

CIRCULATION

© Gregory Sholette

Circulation's unlikely inception begins with the televised proceedings of the O. J. Simpson criminal trial. Searching for new ideas for REPOhistory projects, I was struck by the way one key piece of evidence, Simpson's blood, was used by both the defense and prosecution. Discovered at the crime scene, dropped into test tubes, and enlarged to disclose its DNA signature, this blood also stood trial. In the process, it revealed itself to be a highly charged symbolic site, as well as the material evidence of forensic science. (There was even a sort of trial within a trial that took place regarding the truth claims of the still emerging field of DNA testing.) More than an oxygen-carrying organ filled with genetic information, Simpson's blood emerged as a specter, haunting the entwined histories of African and European Americans. Intrigued its complexity, I proposed that REPOhistory, best known for site-specific "repossessions" of lost histories, produce a public art installation about the social history of human blood. The proposal called on artists to map this indispensable fluid along two axes. One follows the economy of human blood as a regulated public resource and multi-billion dollar global industry, disclosing the urban pathway blood travels through Manhattan from donors, to processing center, and then to hospitals, clinics, and finally waste sites. The other axis pursues the multiple social meanings of human blood, including its aesthetics, folklore, technology, and politics. Between 1996 and 2000, a group of over thirty artists, activists, and teachers met occasionally, and later quite frequently, to explore the concept of Circulation.

REPOhistory's public mapping project *Circulation* approaches the city itself as a specific site. One of the least known aspects of this civic anatomy is the daily processing and distribution of human blood products from donors to bloodbanks, to hospitals and clinics. Effectively this routine forms an invisible circulatory system that in the case of New York stretches from the island of Manhattan outward to multiple points in the burroughs, local states and ultimately even on a global scale. According to Douglas Starr, author of "Blood; An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce," a barrel of crude oil, for example, sold for about \$13 in 1998. The same quantity of whole blood, in its "crude" state, would sell for more than \$20,000.¹² On an individual level, its vitality is conveyed by the statistic that nine out of ten New Yorkers who reach the age of 72 have received a blood transfusion.⁹ *Circulation* seeks to excavate the social history of this singular human organ.

The material economy of blood also has a discursive dimension that is both complex and at times paradoxical. In contemporary society blood is invoked both as a medium of health as well as a source of deadly pathogens. It is both a symbol of human fraternity and of racial segregation. Anger and violence can accompany symbolic threats to blood's "purity" as exemplified by racist organization such as the Aryan Nation. Blood is also the subject, and occasionally the medium, of contemporary artists including the work of Andre Serrano, Ana Mendieta, Andrew Castrucci, and David Wojnarowicz and the activist collective Gran Fury which confronted government neglect of the AIDS crisis through publicly situated graphics and activism.¹³ Finally, and ominously, blood cells and the circulatory system are the portal through which powerful new technologies of commerce and control are being developed, tested and refined. One notorious example of the latter is a proposal by New York City Mayor Giuliani and his Police Commissioner Howard Safir to begin collecting genetic profiles of all arrested citizens. When asked about the civil rights of people wrongly detained he commented "The innocents have nothing to fear..."¹⁴

¹² see Douglas Starr's book *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1998

¹³ Ineed, curator and medical doctor Kóan Jeff Baysa, is currently organizing an exhibition entitled "Blood Culture: Images and Issues of Blood in Contemporary Art"

¹⁴ Police Commissioner Safir outlined the NYPD DNA on December 31, 1999. In the year ahead three unarmed citizens, Amadou Diallo, Malcolm Ferguson, and Patrick Dorismond, all of whom were black, would be shot to death by members of the NYPD.

As with all of REPOhistory's projects this one incorporates the work of numerous artists, educators and activists into an overall distribution system. The project also dispenses with REPOhistory's customary street signs, substituting instead art that literally circulates in actual public spaces. This includes postcards, small objects, images, magnets, and stickers distributed through the mail as well as in subway cars, art galleries, needle exchange programs, health care facilities. A project map, a window installation at Printed Matter, several high school art collaborations, a street performance and a specially designed interactive Web Site at *rephistory.org* complete the program. The incorporation of a Web Site as part of a public art installation is an important departure for the group. Each work distributed by *Circulation* will include the Web address: *rephistory.org*. According to artist Jim Costanzo the Web Site functions as the project's digital "heart", pumping ideas and images in and out of its inter-active matrix. Viewers become participants as they log-in, uplink, or download art and information. Meanwhile, the project map designed by artist Janet Koenig serves to coordinate the spatially dispersed art, educational collaborations, and project distribution sites into one visual directory. The map was made available free at numerous city locations in February and March of 200. It weaves the project's images into a diagram of New York City's hospitals, blood banks, medical facilities and related sites.

Among the works in *Circulation* are Tom Klem's black and white portraits linking two modern chemical processes: photography and blood typing. The individuals in Klem's photographs are rendered in a nearly clinical documentary style and identified, like slabs of meat, solely by their blood types.¹² The issue of racial contagion is the subject of several works including a collaboration by Miguelangel Ruiz and Leela Ramotar displaying a human heart transformed to a battlefield of race with the text "Black Blood," "Blue Blood," and "White Blood." And artist Carola Burroughs, herself a multi-racial person, offers a compendium of terms for "miscegenated" people including "Griffe", "half-breed", "Octaroon", and "metis" superimposed on an image of Zebras. Artist Jim Costanzo also addresses metaphors related to blood in his multi-lingual graphic treatment of collective nouns such as Nation, Tribe, Clan, and Family.

Other projects focus on the politics of medical research including Kevin Pyle's drawings of human pharmaceutical subjects and enlarged blood cells. Printed on magnets his images are to be attached to the outside of medical research facilities around the city. George Spencer's miniature sculptures of pharmaceutical products will also be secretly distributed outside drugstores, hospitals, clinics, and the corporate headquarters of drug corporations. Chicago-based artist Lisa Hecht is designed a series of wallpaper patterns based on blood cells that were part of a window installation at Printed Matter Bookstore. German artist Trebor Scholtz staged a street performance entitled "Flow," in which seven-foot helium balloons attract passers-by to a sidewalk parley involving issues ranging from blood and nationalism to the state of art and health care. The politics of the blood-banking system become the subject of Chicago-based artist Jeni Sorkin's project that looks at issues of discrimination and blood safety. And Irish artist Brian Hand draws comparisons between the bloodied gun-site icon of secret agent 007, and the 1972 civilian massacre known as "Bloody Sunday" in Northern Ireland pointing out that the officer in charge, General Sir Michael Jackson, is now leading the NATO peace forces into Kosovo."

Activist art is pedagogical by nature and an important component of *Circulation* are the integrated collaborations with city Public High School students. Among these are Meryl Meisler's project at the Institute for Collaborative Education where students will work with nearby Beth Israel Hospital to produce a zine and Web-Site exploring the word blood as it appears in the vernacular of youth culture. Meanwhile artist Oscar Tuazon and teacher Andre Knight are developing a

¹² Blood typing is the standard system for classifying blood using the letters A, B, AB, O and so forth. Developed in 1900 it separates individuals into pools of like-tissue types and is indifferent to differences of class, gender and race. Yet despite this "color-blind" system the US military and most Southern hospitals continued to segregate "white" and "negro" blood up until the late 1960s thus pointing to the mutability of abstract knowledge by actual systems of power.

video project at the alternative City as School made up of interviews with members of the Health and Hospital Workers Union as well as blood donors, surgery patients, needle exchange clients, and AIDS activists. Students of Cloud State College in Minnesota collaborated with Keith Christensen to produce work about blood and race that was also integrated directly into *Circulation*. In addition: Jasmine Gartner and Chilean artist Ivan Navarro contribute a light installation mapping the city's blood routes, Jayne Pagnucco contemplates a rare congenital blood disease present in her family, and British artist Jenny Polak exposes racial segregation at INS detention centers. The global commodification of blood is the subject of Marilyn Perez's piece, while artist Sarah Vogwill offers a surrealist "blood" portrait, and Cris Pietrapiana a "Fountain of Blood." Artists Russet Lederman, David Sansone and Canadian Susan Schuppli contribute "on-line" projects. Finally *Circulation* will also include a posthumous work by REPOhistory founding member Ed Eisenberg as well as my work to be distributed on subway-riders "Metro-cards" addressing issues of public surveillance via DNA sampling.

Circulation is also intended as a critical response to developments within public art. One of these is the way the post-Cold War market hegemony in this country now tolerates alternative historical identities previously overlooked or virtually suppressed by dominant history. From high school textbooks to public markers financed by the American Express Corporation, citizenship is no longer constructed solely through Anglo-male narratives. Kiosks set along San Francisco's Waterfront recall the lives of capitalist merchants, but also working-class sailors and the sex workers who serviced both. Markers in Minneapolis examine the ecological impact of European settlers on the Mississippi River. Artists applying for public commissions in Seattle must engage with the region's ethnic diversity and historical complexity. Yet, this expansion of national identity coincides with the retraction of spaces in which much of this revisionist history is made visible, often in the form of "new genre" public art. Private interests and municipal surveillance carve up common spaces previously defined by their openness to disparate populations. The result resembles a post-public sphere, in which managed spaces are largely determined by marketing demographics and police statistics and where future access can be controlled if the need arises. Meanwhile, the new, pop-historical spectator does not so much engage with as consumes a past represented as diverse, colorful, and politically center-liberal. Actively countering such uncritical historical spectatorship has always been a goal of REPOhistory.² By mingling representations of unknown past events with current politics, the group asks the public, as Walter Benjamin argued, to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." For REPOhistory this tactic has become more confrontational over the years as New York City's political climate has become more conservative and public space more privatized.³

At once information-driven and diffuse, *Circulation* responds to this situation at several levels. As an excavation of human blood, the project inevitably moves outside the circular discourse of most contemporary art. Yet, it is not a "community-based" art project even as it disseminates the work of professional artists, activists, and public high school students in spaces both phenomenal and virtual. Nor does it affirm fixed readings of history, but rather understands public space as a material site for critical interference. However, if *Circulation* manages a critique of recent public art and historical tourism, it is primarily due to REPOhistory's eleven years of collective work and the conceptual framework that this often turbulent practice has produced.⁴ Ultimately *Circulation*, like all REPOhistory projects, is the result of an ongoing process of self-validating cultural production and distribution. Unfashionable, didactic, and heterogeneous, this practice nevertheless resists easy assimilation into the hegemony of the post-public sphere and the cultural politics of artistic beauty.
Gregory Sholette September, 2000

Gregory Sholette 9/99

Notes

1. Along with the artists highlighted here, Tom Klem, planned and executed the sequential distribution of artists' postcards and was essential to the production of *Circulation*. REPOhistory

members Jayne Pagnucco, Mark O'Brien, Lisa Maya Knauer, Stephanie Basch, George Spencer, and Neill Bogan also assisted with research and funding for the project.

2. See my essay "Authenticity Squared: REPOhistory Anatomy of an Urban Art Collective," *New Art Examiner* Vol. 27, No. 3, Nov. 1999, pgs. 20-23,71,72.

3. Following two municipally endorsed public projects in New York City—*The Lower Manhattan Sign Project* in 1992 and *Queer Spaces* in 1994—the group's third installation in 1998, *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice* in New York City, was initially censored by the Giuliani administration. Only after threatening the city with a law suit was the project finally permitted. For more on the battle over *Civil Disturbances*, see David Gonzalez, "Lampposts As a Forum for Opinion," *New York Times*, May 20 1998, B1, and Stuart W. Elliot, "Some Legal History Still Being Overturned," *New York Times*, November 15, 1998, City Sect., 5.

4. REPOhistory has no staff or acting officers. *Circulation* gratefully received a total of \$39,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Gunk Foundation, New York State Council for the Arts, and the Puffin Foundation, yet 90 percent went to direct costs for production. For more on group process "Counting On Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice," *Afterimage* Vol. 27, No. 3, Nov./Dec. 1999, pgs 18-20.

Participating *Circulation* artists include:

Carola Burroughs, Keith Christensen, Jim Costanzo, Sharon Denning, Brian Hand, Russet Lederman, Cynthia Liesenfeld, Ken Ficara, Jasmine Gartner, Tom Klem, Andre Knight, Janet Koenig, Ivan Navarro, John Menick, Meryl Meisler, Jayne Pagnucco, Marilyn Perez, Chris Pietrapiana, Jenny Polak, Kevin Pyle, Leela Ramotar, Miguelangel Ruiz, David Sansone, Trebor Scholz, Greg Sholette, Jenni Sorkin, George Spencer, Oscar Tuazon , Sarah Vogwil