

# Form and Firepit: Inaugural Master Class and Atelier in Composition for Conflagrative Material Abatement

*Presented by the Timothy Corbett & John Bargiel Fellowship for Applied Combustion Aesthetics (no freaks)*

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photo courtesy Anna Kadysheva

## **Academic Prospectus**

### **Overview:**

By contrast to usual instruction in fire building wherein a lecturer might present a single structure to a large group, emphasizing dependable means to achieve practical purposes, the Corbett/Bargiel fellowship employs techniques borrowed from fine art studio pedagogy in order to further purely aesthetic concerns pertaining to the same activity.

Participants, limited in number by available space and materials, assemble their own constructions, one to a person, and within size and spacing constraints imposed by the instructors.

After introductory remarks pertaining to methodology, scope, safety, and impact, participants will then receive a generous allotment of time to compose and construct combustible assemblages. During such time, the primary instructors will filter between projects, offering one-on-one time according to the apparent need and inclination of the individual participants.

Formal aesthetic concerns will be stressed throughout the dialogue, with the idea of achieving an ongoing atmosphere of constructive critique. Additional instructors may be summoned at the discretion of the primary instructors. The intention here is to enhance and enliven the creative process with a range of feedback. Technical instruction as well as heckling should be administered on an as-needed basis.

Culmination of the class occurs with simultaneous burn, ideally at twilight, thereby combining aspects of a group exhibition with the camaraderie of a feu de joie. Marshmallows will be provided.

### **Goals:**

- Carve out space for creativity that is between the blunt linguistic instrument that is effigy burning, and the macho ritual of survivalism and bushcraft.
- Create a sustainable approach to fire building that preserves the validity of the act in an age where technology obviates much of its necessity.
- Initiate or otherwise invent a valid art form that allows people who do not currently self-identify as artists to engage in fine art practice at an advanced and respectable level.

- Determine if fine art fire building is, on a modest scale, worth the candle.

**Assumptions:**

Fire building falls under the auspices of the following creative disciplines, therefore the case to be made for its recognition as an art in its own right is self-evident:

-Woodworking, Sculpture & Installation Art, Performance Art, Dance, Synthetic Organic Chemistry, Photography & Projection, Architecture, Decorative and Ornamental Design, Graphic Design, Contemplative meditative arts, Music & Sound installation



photo courtesy Anna Kadyшева

**Praxis**

Apart from conceptual elements comprising this activity, the practical preparations required for safe and successful execution are numerous. Thankfully, they are also straightforward.

Facilities impact should be discussed with Ramblewood Caretakers. While it is assumed that the area surrounding the usual firepit could, with minimal

preparation, support 6-10 small exhibition fires, this assumption should be verified.

Availability of tools and materials should also be assessed. Standard equipment for such a class consists primarily of, but is not limited to:

- (2) shovels
- (1) iron rake
- (3) medium-sized tarpaulins
- (2) 2 small buckets per participant for sand and water.
- (2) camp saws or bow saws
- (1) small hatchet
- (1) medium axe
- (1) spool of twine
- (12) small surveying stakes

Obviously, the usual compliment of groundskeeping equipment one might expect to be on hand at Ramblewood could go a long way toward fulfilling this list. It is understandable, however, that some effort to curb unseemly imposition on camp facilities should be shown. It is therefore advisable that a member of camp staff be contacted in order to properly liaise with this project regarding such matters.

Along similar lines, the issue of firewood should also be addressed. It is assumed that, for a fee, a quantity of firewood could be delivered from a local source. In many ways, this defeats, somewhat, the range of possible forms that students' constructs could take. An alternate plan would be to rely exclusively on scavenging deadfall in the surrounding woods. This would be in keeping with some of the more romantic aspects of fire building, but imposes an unknown time sink on class activities. It is therefore desirable to have the aforementioned Ramblewood liaison weigh in on the current scavenging and deadfall conditions of the property, as well as possible firewood vendors in the area.

Safety and impact concerns should be addressed simply and plainly. At no time should any burning go on unsupervised. Cold-out conditions must be satisfied before students' fires can be left unmonitored. LNT practices will be employed to preserve and protect the grounds. Buckets with sand and water must be filled and accessible prior to the construction of fires. In the event that insufficient grounds are available for the students to build on, improvised platforms comprised of a layer of earth on top of a movable tarp should be constructed and then carefully disassembled afterward. A ban on open-toed shoes as well as excessive synthetic

garb will be enacted. Strict construction height and diameter limits will imposed.



photo courtesy Anna Kadysheva

### **Fragmented and Unfinished Curriculum Notes:**

*“Fuel, air, and heat are all required for combustion, How a fire gets these things determines its character. One can let it grow like a flower, or force feed it like a goose. One can tend feverishly like a plate spinner, or abandon it like an unloved pet to see it scavenge for scraps and become vicious or die.” -somebody who isn’t Tim, surely.*

The method we are developing is a little more specific in one major respect. In order to understand and appreciate how fire can exist as art, we must attempt to construct fires as compositions, striving to include all compositional elements from the outset. In this method, the constant tinkering with, and poking at, associated with fire tending is held off for as long as possible, or at least until the firebuilder feels the composition has run its course.

### **The Paper Airplane Model:**

The analogy that best suits our method is colloquially referred to as the paper airplane model. Effectively, when one sets out to fold a paper airplane, a process

begins that focuses on the materials at hand, and draws on experience and familiarity with the process. The act is not complete, however, until the paper airplane is thrown for the first time. It's flight is marked and reflected upon by the creator, thereby adding to the creator's experience and understanding. Furthermore, though folding and creasing may be regarded as a private or otherwise inward activity, the flight is implicitly public, as it is directed outward from the creator. It is our understanding that much is to be gained from this approach, as fire building goes through similar inward and outwardly directed phases, providing rich contemplative opportunity throughout.

### **Tools & Strategies**

Be aware that the act of preparing the fire will have immeasurable effect on your ability to appreciate and understand your composition. Consider the firebuilder reeking of sweat and chainsaw fuel exhaust, the firebuilder who is frail and desperate for warmth, and the firebuilder who fancies himself a meticulous architect. Each of these characters will naturally regard the same fire with different senses, emotion, and logic (although it's pretty unlikely they'd all build the same fire).

Esteem or dissatisfaction levels for the fire will differ. Tending choices and tinkering urges will differ. Do you need an axe? Are you a romantic woodsman? Will you rush certain aspects of the job while you savor others? How proud should you be of your fire's attributes?

I can build a fire in my hands with a lighter or some matches. The biggest blazes often have completely accidental origins. Fire building in the out-of-doors has gained a kind of status as a survivalist macho parlor trick. This mode is to be discarded. Bros offering unsolicited advice to neighbors tinkering with Camaros in driveways have more to talk about. Furthermore, the authorship of the Camaro is not in play. The burly hunter's campfire and granny's wood stove get going in pretty much the same way. Someone spilled the beans on all the secret knowledge a long time ago. Fire is hot and it'll burn stuff, but you can snuff it by smothering.

Compositional intent and authorship and constrained methodology aren't usually explored to the same level we shall attempt. I hope I'm not the biggest douche of all for saying so.

### **The single match approach as a compositional thought exercise:**

Boy Scout fire building pedagogy emphasizes the virtue of a fire lit with a single



match. The practical reason for this does not require further elaboration. However, the manner in which single-match fires are built provides us with a compositional foundation strategy. It is also particularly useful for our purposes due to being well-aligned with making fires that do not require tinkering.

The path that leads to your composition, or any portion thereof becoming totally engulfed is a smooth gradient of size as pertains to your materials.

The conditions that will allow you to light a log with a match are rare. Accelerants are often woefully and unreliably short-lived, and the depth of your fire's story arc is enhanced with kindling and anticipation.

### **Fire Building for Urbanites In Nature**

A desperate need to connect with the experience by defying it with its own materials. We recreate the birth of technology but we also recreate a moment adjacent to a time with no separation from nature. Also, all of the sensory stimuli are novel and therefore special.



photo courtesy Anna Kadyшева

Ideally, awareness of all the profound aspects of fire aesthetics should set people

free of certain hangups, but actually we merely trade some for others. The object, then, should simply be to provide oneself with an open door through which some fun, richness, and life can pass. I hope I'm not being a douche for all this, but I could live with being called a rascal.

**Technical Problems:**

- scarce fuel
- scarce kindling
- scarce tinder
- bad weather
- wet wood
- dangerous ground
- tool problems
- no matches
- safety concerns
- environmental issues
- legal concerns

**Constructive considerations:**

- wood grain
- prevailing wind
- ground temperature
- moisture in all things
- wood age & sap condition
- character of daylight
- fast & slow burning materials

**Formal considerations:**

- line
- color
- shape
- form
- texture
- space

**Procedural Outline:**

Prepare the ground  
Gather Wood  
Prepare the ground



Construct the inside  
Construct the outside  
Gather Wood  
Construct high and low  
Prepare the ground

**Helpful Remarks To Be Delivered During Class (HRTBDDC):**

“If we light ten fires and nine go out, we’re still burning things”

“It may be helpful to think of the construction as elementary drawing. The fire is quite literally a stick figure. As we all know, stick figures form the basis for all written language.”



photo courtesy Anna Kadyshcheva

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