

**History that disturbs the present:
An interview about *REPOhistory* with Greg Sholette**
Interviewed by Dipti Desai on April 26, 2007

Greg Sholette's work as artist, writer, activist, and organizer has been extremely influential in opening dialogue about the relationship between history, current issues and art. Drawing on an array of art mediums such as sculpture, photography, drawings, film, and texts his work as a socially engaged artist forces us to question our commonsense understanding of art as an individual endeavor that is not connected to society. Instead he calls into question the role of art in a democratic society by challenging the idea of an autonomous art objects and its commodification by the art world. His multi-media art works ask us to think about how art perpetuates the often hidden social structures in our society and how aesthetic practices can become more part of our daily lives. As a cultural producer whose work is grounded in history his art making practice is part of a tradition of artists, cultural theorists, historians, and philosophers that understands art as a mode of production that is deeply connected to the material conditions of society. He was the founding member of two innovative artist collectives: Political Art Documentation/Distribution (1980-1988) and *REPOhistory* (1989-2000). Since he is interested in collaborative artistic practices that opens dialogue about issues of concern to people his work is mainly designed for the public sphere and engages many modes of dissemination, such as signs, posters, performances, public installations, educational activities, flyers, and postcards.

I met with Greg on a beautiful spring day in 2007 at Cooper Union, his alma mater and where he was an adjunct instructor prior to being hired full-time by the Art Department at Queens College. ~~the place he has worked since 1979, to~~ We talked about contemporary art, history, and pedagogy, but ~~Our~~ focused our conversation ~~focused on his work with~~ the artist and writers collective *REPOhistory*, which literally means "repossessing' history". This entailed reclaiming the past and exploring new ways of representing history as a multi-layered living narrative. The collective engaged in several public projects in New York City and Atlanta, Georgia that focused on hidden histories of particular events and the untold stories of marginalized groups of people in our society. As described in their printed literature and correspondence letters, their art projects raised questions about: "Who owns history? Who makes history? Can history be owned? What does it mean to reclaim one's past?"

DD: What was *REPOhistory*?

GS: *REPOhistory* was a New York City based collective of visual artists, educators, academics, performers, and media activists. Our common ground was an interest in the intersection of public space, unknown, often radical histories, and using culture to support political activism. Over a hundred women and men of diverse backgrounds, as well as several high school classes, collaborated with *REPOhistory* between 1989 and 2000. Some individuals participated in a single project, others remained active over a

longer period of time. The working core of the group hovered around a dozen, committed members including at one time or another: Ayishe Abraham, Todd Ayoung, Stephanie Basch, Betty Beaumont, Neill Bogan, Jim Costanzo, Ed Eisenberg, Betti-Sue Hertz, Cynthia Liesenfeld, Kara Lynch, Tom Klem, Lisa Maya Knauer, Janet Koenig, Carin Kuoni, Alan Michelson, Chris Neville, Mark O'Brien, Jayne Pagnucco, Lise Prown, Megan Pugh, Tess Simony, Leela Ramotar, Sarah Vogwill, Jody Wright, and myself. (Yes, the group's active women members greatly outnumbered men.)

REPOhistory—whose name refers to the 1984 indie film “*Repo Man*” (see below)—sought to retrieve, or “repossess” lost, forgotten, or repressed historical knowledge by publicly re-representing and re-mapping these unheralded narratives at specific locations linked with each overlooked subject. For example, our first project in 1992 marked the original “pre-Columbian” coastline of Lower Manhattan on Pearl Street when the island was inhabited by the Lenape people (sign by artist Sabra Moore); the temporary overthrow of British rule in 1689 by Jacob Leisler, almost a century before the American Revolution (Stephen Duncombe); the site of an alleged slave rebellion near Wall Street in 1741 (Mark O'Brien and Willie Birch); and the first meal and slave market on Wall Street in 1746 (O'Brien and Tess Simony); the location where Madame Restell, AKA Ann Trow, operated a prosperous abortion clinic next to the World Trade Center (Janet Koenig and Lisa Maya Knauer). M. Restell successfully provided birth control services to New Yorkers until she was imprisoned and driven to suicide by Christian crusader Anthony Comstock in 1878. During the 1993 bombing of the Twin Towers, *REPOhistory's* Madame Restell and Comstock signs were crushed by flying debris. Still another sign marked the location of first Chinese community at the South Street Seaport in the 1830s (EPOXY, an Asian-American art collective); the spot where union activist Rose Schneiderman gave a fiery, public speech in 1934 (Nannette Yanuzzi Macias and Jeffrey Skoller); the court house where the anti-Communist Smith Act Trials that took place at Foley Square in 1949 (Keith Christensen); and we even (temporarily) memorialized the victory parade thrown by Mayor David Dinkins for the recently freed Nelson Mandela in 1990 (Curlee Holton created the sign). Ironically, Mandela was recently put on a United States “No Fly List” see:

http://news.aol.com/story/_a/mandela-is-on-us-terrorist-watch-lists/20080501090309990001)

It took us three years to plan, research, obtain permits, produce, and install this first, street-sign project known simply as the Lower Manhattan Sign Project (LMSP). When LMSP did finally open on June 27 1992 it was one part of an event called ¿the Americas?: a series of counter-Columbus programs situated in all five boroughs and intended to challenge the prevailing view Europeans had “discovered” the *New World* in 1492. *REPOhistory's* contribution to ¿the Americas? was sponsored by *The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council* (LMCC), then under the direction of Jenny Dixon. LMCC helped us obtain insurance, smoothed the process of securing permits, and paid for the printing of the project maps. We also paid each of the artists a modest stipend thanks to grants from the Puffin and Andy Warhol Foundations. That said,

the actual cash budget for our first project was, I believe, a ridiculous ten thousand dollars, but let me come back to the issue of funding in a moment.

Physically, LMSP consisted of thirty-nine, thin aluminum signs that measured eighteen by twenty-four inches. With a few exceptions, each sign was screen-printed on the front with a three-color image designed by the individual artist (or artists). The back of each sign contained the descriptive, historical text, printed in one-color, usually black for optimum visual clarity on the street. We used a commercial printer I knew named Benjamin Tang who gave us an incredible discount for the first project, but later we switched to computer-printed, vinyl adhesive output that we laboriously attached to the metal blanks ourselves.) In addition, each panel had a number located on the back to help locate the sign on the project map. The four-color map designed by *REPOhistory* member Hilary Kliros was printed in a ten thousand edition and made available free around the city so anyone could in theory do their own self-guided “walking-tour” of the entire project. This first re-mapping project was installed roughly between Canal Street and the Battery, but mostly south of City Hall Park near Chambers Street. We only had permits to keep the project in place from June 1992, to June 1993, after which they were taken down, just as we had put them up; by ourselves in teams with ladders, installation equipment, and with our permit in hand because on more than one occasion police insisted that we show this document.

About a year after LMSP was de-installed LMCC published a small, black and white brochure about the project. Designed by *REPOhistory* member Lise Prown this publication included an essay by Lucy R. Lippard, reprinted from *Z* magazine. Lucy had been present at several of our early meetings including the one where we came up with the name *REPOhistory*. In addition, several of us had worked previously with her in the group *Political Art Documentation/Distribution*, or PAD/D (1980-1988).

The project collaborators fluctuated quite a bit. Whenever we initiated a new project the size of the group doubled, tripled as additional people got involved. But once that particular project ended most of these people would also move leaving the core group to plan for the next project. *REPOhistory's* flexible membership was analogous to the informal administrative structure of the group. Although we had incorporated as a not-for-profit, 501 C-3, in reality we simply shifted managerial roles around as needed. In other words, we functioned without paid positions, staff, and with only one permanent position, that of treasurer. We did have a small office, however, on the second floor of the A. J. Muste “Peace Building” at the corner of Lafayette and Bleeker Streets. The group “inherited” this space from its previous tenant: PAD/D.

A typical *REPOhistory* meeting would find several children crawling across the floor as we hashed out ideas, went over designs for printed materials or signs, and debated what might be our next undertaking. Since we were project-driven, Individual members would temporarily take over directing a project

(usually if it was their idea), and each would contribute as needed in the areas of fund raising, educational outreach, press, design and so forth. Not to say *REPOhistory* operated without internal conflicts of course. The usual tensions of class, gender, and racial privilege also manifest themselves in all group work. However, given the informality of the organization and the sometimes volatile subject matter we dealt with, the fact we lasted eleven years is gratifying. At the same time, the fact we did not resemble a “responsible looking” organization in our structure probably inhibited foundations from supporting us to a greater degree than they did. Still, the group did receive a modest grant from the remarkable and progressive Puffin Foundation for almost every project, as well as numerous checks from individual donors who would send between twenty and a hundred dollars in response to a fund-raising letter. Only towards the very end of our tenure did we land a few, larger grants. Large for us was anything over 5,000 dollars. I suspect if one averaged out the funding we generated our average project budget would be less than 15,000 dollars. Most of the actual expenses were covered by our own, “in kind” labor and even “out of pocket” money.

Following the group’s first project (LMSP) in 1992, all of the other street sign installations —Queer Spaces (1994), Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City (NYC: 1998-1999), Entering Buttermilk Bottom and Voices of Renewal (Atlanta, Georgia: 1995 & 1997) — followed a similar formula: individually designed graphics and researched texts mounted on rectangular metal blanks, all except for Queer Spaces, which was produced in collaboration with the Storefront for Art and Architecture to memorialize the 1969 *Stonewall Uprising* and consisted of nine uniform signs using only text that was screened onto a pink triangle made of chipboard. And besides these publicly installed, sign installations *REPOhistory* also produced a number of other projects including a prop-filled, street performance/pilgrimage that illegally marched from Trinity Church to the recently excavated site of the African Burial Ground in downtown Manhattan in 1993; we also collaborated on an elaborate, multifaceted installation about the history of abortion and forced sterilization called Choice Histories: Framing Abortion for Artists’ Space in 1992 (collaborating on this project was Michael Richards, who was later killed on September 11th 2001 while in his studio at the top of World Trade Center One: see: <http://www.studiomuseumharlem.org/richardstxt.html>); and there was a site-specific project focused on local gentrification in Houston Texas in 1998. The group’s last project in 2000 involved a mass mailing of thousands of artist-designed post cards that mapped the social, economic, and metaphoric history of human blood. Entitled CIRCULATION, this final project also generated *REPOhistory.org*, an online site filled with resources about the group that was designed by member’s Jim Costanzo, Cynthia Liesenfeld, Sharon Denning, Russet Lederman, David Sansone and John Manick. (See Jim Costanzo “On-Line & In The Streets” at: <http://www.repohistory.org/circulation/caa.php3>)

All in all, *REPOhistory* carried out a decade's worth of varied, public-art activity as both local and geopolitical realities underwent dramatic shifts including the hyper-gentrification of New York City; the arrest of Oliver North for his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal; the fall of the Soviet Union; the collapse of Apartheid in South Africa; and the withdrawal of United States military forces following a popular uprising in the Philippines.

DD: How did you come up with the name, *REPOhistory*?

GS In the beginning we simply called ourselves the "history group." This was in 1989 and we would meet regularly to discuss various readings including Howard Zinn's *Peoples History of the United States*, Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire*, Hayden White's *Metahistory*, and most important to me, Walter Benjamin's, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. The Pulitzer Prize winning author Mike Wallace (*Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*) also met with us, as did Ned Kaufman and other, socially concerned historians involved in the Municipal Art Society. All of this was part of our initial phase of "self-education," because *REPOhistory*, for all intents and purposes, was a DIY (Do It Yourself), amateur history project.

The actual naming of the group took place during one of those overlong, brainstorming sessions that everyone who has ever been involved in a collective knows well. The name itself was derived from the "punk" film *"Repo Man"* (directed by Alex Cox of *"Walker,"* and *"Syd and Nancy"* fame). The plot of *"Repo Man"* revolved around a young, disaffected, supermarket clerk in Los Angeles and his bizarre adventures with a hard-bitten repo-man who takes out protagonist on as his protégée. Repo-men, and women, are the bane of the working class, which is today synonymous with the "indebted" class. They work for collection agencies that repossess automobiles and other items from people who cannot keep up with their monthly payments. Our idea was to invert this concept by becoming the "Repo" men and women of un-official history, including working class and women's histories. We would scout-out those narratives that have dropped out of, or have been suppressed by, dominant history, temporarily take ownership of these omissions, then re-insert them into a common, public setting. (Perhaps it is significant that at this point we imagined doing all this in guerilla style, only later did we discover a way to have our "repossessions" legally permitted.) Naturally the group intensely debated this identity, as well as other name options, but *REPOhistory* finally stuck. I believe people eventually came to think of it as funny, and a bit ironic. Maybe the naming process also reflected certain submerged divisions within the group as well. I am thinking of the gap that existed between those "*REPOhistorians*" who identified their work as critical and interventionist, and those interested in using culture to expand or reinforce the cohesion of certain communities? And yet in those satisfying and often electric early days, any actual rift remained invisible. Only later would this difference materialize in a significant way, sometimes taking the form of a productive debate, but at other times creating blockages for moving forwards.

DD: Why history?

GS: I think everybody in the collective would have a different answer for you Dipti, and that is characteristic of how the group operated: more through collective differences, than any compulsory accord. When we first began to meet some people were already involved in discussions about countering the upcoming Columbus Quincentenary celebrations (and that ultimately did frame our first project as I mentioned before.) My own interest was focused on the ways in which history is represented by the “victorious,” as Benjamin points out, and how to develop a counter-history from “below.” (In many ways I am still working on that idea in my artwork and my writings about collectives and what I call the missing mass or “dark matter” of the art world.) But for some of us it was important to make an implicit critique of postmodern pastiche, the dominant artistic model of the late 1980s. Several of us saw in this cultural tendency an intentional, and ultimately conservative subversion of politically charged historical narratives. In other words, what did *Learning from Las Vegas* (Robert Venturi) really teach artists? To jumble together any curious, mismatched historical façade or reference in order to prove how little the past really mattered? This seemed in keeping with Francis Fukuyama’s infamous neo-conservative essay *The End of History?*, published the same year our group was formed and later made into a book. In it Fukuyama uses Hegel to argue that free-market capitalism was the pinnacle of human historical evolution. Of course this was right at the end of the cold war and radical Islam was not yet on the radar screen. There was a counter-argument to these tendencies in the Marxist tradition and Frederic Jameson sums it up succinctly when he stated that postmodernism was like ‘surrealism without the unconscious.’ *REPOhistory* was an attempt to visualize history as a political narrative, rather than an infinite web of loosely associated images.

But there is also a more matter of fact answer to your question “why history.” By the late 1980s many formal artistic issues once so dominant in the Post-War era were, for a complex set of reasons, less and less tenable (I am thinking of Clement Greenberg’s influence in particular here). Suddenly it seemed possible to re-investigate oppositional art and culture and locating strange and marginal histories within New York City, the very center of artistic power, made me at least feel truly subversive. At least for a while.

Another important inspiration for *REPOhistory* was “Points of Reference 38/88.” an exhibition organized by Werner Fenz for the city of Graz, Austria. In 1988 Fenz invited a group of international artists and had them install temporary memorials around the city marking its notorious Nazi past (thus the reference: 1938/1988). Artists such as Dennis Adams and my former professor Hans Haacke were included in the project. Notably, neo-Nazis firebombed Haacke’s public work sometime after its completion. It seemed that some historical points of reference remain alive, like nerve-ends, just beneath the surface. Fenz’s Austrian-based project also seemed like such an interesting, overall format for New York City. No, we don’t have a Nazi past, but we certainly have layers and layers of interesting history.

All of which is to say there is nothing terribly original about the idea of *REPOhistory*, its structure is simple and can be applied elsewhere. It's really a DIY (Do It Yourself) approach to public art and to historical research, and perhaps that is what most links our work to a certain kind of street art, to the "urbanist" theorizing of the Situationist International, and the often antagonistic stance of punk culture, as opposed to formalist notions of detached high art.

DD: What were the goals of *REPOhistory*?

GS: Well we did have a concise little, mission statement that read our aim was to, "retrieve and relocate absent historical narratives at specific locations in the New York City area through counter-monuments, actions and events." And of course the issue of invisibility raises another question--why is it that some histories are invisible, while others are all too visible? Of course it is about the narrative a nation or people construct for themselves, but, for instance, we (semi-naively) asked why are George Washington and Ben Franklin memorialized in public sculpture, while say, an admired, radical politician of the 1930s such as Vito Marcantonio goes un-marked and virtually forgotten? (For the LMSP artist Marina Gutierrez and historian Gerald Mayer temporarily commemorated the popular, East Harlem Congressman at the site of his death near Barclay Street in 1954.) Our early research also revealed for instance that the stock exchange was established in 1792 not far from the location of the City's slave and meal market. While a bronze marker indicating where the stock traders first met has been installed near an old Buttonwood tree at 68 Wall Street, the site of the nearby slave exchange was, and remains, invisible to passersby. That is except for one year in the summer of 1992 when *REPOhistory* marked the site. A significant part of what we wanted to accomplish therefore involved challenging the rules, hidden or merely tacit, that allow some things, some events, some people to be visible, and others to be consigned to the shadows.

This brings me to the actual production of *REPOhistory*'s projects, and why the group settled on metal street signs for its public works. Before we settled on this simple, straightforward format we debated a host of other methods for marking unknown urban histories. One of these unrealized ideas was to make official looking historical plaques that actually had an alternative narrative inscribed on their surface. We would then either put these ersatz markers over the existing plaques, or install them beside existing historical plaques. Alternatively, we also discussed the idea of constructing counter-monuments at the United States Customs House at Bowling Green in downtown Manhattan. (The building is now home to The National Museum of the American Indian, and one of *REPOhistory*'s early members, Alan Michelson, later had a one-person exhibition here in 2005.) In front of this imposing, Beaux Arts building stand four allegorical sculptures by Daniel Chester French that represent Europe, Asia, Africa and the "New World," respectively. Just to give you some idea why *REPOhistory* initially focused on this site consider the allegory of Asia where French depicts a cruel-looking Asian woman (of course, all sculpted, allegorical figures are women), sitting on a throne beneath which sit a pile of human skulls. Needless to

say, the sculptures fully reflect the era of manifest destiny in which they were carved, and as you might imagine, *REPOhistory* would have had a grand time responding to these monuments with its own, amateur-historical reflection on the nation's "official" past. One such possibility that is in keeping with this DIY approach was to design a series of inflatable, counter-memorials that we would pump up late at night and leave in front of the Customs House for commuters to discover in the morning.

Which is to say that initially we just assumed our projects would be illegal, guerrilla actions. That was until Tom Klem joined the group sometime in 1990, or 1991. Tom was up for the guerrilla approach, but he also had connections to people at the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT). The NYCDOT manage the City's official street signs, lampposts, and traffic lights. But Tom knew they had provided street installation permits to artists in the past, and some of this work had been controversial. For instance *Grand Fury*, an artists' collective connected to the AIDS-activist group ACT UP, installed several metal signs challenging the City's policy on homeless people. One of these asserted, "NYC owns 30,000 empty APTS and has 30,000 homeless people. NYC's cost effective solution: LET THEM DIE IN THE STREETS." *Gran Fury's* project was installed in 1990 with NYCDOT permission at *Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino Park* in SoHo. Several years earlier artist Ilona Granet received permission to install a series of satirical "street etiquette" signs around lower Manhattan. One bright pink sign demanded that men "curb" their animal instincts and not harass women on the streets (http://www.romdog.com/granet/index_signage.html).

The unsung hero in all of this public art activity was the NYCDOT's Frank Addeo. He was responsible for permitting any number of public art words, some of them surprisingly critical, by helping artists navigate the city's bureaucracy for permits. Tom Klem's connections with Frank Addeo helped secure *REPOhistory's* official access to the public streets of New York City. Later we ran into permitting problems when Frank Addeo came under pressure from the incoming administration of Rudolph Guiliani. As part of his overall program for policing petty crime, Mayor Guiliani was eager to gain total control of the City's public spaces, even if that meant restricting constitutionally guaranteed displays of public dissent. The former prosecutor summarized his position in 1994 when he insisted that:

"Freedom is about authority. Freedom is about the willingness of every single human being to cede to lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do and how you do it."

(<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A01E2D9173CF933A15750C0A962958260>)

Anyway, before Guiliani entered the picture *REPOhistory* had gone full-circle from planning a guerrilla art campaign, to carrying out an officially permitted public art project. On the opening day of our first

project Manhattan Borough President Ruth W. Messinger, and the city's first and only black mayor David Dinkins, officially designated June 27, 1992, "*REPOhistory*" day. Quite ironic really.

DD: Can you speak about some of the projects *REPOhistory* undertook, in particular your process of working? Given that most of the projects were conceived for public spaces, how did you think about your audience?

GS: The working process for most of these projects followed a similar pattern. The core, working group would develop the historical profile of a proposed project's subject matter by combing through both official as well as alternative historical resources. After that we would put out the word to collaborators, asking them to join us in exploring the particular thematic concept of a new project. When someone showed interest, we provided the prospective collaborator with a packet of documentation, but we also encouraged each artist to do their own research and submit these ideas to us. No one was excluded, no proposals rejected. Which is to say that *REPOhistory* projects were not "curated," but developed out of a group effort. Nevertheless, we did have in place a series of committees that debated the choice of images, correctness of information, style of writing, grammar, and so forth. There were also certain technical specifications for each project such as the shape and dimension of each sign, as well as the size and style of the typeface artist's were to use. The group wanted some visual cohesion to the entire project of course, but some of these specifications were simply practical. The standard size for texts was necessary because each sign had to be readable from 10 feet away: the regulation height of installation stated in our NYCDOT permit. Ultimately, the visual illustration for each sign was designed by individual artists, but always in coordination with *REPOhistory*. For example, there was a *REPOhistory* committee that looked at proposed imagery to make sure it was comprehensible, but also to be sure that nothing politically reactionary (or simply un-informed), and offensive (racist, or sexist,) was proposed. These criteria were a strict "political line" enforced from above in my opinion, but grew organically out of the make-up of the group. Much like PAD/D before it, *REPOhistory* was broadly left-liberal in its cultural outlook. Undoubtedly, this also reflected the dominant cultural politics of New York City at the time. As far as I know only one person ever withdrew a proposed piece from any of the projects over this process. In that case I believe there was a difference of opinion between the artist and the group not about images, but about the written style of the sign's text.

Whenever possible, we also took advantage of friendly experts interested in our work. During the production of LMSP for instance, we ran the texts of the signs by a team of social historians associated with the *Municipal Art Society* just to be sure our work was as accurate as possible. That said, and I think this is very important to note, *REPOhistory* was really about a process of taking responsibility for uncovering, writing, and visually representing history essentially from a multifaceted, subaltern perspective. In terms of addressing an audience our aim was to bypass the specialists and the art world by

going directly to the urban population; those people who used the streets to go to and from work, shopping, site-seeing etc...For the LMSP we imagined our audience to be not only Wall Street “suits,” but also the thousands of service workers and night cleaners who “invisibly” helped maintain the financial district itself. As far as actually knowing who noticed and responded to the signs I cannot really say for certain. Other than a number of anecdotes, some very amusing, we carried out no survey to determine our audience. We simply did not have the time or funds to do that. We do know, however, that the press reported on every REPOhistory project. Although with only a few exceptions it was not the “art” press, but mass circulation papers that were most interested in reporting on our work. Aiming for newspaper coverage was in fact part of our advanced planning for each *REPOhistory* project. Whenever possible we made sure that a paid individual or small firm did our press releases and served as media contact. This is something I consider essential to group’s activism within the public sphere: expanding our visibility as artists and activists into the realm of the mainstream media. In a sense, *REPOhistory* presented urban passersby with a different representation of history as well as an alternative, non-commercial notion of how the public sphere might function and how people might relate to the city other than as consumers.

DD: Could you describe one project that you think was especially successful?

GS: Civil Disturbances, Battles for Justice in New York City (CD) is my choice for the most successful *REPOhistory* project. It was conceived by Mark O’Brian, one of the group’s initial co-founders, and produced in collaboration with the *New York Lawyers for the Public Interest* (NYLPI); a group of legal activists that came together in 1976 to “address unmet legal needs.” NYLPI had previously been involved in various public space related issues such as providing sidewalk ramps for handicapped people and supporting environmental justice issues in financially depressed areas of the city. CD took place between 1998 and 1999, and its primary aim was to mark specific sites related to instances where the legal system was used to benefit politically or economically disenfranchised people, groups, or neighborhoods. This is what was meant by NYLPI’s reference to “unmet needs.” For this project the group decided to install two copies of each sign, one to be located at the site relevant to a particular history, the other located near the various court buildings clustered around Center and Chambers Streets in Manhattan. The concept of the dual sitting was unique to this project. The idea was to provide a one-stop walking tour of the entire project a geographically small area, while permitting us to re-map a larger urban space that included Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. For example, artist Ming Murray’s contribution to CD addressed a successful lawsuit that the Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) brought against the City in 1983. This legal action was intended to stop a twenty-one story, luxury tower from going up in Chinatown. They argued known as CSWA v. City of New York was intended to stop the development of a very large building complex that would inevitably accelerate the area’s gentrification causing local residents to be displaced. The courts ruled in favor of CSWA, agreeing that the negative impact of construction was *environmental* factor that had to be factored into a developer’s plans. *REPOhistory*

installed one of Mur-Ray's signs at Henry and Market Streets in Chinatown, close to where the tower was going to be built, meanwhile a copy of her piece was sited further north, near the City's court houses. The free project map we produced was distributed to people arriving downtown for jury duty. We also designed these project maps so they could easily be reproduced in a newspaper format. On several occasions mass circulation papers including The New York Times did just that, thus greatly expanding the visibility of a project

But I have chosen CD as our most successful project because of what happened once when we actually tried to install the project, and also because of what took place afterwards.

There were twenty signs in all for CD, ranging from issues of gentrification and sweatshop labor to police misconduct and public access for the disabled. Each addressed some specific legal case or situation. But the morning we were to install the project on May 19th, 1998 we received a last-minute fax from the NYCDOT. The message stated that we were not being granted permission to attach the works after all. Tom Klem and other *REPOhistory* members had been working for a year or more to gain permission, doing exactly what we had done for two previous public projects in 1992 and 1994. This involved purchasing liability insurance, indicating exactly which lampposts we wanted to use, and clearing the project through local community boards by presenting them with mock-ups of the proposed signs. (This was a NYCDOT requirement for all of the sign projects.) But on that day in May we stood in the street with our ladders, clamps, tools, and the signs, literally ready to go forward when the installation came to a sudden halt. So we held immediately a public press conference on the steps of the State Supreme Court building at 60 Center Street. We simultaneously held-up all of our completed signs as if to ask: 'why is the city denying us a permit for this project?, why are they obscuring these histories from the public?' The next day David Gonzales of the New York Times Metro Section reported on the situation. Soon after C. Carr at the Village Voice and Time Out New York followed suit. In the end we received as much or even more press than if we had actually installed the work. However, most of the attention was focused on the Mayor's apparent censorship, and only second upon the content of our signs. Recall that it was at about this time during Rudolph Giuliani's second term that the Mayor was coming under increasing fire for his infringements on public rights throughout the City. The mayor had previously ordered dozens of street artists arrested because they had not purchased vendor's permits. But the street artists successfully brought a class action lawsuit against the City on the grounds of artistic freedom of speech. (One *REPOhistory* artist (George Spencer) had even designed a sign to commemorate this case known for CD, see: *Bery V. City of New York* at: <http://www.ncac.org/art-law/sum-bery.cfm>.)

You would think that the City would have hesitated acting this way given that we were working directly with a group of lawyers. Not surprisingly, soon after the permit's denial, several attorneys at the firm of *Debevoise & Plimpton* offered us pro bono assistance to force the City to renege. We considered bringing

a lawsuit against the City on grounds they were violating our first amendment rights. Legally, the city had no substantial case given that there were other precedents, including *REPOhistory*'s past work, for such street projects. Such an action would have attracted a great deal of attention to *REPOhistory*, no doubt making us the latest *cause célèbre* in the so-called culture wars. But the group ardently debated this tactic, finally concluding that it was more important to work out a quiet deal that would allow us to actually make these unknown histories public. To my way of thinking this was one of the groups finest moments.

After about three months of back-channel negotiation our attorney, Jeremy Feigelson, brokered a deal to have the project go forward as planned. On August 4th 1998 the signs were installed. However, within a week or so several of the twenty signs disappeared off city streets. The missing markers included Mark O'Brien's sign about the rights of homeless people, Bill Menking's memorial to the illegal destruction of low income housing in Midtown Manhattan, Marina Gutierrez's sign about race-based discrimination by the City's own public housing administration, and Janet Koenig's commemoration to a test case against the Empire State Building based on the passage of the 1990 American's with Disabilities Act (ADA), a law signed by the first President Bush that made it a crime to prevent handicapped people access to public buildings and spaces.

Koenig's sign depicted the combined legal maneuvers and street protests carried out by wheel chair bound activists and lawyers who eventually forced the Empire State Building to make its famed observation deck comply with the ADA. Our collaborators at NYLPI had also worked closely on this case. What is so strange is that despite the fact that the Empire State Building did finally install an elevator for handicapped visitors, the building's management perceived our marker as a threat. They removed copies of the sign on numerous occasions. How do we know it was they? Because, when Tom Klem and other *REPOhistory* members went to re-install Koenig's sign a maintenance person coolly stated that "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 happened to be directly in front of an Empire State Building surveillance camera. Ed Copeland, the council for New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), requested the surveillance videos, but as far as I know they were never made available. Altogether I believe we re-attached copies of that particular work six times.

It is interesting to note that even though all of these signs were installed in public spaces with permits, certain local interests—a hotel manager, a building owner, several local politicians in Marina's case—simply assumed that they had the right to control what went on adjacent to their private property. I think we all learned an important lesson, one valuable for artists and activists who do public work to consider. What appears to be commonly-owned, urban space is in fact crisscrossed with lines of micro-political power. Civil Disturbances also revealed something basic to what I think *REPOhistory* was trying to accomplish. As if to illustrate Walter Benjamin's thesis that "every image of the past that is not

recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,” *REPOhistory* discovered that it could be politically provocative in the present by invoking the past.

Sometime after *REPOhistory*'s Civil Disturbances project ended the NYCDOT altered the rules governing what was permissible to install on its property (lampposts etc...). Meanwhile, our artist-friendly contact, Frank Addeo retired. Many of the more established public art organizations in the city were displeased with this change of rules, and also very unhappy with *REPOhistory*. Some still believe to this day, incorrectly, that we actually sued the City of New York. Nevertheless, what is apparent if one reads events more critically and politically is that our project signaled the last attempt to dramatically question how public space is used, and by whom, at a moment of accelerating privatization and police management of the commons. Needless to say, most public art installed in New York City after *REPOhistory* has offered passersby a pleasing, aesthetic experience in which critical engagement is suspended in favor of an affirmative submission to the city's powerful finance and real estate sectors. Important exceptions to this tendency do exist, however, including the vibrant public performances organized by *The Change You Want To See*, and *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping*, as well as the many confrontational public activities that took place during the Republican Party Convention in 2004.

DD: Why did you choose to take history into the public sphere?

GS: Well, history is already in the public sphere. Our self-appointed job was simply to illuminate that fact. But the idea of exposing invisible histories was, for most of us, not intended to be about producing a novelty experience, you know, like, ‘isn't it amusing that this fill in the blank: colorful immigrant neighborhood, quaint sailors hang out, lascivious red light district, was once located at this very spot?’ Instead, for most of us in *REPOhistory* I believe, the idea of exploring the past was about upsetting the assumptions of the present. History was merely a critical tool for addressing contemporary issues of social justice. That is why we focused on the historical roots of racism, sexism, gentrification, colonialism, economic inequality, and personal and sexual liberation among other issues. At least in part, each of our projects accomplished this aim. In terms of a lasting presence *REPOhistory* lives on only thanks to people like you Dipti. Although, I also hear rumors that some of our street signs are still hanging on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, and one, somewhat bent-up sign still hangs from a lamppost in a Brooklyn housing project. Designed by artists Jenny Polak and David Thorne the sign was part of CD. The “lost history” it documented was the fatal shooting of a child brandishing a toy plastic gun by a member of the City's Housing Police. The boy's father still lives in that project. At his behest Tom Klem reinstalled the sign sometime after the CD project permit officially ended. (See, Michael Hirsh “Police Brutality Memorial Returns to Baltic Street”, Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill Courier, Vol. XVIII, No. 16, April 26, 1999.)

DD: What is the importance of aesthetics in telling histories?

GS: Aesthetics is of course a tricky term under any circumstances, and more so when dealing with the artistic production of a group, rather than an individual. *REPOhistory*'s street-sign projects directly called out to the passersby. We simply refused to focus our cultural productivity on people with specialized knowledge such as art critics, historians, or aestheticians. As a form of informational address the group's work could easily be dismissed as illustrative, instrumental, didactic. But *REPOhistory*'s projects could also be appreciated as a type of cartographic, urban experience involving social history, visual representation, or, even more abstractly, as the stimulation of phenomenal knowledge regarding space in relation to time. By breaking with predictable routines of day-to-day experience a certain freedom is produced that Nato Thompson and I call the "creative disruption of everyday life." (see:

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=10229>)

A different sort of aesthetic pleasure was generated by the way *REPOhistory* mimicked the authority of urban signage such as traffic signs. This act of impersonation also had a practical side. One reason we met with so few bureaucratic "speed bumps" in 1992 was because our work didn't fit the patterns and molds City officials were familiar with. Was *REPOhistory* an art project? (negative connotations); a commercial venture? (not likely); or was it an educational project? (positive connotations). In truth, *REPOhistory* slid back and forth between different frameworks of knowledge and expectation. No doubt, people who walked down the street and encountered a *REPOhistory* sign probably never thought of it as an art project at all. This sort of mimicry —reproducing the appearance of things including the labor of other workers as well as social institutions — is the principal freedom artists are permitted by the State, although it is a liberty given reluctantly, often as a means of gaining control over the symbolic order. Recall that Plato initially banished artists from the Republic because artists have the capacity to deceive innocent citizens with their work! In this sense *REPOhistory*, just like other interventionist artists' groups, engaged in a form of semiotic warfare in which normative expectations about public space and social identity are redirected towards other, less affirmative ends.

Returning to your question about aesthetics and pedagogy I would say that at least since the time of Immanuel Kant we "artists" have been taught that aesthetic understanding means remaining detached from explicit sensual or practical interests. The real artist is above all that, just as aesthetic experience demands we remain unmotivated by needs or desires. Which is to say that looking at a work of art should be no more "useful" than looking at a beautiful sunset, or watching a volcano explode in the distant landscape. And only by way of this detached judgment do we encounter true freedom, a freedom that is opposite instrumental modes of judgment associated with science, law, or technology. The result was a highly individualistic concept of art for art's sake that broke from the oppressive, servile aesthetics of the Church and aristocracy. An incipient middle class embraced this notion of artistic freedom. They correctly saw it as an ideal way to represent their emerging political and economic sovereignty. In our

contemporary, post-industrial society however, where commodity exchange dominates every aspect of life including even the patenting of human genetic information, such formally detached aesthetic practices cannot avoid being subsumed by the ideological needs of the market. The tragic fate of autonomous avant-garde art is the legitimation of the neo-liberal, corporate culture that today celebrates “radical” *out of the box* thinking and entrepreneurial creativity, even as the planet’s resources, plants, and animals, (including most of the human population), are treated as raw material, or simply as a superfluous drain on the global economy.

But there are other versions of aesthetic experience that are at odds with detached art as an end in itself. Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal represent two such unorthodox thinkers and practitioners. I like to think some of the work of *REPOhistory* also belongs to this other, socially-engaged artistic tradition. Which is why it would be more accurate to align *REPOhistory*’s work with that of “tactical media” (TM). As described by Geert Lovink and David Garcia in the early 1990s, TM is a transitory mode of cultural intervention that does not posit explicit opposition against a perceived adversary, but rather engages in resistance from *within* the opponent’s own territory, often by borrowing the very language, tools, and imagery of the opponent. Once the specific intervention is accomplished TM actors/artists/performers withdraw from the field of engagement to search out a new, and different tactic for the next occasion. Think of the way *The Yes Men* assume corporate identities in order to infiltrate the BBC or the WTO (the World Trade Organization - no wonder artists were expelled from Plato’s Republic!) It is worth adding here that these two forms of socially-engaged artistic practice —the pedagogical on one hand, and the interventionist or tactical on the other— do not necessarily always work in harmony. Throughout *REPOhistory*’s eleven years of practice this difference produced a subtle, generally productive creative tension.

[I COMBINED THREE PARTS OF THE EXCHANGES IN THE NEXT PART DIPTI – SEE WHAT YOU THINK - G]

DD: Clearly, education is a major component of *REPOhistory*’s mission but I know that a lot of the *REPOhistory* projects involved working directly with middle and high school students in both public and private schools. What was the impetus for getting middle/high school students involved in the projects, and why was the school component important to *REPOhistory*?

GS: Almost every project *REPOhistory* produced involved high school, or K-12 students in some capacity. Typically, in the early stages of each project an education committee would put together a packet of teaching materials for distribution to interested public schools. On a few occasions, teachers and students also contributed work directly to a given project. There are several reasons for this focus on public school education. First, quite a few of *REPOhistory*’s most active members already had some

connection to public education prior to the founding of the group. This list included Lisa Maya Knauer, Stephanie Basch, Leela Ramotar, Daniel Wiley, Neill Bogan, and myself (I was the Curator of Education at the New Museum for a short while, and Leela Ramotar continues to teach in a public school today). Later on, Oscar Tuazon, Andre Knight, of *City As School*, and Meryl Meisler of *Independent Contemporary Education* (ICE), produced collaborative works involving their students, which were incorporated directly into *REPOhistory*'s last project in 2000 entitled CIRCULATION. This last effort traced the material and metaphorical history of human blood, touching on issues of race, science, eugenics, AIDS, and popular culture.

DD: It is very interesting to me that you speak of the pedagogy of the everyday. Today, students learn about their world through media—TV, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, street billboards, etc and this has become a pervasive form of education that Henry Giroux calls public pedagogy. This shift in how students learn requires us to rethink what schooling means in our society. So, how does the work of *REPOhistory* connect or challenge public pedagogy?

GS: If I was going to give it a label in relation to these terms, it would be counter-public pedagogy. Because, we were trying to do something that was not advertising, but we deliberately used the same spaces that advertising often does, but to say something very, very different and also to simultaneously critique the art world.

DD: Heritage history has become very cool.

GS: Yeah, and sometimes it replaces the complexities and antagonisms of history with a smoothed-over simulation of the past. One of the more disturbing things that we discovered as time went on involved certain municipalities, smaller cities in particular, that would ask us as a group, or as individuals, to come to their town and produce a local *REPOhistory* project for them. I think these invitations really played into a growing interest in cultural tourism in the U.S. as neoliberal policies did away with the federal government's traditional role as a national economic equalizer, thus forcing states and cities to compete for private, corporate dollars. In other words, what these local administrators really wanted of us "creative people" was to transform their crumbling waterfronts, or dispossessed downtowns into a place where small businesses would safely want to move, and where middle-class people would want to shop. And even though our initial sign project broke a certain kind of ground both politically and culturally, *REPOhistory*, or a watered down version of it, later served as a model for the ongoing enclosure of public space by the private sector. Once you take away that critical edge work such as ours easily collapses into a kind of simulated "history" as festive, consumable "place." I think for a lot of people that is how they will encounter the past---as an imagined history, and not as something that disturbs the present as *REPOhistory* sought to do. One of the group's co-founders, Lisa Maya Knauer succinctly put it this way:

“Histories didn’t just exist or emerge by magic; they are produced, reproduced and contested -- in various arenas, including public school curricula, museum displays.”

DD: Are these types of collaborations between art and history taking place today?

GS: Yes, there are some excellent examples of other historical sign projects that retain an activist social agenda. One year after *REPOhistory*’s first project took place in New York City Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock installed a strikingly similar project in Germany. Stih and Schnock designed eighty metal plaques that were then attached to lampposts in a part of Berlin that had once been home to many Jews including Albert Einstein. The official-looking signs proclaimed that Jews were prevented from using public swimming pools, banned from wearing expensive jewelry in public, not even allowed to purchase cigarettes and cigars. What the markers actually revealed of course, was the series of increasingly draconian, anti-Semitic laws passed by German courts between the years 1933 and 1942. Among the signs was the infamous decree established September First, 1, 1941 that: *All Jews over the age of 6 must wear a yellow star with the word "Jew" on it.* These Nazi regulations began as infuriating prohibitions involving life-style and public behavior, but quickly escalated until Jews were being forcibly rounded up and deported to death camps. Needless to say, Stih and Schnock’s project *Places of Remembrance in the Bavarian Quarter* aroused surprise, as well as anger from many Germans who, in 1993, hoped to bring Berlin back to life as the cultural and political center of a recently reunited Germany. The ghosts of National Socialism were not part of that resurrection, however, Stih and Schnock’s public art project orchestrated a most inopportune “return of the repressed.” (see: http://www.stih-schnock.de/cat_moaf1.pdf)

Stih and Schnock were not aware of *REPOhistory*’s work in New York any more than we were of theirs in Berlin. Nevertheless, we both shared a similar goal: using history to disturb the present. Likewise, we also settled on a fairly straightforward form of public address, the street sign, which is easily adapted to many different public situations. Two other examples of such DIY public histories include the *Black Panther History Marker* at the corner of Market and 55th Streets in Oakland California. This singular street sign was the result of a three-way collaborative effort between David Hilliard, the former chief-of-staff of the *Black Panther Party* in Oakland, and the British artist Jeremy Deller working through the California-based *Center for Tactical Magic*. (see: <http://www.tacticalmagic.org/CTM/project%20pages/BPP.htm>) The other historical sign project closely related to *REPOhistory* is along the Riverfront in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. This project consists of ten historical markers commemorating The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and was produced by a group calling itself *The Howling Mob Society* who insist that while, “the mainstream media—both past and present—frame events in terms of their effect on national economic interests, the Howling Mob investigates history through the experiences of common, working people.”

(See: <http://www.howlingmobsociety.org/howling%20mob%20site/hmssigns.html>)

DD: I am interested in something you just said about how history can get used as cultural tourism. I think that's a very important and pertinent idea because what you were doing was very different. What is the danger of history getting used in this way, as cultural tourism given the relationship between globalization and tourism? Global tourism is one of the fastest growing industries?

GS: And also because globalization has a tendency to erase the marks of the actual history...

DD: Heritage history has become very cool.

GS: Yeah, and sometimes it replaces history, with all of its complexities and antagonisms, with a smoothed over simulation of history. People today, want to go to Galway Ireland say, or any place for that matter, and they don't want to see new buildings or landscapes, they want to see a place as they think it was in the old days—an imagined past. This is where we get back to question of the post-modern. The cultural tourism version of historical memory seems to me much more related to the notion of pastiche that Federic Jameson talks about. He would often talk about postmodernism as surrealism without the unconscious. It was a kind of depthless, sort of juxtaposing of various kinds of images, or sort of alternative historical moments. I think that's kind of what we find happening to some extent today—for instance, we create a kind of fake town and have people dressed up as inhabitants of that town. Having said that, I think people do have a hunger for a sort of identity---they want to see what was authentic in this culture or what was authentic in my culture, because they feel so disconnected from the narratives of the past. And in a way, I think REPOhistory also tried to do that --- to give them a story that was a different story, to talk about, say, the communist party in New York City, or to talk about a time when abortion was actually legal in New York City, or to talk about what the coastline of New York City once looked like when Native American lived here, or to talk about more current events like when Nelson Mandela was visiting New York City after getting out of jail. All of these histories are often forgotten in public spaces. So if you take away that critical edge, then it collapses into a kind of decoration---history as a kind of decoration. And I think that is unfortunate, because for a lot of people that is how they will encounter the past--- not as something that disturbs the present.

(REPOhistory's documents, including many of the actual street signs can be found New York University's Fales Archives in Manhattan. See also: <http://www.repohistory.org/>)

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