

CIRCULATION: a public mapping project of REPOhistory

CIRCULATION is dedicated to our friend and colleague Edward Eisenberg (1951-1997)

CIRCULATION is the sixth public art project by the artists' collective, REPOhistory. Since 1989 the group of a dozen members and dozens of collaborators have produced a type of social cartography in which the invisible historical and political contours of a given place are marked and mapped. With CIRCULATION, REPOhistory approaches the island of Manhattan as a specific site, one that contains a matrix of partially detectable systems that shape its physical and discursive topography. Along with water and electricity, subways and sewers, zoning regulations and taxes there is one system that may be as invisible as it is vital: this is the daily routine of collecting, processing and distributing hundreds of pints of human blood each day.<sup>1</sup> Blood is drawn from a pool of voluntary donors, delivered to blood-banks, processed and dispersed to hospitals and clinics around the city and region. Used or polluted blood is even excreted out of the system via the Bronx to disposal sites farther north.<sup>2</sup>

The project operates with the following premise: to reveal the unknown history and material topography of this one particular human organ that has fascinated writers, artists, philosophers, even entire nations. This same bodily substance is also the basis of a specialized industry making it one of the world's most valuable commodities. With CIRCULATION, REPOhistory asks the public to "read" this vital material not solely as a natural, biological thing, but as a specific historical site layered in social meaning and cultural significance. CIRCULATION becomes one possible map exposing the restless movement of this organ, human blood, as it travels through the physical and social spaces of Manhattan's urban anatomy.

The social signification of blood is as complex as it is mutable. It has changed in response to shifts in cultural ideology such as the pseudo-scientific theories of racial hygiene that developed in Europe and the United States in the 1930s. Sometimes it has changed in response to technological discoveries. As late as the 1920s draining quantities of blood out of a sick person was still considered a legitimate medical practice. In 1940, thanks in part to the pioneering work of Charles Drew, the technology to store and redistribute plasma from one individual to another helped transform blood into a full-fledged commodity while saving the lives of thousands of people each year. Ironically Drew, an African American, was barred from becoming a member of the American Medical Association because of its whites-only policy.

The commodity nature of blood was most apparent in the 1960's and 1970's when medical businesses were permitted to purchase plasma typically from impoverished individuals in need of cash. In the last few decades blood became a freely donated "gift" however the international market for plasma has grown to become a multi-billion dollar a year trade. According to Douglas Starr, author of "Blood; An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce, "A barrel of crude oil, for

example, sells for about \$13 at this writing [1998]. The same quantity of whole blood, in its "crude" state, would sell for more than \$20,000."<sup>3</sup>

The evolving perception of what blood was and the circulatory system also affected such activities as the construction of cities and theories of commerce. David Harvey's 1628 treatise asserted that blood moves in a mechanical fashion, circulating within a network of tubes controlled by the heart that he likened to a mechanical pump. This model of interconnected arteries and circulating fluids was later applied to the maintenance and planning of streets and boulevards in France and the United States in the mid 1750's.<sup>4</sup> Closer to our own time the perception of blood has undergone dramatic alterations leading to a virtual paradox of signification. In the post-AIDS context blood is often perceived as both a medium of healing and a source of deadly pathogens. One outcome of this ambivalence are misplaced fears by potential donors of becoming contaminated with the HIV virus. This has led to extreme shortages in many regional blood supplies including New York City.

Blood is often invoked as a symbol of fraternity, at the same time it has served as an imaginary physiological dividing line that segregates people of different colors, classes, cultural backgrounds and nationalities. The social violence accompanying these ideological exclusions finds its expression in overt forms of racism like the Ku Klux Klan or Aryan Nations as well as also the invisible legal mechanisms of the state itself. One need only look at the disproportionate percentage of African Americans on death row or the planned "hubbing" of deportees along ethnic lines by the Internal Revenue Service to see the ongoing destructive legacy of outmoded ideas like "racial types."

Finally, the circulatory system, blood cells and plasma are portals through which powerful new technologies of commerce, healing, and social control are being tested and refined. Important medical breakthroughs capable of improving lives cannot simply be separated from numerous unethical, U.S. governmental, human blood experiments targeting the poor and marginalized. The infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments in the 1930s are but one example of this abuse. Soon after the testing of the first atomic bomb the government began secret tests on unsuspecting hospital patients. The subjects were consistently low income and/or persons of color, including children and women. Radioactive plutonium was injected into these subjects and for years they were observed by doctors sworn to "do no harm."

The field of medical sciences has provided important improvements in public health. Blood transfusions now save countless lives and hereditary diseases like Sickle Cell Anemia and Hemophilia may be on the verge of extinction thanks to new gene therapies. But who benefits from these technologies is often a question of politics rather than corporate good will. With the pharmaceutical industry's profits in the multi billion dollar range, clearly organized public pressure alone will not assure ethical treatment and equal access to health care for all citizens. Consider the race amongst governmental and private interests to map the entire human genetic sequence. This project signals yet another shift in the social perception of the human body. Will the body remain an individual's private domain or evolve into a source of raw biological materials?<sup>4</sup> Despite the way language sometimes playfully and

sometimes grimly modulates the public's perception of blood it is physical hardships and individual profits that continue to structure much of its changing narrative. This narrative, including its texture and topography, politics and aesthetics, is the subject of CIRCULATION.

CIRCULATION dispenses with REPOhistory's customary street signs, substituting a collection of artist-designed images and texts distributed through the mail, over the Internet, and at specific sites in art galleries and in the streets. Along with hundreds of mail art works the project includes small objects, magnets, stickers. CIRCULATION also includes a window installation at Printed Matter Bookstore, a performance piece entitled flow , and an interactive web site <[www.repohistory.org](http://www.repohistory.org)> that will remain on-line after the project's other elements are disseminated. The CIRCULATION web functions like Harvey's heart by pumping images, texts, data and ideas through an array of digital arteries. The project also features two collaborations made with New York City public high students, The Bleeding Edge (<http://www.thebleedingedge.org>) is an on-line zine that features "Blood for Beginners" an illustrated dictionary and "Red-Time Stories" all produced by students at the Institute for Collaborative Education on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. At City As School on Manhattan's lower west side, students have produced a series of video interviews about the social and political discourse surrounding blood as a multimillion dollar industry. Stories include selling blood for yarn, a case of baby switching caught by DNA tests, the culture of vampirism, and contracting hepatitis from raw oysters.

REPOhistory's public art project CIRCULATION encourages viewers /NOT ONLY TO GIVE BOOD BUT/ to become active accomplices. By picking up postcard images at the distribution points located on the map and mailing these to others, and by logging on to [repohistory.org](http://repohistory.org) and interacting with the project on-line, you become a mobile cell, a co-conspirator helping to reveal the all-but-hidden circulatory system of human blood.

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(NEA LOGO and NYSCA LOGO goes here.)

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With additional collaborative projects by:

Lisa Hecht: window installation at Printed Matter Bookstore

Keith Christensen in collaboration with Anna Wagner-Ott and St. Cloud State University students. Meryl Meisler in collaboration with students at Institute for Collaborative Education, a NYC Public High School

Oscar Tuazon & Andre Knight in collaboration with students at City As School, a NYC Public High School

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CIRCULATION maps and mailart are available (through March 2000) at these distribution points:

Exit Art, The First World, 548 Broadway • Printed Matter Bookstore Inc., 77 Wooster Street • Swiss Institute NY, 495 Broadway • Bread & Roses Gallery, 1199 Health and Hospital Workers Union, 30 W.42 Street • Rush Art, 526 West 26th Street • Roebling Hall Gallery, 390 Wythe Ave @ South 4 Street, Williamsberg, Brooklyn (open Sat, Sun, Mon noon to 6pm)

(footnote #1 Blood's vitality is conveyed in the statistic that nine out of ten New Yorkers who reach the age of 72 will have received a blood transfusion.)

(FOOTNOTE #2 12 million pints of blood were used in surgery in 1996 and most of this ended up as waste.)

(FOOTNOTE #3 Hospitals pay between \$75 and \$150 a pint of processed blood. The New York Blood Center alone made \$195 million in revenue in 1977 largely due to overseas plasma sales - NEW YORK OBSERVER must give exact source) CHECK!

(FOOTNOTE #4 Beginning in 1750 the city of Paris enacted a series of laws obliging residents to unblock and clean city streets. Washington DC was planned to allow for the orderly circulation of citizens. Richard Sennett pgs 257-265)

(footnote #5? The body's "secrets" are now licensed for potentially huge profits by corporations like Millennium Pharmaceuticals in Massachusetts that provides recipe's for biological molecules and genes to drug manufactures on a pay per use basis.)

Gregory Sholette, ( 2000