

Justice, Radically Imagined

Members of Chicago Torture Justice Memorials
Interviewed by Rebecca Zorach

Rebecca Zorach: *CTJM, according to its mission statement, “aims to honor and to seek justice for the survivors of Chicago police torture, their family members, and the African American communities affected by the torture.” The exhibition, Opening the Black Box: The Charge Is Torture, held in fall 2012 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s (SAIC) Sullivan Galleries, included speculative memorial proposals to an open international call for ways to memorialize these cases; video testimonies by torture survivors; a timeline displaying newspaper articles, legal documents, and activist propaganda; and a large wall drawing of more than one hundred names of people known to have been tortured by Chicago police officers under Commander Jon Burge.*

Could you each speak about your participation in CTJM and when, how, and why you got involved?

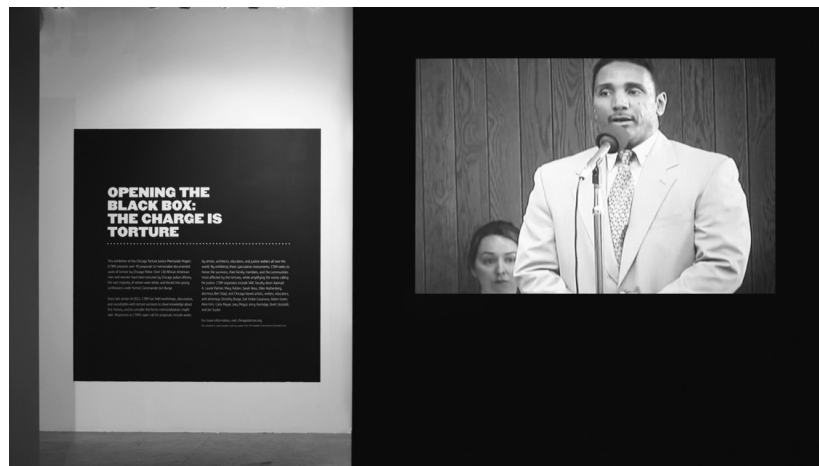
Amy Partridge: The first time it came up as a project was in a conversation with Joey Mogul, Debbie Gould, and Laurie Palmer. Joey was expressing her desire to find some way other than the legal system to deal with the police torture cases that she’d been working on and to build public support around the cases; she had been looking at the reconciliation models and reparations models. Laurie Palmer’s earlier project, *3 Acres on the Lake*, came up. I remember the conversation moving from, “We should do a reparations campaign” to “What if we did this as a project where people submit proposals to think about what reparations would look like?”

The next phase—which Alice and Joey were really central to—was trying to recruit others to the project, to set up organizing and advisory com-

mittees. We hosted a series of introductory events where we tried to figure out how to describe the project, how to make sense of it to ourselves and to a general audience. At each event we issued a general call for speculative proposals for memorials, which culminated in an exhibition at the Sullivan Galleries. Now we're trying to figure out how to make reparations the focus of the project. How do we realize some of the proposals? How do we make concrete demands around reparations?

Dorothy Burge: I first got involved at the design charrette that happened at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), where people came together and showed examples from different memorials that honored survivors of torture around the world. That's when I first heard what was going on in this project. I'm representing a group called Black People Against Torture, and they have done a lot of work in terms of awareness and political grassroots organizing to let people know about Jon Burge, the Burge survivors, and the people who are still in prison who we need to be advocating for on an ongoing basis. This was a way for me to continue to get the message out to a different audience through the arts.

Marvin Reeves: I'm linked to the project through Alice and her ability to bring understanding to what happened. I was incarcerated for twenty-one years, wrongfully convicted. I'm a Jon Burge victim, a twenty-one-year survivor—and trying to make sense of what took place. Because after twenty-one years they throw you out of prison and there are no programs for exonerated guys. And I always asked the question, "Why? Why are there programs for guys who commit the most heinous crimes, but guys who are wrongfully convicted and sent to prison and exonerated, they're just pushed out the door?"



Opening the Black Box: The Charge is Torture, installation view, Sullivan Galleries, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2012. Courtesy of the Sullivan Galleries. Photo: Tony Favarola

So that makes you want to be a part of something, to make sense of what's going on with us. This program is like an outreach for guys like myself and other exonerated guys who are trying to make the world understand these things happened, and let's take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again, because this Jon Burge cat was for real. He wasn't a cartoon character; he did this for real. I'm a victim of it.

This project helps me understand that there are people who care about us, even though the system didn't care about us. But as Americans, when you're thrown to the wolves, you don't understand how it can be that you're wrongfully convicted, that you're put in prison. And you walk the yard many days trying to figure out how I got here. This project brings light not to how you got there, but to how you try to get home.

To me, the exhibit means recognition. We all know in the world that recognition means a lot. If you accomplish something, you want to be recognized. And that's what that wall means. When I signed my name on that wall, that wall meant freedom.

Alice Kim: I had been involved in anti-torture work, anti-death penalty work since the mid-1990s. This project idea felt like a different way to approach the organizing work that a lot of us have been doing. I had had an interest in bridging the arts and social movements, and the way that that had expressed itself previously was that I curated a couple of death row art shows featuring the work of death row prisoners. This took it to another level by inviting people to submit speculative proposals. It captured what I think is important for contemporary movement building. Robin Kelley's book *Freedom Dreams* makes the case that activists, leftists, progressives, need to dream. He uses the term "unleash radical imagination," which is a great way to express what we need to do in this project.

Our first big discussion was what are we going to be called. That was an endless debate. It was weeks and weeks of having really strong positions about it. I guess when you look at different groups or forms of expression merging, the things that you end up spending time thinking about are not what you necessarily expect.

Marvin was describing the gallery wall. We came up with that as a group and we thought, "it'd be cool to have the guys sign their own names." The moment Darrell [Cannon], the first torture survivor, got up there to take his pencil to the wall, the feeling in the room was palpable; everything changed. There was this sense that this actually matters. Alongside all of our discussion about inviting people to submit their memorials, the exhibit in and of itself was a memorial. And that became so crystal clear when the guys were signing the wall. The power of art is not tangible. But something about the submissions and the process took us to a different place. It was not just historical memory but also what a speculative memorial could look



Opening the Black Box: *The Charge is Torture*, installation view, Sullivan Galleries, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2012. Courtesy of the Sullivan Galleries. Photo: Tony Favarula

like: that imagination was opened wide. I'd like to see more of this kind of art practice and movement building. We're learning as we go along.

I remember Joey and I—you guys were all talking about charrettes—we turned to each other and we're like, "What's a 'charrette?' What does that even mean? How do you spell it?" But we became a collective and really utilized everybody's different knowledge, understandings, and talents.

RZ: *I sense in your description of some of the discussions a sort of activist impatience with too much talk and not enough action. In those endless discussions about what the name should be, were there learning experiences that were important to the project? Was it more than just a discussion about the name?*

AK: I think the discussion about the name really was about what is our identity and what are we doing? It centered on the name, but it was also us figuring out our identity. As an activist I am often impatient! At the same time I have a deep respect for process, and that's how you figure out just how this collective is going to relate to each other, and ultimately it's that process that helps you get to a different place. We did have deeper discussions, practical discussions, conceptual discussions: do we want Chicago Torture Justice Memorials to be a contest? Is there going to be an award at the end of the thing? Is Chicago Torture Justice Memorials actually going to end up in a memorial? And then through the course of all of these discussions we came to a consensus that we wanted this to be very open; we don't want it to be a competition. We wanted the kinds of values that we think are important to be expressed in how we unfolded this project.

DB: I think that was really important, because it made it very, very inclusive. We talked about different art forms, and how art is defined very

loosely. So you could be a performance artist, quilter, painter, or writer and your art form would be welcomed. We had people who have done spoken word and who have done different types of art. It was all welcome and appreciated and it was all a part of the process.

Ellen Rothenberg: I would like to add something sparked by Alice's remark. The project has redefined how we think about what a charrette can be. We had to be open to what the experience was like when people came together around the subject of torture. They weren't ready to pick up a piece of paper and a pencil and some scissors and start designing. They wanted to talk; they wanted to meet with the survivors; they wanted to discuss what this history was and how we're part of it. It slowed everything down, and we were suddenly engaging less in a design framework and more in a conversational discussion framework. So it changed the terms as well.

DB: It also changed the impact. To me, one of the most impactful parts of this project was when we were at Northeastern Illinois University's Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies doing the panel, and the mothers came who had sons who were incarcerated. For them to be able to talk to these men (the Burge survivors) about their life, their survival, was to me something that was very, very important. A really important part of the project is awareness. In my opinion, that was one of the most powerful things that this committee has done.

Darrell Cannon: You know, *déjà vu* comes to mind for me because I got involved with this particular organization through Joey and Alice. I got arrested in November 1983. The following month my lawyer had me make drawings of everything that had happened to me—how I was tortured, and by whom. Experts examined those drawings and said, "Yes, this happened. There's no way on God's green earth that Darrell Cannon could've conjured this up. It's too detailed." This project has been extremely detailed. Everyone has given their input. Some had drawings that they did to capture what they felt torture was all about; others showed pictures of people who had been tortured not only here in the United States, but also abroad.

In scoping out torture itself, you put a new face to it. Sometimes they say pictures capture more than words can, and in this case, the pictures and the manner in which they were displayed was awesome. For an illiterate person coming who couldn't read the words, they could follow the pictures and get a precise pattern and understanding of what had been going on here for far too long. It was fantastic. For those I brought here to see it, it was awesome to them. Now when you say "torture," the images come to mind.

I was asked not too long ago what I felt was fitting for a memorial to this experience. With all of the memorials they put up, I would say a building that people can come into, where they can stand and look, read, sit down, and have lively discussions in a building that belongs to us. Why not have

our own building, a building that's open basically throughout the year, where any and everyone can come in, a comfortable environment where you can sit down, think, and contemplate—"This really went on where I lived"? That would be amazing.

ER: Many of the initial proposals were based on Marvin and Darrell's narratives and the supporting documents. A lot of the research came back to people's encounters with the experiences of the torture survivors. That's the most powerful aspect of the way that the project has evolved. It's an organic project. It's interactive. It's discursive. It's not possible to put the experience on one side—the history, the politics—and the art making on the other. They're in constant dialogue. The testimonies of the mothers, or when both Marvin and Darrell come to the microphone—those are the moments when there's absolute stillness and attention. It's transformative, certainly for me as a teacher at SAIC, to see our students here and from other schools come to the exhibition and the programs. Those moments are very important.

DC: And you know what? We did it twice, now at Dorothy's school. And it's fantastic to sit there with these youngsters who have no knowledge about torture—they're too young and they didn't experience it—but who after hearing what we had to say, were all in awe. "I can't believe this! And you're still standing?" And I always say, "Yes, I'm a stubborn son of a gun thanks to my mother and my grandmother."

MR: America has a long list of things to be ashamed of and slavery is one of them. But if you want to know about slavery today, go to one of your museums. You've got museums of art, the Museum of Natural History. You want to know about the sea creatures? You've got the museum about that, too. Why not have a museum for what took place in Chicago? Why not let people understand this took place? Further along in the future, it'll make people understand that when that snake rears its head, if we've studied about it, we'll know what we're seeing, because a lot of people would be shocked and appalled if they knew about these cases. I go to different colleges and I talk and explain my situation, what took place with me, and they are appalled. You can't really make them understand the magnitude of what happened to us guys, because in America that's not supposed to happen.

DC: I'll be doggoned if this wasn't a war that we were involved in, too, here in the United States, and we deserve reparations. We're not asking that one thousand guys who were locked up be granted reparations. But there are at minimum a good two or three hundred that documentation would show deserve reparations. I don't think it's too farfetched. Once we get this established, the next project should be reparations, beyond a shadow of a doubt.

RZ: *I can imagine that a lot of people being confronted with this history that they didn't know about would find it a really upsetting experience, possi-*

bly so upsetting that they'd want to shut it off and not hear about it. I'm wondering whether that was talked about in the project. How do you communicate this experience to people in ways that allow them entry points into it to understand it without turning off emotionally and refusing to engage?

ER: The exhibition provided several different entry points. One was an event where people saw Marvin, Anthony, and Darrell signing the wall or speaking. There were those kinds of intense moments. There was also artwork by schoolchildren, in high school, and in college, produced all over Chicago. A visitor might view a paper model made by a student and this became a threshold to thinking about the history of torture and how to acknowledge and commemorate this history. There were contributions from people from other countries who were reaching out from experiences that they had in their own cities. All the different materials and visual representations of the experience provided opportunities to approach the work differently.

DC: These exhibits had something for everyone. If you couldn't relate to one thing, there was something else you could relate to—whether it was pictures, audio, a reading. You couldn't have conjured this up by yourself singly; it had to be a collaboration of people and groups, and it came out to be greatness. We should do it again, where it'll be up forever.

Kevin Kaempf: It's been an interesting challenge. I think the call for proposals was successful because we were doing it in so many different ways. I personally reached out to friends, colleagues, even international artists, people who I knew directly or in passing, people felt distanced from the specific history of torture in Chicago. Many people expressed the heaviness around trying to imagine a proposal. Still I felt confident, but it took many conversations with the people I was reaching out to for proposals. Before I was really involved with the group, I went to many of the events and took part in community conversations. This really helped me see that the burden extended to a larger community—the entire city and beyond should be talking about this.

The work that the group had done was very significant in terms of archiving the documents, the images, and the reports, and sharing that with artists who might then review that history and respond to it. It was powerful to be communicating with an artist in the Netherlands who was going through the nitty-gritty of this history in Chicago, and in a way, spreading the voices of the family members and the torture survivors. Then having those responses come in and be part of this visual display really connected global issues and instances of torture with what happened here in Chicago.

DB: One thing that I think is important as an African American woman is to bring African American youth to this kind of exhibit. These kinds of

events are where we can discuss our experience with the police. Our experience is often so different from mainstream America and it is important to be able to say to them, “See, there’s something we can do. We don’t have to just take this. There’s a way that we can organize, get our voices heard, make a difference, right some of the wrongs that have been done.”

AK: One thing that crystallized for me is that the practice of art making gives you permission to imagine the impossible. And so in these speculative memorials, we weren’t saying, “Do what’s realistic.” Anything is fair game. And so it gives you permission to imagine the impossible—and once it’s imagined it’s no longer entirely impossible? You can see how the practice of art making can actually inform the practice of organizing, activism, and movement building. If you start from a place of imagination, possibility is freed up. That’s a much different place than many of us usually feel like we have to start, because politics is so mired in compromise and what’s “doable.”

ER: Joey’s call to action—“we’re not going to get justice through the courts”—was galvanizing. The idea of a lawyer and activist who has spent fifteen years of her life fighting for justice turning to artists was a radical idea for me. I felt so empowered. That was the hook!

AP: A concrete way to answer your question about how we present these cases that you “don’t want to know about,” is to mention the timeline, which offered another entry point because it included newspaper articles, legal documents, and activist propaganda generated in response to these cases from the 1980s to the present. One of the decisions we made early on was that it must include this activism on the streets, with Black People Against Torture, Citizens Alert, and ACT UP/Chicago.

But then I think the art proposals did something different. One of the submissions I love talking about proposed adding another star to the Chicago flag. You’d never come up with that as an activist strategy, right? And yet it has this deep symbolic potential. I’m really interested in what it would take to push that through and to really find out why it won’t work—or maybe it will.

But to me, it’s *that* important to the history of this city to make that claim. The power of the proposal is its insistence that this history be recorded at the level of the Chicago flag—that the only way to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again is to incorporate it into the symbol of Chicago itself.

RZ: *Ellen, how did you get involved in the project?*

ER: Well, I was part of the second wave, and Joey reached out to me because I had experience with memorializations of trauma in relation to World War II genocide. She was interested in how that experience might contribute to the discussions we were having.

There’s activism in Latin America around the disappeared and military-instigated genocides. In Europe there are museums, there are archives, but a lot of it is in the form of public sculpture. The model of a speculative

memorial, to ask the public to imagine what it could be, was something new and very exciting.

DC: We have noticed—and when I say “we,” I’m talking about us men—we’ve noticed that lately it’s been women who have stepped forward, and that’s been amazing. To have our own place where buses or schoolchildren can come tour—as long as we have the women on board with us, we can’t fail; we cannot fail. Because all these women are a voice to be reckoned with.

AP: One thing that Darrell reminds me of is Tamms Year Ten. A lot of people involved in the campaign were involved in Tamms Year Ten. The fact that it started as a poetry committee that sent in poems and started getting responses from folks in prison, and then the responses led to relationships, and those relationships led to organization—in a kind of organic way—really is an important precursor for me and, I think, for a lot of the people who were involved, because it demonstrated how you move from the odd act of sending poetry to people you do not know, to building these relationships, and then ultimately demanding to “Close Tamms Down!”

DB: It was also important to have Tamms here at this exhibition, and I am glad that they were there. We were able to go in to that section and find out what was happening with Tamms, meet people who had been in Tamms. Both of these stories intersect in a deep way.

RZ: *Kevin, could you talk about how you got involved?*

KK: I was at one of the very early meetings. Once things started getting underway, I was asked to be a part of the advisory group. And then as the exhibition opportunity became more concrete, I jumped on board to solicit and seek more proposals. I grew up in the western suburbs; I remember in high school reading the investigative reporting in the *Chicago Reader*. It was so strange to come back so many years later to be involved on this level. I think I was asked to be involved because my own art interest is in exploring public space and civic space, and how official voices decide to mark or not mark specific histories. I have a particular interest in ephemeral or citizen-based modes and forms that might make a fuller history of what actually transpires.

The visual artists who had a connection to SAIC could do a particular type of work. In other moments of the larger project, with Joey’s or Alice’s or Dorothy’s particular skill sets based on the work that they do, a leader will emerge for a particular project or aspect of the project. There was an ebbing and flowing based on people’s availability or passion around an individual form. You know, if it was going to be the film screening or something more public, a poetry reading, people would step up to shepherd that particular idea forward.

DB: I think it was really important that each time we had an event, a survivor was there. That was so, so important to this project. At each event we have actually had the authentic voice of a survivor.

AP: And I think that speaks to your and Joey's and Alice's long-term activism around these issues. That was critical, because it meant that relationships were already there.

MR: This project sets the tone to try to make guys like myself and others understand that there are people out here in the world who care, and everyone is not like Jon Burge. We all know for a fact that we're not animals, but if they put you in the woods and you have to live like an animal, then you will become one. Prison is the same way: you're not of the criminal mind when you go there, but you have to be of the criminal mind to survive. That doesn't leave you when you come home.

But at the same time you've got people like Alice and Joey who come out and lay hands on us and let us know, "Hey, it's going to be all right. You're not there, man; you're here, and that's out there." That makes so much difference, and it makes us feel like we're a part of something. Nobody goes through life saying, "I don't want to be a part of nothing." Everybody goes through life saying, "I want to be a part of something." And that's why it's so important.

DB: Years ago, I had the incredible opportunity to meet the human rights activist James Cameron. He survived a lynching attempt in Indiana in the 1930s. He was the founder of the Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee. He was eighty-nine years old when the US government finally apologized to him for the lynching attempt. To me that was incredible! It was something I never thought I would see in my lifetime. So we know it can happen and now we are going to make sure that it does happen for the Burge survivors.

This interview was conducted in July 2013 with several current members of Chicago Torture Justice Memorials. This group is comprised of a loose coalition of educators, activists, community organizers, artists, and lawyers who aim to honor and to seek justice for survivors of torture by the Chicago Police.