

Permission to Disrupt

REPOhistory and the Tactics of Visualizing Radical Social Movements in Public Space

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Public space is a codified arena that bombards us with messages and images much like the television and textbooks that define other formal and informal educational experiences. A common denominator in the thousands of signs and billboards constituting urban and rural landscapes is an endless list of rules to follow and products to consume. Missing is a greater sense of history, including reflections on community-based activism—apart from a handful of official state historical markers that are problematic in their own right, as they tend to enshrine one version of history, while erasing others. For how often does one come across “official” markers that speak of resistance to power, particularly resistance to economic power, class power, or state power? Additionally, how often does one see *any* type of imagery in public space (including street art) that addresses social movements and radical content?¹

REPOhistory, a highly influential art collective, set about to challenge official state historical markers and the control of public space, through creating public art projects where past community-based struggles were visualized on aluminum signs mounted to city-owned street poles (see Figure 53.1). Their process involved proposing and collaborating on a project idea, researching lesser-known histories, designing various signs, navigating through multiple layers of bureaucracy to receive permission to install them legally, and documenting their work. Through this work, REPOhistory critiqued the overall process of visual commemoration by asking their audience to consider which histories are told, which are omitted, and who decides how the past is represented. Furthermore, REPOhistory invites us to consider the benefits and drawbacks of working within bureaucratic structures and asking permission from those you wish to disrupt.

REPOhistory (www.repohistory.org) was formed in New York City in 1989 and created over a dozen projects (primarily in NYC and Atlanta) before disbanding in 2000. Their name evoked the title of the 1984 cult-movie classic *Repo Man*, but their work did not involve repossessing automobiles. Instead, they repossessed radical history and, according to co-founder Gregory Sholette (1999), a primary goal was to “work the gap between official history and a re-reading of the past [including] overlapping narratives, forgotten figures, and repressed events” (p. 3). The collective consisted of a rotating group of a dozen or more visual artists, performers, activists, historians, and educators. Many had backgrounds in public art where their process

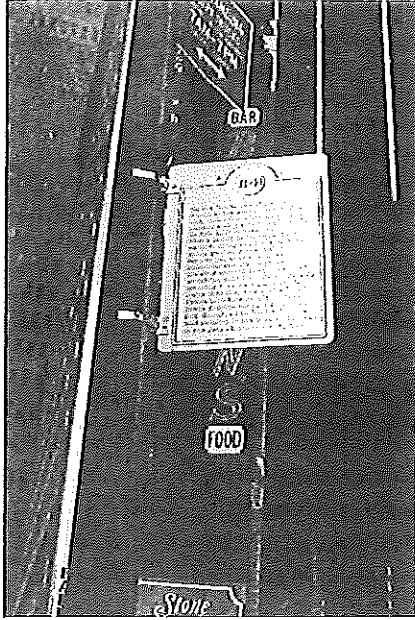


Figure 53.1 Tom Klem, "Homelessness: Forgotten Histories," REPOhistory, The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, installed in lower Manhattan, 1992. Screenprint on white metal blanks. Photograph by Tom Klem. Text reads: "On the fourth day of the month of March in the year nineteen ninety-one, three homeless Americans passed a very cold and bitter night on this spot in lower Manhattan. Three proud and independent people, using any material they could gather, made their own lean-to paper shelter near subterranean steam grates, drawing warmth to survive, ever watchful, that cold, cold night. By morning they were gone, leaving no trace that they had ever existed. These invisible people roamed these granite canyons forgotten and discarded by family, friends and country in the month of March in the year nineteen ninety-one."

of envisioning and executing their work relied upon collaborating with city officials. Nonetheless, the collective discussed a range of different non-permission tactics including the installation of inflatable counter memorials, fake bronze plaques, and sculptural objects attached to light posts.

However, they decided on the permission-based route for their first project, The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, because they saw a good chance of it getting approved. The project was first conceptualized in 1989 and launched in 1992 during a series of public art works in NYC aimed at challenging the official Columbus Quincentennial celebrations. Technically, the project consisted of placing 39 metal signs (18" x 24"), each hand screened and designed by a different artist, at various locations throughout Lower Manhattan (see Figure 53.1).

Tom Klem, a collective member, had previous experience working through the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) and volunteered to explore the options presented. Before joining REPOhistory, Klem had been Chairman of the Board of a small artist-run, non-profit art organization that created a host of public projects in NYC from the late 1970s to the 1980s. His experience and his connections proved to be vital as he set out to gain permission for The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, a request he and other collective members initially doubted the city would approve. Klem recalls:

I enquired fully expecting to hit a brick wall. I had lunch with my friend Frank Addeo of the New York City Department of Transportation and clearly described the project with all its political edges. He told me the NYCDOT did not comment on content, as these were works of art. (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

Klem further notes:

He told me that the requirements for an "Art Permit" from the NYCDOT were as usual, that the artwork could not be libelous or a danger physically to the public, [it must be] Community Board One approved, have liability insurance of \$1,000,000 covering the NYCDOT and be installed to the specs of the NYCDOT. As some of our signs were in Battery Park, I also had to secure an "Art Permit" from the NYC Parks Department. (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

Addeo's response seemed too easy to believe. Was he (and by extension the NYCDOT) championing artistic freedom to avoid accusations of censorship? And if so, did the NYCDOT believe

public art could not possibly create much disruption and thus it was not worth challenging? Regardless, Addeo's answer provided a crack within the system and, considering that any type of political censorship seemed doubtful, REPOhistory was more than willing to walk through the bureaucratic steps needed for approval. Klem notes:

The NYCDOT required the signs be checked for libelous statements as to insure someone would not sue the City. They did not ask to approve the content. As for the design we followed safety specs like rounded edges on the signs. I provided slides of the fronts of all the signs of each project for this purpose and never was asked to change a thing. (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

Additionally, before the NYCDOT would issue permits, REPOhistory had to first obtain Community Board One approval, which meant receiving permission from each Community Board (a governance of local residents and businesses) within every area of the city where REPOhistory planned to install a sign.

Because the signs were to be temporary and had an educational component, the response from the Community Boards was overwhelmingly favorable. However, Sholette adds that throughout this process it helped "that Tom Klem had experience with these procedures, and that we tended to omit some of the more controversial signs from our presentations to each of these board meetings" (personal communication, January 15, 2008).

The next step was to secure funding for the project. Klem explains:

I wrote a proposal to the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council telling them about our project and asking them to sponsor our public art project. Several months later I received a letter from Jenny Dixon stating that they would. This was particularly important because Jenny Dixon was also the Chairwoman of Community Board One's Art Committee at which I would have to make a presentation and get approval prior to presenting before the entire Community One in order to get the approval we needed to get all the NYC Permits. In the end, we had a contract from the City of New York who owned the light poles we installed our artwork on. (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

Gaining city approval was a long process, but it proved to be vital, because once the signs were approved, it was difficult for those who disagreed with the content of the signs to take them down.

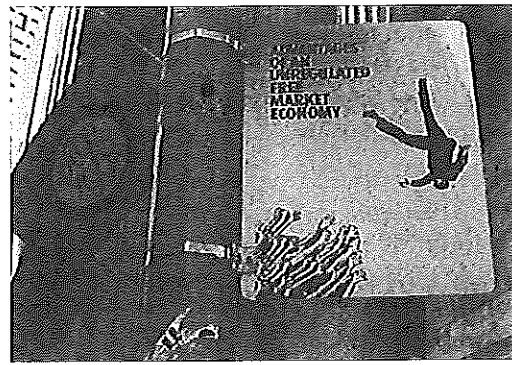


Figure 53.2 Jim Costanzo, "Stock Market Crashes," REPOhistory, The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, placed in front of the New York Stock Exchange, Manhattan, 1992. Screenprint on white metal blanks. Photograph by Tom Klem.

For instance, a sign by Jim Costanzo titled "Stock Market Crashes" that was placed on a city-owned pole in front of the New York City Stock Exchange would have been immediately removed had it not been given sanction by the city (see Figure 53.2). Visually, it depicted a chaotic scene of a stockbroker falling from the sky into a crowd below with text that read "Advantages of an Unregulated Free Market Economy." The image recalled that, during the 1929 Wall Street stock market crash, a number of stockbrokers had jumped out of the building's windows; but more so, the sign referenced the pattern of fraud and government deregulation that had led to a cycle of market crashes and Depres-

sions. Ironically, the sign served as an ominous warning of what would occur in 2008 when decades of deregulation in the banking and sub-prime mortgage industries led to the current financial meltdown that the global economy now faces.²

Not surprisingly, Costanzo's sign was not viewed favorably by the New York Stock Exchange, and yet they were powerless to remove it for the duration of a year. Klem notes that:

A permit allowed this sign to remain at that site even though the head of the New York Stock Exchange called the NYCDOT Commissioner to have it removed that same week. In 1992, the NYCDOT was a powerful city agency and we were protected from any private citizen or corporation from violating our contract with the City of New York. I installed all of our signs in every project and followed all the specs to the letter to insure our protection under these permits. (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

Protection was one factor; however, conceptually, the official permission also served as a critique on just how far a radical art collective could push city regulations. At times, REPOhistory's entire process seemed to both challenge and reflect upon the nature of bureaucracies and the indifference that many administrators display as long as everything falls within stated guidelines. Klem reflects:

We had our opening in Battery Park as well so I applied for and got a "Special Events Permit" from the NYC Parks Department. To top it off, I secured a Proclamation from the Mayor's Office declaring the day of our opening "REPOhistory Day." (personal communication, January 21, 2008)

This proclamation becomes all the more surprising when one considers that State and Federal governments are often notorious for making sure that a sanitized version of history is presented in public space. A bureaucratic process guarantees that a public artwork will be sanitized of all political content so as not to offend any possible constituency. Or worse, the work will represent a top-down version of history that equates order and a respect for government and powerful institutions.

The Lower Manhattan Sign Project not only celebrated alternative histories that addressed opposition to power, but the project itself critiqued the control of public space. Sholette (2004) notes:

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...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. (p. 285)

To increase this public dialogue, the collective promoted the signs far and wide for the legal aspect of the project allowed REPOhistory to openly promote the signs without fear of prosecution. Sholette (2004) explains:

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*. (p. 285)

Having permission also made it easier for REPOhistory to obtain modest grants, which they did through the Andy Warhol Foundation, along with sponsorship by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Center (LMCC).

In the end, it would be hard to argue against the permission-route for the Lower Manhattan Sign Project. The signs were allowed to stay up for a one-year duration; they were not censored, nor were they removed.³ However, it is important to note that Tom Klem's existing connection with Frank Addeo of the NYCDOT made the process easier to navigate. Also, one should be mindful that the city government was more progressive in the early 1990s than in the years that followed. During the Lower Manhattan Sign Project, David Dinkins was the mayor of New York City (the first and only African American mayor of the city), and his administration was far more open to the arts and public discourse than his successor, Rudolph Giuliani. In contrast, the Giuliani administration became notorious for waging a campaign to "clean up the city"—a code for gentrification that accelerated the path of the city toward becoming a home for hyper-wealth, finance, and tourism, at the expense of everyone else. Giuliani's reign coincided with a drastic increase in real estate costs and speculation, all of which resulted in more police surveillance and oppression that radically altered the city's public sphere.

Undeterred, REPOhistory continued to create new work during the Giuliani administration, despite facing open hostility. For example, their 1994 project "Queer Spaces," which was timed to coincide with the 25th Anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, faced considerable opposition from city officials. The project consisted of a series of pink triangular signs that commemorated struggles and sites that were significant to New York's LGBT community (see Figure 53.3). REPOhistory followed the same path of obtaining permission for this project as they had done for the Lower Manhattan Sign Project, but this time the permits were denied. Only when the collective threatened to hold a press conference on the steps of City Hall did the permits finally arrive.

Other problems occurred when REPOhistory launched the Civil Disturbances signs in collaboration with the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) in 1998. The project addressed past and present legal cases that had important social and political ramifications for the city, and consisted of placing twenty signs at various locations in the city (see Figure 53.4). Sholette (personal communication, January 15, 2008) notes that the city government tried to shut it down and "only by threatening to launch legal action against the Mayor and the City for

trying to prevent our constitutional right to free speech did we finally get the permit from the DOT to proceed."⁴

Fighting the city government added a new dimension to REPOhistory's work that had been absent during the first project. The city government now took on its familiar role as an oppressive force to counter, instead of acting as an ally—albeit one that made the collective jump through layers of bureaucracy. Now, the government presented itself as something to fight against. Klem, reflecting on the irony of the situation, noted that in the Civil Disturbances series, "We were attacking injustices created by the city government who we were seeking permission from. Many of the signs mentioned the Mayor by name"



Figure 53.3 REPOhistory, "Marsha P. Johnson 1945-1992," (sign honoring the legendary drag queen and activist). REPOhistory, Queer Spaces, 1994. Screenprint on composite board. Photograph by Jim Costanzo.



Figure 53.4 Jenny Pollack and David Thorne, "Who Watches the Police? The Law and Accountability for Police Misconduct," (sign to commemorate victims of NYPD shootings and the families that attempted to prosecute the police), Civil Disturbances, installed at the Gowanus Houses at Baltic and Hoyt Streets in Brooklyn, 1998. Adhesive vinyl on aluminum blanks. Photograph by Tom Klem. This sign remains to this day installed at a Brooklyn housing project, thanks to a family member of one of the victims.

(personal communication, March 26, 2008).
Consequently his administration wanted

them removed yet they were legally protected to remain installed.

Nonetheless, several were removed without the collective's consent. Sholette (1999) explains⁵:

Among these was Janet Koenig's work documenting the Empire State Building's prolonged non-compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Marina Gutierrez's piece critiquing housing discrimination by the city against Puerto Rican families in her Brooklyn neighborhood, and a sign by William Menking that "landmarked" the site of an illegal demolition of low income housing on the lot where a luxury hotel now stands near the "new" Times Square. As it turned out the art was being removed in each case by building managers or local politicians. (p. 4)

These more contentious struggles raise a number of critical points. Official approval does not automatically guarantee a sign will stay up, and the ability for artists (and citizens for that matter) to push progressive ideas through governmental channels depends greatly on whether or not the government is willing to listen. Moreover, the willingness of the government to act depends on the extent of the pressure that is asserted on them and how, in turn, they perceive the action might help or harm their own status as elected officials.

In the case of NYC, one administration provided an opening, the other, a barrier. Additionally, when REPOhistory requested the government to approve the public art that contained radical content, REPOhistory was in effect asking that the government take a more progressive position that accepted a divergence of opinions within the city and among its people.

In this regard, REPOhistory challenged the city government and officials to indeed act as public officials who would listen to the public's concerns and take a role in representing multiple voices. However, by asking permission, REPOhistory positioned itself in a subservient role, one that reinforced the notion that the government controls and decides what is allowed and not allowed in public space. Yet, the very process of questioning and pressing the government, and raising concerns about which histories were omitted from public space chipped away, at least metaphorically, at the overwhelming control that governments yield in determining and controlling public space and memory.

Moreover REPOhistory's work was situated within the awkward safe space of a neoliberal city and structure that makes protest possible, yet so difficult to truly impact radical change. The bureaucrats smile and allow free speech and dissent as long as it does not fundamentally impact class structures, profit, and the privatization of markets. Addeo and the NYCDOT certainly did not see REPOhistory's work as a threat and that is reason for alarm. Was it because they were

naïve to the implication and power that the work posed? Or could the collective have upped the ante in their art and activism to a level that would have threatened powerful institutions—both corporate or government? That said, the Giuliani administration's harsh reaction to the same type of work could counteract this point, or simply demonstrate how autocratic was his tenure as mayor.

In the end, however, REPOhistory's decision to go through governmental channels was first and foremost a tactical reason. City approval not only seemed possible, but also preferable to a guerilla action. Sholette (personal communication, January 15, 2008) notes, "prior to that we were ready to act in a guerrilla fashion, attaching them to lampposts and street signs in the dead of night, more or less like illegal graffiti writers." Yet, with Tom Klem's connections, few reasons existed not to seek official permission. Censorship seemed unlikely and the legality of the project made it possible to protect and openly promote the action.

Henceforth, REPOhistory's work has had an extended life. Their many projects have become widely known and written about. Consequently, REPOhistory has influenced other artists and art collectives to do similar work in placing counter-histories in public spaces in their own communities. This ongoing effect of their work is as important as the role the signs played when they were first installed.

Notes

1. The Street Art Collective (SAW) responded to the lack of political content in public space in 2006 by printing a poster set that addressed anti-globalization struggles (an image of some of the posters in Brooklyn, New York, is featured on the cover of this book). The project involved placing a call for designs through email and website announcements where eventually 25 different posters (each by a different artist) were selected out of more than 200 submissions. SAW then printed 5,000 copies of the poster booklet on newsprint and distributed them (mostly for free) through an informal network of street artists. Over the course of three years, posters were plastered in cities in North America, Europe, Japan, India, Australia, and numerous other locations, some known, many not. For more information on the project, visit <http://www.streetartworkers.org>
2. During the protests in 2008 against the bailout of Wall Street, one of the more memorable signs to appear in the New York City demonstrations in front of Wall St. was one that simply read, "Jump."
3. The signs could have stayed up longer, but it was prohibitively expensive to renew the permit beyond one year.
4. For more information on the Civil Disturbances project, see Gregory Sholette, *REPOhistory's Civil Disturbances NYC: Chronology of a Public Art Project*, retrieved from http://gregorysholette.com/writings/writing_index.html.
5. Also, the sign by Jenny Polak and David Thorne that commemorated three victims of police shootings and the families who attempted to prosecute the police was taken down on Baltic Street, between Hoyt and Bond in Brooklyn. However, the artists and the community made sure that it was re-installed in 1999. For an article on the rededication of the sign, see Michael Hirsh "Police Brutality Memorial Returns to Baltic Street," *Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill Courier*, Vol. XVIII, No. 16, April 26, 1999.

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