

# Call and Response: Lucky Pierre

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## What's in a number?

*100 Actions; 17 years of events—of creating structures for something to happen; 13 hours of Election Day, 2012; 225 years of the US Constitution; 24 hours of top 40 hip-hop radio; 197 of the 310 final meals published by the State of Texas or 150 hours of videotaped meals, 25 minutes each; a 12-hour conversation about the war in Afghanistan; 100 hours of recorded swearing—digitized, transcribed, and catalogued; 24 guest presenters (artists, activists, historians, researchers, veterans, and soldiers currently serving in Afghanistan); more than 110 victims—all African American from Chicago's South Side; 1,000 Actions.....*

## Ongoing

Founded in 1996 by Mary Zerkel and Michael Thomas, Lucky Pierre has been working together ever since. Dissolving for short periods and then coming together in different configurations, these under-the-radar shape-shifters have continued to produce radical works that undermine divisions between artists, audience, and community; collapsing boundaries through structures that invite participation by anyone who's interested, who has something to say or share. Their most recent projects are quintessentially democratic, open platforms for questions, collective learning, and performance. Lucky Pierre asks us to come together, to think about big issues: the constitution, capital punishment, the history of torture in our city, the

endless war in Afghanistan, freedom of speech. We go with the assurance that the conversation will be lively, that there will be something to eat, and that we can stay as long (or short) as we like—fifteen minutes or twelve hours. And it is this combination of monumental duration and Midwestern hospitality, the continual reinvention of community, paired with discrete individual actions which defines Lucky Pierre as “American”—come, stay awhile, have a beer.

*Every Lucky Pierre piece is about America. We look at the American landscape—geographically, politically, and socially.*

—Mary Zerkel, *Election Day, 2012: America, American, America/n*



Jennifer Karmin's contribution to *America/n*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.  
Photo: Kevin Kaempf.

### ***Final Meals***, 2003 and ongoing

Beginning in 1982 the State of Texas Department of Criminal Justice published an online record of each and every final meal requested by death row prisoners. Numbering over 500 requests before the program was curtailed in 2011 by the Texas Legislature, this public record became the precise and very human roadmap for *Final Meals*. In 2003 Lucky Pierre began what has become an ongoing project: carefully re-creating the final requests, cooking, and serving each meal to an individual volunteer, who eats alone

in silence for twenty-five minutes while being videotaped from overhead. The documentary archive of the accumulated 197 re-created meals (to date) totals eighty-seven hours. Like almost all of Lucky Pierre's works, *Final Meals* is self-funded and self-produced with the help of friends and volunteers. They purchase the food, cook and serve the meals, organize the volunteers, and produce the documentation. Over the years the project has stalled for periods of time because of the costs involved, lack of institutional support, and most critically what was described as the enormity and overwhelming sadness enacted in this project in the accumulation of meals and people. The people who simply requested "a flour tortilla and water," or "an old-fashioned cheeseburger" or "chicken-fried steak and gravy" or a "chocolate cake with pink candles..." and are no longer living. Perhaps these pauses in Lucky Pierre's *Final Meals* have been as important as all the activity?

*...slowing down, as movement away from production. Movement without goal. Time. Pace. Shared space. Singular focus. Shared focus. Humanity. Consciousness. Even Democracy.*

—Michael Thomas, *Emerson Takes a Walk*

Perhaps it's the extended duration itself or in the downtime between things where the real work occurs? Lucky Pierre's latest version of *Final Meals* has come into focus, making a significant shift from the meditative act of solidarity embodied in the silent solitary consumption to ending instead with a community meal around a shared table not in black-and-white but in living color.

***What we don't talk about...***, 2011

*We've always believed in generosity in the work and in our lives. There's been critique that we've "devalued" our work by making it free.*

—Lucky Pierre

## **Resistance**

On the tenth anniversary of the war in Afghanistan Lucky Pierre hosted a twelve-hour conversation about the war in their studio. Free and open to the public, the event included presentations by soldiers serving in Afghanistan, artists, historians, researchers, and activists. *What we don't*

*talk about* ... was the first time that Lucky Pierre took the risk and gave complete control of content to the twenty-four presenters who could choose any aspect of the war to discuss for thirty minutes. This open propositional structure and surrender of authorship to participants was a signal move for how Lucky Pierre would organize future projects like *America/n* in 2012 and the recent *I Hate America! (I Love America.)* Closely aligned with the format and intentions of 1960s anti-Vietnam war teach-ins, *What we don't talk about...* punctured the silence and informational vacuum surrounding the war in Afghanistan, collapsing the distance between daily life in Chicago and the contested geography of war. This experimental event was mobilized in only five weeks. Lucky Pierre's ability to move quickly without support or assistance from presenting institutions and to act freely outside of the strictures and conventions of the art world is not a default position. Their insistent independence defines who they are and what they do. It's the core of the group's ethos and key to how they survive and keep working.

*This has echoes in our work existing for so many years outside of (and often in opposition to) the established avenues, outlets, and institutions involved in selling and then collecting on the cultural capital of the performance/art/social practices... we've really worked to stay outside that world.*

—Lucky Pierre

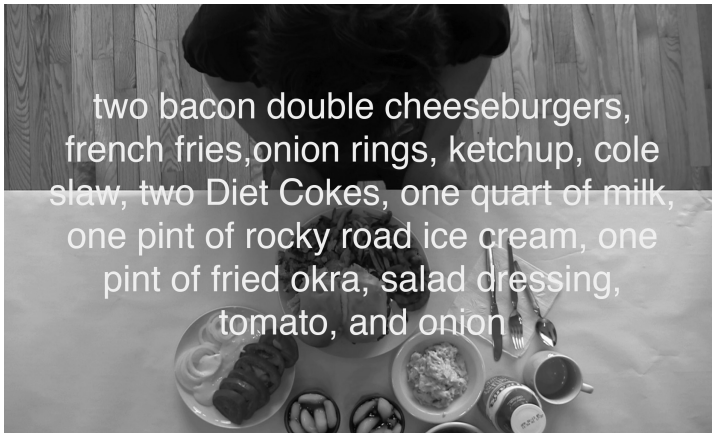
Their resistance has its own momentum. It's the reason they never fail to have an audience or multiple volunteers for their projects. When you work with Lucky Pierre you participate in something live—performance, discussion, activity—all mobilized by the community that comes together around a project, not as consumers but as producers of politics, culture, and conversation, of new possibilities for spending time together.

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*Final Meals* created by: Holly Abney, Travis Hale, Kevin Kaempf, Jeff Kowalkowski, Heather Lindahl, Tyler B. Myers, Bill Talsma, Michael Thomas, and Mary Zerkel.

*What we don't talk about...* was created by: Holly Abney, Kevin Kaempf, Jeff Kowalkowski, Bill Talsma, Michael Thomas, and Mary Zerkel.

With thanks to Lucky Pierre for their work and to Kevin Kaempf, Michael Thomas, and Mary Zerkel for their generosity and conversation.



Lucky Pierre, *Final Meal Request #309* and *#310*, 2013, stills from video.  
Courtesy of the artists.