

GREGORY SHOLETTE

REPOhistory's Civil Disturbances NYC: Chronology of a Public Art Project

How the Project Got Started . . .

Spring of 1996, The New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), a non-profit legal advocacy group, approaches REPOhistory with an unusual proposal. Would REPOhistory be interested in producing a public art project about the history of public interest law? The aim of this yet unnamed project would be to raise social awareness about the work of public law at a time when conservative lawmakers actively sought to block such advocacy. In addition the project would inform the public about the impact and ongoing legal challenges aimed at extending and protecting the rights of the politically or economically disenfranchised. REPOhistory agreed provided that the contents of the project would not be open to major revision by NYLPI. With this understanding work began on the project which would later be entitled CIVIL DISTURBANCES: Battles for Justice in New York City. Mark O'Brian became the project coordinator for REPOhistory's new undertaking.

May 21, 1996, NYLPI began the process by canvassing dozens of public interest lawyers and organizations in the city requesting a list of cases they considered to be most worthy of commemoration. NYLPI then presented REPOhistory with a compilation of 30 cases to consider. Eventually nine of these cases were taken up by various members of REPOhistory. Eleven additional cases or legal issues were chosen by artists bringing the total number of potential signs to 20. However six more months would pass before the first designs and texts would be ready for review.

November 1997, most of the project's twenty signs were being finalized designed and written by the various artists and activists working with relevant lawyers assigned to them by NYLPI at REPOhistory's request.



"Due Process: Goldberg v. Kelly" by Mona Jimenez at Worth Street and NYC offices of Employment Services, 109 E. 16th Street.

January and February 1998, the individual sign designs & texts are critiqued by group.

March 1998, the signs are printed on adhesive vinyl and one by one laminated to aluminum panels in preparation for street installation.

April, March, and early May 1998, REPOhistory proceeds with procurement of the Department of Transportation Permit in the usual fashion with no sign of problem.

On *May 1st* (known in the legal profession as “Law Day”) several of the signs are displayed at a public gathering that includes speeches by Mayor Giuliani and several city judges.

May 12-15th, our contact at the Department of Transportation (DOT) lets us know that he has not yet received approval on the project by his superiors, but expects it any day. We plan an installation and press conference for May 19th.

The Installation that Almost Wasn't . . .

May 19th, 1:00 PM 1998, on the hour of our press release the DOT faxes us stating we have been denied a permit. We go to press with this information. The next day David Gonzales of the *New York Times* Metro section reports on the situation as does *Time Out New York* a few days later. The law firm Debevoise & Plimpton offers to represent us against the City pro bono. After several months of negotiation the DOT backs down and we get our permit. Civil Disturbances is installed and opens on August 4th, 1998, however, because of construction work at some key sign locations, a large number of the signs meant for Foley Square are re-located a few hundred feet south at St. Andrews Plaza, a pedestrian walkway near the Municipal Building. As planned, a second copy of each of the twenty signs is installed at a specific location relevant to the case or issue described, primarily in Manhattan but also in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

From 1994-1996, 75+ people were killed (shot in back, shot in head, pinned face down and shot, choked, hogtied and crushed, beaten to death, etc.) by New York City police officers.

SECRET Grand Jury investigations

SECRET Internal Affairs Bureau (IAB) investigations

Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) lacks subpoena power

Statements made to CCRB and IAB can not be used against officers in a trial

¿desaparecido?

Only 3 officers were convicted of committing any crimes, 0 for murder.

Jury trials rare for individual officers

14 CIVIL DISTURBANCES: BATTLES FOR JUSTICE IN NEW YORK CITY

CIVIL DISTURBANCES chronicles some of the important legal struggles waged by public interest lawyers and activists in NYC over the past 30 years. Many ended in victory; others continue to challenge us today. All have sought to extend rights guaranteed by America's constitution and laws to all sectors of society.

REPO HISTORY
REPRESENTING HISTORY

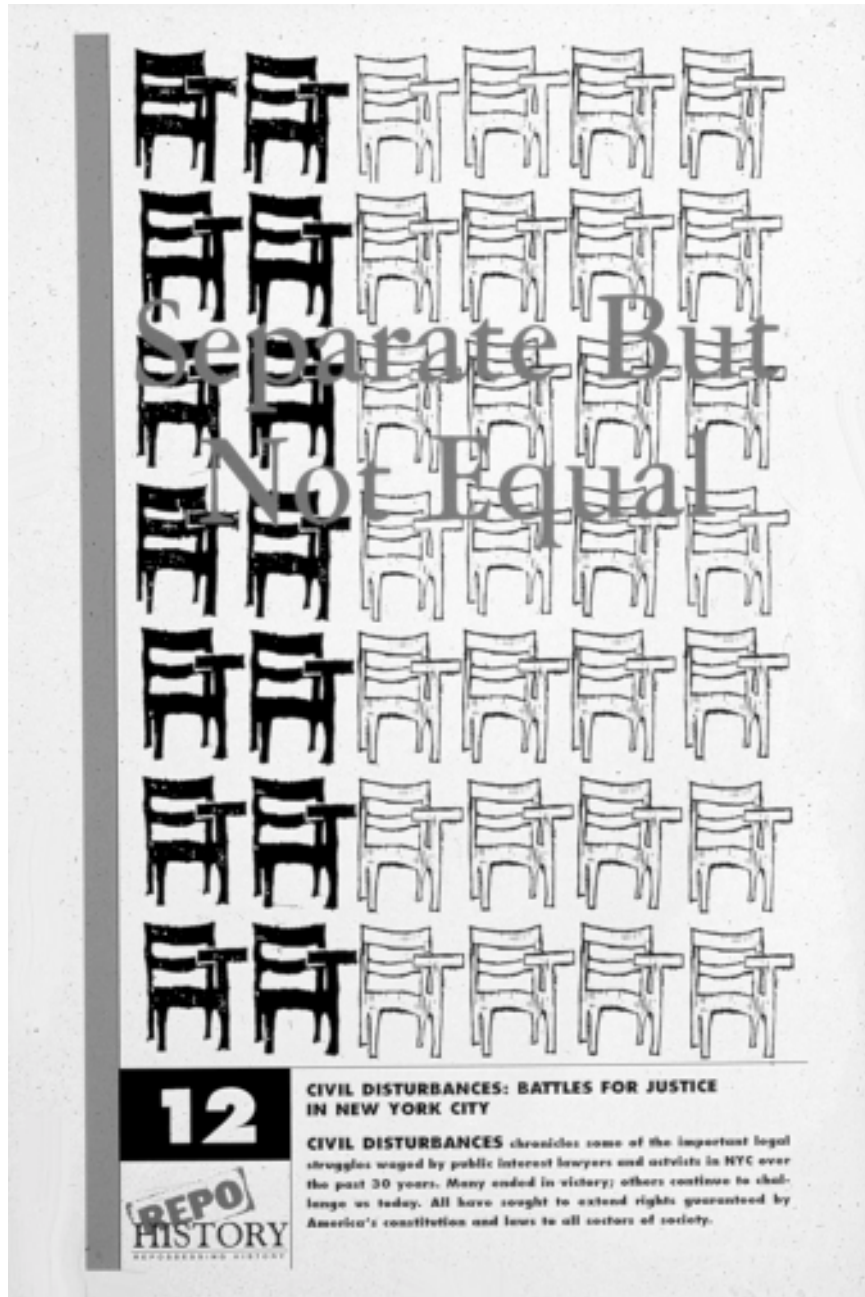
"Who Watches the Police?" by Jenny Polak and David Thorne. Corner of Leonard Street and Centre Street; West 159th Street (Manhattan); Baltic and Hoyt Street (Brooklyn); 6 Cameron Place (Bronx).

Signs of Antagonism . . .

Shortly after its installation Marina Gutierrez's artwork in Williamsburg Brooklyn is taken down by the local DOT after complaints by the local Hasidic community, criticized by Gutierrez's text. Gutierrez, a Williamsburg resident herself, designed her REPOhistory sign to graphically depict the twenty year battle to end housing discrimination by New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in that ethnically diverse neighborhood. For years the City had a discriminatory quota system in place that favored Hasidic families over Latino or African American ones. After recovering and re-installing the work in mid August, it was removed a second time. The story winds up on the cover of *El Diario*, with cable news station New York One and the *New York Post* also picking it up as well. The work is recovered once again but it is re-installed a third time on October 14th with more press coverage and amidst a planned public demonstration by housing activists. As of today the sign remains in place.

Another Sign is Taken Down . . .

REPOhistory artist Janet Koenig's sign, Disabled in Action v. Empire State Building, was installed at 33rd Street and Fifth Avenue just outside the historic building named in this landmark case which marks the lawsuit that forced the skyscraper to comply with Federal Laws making all public buildings accessible to the handicapped. The Empire State Buildings world known observation deck remained inaccessible to the disabled tourist. Following successful prosecution the building complied. However soon after CIVIL DISTURBANCES opened, the sign commemorating this battle was found to be missing. Delays prevented re-installation for several months but at 2PM on Sunday, October 25th a REPOhistory re-installation team arrived at the Empire State Building to replace the missing artwork. While hanging the new sign a security guard emerged from the building who, despite being shown the group's Department of Transportation permit for the project, stated: "if you put it up I will take it [the sign] down." By the next morning the sign was gone. The location of the sign happens to have been directly in



"Brown v. Board of Education, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund" by Laurie Ourlicht. 20 West 40th Street (Manhattan), former headquarters of the NAACP.

front of an Empire State Building surveillance camera. The video tapes have been requested by Ed Copeland, council for the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). However discussions with the building management have failed to produce the missing art work REPOhistory and NYLPI are preparing a third replacement sign for the site before the start of the new year.

Opposition Continues . . .

In early November a REPOhistory sign by artist William Menking that was installed just outside of the Millennium Hotel on West 44th Street was discovered missing. Menking's Sign uses a collage of news clippings and text to remark on the infamous and illegal destruction of four SRO hotels that once stood where the Millennium is now located. The incident took place several years ago when Harry Macklowe, real estate speculator, art collector, and owner of the SROs, demolished the buildings overnight with people still in them who were forced to flee into the street. Macklowe himself was never prosecuted or fined. The management of the Millennium removed the sign on October 28th of this year claiming it made finding the entrance of the building confusing (see *New York Times* Nov. 15, 1998: "Some Legal History Still Being Overturned" in the City Section p. 6).

On Wednesday November 25th, the day before the Thanksgiving holiday, REPOhistory and NYLPI receive letters from the management of the Millennium Hotel stating that the sign is bad for their business and cautioning us that they will seek damages if the sign outside the hotel is re-hung or even if the sign downtown on St. Andrews Plaza remains on public view! Despite this threat the sign was replaced and the project with most of the images intact continued till the end of the permit period.

Nicolas Lampert interviews Gregory Sholette

NL REPOhistory had a very interesting history of its own. Could you briefly explain the work and concepts behind REPOhistory to someone unfamiliar with the project.

GS REPOhistory was founded in 1989 in New York City by a heterogeneous group of visual artists, performers, activists and educators. Between 1992 and 2000 the group produced over a dozen collaborative art projects primarily in public locations in New York City and Atlanta, Georgia. The group's mission consisted of "repossessing" the unknown or forgotten histories of working class men and women, of minorities and children, at specific urban sites. REPOhistory's primary means of doing this involved three components. First, we installed a series of artist-designed, street signs at or near the location of each "lost" history to be "recovered." Second, we created maps of the entire region of the city undergoing one of REPOhistory's historical revisions and then printed and distributed these for free. And finally, we made certain to publicize these critical re-mapping projects and not in the art press only, but in mass media publications including *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice*.

However from my perspective at least, REPOhistory's mission was not merely a making visible of "other" histories, other peoples, other cultures in order to "steal back" this or that lost history or curios or antiquated historical detail, but an attempt to initiate a public dialogue about *present day* concerns. I understood the group's practice as a salvaging of some version of a public sphere, to retrieve a critical space for discourse and dissent from the hegemony of mass consumerism and corporate culture that dominates modern life. But why the focus on history?

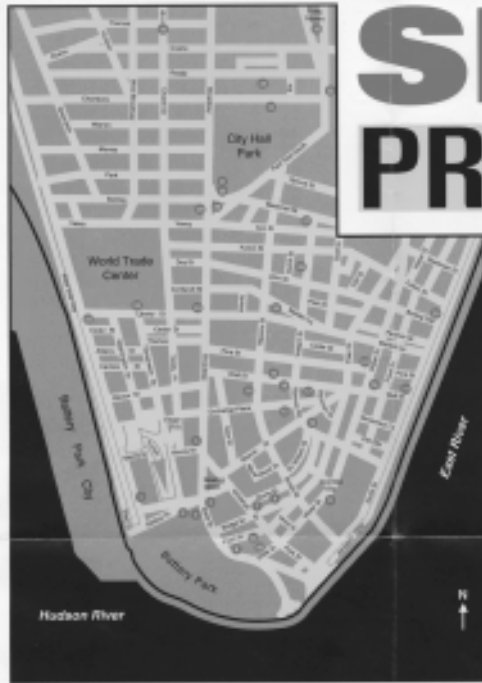
Every REPOhistory alumni will have their own take on this but mine is based on the somewhat utopian politics of redemption embedded in the work of Walter Benjamin and

Fredric Jameson among others. History or better yet, collective memory stands in relation to the present like the Id or the “it” does to consciousness. At once fascinating and monstrous it is the very “otherness” of history that posits both hope and danger. The hope is that of past generations for a “better” world tomorrow. The danger is, as Marx pointed out, the very weight of the past pressing upon the lives of the living . . . so that is my sense of what fueled our mission: a practice that is activist, didactic, liberatory and not without risk. Curiously, when you consider the fact that on more than a few occasions our “salvaging” of specific histories actually caused a ruckus, for example our 1998-99 project Civil Disturbances in particular, there exists strong indication that recalling the past can indeed redeem this residual utopian potential.

NL What originally inspired the idea for REPOhistory?

GS There is no simple answer to this question of proper origins, nor for REPOistory or perhaps any group. But I can say with certainty that REPOhistory’s inaugural meeting took place in May of 1989 when a dozen people gathered in response to a three-page proposal that I wrote and distributed initially to a group of colleagues. My proposal outlined what I informally called a “history project” and was itself based loosely on another public art project from 1988 called *Points of Reference* in which invited artists installed site specific work about the veiled Nazi past in Graz Austria. My retailored proposal called on artists to “retrieve and relocate absent historical narratives at specific locations in New York City through counter-monuments, actions, and events.” What emerged from the first meeting was a public art intervention that instead of exposing a hidden fascist past would offer a critical counterpoint to the then upcoming celebration of the Columbus Quin-centenary planned for 1992. The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, the group’s first public installation, was the eventual outcome of the direction taken at this first meeting. We then spent almost two years formulating the first public art project while reading books including Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States*. One could almost say that our inaugural project was a graphic tribute to Zinn’s revisionist project.

The Lower Manhattan SIGN PROJECT



June 27, 1992-January 1, 1993

Opening: Saturday June 27
 Castle Clinton in Battery Park
 (Rehearsal Sunday June 28)
 Artists Reception 2 pm
 Parade 3 pm

The Lower Manhattan Street Sign Project is a series of 36 temporary historical markers designed and created by REPOhistory, a multi-ethnic collective of artists, writers and educators.

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Joyce Pagano - 17 Battery Pl. on West St. Peter's Feast/Is Island | 11. Jan Costanzo - Broad St. & West St. Stock Market Crash | 21. Lisa Frown & Curt Salata - William St. & Fulton St. Gotham City |
| 2. Tammi Ayres - Battery Park & Battery Pl. Indian Sign or When Will America be Discovered? | 12. Ed Eisenberg - Wall St. between Nassau & William Sts. Asian Democracy: Inequality of the U.S. Dollar | 22. Brian Goldberg - William & Beekman Sts. Epitome |
| 3. Mark O'Brien & Willie Black - Battery Pl. near the Customs House Great Negro Plaid of 1797 | 13. Sam Brinkley - Wall St. near William St. Subway Fire | 23. Jessie Carville & Deborah Mesa-Pelly - Traffic Island, Park Place at Barclay St. Famous Anger, Racism and Social Inequality |
| 4. Stephan Dussanville - Bowling Green & State St. Leader's Rebellion | 14. Clara Kuzin - 54 West St. near William St. Journalist and National Health Care | 24. Gerald Sawyer & Marina Suberina - Barclay St. near Broadway. Via Manhattan: Political Congressman |
| 5. Doris Wack - Morris St. & Broadway. Butler made from Statue of King George | 15. Tea Timoney & Mark O'Brien - Wall & Water Sts. Near Market Slave Trade | 25. Judy Wright - Park Place at the top of City Hall Park. Civil Defense Day/Nov. 1962 |
| 6. Tom Kato - Stone & Whitehall Sts. Nonesuch/MSM: Forgotten History | 16. Norelle Farnard - Nassau & Jeff Bealle - Wall & South Sts. Poor Settlements: Lower East Side | 26. George Spencer & Cynthia Anderson - Park Place at the top of City Hall Park. Being & Expulsion |
| 7. Robt-Sue Hart - Whitehall St. Whitehall St. INDUSTRY-COMER | 17. EPOX - Bowling Alley near South St. 1937 Chinese Community in NYC | 27. Luella Orlowitz & Jim Shantz - Municipal Building Chambers St. FORUM: NYC/Observer's List |
| 8. Sayra Shores - Pearl St. & Whitehall St. Origin of Pearl Street | 18. Alan Shalonsky - Pine St. at Water St. John Jacob Astor & Native Americans | 28. Arlo Morse & Andy Maxwell - Chambers & Elk Sts. The Hot After House |
| 9. Curtis Rubin - Stone & Pearl Sts. Native Manicure's visit in NYC | 19. Das Wiley - Liberty St. near West St. The Story of the Volunteer | 29. Dan Wiley & Lisa Keys - Nassau/Park St. between Broadway & Lee St. Regent Hotel Ground/The City Limits |
| 10. Concave Silver - State St. near Whitehall St. Origin of the West Indian | 20. Lisa Moss - Kinross & Janet Kinross - Liberty & Quaker Sts. Midtown Hotel & Anthony Comstock | 30. Kath Christensen - Lower Park Square South Art 1999 |
| 11. Tahereh Vahidi - St. Indian Settlement 1684 | 21. Hull Ogden & Inna Leberich - Liberty St. west of Broadway. Office Workers Eat Their Lunch | 31. Sageanna Beards - Church St. between Leonard & Franklin Sts. United Tailorers Society |
| 12. Linda Wainwright - Governor Square & South William St. 1848-1849 | 22. Hilary Wilson & Ratty Basswood - Market Lane & Nassau St. Where's My Home? | |

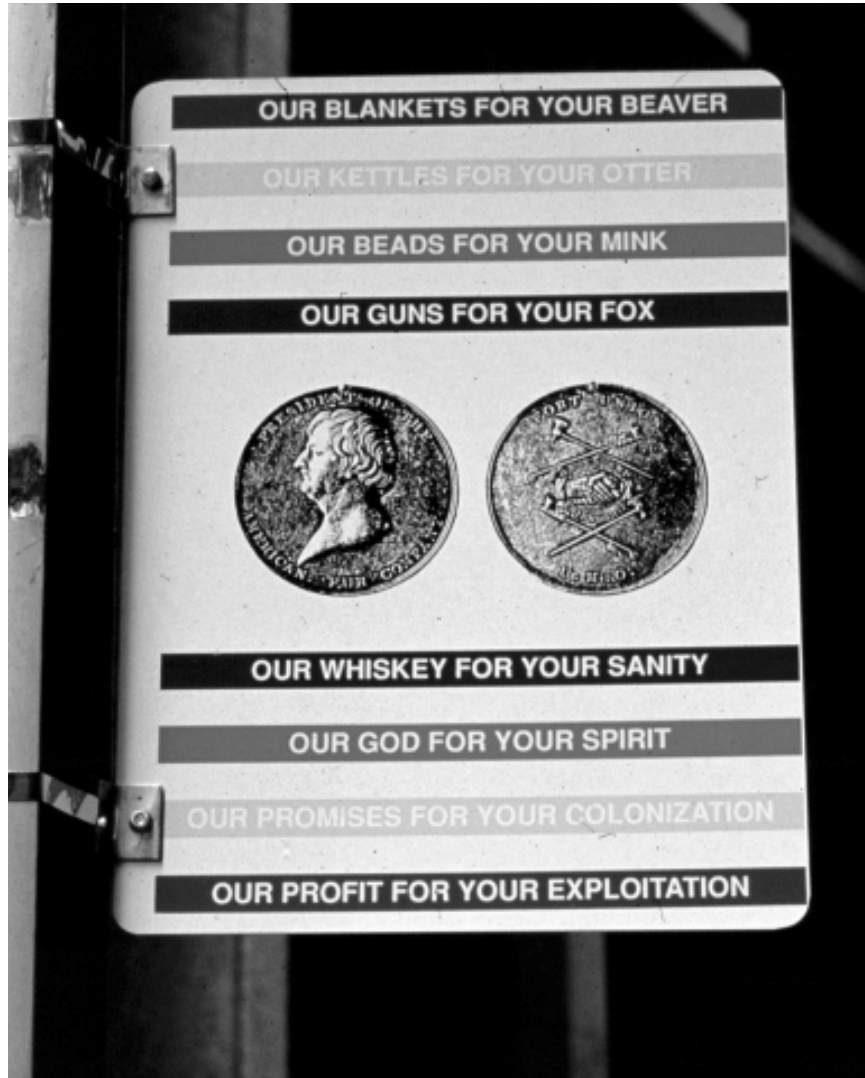
Special thanks to the Redford Foundation, the NYC Department of Transportation, Architects, Inc., Ben Fong and The Able Company, Community Board 1, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Royal Foundation, Culture Council Foundation/POCA, Public Foundation and Artistic Space.
 For information, including guided walking tours, contact REPOhistory at 333 Lafayette St., Room 301, NYC 10012 or (212) 929-2241.
 Printed by Haggard Edge Press NYC

REPOhistory: Lower Manhattan Sign Project, 1992.

Another strong contributing factor to the group's formation was a 1988 organizing effort to produce an illustrated booklet called "How To '92" that offered artistic ways of counter-acting the Columbus celebration planned several years hence. Of the future members of REPOhistory Mark O'Brian, Todd Ayoun, Lisa Maya Knauer, Jayne Pagnucco, Tom Klem, Jim Costanzo, Neill Bogan, Janet Koenig, Betti Sue Hertz, Megan Pugh, and Lise Prown all played key roles in the formation and collective management of the group.

NL Looking at the art shown in museums, galleries, periodicals and art schools in the United States, one would probably come to the conclusion that political art is close to non-existent. What do you think are some of the reasons behind this lack of political art in our society? Is it simply a case of it being created and not shown? Or are artists in general not interested in the subject?

GS I think both your hypotheses have validity. As you suggest, artists in general are disinclined towards explicit political commentary in their work by the circumscribed nature of the art world. By the term *art world* I mean the integrated, transnational economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennials and trade publications that, together with curators, artists and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks. And while a certain dalliance in political content moves in and out of fashion within the art world, few artists seriously interested in pursuing a career attempt any sustained engagement with worldly concerns not directly impinging on the narrow self-interest of the art world itself. The result is too often a neutralizing form of irony whenever politics does make an appearance in galleries, museums and so forth. Having stated this, there is a great deal of creative work being produced with social and political intent most of which is simply not seen. This work, some of it naïve in content and/or form but always impassioned can be found on display in community centers, union halls and churches. It has also recently become visible over the internet and in the carnivalesque street demonstrations that have marked the counter-globalization movement of recent years. There are also a few exhibition spaces where such work is



Alan Michelson's sign about John Jacob Astor at Astor Place, Manhattan 1992.

occasionally still exhibited including college and university art galleries and alternative spaces such as Exit Art. But this raises another impediment to political engagement on the part of artists and that is money. In a profession where most people work two or three jobs simply to make ends meet it is a hard sell suggesting that artists should handicap themselves still more by making work that is of limited interest to the few sources of financial support that do exist.

NL I was interested in a quote of yours from a recent interview that you did with “Groups and Spaces” (http://www.groupsandspaces.net/e_zine1.html)

What happened in my opinion by the end of the 80s was this: the art world selected a few, individual artists making “political art” or “art with social content” and set about legitimating them within the museum and within the art historical canon. Meanwhile, the broad base of such activity that had led to the very possibility of this recognition was thrust back into darkness, a darkness I should add that made us invisible not just to the institutional center but also each other.

Could you expand upon this topic, in particular those who are legitimized. I sense that artists that rise from the underground to fame in established art circles, in a sense become what they once rebelled against. A “Rage Against the Machine” scenario where the message is diluted by the carrier.

GS The entire history of middle class notions of art rest on a controlled self-criticism and at times even lampoonery of high art itself. At certain times political art fits that bill nicely. At other times it is formally extreme works and still other times it is sexually explicit imagery and so forth and so on. That is not to invalidate the importance of these moments of rupture such as brought about by early Conceptual Art any more than one should simply dismiss socially critical work that ends up in museums. But the problem that seems to repeat itself each time politicized art “has its day” is the way recognition within the legitimating institutions of the art world evacuates the critical punch of the art itself. Why is



Neill Bogan and Irene Ledwith's sign at Wall Street in Manhattan, 1992.

that? In my view one reason is that no political art practice can succeed at truly challenging the status quo beyond a certain aesthetic reformism if it is not linked in a meaningful way to real-world (not art world) movements aimed at progressive social change. Short of this, political art that situates itself primarily as a critique of bourgeois institutions largely exists as a sort of rehearsal at best. Besides, this leaning into the wind of history, a “history” that is formulated by the limited horizon of capitalist imagination to boot, is not that different from other kinds of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art practices. Nevertheless it is vital to illuminate this process both within and outside the mechanisms of art high art that is. For example the history of collective art practice, most of it linked to left culture, remains to be excavated. I believe that were such a history to be written it would overturn a great deal of what museums present as the genealogy of art. The same is true of the entire range of creative work produced within society. I recently have called this the Dark Matter of the art world and theorize that its increasing visibility via ever more affordable digital and web-based technologies in particular is not only affecting art world practices, but is threatening the very foundation of value production within these elitist institutions and discourses.

NL In the same interview, you stated.

It is apparent that today a similar kind of cross-over phenomenon in which artists move away from a strictly art world context and into an activist or autonomous mode, is taking place. This new activism is most visible in the WTO counter-actions in various international cities. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have even described these new activists as “Nomadic Revolutionaries.” What one finds is the participation of academically trained artists working beside “non” professionals and political activists all involved in transforming collective dissent into an energetic and pleasurable carnival. Let me repeat that it is invigorating to see this crossover activity happening and perhaps this time, thanks to the self-awareness and cleverness . . . as well as the increased visibility and networking



REPOhistory "Queer Spaces" Project: coordinated by Megan Pugh for the Storefront for Art and Architecture, Manhattan, 1994.

potential afforded by new technologies, things will go differently.

Could you give some examples of this cross over of artists to activist that inspire you.

GS Certainly. The range of cross-over art activism is quite amazing. The groups I like to cite in this regard include *RTmark*, *Ultra-Red*, *Temporary Services*, *Wolkenklausure*, *Las Agencias*, *Critical Art Ensemble*, *Reclaim the Streets*, *The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping*, *The Center for Land Use Interpretation*, *Ne Pas Plier*. To one extent or another each of these organizations involves or has included in specific projects both trained artists as well as non-art activists. Some of the work is so “borderline” in between art and activism that it does not even register on the art world’s radar screen. And that may be a very good thing if not indefinitely at least for the moment. Admittedly my observations are largely anecdotal, but while there is as yet no effort yet to conceive of or let alone produce an over arching networking structure or political agenda, the existence of this growing interest in such collaborative practices among younger artists is encouraging.

NL Many of the new tools available to artist and activists revolve around computer technology and the Internet. One could say that we are playing into the hands of the very technology that the power structure (the military/industrial complex) has developed and uses to their full capacity. Why not instead focus on a more ecological path, one based on true survival techniques such as learning how to grow your own food and getting back to more land based/community based forms of living. What are your thoughts on these opposing paths?

GS At the risk of reductivism I must say that this is in many respects a very old debate. You can see remnants of it in the historic battles between Anarchists and Marxists, between the Soviet “left” artists of the Proletcult and the avant-garde Constructivists (now *that* was a real culture war!) and again in the Cultural Revolution of China or even lesbian separatism in the 70s. In many respects each revolves around a similar question of developing independent and autonomous social

structures versus a “stealing back” of the means of production and therefore the very wealth and control of society. My thoughts, for what they are worth, are to rethink the entire metaphor of divergent paths itself. Consider first that given the apparent incompetence of the intelligence and military prior to the horrific events of September 11, 2001 one should not monumentalize these institutions any more than museums or universities. The creative potential of the masses, as Antonio Negri refers to the contemporary public, is not likely to be fully circumvented by even the most sophisticated technologies. I say use them for progressive ends, while remaining cautious about their limits, as well as one’s own limits both historically and politically. The other side of your equation is in need of an equal deconstruction. While imagining and attempting to produce a provisional autonomy is important, one can not be seduced into believing there is such a thing as a “clean slate” or a safe place from which to build a new and sovereign culture. Derrida writes about this desire to ‘start from scratch’ in his essay, “The Ends of Man: Reading Us,” first published in France in 1969 and warns that,

To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside [is risking a form of] trompe-l’oeil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted . . .

The solution he proposes is one I offer you now: to weave aspects of each of these “paths” you refer to, as well as other strategies both old and new, into a hybrid, progressive theory and practice. This emerging framework may at first seem improbable, even monstrous but who said that making a revolution would be a walk in the woods?

(entire interview available at: <http://www.drawingresistance.org>)