

Jason Lazarus



A Constant State of Becoming

Steven L. Bridges

Over the course of his ten-plus years working as an artist in Chicago, Jason Lazarus (American, b. 1975) has been identified most consistently with his work in and (increasingly) around the medium of photography. Within the last few years in particular his investigation of photography has begun to unravel new threads of inquiry that contribute to an expanded notion of the field. Parsing out different qualities and strategies inherent to the medium, Lazarus creates work using found photographs, scanned ephemera, the optical phenomenon of after-images, photograms of text culled from the Internet, and photographs that other people have entrusted to him as the curator and steward of an ever-growing archive—all of which are often presented alongside his more traditional photographic works (many of which are filed on the artist's website under the rubric "2004–Present").¹ However, as this exhibition sets out to elaborate, the artist's insatiable curiosity and perambulatory thought process are endlessly leading him in new directions.

For *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Jason Lazarus*, the artist confronts the ever-changing nature of photography while also embarking on two new process-oriented works that were developed specifically for this exhibition. These two projects—*Untitled* (2013) and *Phase I/Live Archive* (2011–present)—inform the show's conceptual framework and fortify Lazarus's overarching interest in developing an exhibition that critically examines the process of learning along different continuums: both temporal (the moment vs. history) and scalar (the individual vs. collective, group activity). Not simply a rhetorical ploy, the idea of "a constant state of becoming" is both the pretense and the methodological underpinning of the exhibition, which is deeply entwined with the development and implementation of the two projects explored here. From this vantage point, it is exciting to consider the possibilities for each of these projects, yet it is their potential to speak to each other, to intersect and inflect one another, that may be the most exciting proposition of all.²

The project *Untitled* was born out of Lazarus's desire to activate what he refers to as a "parable of learning" within the context of the exhibition.³ Largely inspired by his experiences as an artist-educator—and reflecting on how his own processes of learning, failing, and persevering often play out in the public spaces of museums, galleries, and classrooms—the premise of *Untitled* is relatively simple and straightforward: to have someone learn Frédéric Chopin's (Polish, 1810–49) *Nocturne in F Minor, op. 55, no. 1*, over the course of the exhibition. Yet, as with Lazarus's works in general, the initial sense of candor that one experiences upon first encounter slowly gives way

1 <http://jasonlazarus.com/>
2 At the time of writing these projects are still in their planning and production phases.
3 Jason Lazarus, personal communication with author, July 20, 2012.



Too Hard to Keep (detail), 2010–present
Archive of photographs, digital image files,
and various ephemera
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago



Untitled, 2011
Found photos, board, blanket,
gaffer's tape, and mounting hardware
33 x 29 in. (83.8 x 73.7 cm)
Photo courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

to deep and meaningful complexities. Aside from being one of the most well-known composers of all time, Chopin was a dedicated teacher of piano and is credited with having transformed the nocturne from an educational tool to a concert hall staple. Also of interest here: Chopin dedicated this particular nocturne to his student, Jane Stirling (Scottish, 1804–59). The respect embodied in this gesture points to the value Chopin placed on learning—specifically reciprocal education, as the channels of learning are always multidirectional—and this is quite meaningful for Lazarus, who invests much of his time in this reciprocal process.

It is also important to note that the selection of the composer and the particular composition are tinged with personal nuance and contribute to the conceptual depth of the project. It is quite meaningful that the initial spark of the idea was triggered when a former student of the artist e-mailed him a link to a YouTube video of composer Jorge Bolet (Cuban, 1914–90) performing Chopin's piece.⁴ The video is mesmerizing—Bolet's hands firm and flutter in a choreographed dance across the keys, not simply reciting the haunting beauty of the nocturne but interpreting the composition—and in watching this rendition, Lazarus must have intuited the many laborious hours of practice, the frustration and perseverance that is rarely (if ever) staged in front of an audience. This recognition—that knowledge is not a given and that skill and deep understanding are strived for, not predetermined or preexistent—led Lazarus to present exactly what others go to great lengths to conceal. By making public and visible the personal process of learning, viewers witness the very act of learning as it happens in real time.

It was important for Lazarus to identify a suitable collaborator who would not only entertain his rather unorthodox proposal but also imbue the project with his or her own personal meaning. Through his undergraduate alma mater, DePaul University, Lazarus connected with a student of classical piano, Anthony Zediker, who was intrigued by the artist's idea. The selection of Zediker as the project collaborator shifted the nature of the piece in a significant way. Zediker's skill level and experience mean that, while he has never played Chopin's Nocturne in F Minor, op. 55, no. 1, he can easily read the composition and begin to feel and sound it out without as much struggle as a novice would. This led to a recalibration of the project, since initially Lazarus had imagined a bit more turbulence throughout the learning process. Instead, the piece will focus on the later stages of learning, when intense, immersive study and experimentation will (hopefully) lead to personal inflection. Toward the end of the project, we may not be listening to Chopin, but rather to Zediker's Chopin.

At the other end of this proposed continuum lies *Phase I/Live Archive*, a project that Lazarus began as an artist-in-residence at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Following the developments of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) in 2011, the artist began to question how people with limited access to the actual protests experienced the movement, particularly via different media outlets.

4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2yoZQcLoSY>
5 For instance, in works such as *Inside Cabrini Green housing project (before razing)* and *Michael Vicks abandoned public apology note in my own handwriting (both 2007)*.

As the handwritten note or personal signature has been a recurring element in a number of the artist's past projects,⁵ it is only natural that Lazarus would be drawn to the makeshift, improvised signs wielded by OWS protestors. The media, constantly in search of some unifying message (of which there was none), seemed to prioritize the dissemination of images portraying the multitude of voices sounding off in the streets of New York, Oakland, Chicago, and many other cities around the world in 2011. These images, sourced from newspapers, news and other websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds, became the fodder for this project.

In a move that pushed his investigation of photography into new realms, Lazarus invited his students to re-create signs from media-sourced images that resonated with them on a personal level. Participating students were asked to select a sign culled from the media and re-create it using similar materials (i.e., cardboard, markers, the occasional picket, etc.), adding to the ever-growing archive of re-created signs that the artist cares for. What is most striking about this collection of signs, however, is the immense variety of voices and messages they express. Featuring a range of sentiments, from overt political slogans to quiet, soft-spoken pleas for recognition, this accumulation of messages speaks volumes about the desire to be seen and heard and the ways that people overcome their individual and collective sense of voicelessness.

For this presentation of *Phase I/Live Archive* at the MCA, Lazarus has developed a new arm of the project that allows museum visitors to select a sign of their choosing and carry it with them as they move through the galleries. This additional layer of complexity brings the project to a new and different place. What does it mean for visitors to wield re-created OWS signs in the galleries of the museum? What new meanings, relationships, and discussions might unfold as a result of this? How is a public institution also a public space, and who has access to such space? Furthermore, this notion of a living archive, an ever-growing repository that is available and made accessible for use and re-use is itself an intriguing proposition. It begs the question: What resources do we have available to us to learn from, to better understand the past in order to shape the future, and how do we actively use these resources? What *Phase I/Live Archive* both distills and (re)activates is a process of learning at a much grander scale. Here the discussion shifts to historical time and collective learning. Democracy, like knowledge, is not a given. It is something to be strived for and sought after through practice, through dedicated, focused work and self-awareness. The democratic process, just like the individual learning processes we undertake on a daily basis, is always in a state of becoming, the direction of which is influenced and shaped by the personal investments of its practitioners.

In this light, thinking about personal histories and historical progress, one can begin to see the exhibition folding back onto itself in a reflexive curve. The other works on display accompany and deflect the idea of a public parable by presenting a glimpse into Lazarus's



own development as he continues to craft a unique artistic vision and voice. The works featured in the inner gallery are not static images and objects but moments along a greater continuum that is the artist's trajectory. For Lazarus, too, exists in a constant state of becoming; the accumulation of different bodies of work and forays into new art-making terrain all augment and shift the meaning of the works that have come before and, inevitably, those that follow. Similarly, the exhibition offers viewers the opportunity to reflect on their relationships to learning (both individually and collectively) and invites them into the fold. In many ways, *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Jason Lazarus* is also a process of learning, relying as it does on the reciprocal relationships that exist between artist and audience, its meaning and significance informed by the exchanges that may or may not take place.

Steven L. Bridges is Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Phase I/Live Archive, 2011–present
Dimensions variable
Photo courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

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Cover: Jason Lazarus.

Untitled, 2011.

Archival ink-jet print.
40 x 50 in. (101.6 x 127 cm).
Photo courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago.

Since receiving his MFA in Photography in 2003, **Jason Lazarus** has actively exhibited around the country and abroad while curating, writing, and teaching photography part-time at Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. He has exhibited in Chicago at the Renaissance Society, Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, as well as at PPOW Gallery in New York; Kaune-Sudendorf in Cologne, Germany; and D3 Projects in Los Angeles. His work can be found in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Milwaukee Museum of Art, and MCA Chicago, among many others.

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