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Performance artist evokes brother's suicide in video blog

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AMHERST, N.Y. -- For 17 minutes, Chris Barr stood facing a tree at the edge of a parking lot, hands in the pockets of his jeans, moving only with the wind shifts that sporadically buffeted his body.

When the wind-up kitchen timer at his feet rang, Barr fell, hard, to the ground, landing on his back, hands still in pockets.

A minute later, he stood up, brushed dirt from his right elbow, walked over to the video camera he set up to capture the scene and packed it up.

Another day, another re-enactment. Another reminder. Another work of art.

Barr, 25, is a performance artist whose latest project evokes his younger brother's suicide three years ago to draw attention to the frequency with which people take their own lives _ every 17 minutes _ while inviting the viewer to contemplate life and death, living and dying, for that time span.

The re-enactments _ more than 50 of them since November _ are posted on a video blog, the most modern of media.

"This tree is kind of singled out," the University at Buffalo graduate student said, walking up to the last in a line of trees on campus where he performed a recent re-enactment.

He has taken the project to West Virginia hillsides, downtown Buffalo parking lots and cemeteries, anywhere his intuition tells him is a fitting tree.

The artist's 20-year-old brother, Anthony, had directed the family to the tree that he and his father carved their names in, telling them in a note where to find his body. Anthony Barr had a knack for finding the kind of trouble, sometimes alcohol-fueled, that exuberant 20-year-olds find, his brother said. He suspects Anthony felt like he was letting people down.

"The imagery of the tree in each ritual is deliberate. It may conjure images of Buddha and cycles

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of life," Barr said, "but it also refers specifically to the site of my brother's death."

The weather is an equal player. Anthony Barr shot himself during a blizzard that stretched the ride from the hospital from 45 minutes to five hours.

"Part of what I wanted to do was get myself stuck in weather," Barr said. The Buffalo elements have not disappointed.

"I've experienced the weather in ways I haven't before," he said. "Generally, you don't stand out in the rain, so you don't really know what that feels like, or stand and let the wind hit you and just kind of experience when the wind comes in bursts. You kind of feel like you're moving like a tree, you kind of sway back and forth a little bit."

Performed in public places, the re-enactments have drawn a mix of reactions from passers-by.

"I've had a couple people ask if I was OK after I've fallen over," he said, laughing. "In one of them I did on campus, a whole tour group walks in front of me. I love the video. They just kind of walk past. I heard the tour announcer kind of like, 'We've got all kinds of unique things.'"

Visitors to the blog, including loved ones of suicide victims and suicide survivors, have praised him for highlighting the issue.

"Thank you ... I am trying to get the message out too," the mother of a teenage victim wrote.

"Keep filming," e-mailed another viewer, "for in so doing the world is becoming more aware of suicide."

After choosing a tree, Barr sets his video camera on a tripod and frames the shot before stepping into it. While Barr is silent, the camera picks up the ambient noise of wind or rain, traffic or passers-by.

One video has his West Virginia relatives puzzling off camera about "one of his art things." In another, the first one, church bells coincidentally ring in the final minute, ending just as Barr falls. It was Nov. 2, Anthony Barr's birthday.

"It's meditative in a way," he said of the silent 17 minutes, which sometimes bring buried memories of the brothers to the surface: getting a bloody nose during a karate match in the yard, riding Big Wheels down a dirt road. "But some people would use meditation to clear their mind of things. I've set this up in a way where it puts things in my mind, so rather than go into this trying to remove thoughts from your head, it brings you back to one thought. It's centered around something."

The physical pain from the fall "brings me back," Barr said. "It grounds me. It reminds me that I'm a body; I'm here."

Barr began the project while taking a course exploring art and the body last semester. Assistant Professor Caroline Koebel called Barr's work "highly significant and complex."

"By symbolically repeating his brother's fall to the earth, the artist conjures the suspended present; he returns to the irrepressible moment of the deceased's last breath," Koebel said. "Chris doubles his brother. His action expresses the desire for the power to resuscitate the one he has lost and,

conversely, his acceptance of his loss _ contradictory states that only an artwork such as 17 minutes can encompass."

Barr, who is pursuing a master's degree in fine arts, attracted attention last year with a project called "Chris Barr is Available on Thursday," which invited the public, via the Internet, to plan his Thursdays for two months. That had him taking flowers to a nursing home, giving blood or bumming cigarettes from strangers.

Like the 17-minute project, the Thursday piece had an element of reclaiming time, he said.

"The way we live now, just finding ways to steal time is something that's difficult and a challenge to do," he said.

He also hopes that placing suicide in the public realm will help to remove some of the stigma and shame still associated with mental health issues, something experts favor.

"The only way to educate is through breaking through the stigma," said Dr. Daniel Reidenberg, executive director of SAVE, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education. "So we have to raise awareness, which breaks down stigma, which allows us to be able to educate, and therefore, prevent the loss of life."

Few people recognize that there are more suicide deaths than homicides in the United States each year, about 31,000, said Dr. Yeates Conwell of the University of Rochester. "So in terms of suicide as a preventable form of death in the vast majority of cases," he said, "as soon as we recognize that, bring it out of the closet, then we can start to think together about approaches to its prevention."

Barr said his project will continue until he determines an appropriate end, maybe Feb. 11, the anniversary of his brother's death.

On the Net:

Chris Barr: www.chrisbarr.net

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education: <http://www.save.org>

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