Mark DONNELLY
St Mary's University, London, United Kingdom

CAN COUNTER HISTORIES DISTURB THE PRESENT? REPOHISTORY'S STREET SIGNS PROJECTS, 1992−1999

Summary. This paper argues that where appropriations or invocations of the past have contributed to projects of social and political change, they have usually done so with little or no recourse to the historical past. Instead, activists and campaigners have used various forms of vernacular past-talk to unsettle those temporary fixings of 'common sense' that limit thinking about current political and social problems. The example of such past-talk discussed here is the work of the art-activist collective REPOhistory, which sought between 1989 and 2000 to disrupt the symbolic patterning of New York's official and homogenized public memory culture by making visible ('repossessing') overlooked and repressed episodes from the city's past. In effect, they challenged the ways in which history's dominance of past-talk within the public sphere was constituted by exclusions of subjects on grounds of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. REPOhistory fused politically-engaged art practices with Walter Benjamin's belief in the redemptive potential of dialectical encounters between past and present. To assess the value of their art-as-activism projects ("artivism"), this article will situate REPOhistory's practices within a frame of ideas provided by Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe. In a series of street sign installations that mixed visual art, urban activism, social history, and radical pedagogy, REPOhistory exemplified why the past is too important to be trusted to professional historians.

Keywords: activism, agonistic politics, counterpublic, hegemony, installation, past-talk, street signs.

INTRODUCTION

Historians rarely try to disturb the present. Their lingering attachment to objectivist ideals and their insistence on the "facticity" of the historical past make them unlikely advocates of present-day political causes in their professional work. Academic history's adherence to long-dominant epistemologies, methodologies, and representational forms mean that a collective resolve to preserve the institutional credibility of the discipline normally takes precedence over whatever radical political ambitions its practitioners might have as individual citizens. In contrast, artists, activists, and campaigners have long practiced forms of vernacular past-talk to unsettle those temporary fixings of "common sense" that restrict thinking about current political and social problems to history's already-known. They have also proved adept at contesting the contours of collective memory culture, pointing to its absences and erasures, drawing attention to the matrices of power that shape the selection of objects of memory work, and countering hegemonic historical narratives that purport to explain present conditions in terms of their relationship to a posited past. REPOhistory were one such group of artists who in the 1990s instrumentalised the past in pursuit of directly articulated political agendas.

REPOhistory was an art-activist collective that sought to disrupt the symbolic patterning of official and homogenized public memory culture in the United States. The group looked for ways to fuse politically-engaged art practices with Walter Benjamin's belief in the redemptive potential of dialectical encounters between past and present. The result was a series of installation projects that mixed visual art, urban activism, and radical pedagogy in attempts to make visible the knowledge about the past that had been erased or forgotten.[1] Most of the group's public art projects were organized, created, and staged in New York, a city that had a long-established art-as-activism culture as well as an infrastructure of material support for micro-groups on the political

left. REPOhistory's two distinctive contributions to this art-interventionist network were to counter dominant (f)actual representations of the past and to challenge how public art was used to adorn urban spaces that had been transformed into privatized sites of managed consumption. In these ways, the group's work was both political (naming specific issues) and metapolitical (challenging what was regarded as being sayable in the public sphere). By combining these two points of reference, the group's activities could also be understood as an attempt to produce what Nancy Fraser called "subaltern counterpublics", which were "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[2] This article will discuss several of REPOhistory's major projects and examine them against the group's stated aim to produce past-referencing, counter-hegemonic "artivism".

REPOHISTORY'S SIGNS PROJECTS

When REPOhistory first met in May 1989, one of the subjects they discussed was Greg Sholette's idea that artists should "retrieve and relocate absent historical narratives" through the production of "counter-monuments, actions and events."[3] Drawing inspiration from recent work by artists such as Martha Rosler and Hans Haacke, REPOhistory sought to contribute to attempts in the US to disrupt the "celebrations" of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas that were planned for 1992.[4] Initially, the collective was known simply as the "history group", reflecting how its earliest meetings were directed towards self-education in historical practice and understanding. They discussed texts by historians and theorists like Howard Zinn, Eduardo Galeano, Hayden White, and Walter Benjamin, as well as inviting 'socially concerned historians' from New York's Municipal Art Society to talk at their meetings. The subsequent name change was inspired by *Repo Man* (1984), Alex Cox's indie film about debt collectors. Its adoption signaled a more critical and interventionist orientation for the group. Analogous to the way that the debt collectors in *Repo Man* repossessed cars and other items

from people who defaulted on their loans, REPOhistory aimed to "repossess" content that had been repressed or excluded from a dominant history culture and to (re)insert this content into the public sphere.[5] Although they had originally intended to work in the spirit of graffiti writers or Situationist pranksters, making their own "guerilla" art interventions in New York's public spaces, the group decided that their investment of time and effort in REPOhistory warranted more enduring outcomes than the temporary spectacles that would result from a "hit and run strategy".[6] So, the method that they used most frequently, and one which depended on securing permits from the city authorities to display their work, was production of sets of metal street signs that they attached to lampposts (usually for a period of between six months and one year). These street signs, which commonly consisted of an image on one side and a short text on the other, would then be encountered as part of the "signage jungle" of the modern city.[7] The group's major street signs projects were: *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project* (1992–3), *Queer Spaces* (1994), *Entering Buttermilk Bottom* (1995) and *Civil Disturbances* (1998–9).

In addition to REPOhistory's core membership of around a dozen volunteers, there were more than a hundred people of diverse backgrounds who collaborated in the group's various projects throughout the 1990s. Typically, this fluctuating membership consisted of artists, academics, performers, teachers, and media activists (most collaborators were female). Several high school classes also participated. Funding came from sources like the progressive Puffin Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and various individual donors.[8] According to Sholette, who believes that the group's horizontal and loose administrative structure probably damaged their chances of winning major grants, the typical funding for one of their street sign projects was in the region of $10,000 to $15,000—with many of the actual production costs being covered by group members' unpaid labour and out-of-pocket money.[9]

For REPOhistory's first urban installation, *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project* (LMSP), members of the group designed and produced 39 silk-screened, aluminium signs that were attached to

streetlights in Downtown Manhattan between June 1992 and June 1993. This installation took three years to research and plan, and it was sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council as part of a wider public art project called *1992 ¿The Americas?*. The sponsoring partners in this collaborative venture were the Bronx Council on the Arts, the Staten Island Snug Harbor Cultural Center, and Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, each of whom commissioned works that probed the relationships between art, history, and identity against the background of that year's Columbus quincentennial celebrations.[10] REPOhistory's signs represented 39 opportunities to re-narrate the past of a given place and to interrogate modes of "standard historical representation".[11] Each of its 18 x 24 inch signs was researched and designed around a feature of the city's multi-ethnic and working-class life, carrying a three-color image on one side and a brief explanatory text on the reverse. Prototype designs for the signs were shown at the Marxist School in June 1991, before being constructed and sited in a roughly one square mile area of the Financial District the following year. Sholette referred to the process of installing the signs as "writing on the skin of a gentrifying New York".[12] In Andreas Huyssen's terms, we might describe the installation as "writing realistic counter-(hi-)stories against the reality fiction of history."[13] Twenty-five of the signs were works of different single artists, with the remaining 14 produced as collaborative efforts which were often cross-cultural and interdisciplinary.[14] Each sign was also numbered and plotted on ten thousand freely available (and freely distributed) maps designed by REPOhistory member Hilary Kliros, which meant that the whole project could be experienced as a coherent walking tour as well as being encountered separately and randomly by workers, tourists, and other pedestrians. The installation opened on 27 June 1992 with a proclamation from Manhattan Borough President, Ruth Messinger, who declared the day to be "REPOhistory day", and a parade that featured performances and storytelling at some of the signs about the subjects that they represented.[15] In order to raise awareness about the LMSP across the city and beyond, a press agent was

commissioned to publicise the installation project; the *New York Times, Village Voice* and *New York Newsday* all reported on it more than once, but it was largely ignored by the specialist art press.

The Lower Manhattan Sign Project was designed to confront a large and diverse audience with images and texts that connected the past with instances of contemporary injustice and oppression. The one moment when this plan was suspended occurred on 1 December 1992 when the signs were covered up as part of the *Day Without Art*, an event that was organized by the group Visual Aids to mark and remember all those who had died from AIDS-related illnesses.[16] For the rest of the time of the year-long installation, the signs represented what Lucy Lippard called "subversive picture-bites".[17] Sign 18 by Tess Timoney and Mark O'Brien, for example, showed the location of an old colonial slave market on Wall Street, dating from the 1740s—a site whose invisibility from public recognition contrasted with the official bronze plaque that marked the spot where stock traders had first met in 1792. Sign 23 by Lisa Maya Knauer and Janet Koenig marked the location of Madame Restell's abortion clinic and drew attention to the efforts of a Christian "anti-vice" campaigner, Anthony Comstock, against Restell (real name Ann Trow) as well as those of the American Medical Association to criminalize abortion in the nineteenth century.[18] Sign 33 by Anita Morse and Andy Musilli linked the site of Manhattan's first Alms House with the contemporary crisis of homelessness by memorialising the life of June, a homeless New Yorker, who died in February 1992. Sign 36 by Stephanie Basch marked the United States' first all-women's strike in Lower Manhattan, while simultaneously drawing attention to the textile industry's contemporary use of non-unionized labour both overseas and in the US. Jim Costanzo's sign, *Advantages of an Unregulated Market Economy*, showed a stockbroker falling from a height as a crowd of outstretched arms attempted to catch him. Of all the signs, this one articulated the most direct criticism of contemporary capitalism, anticipating the kind of rhetoric and slogans that would be used by Occupy Wall Street some twenty years later—indeed, Costanzo went on to be involved in

OWS. REPOhistory lacked the resources to conduct a survey on how audiences reacted to their signs. Nonetheless, the group was at least clear about its intention to provoke viewers—not just Wall Street "suits", but the army of night cleaners and low-paid service workers who kept the Financial District functioning—into making multiple and critical readings of the signs' content.

The collective's next major project, *Queer Spaces*, marked significant sites of New York's gay and lesbian cultures by fixing street signs shaped as pink triangles around Greenwich Village. In doing so, they addressed a theme that was silent in *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project*, which had made no direct reference to LGBT-related politics or cultural memory. The idea for the new project came when REPOhistory member Todd Ayoung brought to the group's attention a call for contributors by the Storefront for Art and Architecture, who were planning an exhibition called *Queer Spaces*. This exhibition in 1994 was timed to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, when members of the LGBT community forcibly resisted the latest in a series of police raids against the Village's Stonewall Inn on 28 June 1969. REPOhistory's *Queer Spaces* installation recognized the importance of Stonewall as a moment in the modern campaign for LGBT rights, but it also sought to counter the decontextualized mythologizing of the event in the popular media by referencing the earlier emergence of political consciousness and activism among the gay and lesbian community that made the resistance outside Stonewall possible.[19] There were nine signs, all of which utilized the "serious" typography of official heritage markers, with the form of the pink triangle designed to invoke and reclaim a resonant symbol of anti-homosexual persecution. Their installation in site-specific street locations functioned to historicise public spaces. The complete set of signs could be viewed at the Storefront for Art and Architecture's exhibition space in New York, where a map was available for anyone who wanted to go and see the signs in their various locations around Greenwich Village.

Each sign was bolted to a lamppost as an inverted triangle, with the title *QUEER SPACES* running across the top edge, and PLACES OF STRUGGLE and PLACES OF STRENGTH in smaller lettering along the two diagonal sides. These three phrases provided a frame within which the sign's main title and text were positioned—along with REPOhistory's logo in small-scale and the sign's number at the bottom apex. While planning the installation, the group drew up a long list of twenty-five potential sites and signs, in consultation with activists in the gay and lesbian community. After discussing the merits of organizing the project around a singular theme—gay-bashing, cruising and red-light districts were all considered as options—it was decided that the long list should reflect more broadly the recent history of LGBT activism. The group then voted to choose six sign subjects from this long list, with the content of three additional signs to be determined later. REPOhistory members Lisa Maya Knauer, Ed Eisenberg and Mark O'Brien researched and wrote the text for all the signs, helped by staff at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.[20]

As with the previous signs project, *Queer Spaces* contested the erasures by dominant collective memory culture. REPOhistory member Betti-Sue Hertz later explained that the signs were never conceived as a "call to action", but were intended to be in conversation with the official markers of memory culture—as well as serving as symbols of the various sites of cultural significance that the project was unable to mark because of material constraints.[21] Sign 2, for example, marked the location of a demonstration in March 1987 against pharmaceutical company profiteering—it was this demonstration that led to the formation of ACTUP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Sign 5 commemorated the Daughters of Bilitis, one of the earliest lesbian political advocacy groups that had been founded in the 1950s and which had offices in Greenwich Village for several years from 1963 onwards. Sign 6 was installed outside the former site of Bonnie and Clyde's, which was a lesbian bar that was in business from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. Sign 7, meanwhile, commemorated the life and death of Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992), who, it was stated, was "born Malcolm Michaels. Stonewall Veteran, performer, panhandler, prostitute, Warhol Model". The sign's main inscription read:

On July 6, 1992, the body of this legendary drag queen was found floating in the river near this site. The police quickly ruled her death a suicide although witnesses reported seeing Johnson harassed by youths on July 4. In response to a vigorous campaign by the New York Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project the death has been reclassified as "drowning of an unknown nature." We may never know the true circumstances of her death.[22]

Queer Spaces was followed by a sign installation in Atlanta, Georgia, titled *Entering Buttermilk Bottom* (1995), which drew attention to how an African-American community in the city had been displaced in the name of "urban renewal". There was a further collaborative signs project with residents of Atlanta's Fourth Ward in 1997, called *Voices of Renewal*. And in 1998 in Houston, Texas, the group created a document in the form of a fold-out map that mixed text, documentary photographs and topographical maps to explore issues of urban growth, displacement, and luxury redevelopment around the downtown site of the city's abandoned King George Hotel. However, measured against the group's stated ambition of using the past to "disturb the present", REPOhistory's most successful (counter)production was probably *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City* (1998–9), a joint venture with the non-profit law office New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI).[23] The project's aim was to install 20 street signs that identified important precedents established by public interest law, as well as important ongoing struggles for justice, at a time when public law services themselves were threatened. There were two copies of each sign: one was sited in a location that was relevant to the subject material, the other was installed near the various courthouses in Manhattan where the cases were tried. Each sign also carried a more general warning about the danger of restricting access to legal representation to those who could afford to pay. The text read:

> CIVIL DISTURBANCES: JUSTICE UNDER SIEGE. Budget cuts and political attacks threaten the practice of public interest law as

never before. What will happen if the disadvantaged can no longer gain access to justice?

Among the legal cases that *Civil Disturbances* commemorated were a lawsuit that established the rights of homeless families to decent emergency shelter, another one that established public access rights to the Empire State Building for people with disabilities, a major class action against the city authorities for maladministration of child welfare services, a case against the New York Police Department and Family Court for failing to protect women from their violent husbands, and the successful use of the courts by activists in Chinatown to resist further "gentrification" of their neighbourhood.[24] As with their previous sign projects, the initial long-list of subjects from which the final selection would be chosen was worked out collaboratively. Once this selection had been made, lawyers from NYLPI worked with REPOhistory artists to produce draft designs which were then critiqued by the group. These designs, created by artists such as Mark O'Brien—who was also the project coordinator—Janet Koenig, Marina Gutierrez, Laurie Ourlicht, Ming Mur-Ray, Stephanie Basch, and Mona Jimenez, were powerful in their own right. However, what gave *Civil Disturbances* its oppositional credibility was the political pushback that it generated. For its earlier projects, REPOhistory had been able to obtain temporary permits to install their signs without encountering too much political obstruction. This was mainly thanks to artist Tom Klem's contacts with Frank Addeo, an official in New York's Department of Transportation which was responsible for managing the city's street signs, lampposts and traffic lights. It also helped that New York's Mayor at the time of the first installations, the Democrat David Dinkins, supported a social diversity agenda that was favourable to the kind of political art projects that Klem and his colleagues undertook. But by the time that Joan Vermeulen, executive director of NYLPI, proposed the project that became *Civil Disturbances*, Dinkins had been replaced by the Republican Mayor Rudy Giuliani. This new administration's *Quality of Life* campaign envisaged public art as something that should complement corporate- and landlord-friendly policies

across the city, rather than as a tool for making critical interventions against hegemonic authority.[25] As a result, they only reluctantly gave permission for *Civil Disturbances* to go ahead, following months of negotiation with REPOhistory's lawyers. After initially denying the permits required to install the signs in May 1998, and knowing that there were lawyers who were prepared to bring a lawsuit against the administration for infringing artists' rights of free speech under the US constitution's First Amendment, Giuliani's team finally agreed to a deal that allowed the installation to go ahead in August 1998.[26] By having to negotiate with powerful political adversaries, REPOhistory became actively involved in the very battle against the corporate-friendly homogenisation of public space and de-politicisation of public art that it had long sought to highlight. Notwithstanding the fact that permits had been secured for *Civil Disturbances*, various landlords and business were sufficiently disturbed by what was displayed on some of the signs to censor them by repeatedly removing them from public view.[27] These removals revealed the extent to which owners and managers assumed that they had a right to control what was displayed in the public space that was adjacent to their private properties. As Sholette said: "What appears to be commonly-owned urban space is in fact crisscrossed with lines of micro-political power."[28]

A PAST THAT HAUNTS THE PRESENT

By installing their signs as art objects in street locations, REPOhistory extended the conventional space of the gallery as a site of display and a locus for the expression of curatorial authority. In their choice of the signs' referents, they simultaneously challenged ideas about social legibility within the public sphere and critiqued notions that the public sphere could function as a disinterested space for artistic production.[29] Admittedly, their preferred model for contesting hegemonic representational politics was a straightforward inside/outside, dominant/subordinate one. But by choosing to invoke "historically" subordinate references in their projects they shared some common ground intellectually with Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, who regarded

collective memory of past political struggles, resistance, and organisation as a precondition for the practice of counter-hegemonic politics. As Negt and Kluge argued, "the assault of the present on the rest of time" was one of the major problems to be overcome in the modern public sphere because 'the tendency towards historical impoverishment' eroded the horizon of experience, stripping the past of its critical potential for use in the present.[30] Understood in these terms, counter-hegemonic political work included the task of contesting dominant ways of managing and understanding temporality within the spheres of public life—including the state's repertoire of ceremonial display. This is what REPOhistory sought to do: juxtapose installations that articulated their own ideological positions with the kind of official memory artefacts that are used to equate heritage with economic and cultural value in contemporary urban spaces.

In their declared intention to "repossess" history, the group clearly drew on the influence of Walter Benjamin, whose *Theses on the Philosophy of History* they had read and discussed at their early meetings. Benjamin was inspirational because he regarded the past as a store of ideas and ideals, traumas and oppressions, experiences and visions that people can choose to recognise and incorporate into their political projects. The past has no determining force as such, he argued, but one might "awaken" to it both as a form of cognition and as a motive for political praxis.[31] Benjamin's concept of "awakening" stressed the importance of recognizing how moments in the past can be seen as belonging to a given situation in the present, and also of *acting* in a way that politically transformed that present by making those aspects of the past that belonged to it live in the now.[32] Consistently in his writings, Benjamin critiqued philosophies of history that fused together temporal continuity, historical causality and the ideology of progress. He stated that: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by presence of the now… blasted out of the continuum of history."[33] Benjamin rejected the idea of "empty time" that was disconnected from the "time of the now, which is shot through with chips of Messianic

time".[34] By this, he meant that political action in any given present has the potential to redeem the injustices of the past by insisting that those injustices do not belong to an absent past: they are part of the now in which political futures are contested.

Benjamin's thinking here has obvious affinities with Derrida's terminology of spectres that haunt the present and with his concept of the "messianic without a messianism".[35] Derrida was careful to elaborate where his thinking diverged from Benjamin's.[36] Nonetheless, both thinkers point towards an idea of a political consciousness in the present that resists an understanding of history as a progressive and autonomous force. Rejecting models of historical thought that position the past as an inferior antecedent of the present, Derrida and Benjamin suggest forms of political activity and thought that mobilise traces and spectres of the past while still denying that there is a historical past with its own shape and trajectory.[37] In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida explained how, from the outset, his project of deconstruction had sought to make possible a concept of historicity that opened up access to an "affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise."[38] For Derrida, having a concept of historicity that was not another instantiation of the metaphysics of presence was indispensable to political projects of justice and emancipation. He also insisted that the emancipatory desire, or the promise of a justice to come, could only be realized in conditions of undecidability, where the certainty of a final ground for a decision would never be available. Dispensing with the idea of the historical past as a given, Derrida, therefore, enables us to conceive of a historical consciousness in which the past "haunts" and acts in the force fields of the present, but not in ways that are mappable and reducible to instantiations of presence.

THE COUNTER(F)ACTUAL AS COUNTER HEGEMONY

REPOhistory's signs projects attempted to utilize past-talk as a means for disturbing current conceptions of the "sensible" in politics and social relations. To appreciate how such attempts might work, Laclau and Mouffe's theorization of hegemony and Mouffe's more specific writing about agonistic politics and artistic practices are particularly useful tools. Viewed through a hegemonic framework, politics is the process by which diverse articulatory practices bring about the incomplete and selective structuring of the social field.[39] For Laclau and Mouffe, the political refers to a dimension of antagonism which is irreducible in human relations and which is constitutive of the social. In this way, radical and plural democratic politics is best seen as a struggle that is characterised by endless multiple contestations, carried out from different and necessarily fluid subject positions that are connected to each other by chains of equivalence, and in which everything is to play for and nothing is guaranteed. Because the community can never achieve the promise of the absent fullness that always eludes it—a finally reconciled and harmonious society in which there is consensus without exclusion—the social remains a site in which groups "compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation."[40] When a hegemonic understanding of a given particularism is successfully maintained for a long period, a contingent social structuring can easily come to be regarded as "natural", "common sense" and simply the "reality" of how things are. Therefore, one of the tasks of a project of "radical plural democracy" is to "reactivate" the "sedimented" hegemonic operations that produce given social structurings.[41] Crucially, in what Mouffe and Laclau call an agonistic model of politics, there is no expectation that struggles to extend liberty and equality across forms of social relations will terminate with the arrival of a fully emancipated, reconciled society—one in which partisan politics would be superseded by the need simply to manage common affairs rationally. On the contrary, agonistic politics imagines an unending series of contests to install new forms of hegemony which in turn will be contested and replaced.[42] Agonistic confrontation, argues Mouffe, is democracy's "very condition of existence".[43]

Artistic and cultural practices have a role to play in reactivating hegemonic fixings because there is no privileged discursive site or centre from which the work of agonistic politics should proceed. Indeed,

the point is often made that in the post-Fordist regime of production, which is characterized by forms of immaterial, affective, and communicative labour, the central terrain of political struggle has become the sites where subjectivities are articulated and the "distribution of the sensible" is managed. Artists, argues Mouffe, can work to "undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalist reproduction", because artistic practices are crucial to the constitution and subsequent diffusion of that imaginary in the first instance.[44] Understood in this way, REPOhistory's awkward reminders of past injustices that jarred against the smooth objects of New York's consensual memory culture can be appreciated as attempts to disarticulate an existing common sense about the ways in which an apparently progressive temporal movement had led towards an inevitable (and thus justified) historical present. Moreover, by invoking memories of past struggles for justice, they pointed towards alternative visions for living that might once have taken hold *and which still could.* Having said this, it is difficult to show empirically that a small artistic collective like REPOhistory was able to produce significant political effects on its own: obviously, Wall Street's speculative excesses and New York's gentrification continued unimpeded by the group's interventions in the public sphere. But, equally, strategies of agonistic confrontation should not be viewed as singular cases. REPOhistory's projects are best thought of as part of a network in which there were direct connections to social movement groups, public interest lawyers, sympathetic writers in the newspaper press and progressive allies within the Democrat administration in New York under David Dinkins's leadership. More broadly, the network also included art-as-activism forerunners and contemporaries such as Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Political Art Documentation / Distribution (PAD/D), Group Material, Guerilla Girls, 16 Beaver Group, and others that were featured in Nato Thompson's 2004 retrospective exhibition of 1990s socially-engaged art, *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*.[45] As Thompson went on to argue, the tactics of artists such as these were taken up by some of the global justice movement activists who protested on the streets in Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001).[46]

REPOhistory split after their final project—*Circulation*—in 2000, but their strategy for disrupting dominant histories has been taken up by other groups and organisations. In 2005 artists and activists in the United Victorian Workers' Union disrupted the annual *Victorian Stroll* in Troy, New York, by re-enacting the roles of nineteenth-century exploited workers and inserting themselves among members of the Troy Chamber of Commerce who were parading in the Victorian-era clothes of the wealthy owners of industry. In 2007 activists in Pittsburgh's Howling Mob Society installed a series of ten signs to commemorate the major Railroad Strike of 1877, recovering a buried story of political radicalism. Finally, since 2011 the grassroots archiving-as-activism of Brooklyn's Interference Archive has demonstrated why the past is too important to be trusted to professional historians. As REPOhistory declared, it needs to be repossessed from them.

References

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project,* edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999. 245–255.

Brown, Wendy. *Politics Out of History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Derrida, Jacques. "Marx and Sons." In *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx: *Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Antonio Negri et al.,* edited by Michael Sprinkler. London: Verso, 2008. 213–269.

Desai, Dipti. "History that disturbs the present: An interview about REPOhistory with Greg Sholette." Accessed July 21, 2017. http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/History-that-disturbs-the-Present1.pdf.

Diller, Matthew. "Introduction: Civil Disturbances—Battles for Justice in New York City", *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 26 (1999), 1317–1323.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* edited by Craig Calhoun. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1992. 109–142.

Friedlander, Eli. *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Glahn, Philip. "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice and the Possibilities of Critical Articulation." *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism,* 28 (2000), 10–12.

Hertz, Betti-Sue, Ed Eisenberg and Lisa Maya Knauer. "Queer Spaces in New York City: Places of Struggle/ Places of Strength." In *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance,* edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter. Seattle: Bay Press, 1997. 356–370.

How to '92: Model Actions for a post-Columbian World, Minneapolis: Alliance for Cultural Democracy, (n.d.).

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 2001.

Laclau, Ernesto. "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity." In *Emancipation(s),* edited by Ernesto Laclau. London: Verso, 2007. 20–35.

Laclau, Ernesto. *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society.* London: Verso, 2014.

Lucy Lippard, "Anti-Amnesia" in REPOhistory, *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project.* New York: REPOhistory, 1993. 4–7.

"Marking LGBT History in the Village and Beyond: A Panel Discussion with REPOhistory." Filmed June 22, 2016 at an event co-sponsored by the School of Public Engagement and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mI_oMfIS8c.

Mosès, Stéphane. *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, translated by Barbara Harshav. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 2009.

Mouffe, Chantal. "For an agonistic public sphere." In *Radical Democracy: Politics between abundance and lack,* edited by Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. 123–132.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Democracy as Agonistic Pluralism." In *Rewriting Democracy: Cultural Politics in Postmodernity,* edited by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 36–45.

Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso, 2013.

Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, with a foreword by Miriam Hansen, translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

REPOhistory, *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project,* New York: REPOhistory, 1993.

Sholette, Gregory. "Authenticity Squared. REPOhistory CIRCULATION: Anatomy of an Activist, Urban Art Project." *New Art Examiner,* December (1999), 20–23 and 71–72.

Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture.* London: Pluto Press, 2011.

Steiner, Uwe. *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, translated by Michael Winkler. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Thompson, Nato. "Trespassing Relevance." In *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004. 13–22.

Thompson, Nato and Gregory Sholette, with Joseph Thompson, eds. *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004.

Notes

1   Dipti Desai, "History that disturbs the present: An interview about REPOhistory with Greg Sholette," accessed July 21, 2017, http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/History-that-disturbs-the-Present1.pdf. See also Philip Glahn, "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice and the Possibilities of Critical Articulation," *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 28/3 (2000), 10–12.

2   Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1992), 123. For a complementary discussion see Chantal Mouffe, "For an agonistic public sphere" in *Radical Democracy: Politics between abundance and lack* ed. Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 123–132.

3   Gregory Sholette, "Authenticity Squared. REPOhistory CIRCULATION: Anatomy of an Activist, Urban Art Project," *New Art Examiner,* December (1999): 20–23 and 71–72. The online version cited here is available at http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/12_authenticity1.pdf.

4   See the booklet, *How to '92: Model Actions for a post-Columbian World*, (Minneapolis: Alliance for Cultural Democracy), (n.d.).

5   For an account of REPOhistory's membership, methods and productions, see Desai.

6   Lucy Lippard, "Anti-Amnesia" in REPOhistory, *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project* (New York: REPOhistory, 1993), 4.

7   The phrase is from Lippard, 4.

8   Desai, 4.

9   Desai, 4.

10   REPOhistory, unnumbered preface. The Bronx Council of the Arts commissioned Betti-Sue Hertz and Fred Wilson to curate an installation called *Houses of Spirits/Memories of Ancestors*; the Staten Island Snug Harbor Cultural Center sponsored an exhibition called *Silhouettes of the Southwest* under the curatorship of Olivia Georgia; and Socrates Sculpture Park appointed Enrico Martignoni to commission five artists whose brief was to explore the future directions of public art.

11   Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 74.

12   Sholette, *Dark Matter,* 73.

13   Cited in Glahn, 11.

14   Lippard, 6.

15   Lippard, 5.

16   A cover was temporarily placed over the signs which read, "World Aids Day Without Art".

17   Lippard, 6–7.

18   Around the same time as *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project*, REPOhistory also organised a multi-media gallery installation at Artists Space in New York called *Choice Histories: Framing Abortion*.

19 Betti-Sue Hertz, Ed Eisenberg and Lisa Maya Knauer, "Queer Spaces in New York City: Places of Struggle/Places of Strength" in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 361. The authors, all of whom were major contributors to *Queer Spaces*, acknowledged that they could have 'fleshed out this history more fully' by documenting other developments such as educational reform and the growth of community organisations. They could also have addressed issues including lesbian separatism and self-organising by lesbian and gay people of colour. But practical and financial constraints restricted the number of signs that they were able to produce.

20 Hertz, Eisenberg and Knauer, 359, 361–363.

21 See "Marking LGBT History in the Village and Beyond: A Panel Discussion with REPOhistory," filmed June 22, 2016 at an event co-sponsored by the School of Public Engagement and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, accessed March 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mI_oMfIS8c. Ed Eisenberg explains in this film that funds were scarce for *Queer Spaces* partly because *The Lower Manhattan Sign Project* had used up so much of the group's resources. See also Hertz, Eisenberg and Knauer, 368.

22 The full text of all the signs can be found at REPOhistory member's Betti-Sue Hertz's blog, accessed 23 March 23, 2018, https://bettisue.tumblr.com/post/144574286290/repohistorys-queer-spaces-public-signage-project.

23 See the special edition of *Fordham Urban Law Journal,* 26/5 (1999).

24 Matthew Diller, "Introduction: Civil Disturbances – Battles for Justice in New York City," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 26 (1999): 1317–1323. See also Sholette, *Dark Matter,* 75–8.

25 Sholette, *Dark Matter,* 75.

26 The Department of Transport told REPOhistory that their permits had been denied just as the group were about to open the installation with a press conference on 19 May 1998. The timing of the denial of the permits might have been intended to cause the maximum amount of obstruction. But in fact, it generated press coverage in publications like the *New York Times, Village Voice* and *Time Out*, questioning the Giuliani administration's attempts to censor artists.

27 Sholette, *Dark Matter,* 76, 78.

28 Desai, 12.

29 Glahn, 10.

30 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, with a foreword by Miriam Hansen, translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), XXXV and 276.

31 Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to his Work and Thought*, translated by Michael Winkler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 149. See also Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 2012).

32 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 388–389.

33 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin,* ed. Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 252–253.

34 Benjamin, "Theses", Appendix A, 255.

35 Benjamin, "Theses", 245–255. *Thesis* 9 refers to the "angel of history" with its face turned towards the past.

36 Derrida explained that whereas Benjamin's messianism was associated with Jewish traditions, his own concept of the messianic was a quasi-transcendental structure, not bound up with any particular moment of history or culture—and not describable as a power as such. This was why, said Derrida, he spoke precisely of a "messianicity *without* messianism" (original emphasis). See Jacques Derrida, "Marx and Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx: *Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Antonio Negri et al.* ed. Michael Sprinkler (London: Verso, 2008), 250.

37 Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 172–173.

38 Derrida, 94.

39 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001), *passim*.

40 Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007), 35.

41 Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), 63.

42 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 1–18.

43 Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy as Agonistic Pluralism," in *Rewriting Democracy: Cultural Politics in Postmodernity,* ed. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 43.

44 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 88–90.

45 See *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, ed. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, with Joseph Thompson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004).

46 Nato Thompson, "Trespassing Relevance," in *The Interventionists*, 21. For an illustration of this transfer of tactics see the documentary by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, *Disobbedienti* (2002).

Mark DONNELLY
Šv. Marijos universitetas, Tvikenhamas, Londonas

AR KONTR(A)ISTORIJOS GALI SUTRIKDYTI DABARTĮ? 1992–1999 METŲ „REPOHISTORY" GATVĖS ŽENKLŲ PROJEKTAI

Santrauka

Straipsnyje teigiama, kad meno projektai, kuriuose buvo aproprijuojama ar aktualizuojama praeitis, nors ir skatino socialinius ar politinius pokyčius, visiškai ar tik menkai išnaudojo istorinius praeities šaltinius. Tačiau tos kompanijos ar aktyvistų grupės, kurios linkusios naudoti įvairias vietinių pokalbių apie praeitį formas, ardo įprastinės logikos įtvirtinimus, ribojančius mąstymą apie šiuolaikines politines ir socialines problemas. Taigi straipsnyje analizuojama „REPOhistory" aktyvistų grupė, kuri savo pasirodymuose pasitelkia pokalbius apie praeitį (*past-talk*). Analizuojami 1989–2000 m. stebėti aktyvistų grupės pasirodymai, kurie turėjo galią sutrikdyti oficialią ir homogenizuotą Niujorko miesto kultūrinę atmintį, išryškinant nutildytus, atmestus praeities istorijos liudijimus apie Niujorko miestą. Šis projektas rodo, kaip metamas iššūkis viešajame sektoriuje dominuojančiai istorijai, kuri, pasitelkdama pokalbius apie praeitį, ostrakizmui pasmerkia tuos subjektus, kurie neatitinka priimtinų lyties, etniškumo, socioekonominio statuso normų. „REPOhistory" savo pasirodymuose taiko politiškai angažuotas meno praktikas, kurios, pasak Walterio Benjamino, turi atperkamąjį potencialą dialektinėse praeities ir dabarties interakcijose. Siekiant atrasti aktyvistinę galią (meno aktyvizmas) „REPOhistory" grupės meno projektuose, šios grupės kūrybinis potencialas straipsnyje analizuojamas įveiksminant Benjamino, Jacques'o Derrida, Ernesto Laclau ir Chantalio Mouffe idėjas. Serijinėse gatvės ženklų instaliacijose, kuriose kartu egzistuoja vizualus menas, miestas, miesto aktyvizmas, socialinė istorija ir radikali pedagogika, „REPOhistory" pateikia pavyzdį ir kartu kelia klausimą, kodėl praeitis, kuri yra tokia svarbi, turi būti patikima tik profesionaliems istorikams.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: aktyvizmas, poleminė politika, kontr(a)publika, hegemonija, instaliacija, pokalbiai apie praeitį (*past-talk*), gatvės ženklai.

Mark DONNELLY

Mark Donnelly is a Principal Lecturer in History at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London. His books include *Doing History* (co-authored with Claire Norton, 2011), *Mad Dogs and Englishness: Popular Music and English Identities* (co-edited with Lee Brooks and Richard Mills, 2017) and *Liberating Histories* (co-authored with Claire Norton, 2018).
Email: mark.donnelly@stmarys.ac.uk