive social upheaval that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s has had a long tail of effect throughout our society. Many scholars, Mark Hamilton Lytle included, have concluded that the political revolution proposed by the radicals of the era was essentially lost, but the cultural revolution that germinated in this time of confrontation and dissent, was won. New spaces of opportunity opened in our society that had been previously closed, but even so, many central issues and divisive fault lines still remain. Our country today remains deeply divided.

Postscript

As an instructor this was an amazing project to undertake with a class. While I have been considering ways of enacting democracy within the classroom, and have been considering ways to create engaging collaborative class projects, this project came about organically. At a certain point the question just became "why not go for it", and so I did – and as a class we did. The project was plotted out and planned each week, class by class, relying on open discussion and collaborative decision making in a very intuitive manner. In many ways my role was to lead from behind, bringing up practical considerations in our deliberations, making sure what we wanted to do was realistically able to be accomplished within a semester, keeping the class focused and on task throughout the project's development, as well as pointing the class to campus resources we could utilize as our project came to life with each passing week. The most powerful aspect of this project was that which we could have never planned – restaging this peace protest in the context of the attacks in Paris. It was through the restaging of a peace vigil on our campus, that this event became a momentary yet meaningful vigil in response to acts of terrorism in our world today. In this way we did connect to this past moment on campus, and it was genuinely experienced and embodied in our present. It was, echoing the opening quote by Carrie Mae Weems, through this reenactment, that we were allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present. It was a powerful moment shared by all those who participated on that day.

²⁹ Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon*, (Oxford, 2006). 375.



Bring The War Home - Restaged. Archival Pigment Print, 40 x 60 inches, (2015).

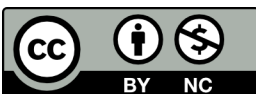
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Vietnam War Protest - Main Hall, St. Norbert College (1969)

Bush Art Center
Godschalx Gallery
February 29th - April 1st, 2016

