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HISTORY THAT DISTURBS THE PRESENT

There is no such thing as society.
Margaret Thatcher

Queer Signs

The Meatpacking District in Manhattan stretches just a few blocks south and wide along the Hudson River near 14th Street. In the late nineteenth century the area was home to several hundred slaughterhouses and meat processing plants. About 100 years later the area was largely abandoned to black market activities including illegal drugs and transsexual prostitution. Throughout the 1970s fiscal crisis these shadow economies generated their own set of rules and cultural meanings, as well as an alternative historical narrative transmitted largely by word of mouth. One of these counter-histories involved Marsha P. Johnson, an African-American drag-queen and transgendered social activist. According to available records, Johnson had taken part in the legendary Stonewall Inn Uprising of 1969, in which gay people rebelled against constant police intimidation during several days of street riots in Greenwich Village. In the 1970s she co-founded along with Sylvia Rivera an informal organization known as Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, or STAR, which aimed to assist young and frequently homeless transgendered runaways, many of whom turned to prostitution for a living. Along with providing runaways with shelter and food, STAR also put pressure on mainstream gay and lesbian groups to recognize the civic rights of transgendered people.¹ Johnson remained socially active until 1992 when, on the morning after that year's annual Gay Pride Parade, her dead body was discovered floating in the Hudson River. Officially, the New York Police Department listed her death as suicide. Unofficially, according to members of the transgendered prostitute community in New York City, Johnson's death was the result of gay bashing, a physical assault by several men that reportedly took place the night before the parade.

Two years later a group of cultural activists brandishing a temporary city permit mounted a pink triangular marker on the pier near to where Johnson's body had been found. Printed on this sign was a tersely worded eulogy to the drag



1994 REPOhistory street sign memorial for transgendered political activist Marsha P. Johnson (1945–92), located in the Meat Market area of Manhattan, one of nine placards making up the Queer Spaces project sponsored by the Storefront for Art and Architecture, NYC. Image courtesy Jim Costanzo.

queen, describing her activism amongst the Meatpacking District’s transgendered subculture as well as her untimely death. The rose-colored testimonial’s presence was unusual, though unspectacular. It was a relatively small, text-covered object nestled among New York’s dense network of signs regulating parking, traffic, city utilities, and the movement of pedestrians. At the same time, its function was not regulatory. The “solemn” tone and serious-looking typography suggested an official historical marker. However, its shape and color undermined this reading because most official historic preservation takes the form of substantial bronze plaques or figurative statuary commemorating civic, military, or political leaders. It was a “queer sign” that commemorated an individual few had ever heard of and a city that was no longer visible. As though from the grave it summoned to light something missing, forgotten, and, in Johnson’s case, literally discarded. Its phantom jurisdiction briefly haunted one small corner of a gentrifying Meatpacking District, calling forth an *other* city, a spectral city, with its own, unremembered rules and regulations, myths and memories.

Johnson’s temporary memorial was one of nine similar historical markers—all triangular, all pink—attached to lamp-posts and traffic posts around Manhattan’s Greenwich Village between June 18 and August 31, 1994. The project was entitled

Queer Spaces. It coincided with the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising and was the second in a series of historical public sign projects organized by REPOhistory, a varied group of artists and activists whose primary conceit was to act as the self-appointed amateur historians of those who lacked visibility within public spaces where official commemorative statues and bronze plaques held sway.² One pink sign was mounted near the former offices of the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian political advocacy group founded in the 1950s; another plaque was located at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway where a militant demonstration against pharmaceutical company profiteering took place in 1987 and signaled the formation of ACT UP, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Further uptown, at the site of the former Everard building, a triangular placard described the pre-AIDS-era Turkish-style bathhouse as part of “a network of gay bathhouses that were an integral part the sexual life, folklore, and economy of New York’s gay community.”³ Nestled among New York’s dense network of signs regulating parking, traffic, city utilities, and the movement of pedestrians REPOhistory’s pink triangles appeared to offer their own set of laws, as if an additional set of instructions were necessary for everyday transit to work, home, leisure, shopping or, perhaps more to the point, as if passersby required some kind of supplemental information in order to fully grasp how and why they were in this particular city, at this specific time and place.

REPOhistory was initially informed by multicultural readings of lost, forgotten, or suppressed narratives, writes group member Jim Costanzo, after which it sought to remap this information directly onto “the public sphere with the goal of using history to comment on contemporary social issues from progressive perspectives.”⁴ Fredric Jameson has proposed that such cognitive mapping helps situate a fragmented sense of identity within a shifting post-modern landscape. In a sense, REPOhistory momentarily did this by writing directly on the skin of a gentrifying New York using *détourned* versions of the city’s own semaphores, signs, and rules of conduct as its medium. Between 1989 and 2000 the group produced six historical public marking projects, three in New York City, as well as two in Atlanta, Georgia, and one in Houston, Texas. All were similarly pragmatic: a series of traffic sign sized panels were attached to a signpost or lamp-post. An image was printed on one side, a text on the other. For each sign a different individual or individuals researched the specific site to be marked using guidelines provided by the collective. Initially intended to be an illegal, guerrilla art intervention, REPOhistory eventually obtained nine-month-long installation permits from municipal authorities for most of its projects. Once in place, a printed map plotting the location of each site-specific marker was freely distributed through a variety of institutions: city agencies, art galleries, and the US postal system. In addition, a press agent was commissioned to publicize the installations, thus expanding the informational range for each project. The group’s

projects were not only site-specific, they simultaneously aimed to re-articulate the flattened temporality of the post-industrial city. REPOhistory's critical theory of site specificity, therefore, was realized at two levels: first as a re-narration of a given place using documents, oral histories, public records, and so forth, and second as an interrogation of standard historical representation. The importance of the latter, de-mystifying approach is summarized by group member Lisa Maya Knauer who points out that "histories didn't just exist or emerge by magic; they are produced, reproduced and contested—in various arenas, including public school curricula, museum displays."⁵ However, compared with other public artworks of the 1990s, REPOhistory's projects appear understated and prosaic, as if the group were possessed by an archive, which demanded that its content be permitted to "speak for itself." Furthermore, while the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *New York Newsday*, and other mass circulation newspapers did report on REPOhistory's work at the time, and in several instances reprinting the entire project map, few art-related journals or publications even noticed the group's work.⁶

In the year of REPOhistory's founding, sculptor Richard Serra's provocatively austere *Tilted Arc* was de-installed from the Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan following public controversy.⁷ Four years later, in 1992, as the group launched its first sign-project in downtown Manhattan, Jeff Koons's four-story topiary *Puppy* towered over pedestrians in the town of Bad Arolsen Germany. One year later Rachel Whitread's *House* stirred up local opposition in East London when the artist transformed a unit of actual public habitation slated for demolition into a ghostly plaster monument. Perhaps most dramatically, in 1995 artists Christo and Jean-Claude wrapped the entire Reichstag in fabric shortly before it resumed functioning as the parliament of a recently reunified Germany. Each of these large-scale projects conspicuously announced their aesthetic disposition through the use of improbable materials or dramatic shifts in scale. By contrast, REPOhistory's first public installation was entitled simply the *Lower Manhattan Sign Project* (LMSP), and took place in Manhattan's Financial District in 1992. It was intended to function as a critical counterpoint to the Christopher Columbus Quincentennial celebration of that same year. Focusing on the city's multiethnic and working-class history, the group's alternative street signs temporarily marked the location of the city's first slave market, the offices of a successful nineteenth-century abortionist named Madame Restell, the contour of the island's pre-Columbian coast line, the site of an alleged slave rebellion in 1741, and the historic visit by Nelson Mandela to the city just two years prior to the LMSP installation. Near City Hall the group marked the site where pacifist demonstrators were arrested in the 1950s for refusing to take part in civil defense drills; nearby a sign commemorated where radical New York Congressman Vito Marantonio had collapsed of a heart-attack in 1954; a few hundred feet away another sign

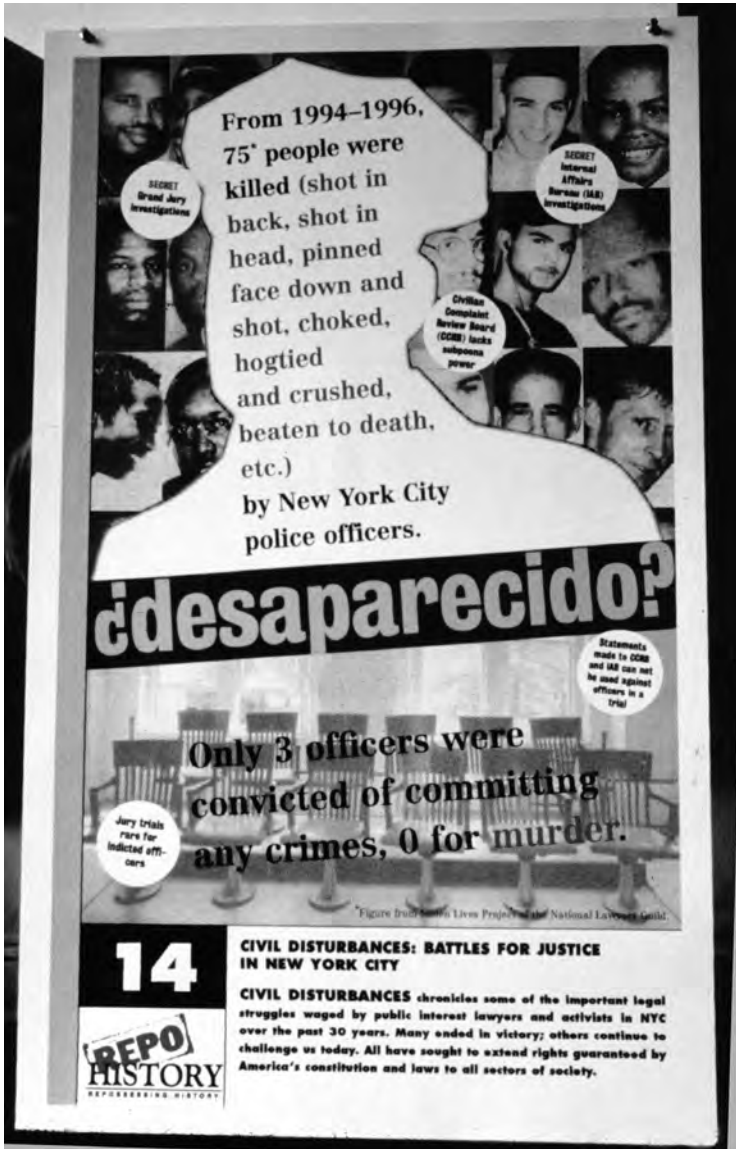
marked the location of a public address by abolitionist and feminist Frances “Fanny” Wright, who proposed deliberate miscegenation as a solution to racism.

Much of the visibility for this project can be traced to a little-known figure within the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) who issued REPOhistory its installation permit. Frank J. Addeo was known “off the record” as a strong supporter of public artworks, including the seriously humorous street signs of Ilona Granet that cautioned men to “curb” their animal instincts, as well as more controversial projects such as Gran Fury’s 1990 street-sign project that read, in part, “10,000 people with AIDS are homeless. NYC’s cost effective solution: DO NOTHING.” But Addeo’s relatively informal approach to granting artists access to city streets would soon become a casualty of increased governmental supervision during the administration of Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. In the meantime, it was David Dinkins who governed New York. A staunch Democratic Party loyalist, he ran on the promise of reducing racial tension and described New York as a “gorgeous mosaic” of ethnic diversity. One measure of this illusive goal can be read by REPOhistory’s official reception. The day the LMSF opened the group received an honorary scroll from the City pronouncing June 27, 1992, “REPOhistory Day.”⁸ Dinkins remains the only African-American Mayor of the city to date. All subsequent REPOhistory projects would be carried out under the administration of former prosecutor Rudolph “Rudy” Giuliani, whose anti-crime, anti-taxes platform overwhelmed Dinkins and the liberal Democratic Party in the election of 1994, the year of *Queer Spaces*.⁹

Not long into Giuliani’s second term, REPOhistory was ready to launch a new street-sign project, this time in collaboration with the not-for-profit organization New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). Founded in 1976, NYLPI’s mission is “to serve the legal needs of underserved, underrepresented New Yorkers and their communities.”¹⁰ The result of REPOhistory/NYLPI collaboration was entitled *Civil Disturbances: Battles for justice in New York City*: 20 graphic street signs commemorating specific legal precedents that literally shaped the fabric of life in New York City as much as the “streets on which we walk and the buildings in which we live and work.”¹¹ But in spite of the group’s previous record of obtaining temporary installation permits from the NYCDOT this time the agency refused REPOhistory’s request for permission to install *Civil Disturbances*. Giuliani’s “Quality of Life” campaign seemed bent on systematically erasing traces of the New York REPOhistory struggled to remember, as if eliminating an invisible legion of ghosts was as essential to neoliberal reforms as was balancing municipal budgets, or providing tax breaks to wealthy landlords and corporations. Meanwhile, holed up inside City Hall, the Giuliani administration appeared increasingly besieged by journalists and advocates of free speech who pursued charges of censorship and political authoritarianism against the Mayor. Indeed, by 1998 six lawsuits had been filed over denial of access to information about municipal budgets, real

estate deals, conditions in homeless shelters, freedom of speech violations, and city housing and law enforcement policies.¹² By comparison, REPOhistory's art installation was a relatively modest excavation of the past. A series of street signs—by now the group's signature medium—were to be installed at 25 specific locations in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Each site marked by REPOhistory related to a different moment in the City's legal history: a corner where street artists were arrested for selling un-permitted merchandise, a downtown courthouse where battered women filed petitions for increased protection, a Greenwich Village co-op sued by AIDS sufferers for trying to close the building's first floor medical clinic, a Federal courtroom where welfare recipients collectively regained benefits lost under the Reagan administration, a street where Chinatown labor activists stopped real estate speculators from further gentrifying the neighborhood, the entrance of the Empire State Building where wheelchair-bound disabled people chained themselves to doors, demanding access to sidewalks, parks, and public buildings, as well as multiple locations in low-income neighborhoods and public housing projects where Latino and African-American victims failed to have murder charges brought against violent police officers. In an atmosphere of eroding civil liberties the corporate law firm Debevoise & Plimpton entered into a series of discussions with City attorneys on behalf of REPOhistory. One year earlier the Giuliani administration lost a class action suit brought against the City by street artists. The precedent set by *Lederman/Bery et al. versus City of NY*, a case that REPOhistory included in its Civil Disturbances sign project, underscored the First Amendment rights of free speech for artists. The decision was a stunning loss for Giuliani, whose so-called "Quality of Life" campaign hinged on regulating behavior by enclosing and micro-managing urban spaces. Possibly fearing another defeat, the City finally withdrew opposition to Civil Disturbances, and the signs were successfully installed on August 4, 1998, about ten weeks later than anticipated. Nevertheless, this victory over City Hall did not end censorship of the project, which was subsequently carried out by local landlords, politicians, and businesses.

Almost as soon as the project was installed several individual signs "disappeared" from public view. Among these was "REPOhistorian" Janet Koenig's sign that documented the Empire State Building's prolonged non-compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (removed by building managers); Marina Gutierrez's work critiquing housing discrimination by the city against Puerto Rican families in her Brooklyn neighborhood (taken down by local politicians); and a REPOhistory street marker designed by former Archigram member William Menking detailing the illegal demolition of several, low-income hotels just blocks away from the "Disneyfied" post-1990s Times Square. Owner and art collector Harry Macklow had the lot cleared one night, later selling the land to a London-based international luxury hotel and resort chain. That corporation built its flagship New York hotel on the site. Today the Millennium Premier offers an



1998 REPOhistory street sign by artists Jenny Polak and David Thorne, describing the inadequate investigation of criminal activity by New York City police officers for committing violent acts against residents. The sign was one of 20 graphic markers making up the project *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City* (1998–99), which was initially delayed by several months when City officials objected to public works highlighting the use of legal action to expand the rights of homeless people, workers, children, and the disabled among others. Image courtesy Tom Klem.

“Oasis” where high-energy service provides a new level of self-indulgence—or at least this is the message that accompanied a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* soon after the hotel opened. Rendered in a retro, 1930s drawing style, three chicly dressed individuals, a man and two women, sip cocktails and presumably discuss business. REPOhistory’s public invocation of the unknown, nearly indigent men and women forced to flee the wrecking ball that made way for this grand new establishment was not well received. The managers of the Millennium removed the legally permitted sign and then delivered a letter to NYLPI threatening legal action if any attempt was made to re-install the artwork either near the hotel, or anywhere else in the city. REPOhistory was divided over how to respond to this threat. Ultimately the group’s temporary NYCDOT permit ended before action was taken. Nevertheless, anxieties raised by the possibility of legal confrontation undermined group cohesion and revealed just how fragile cultural activism had become in New York since the days of, say, the Art Workers’ Coalition or the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. REPOhistory carried out one last project in 2000 using the postal system and Internet to distribute its graphics. Much to the chagrin of local public art organizations the Civil Disturbances debacle led the City to close loopholes used to gain installation permits. Many of the more established public art organizations in the city were displeased with this imposition of rules and irritated with REPOhistory for triggering the changes. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the late 1990s was a moment when democratic access to urban space was being curtailed or eliminated in New York in favor of increased privatization and police management. Needless to say, much of the public art installed since—for example the enormous 2005 Gates project in Central Park by Christo and Jeanne-Claude—has sought to deliver a strictly non-confrontational, non-content oriented “aesthetic” experience.

Queer Spaces

What was distinct about REPOhistory’s archival recovery projects is that most of them took place just as those who claimed to stand for law and order—Mayor Giuliani and his administration—let loose upon the city a wave of free-market, real-estate based anarchy that simultaneously sought to “disappear” any trace of the hustlers, homeless, street artists, activists, radicals, union organizers, and anyone else not sympathetic with the new economic and social order. Maintaining the appearance of control became of uppermost importance to the new regime. According to the Mayor and his police commissioner William J. Bratton, stepping up misdemeanor arrests, banishing the homeless from streets and public spaces, and repairing damaged building facades would inextricably lead to the lowering or elimination of more serious criminal offenses.¹³ Initially this so-called “Broken Windows” program was directed towards reducing such violent offences as rape

and murder. New York City police were given broad search and seizure powers as petty criminal violations jumped dramatically. But before long this panoptic management of public space expanded even further as thousands of surveillance cameras were installed at street level throughout the city, not only by law enforcement agencies, but also by landlords and private businesses.¹⁴ “Freedom is about authority,” insisted Giuliani in one of his first appearances before the press after being elected Mayor. “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.”¹⁵ Hand and glove with increasing top-down jurisdiction over urban behavior went the deconstructive processes of economic privatization and deregulation, because only upon the ash of a ruined social welfare state could the revanchist city come into being.

Giuliani had served under Ronald Reagan as an Associate Attorney General. Once elected Mayor of New York he set in place his own form of neoliberal restructuring that including increased private management of public programs and deep budgets cuts for sanitation, social services and education. The Mayor also slashed commercial rent taxes on corporations willing to move to Wall Street, sold the city’s television and radio station, and sought to reduce the city’s unionized workforce by 7 percent as he eliminated affirmative action rules established by Dinkins so that city contracts would assist businesses owned by women and minorities.¹⁶ Many of these policies were an accelerated continuation of the bailout program of the late 1970s carried out under Mayor Ed Koch, but which had been slowed somewhat under Mayor Dinkins. According to David Harvey, who extends an argument first made by urban theorist William Tabb, it was New York City in the mid 1970s that became the test site for a radical economic and political makeover in the United States that “effectively pioneered the construction of a neoliberal answer” to post-war economic problems, including the over-accumulation of capital, falling rates of profit, and competition from emerging markets around the globe. Significantly adding to this reconstruction challenge was how to maintain discipline over labor at a time of political disenfranchisement and even overt rebellion.¹⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, key to ending the city’s lingering fiscal crisis was transforming New York into an appealing location for corporate headquarters as well as a desirable place of residence for the wealthy and for upper-middle class professionals employed in F.I.R.E—the finance, insurance, and real estate sector. To help secure this workforce, who were to replace the lost blue-collar manufacturing base of previous decades, New York City adopted a global cities strategy.¹⁸ According to sociologist Alex S. Vitale, this meant attracting international capital by adopting “fiscal strategies consistent with the ideology of structural adjustment, which called for a hollowing out of the welfare state in favor of market mechanisms.”¹⁹ Financially depleted neighborhoods on the Lower East Side, Hell’s Kitchen, and the Meatpacking District were targeted by waves

of real estate development. Public housing was privatized, rents skyrocketed, and unions were pressured to give up hard-won benefits. If outwardly these neighborhoods aimed for a scrubbed-clean but superficially Bohemian aesthetic, in reality they resembled suburban gated communities where the poor and traditional working classes were systematically excluded through a combination of high rents, privatized public space, electronic surveillance, and, when all else failed, aggressive police tactics. By Giuliani's second term, places like the Meatpacking District were no longer social and economic hinterlands. Now four-star restaurants, high-end fashion showrooms, and commercial art galleries moved in, some with franchises in London and Berlin. Effectively, "legitimate" business interests catering to the increasingly well-heeled urban gentry were replacing an illicit street economy of recycled goods, drugs, and transsexual prostitution. Not without sarcasm Saskia Sassen calls these makeovers the "glamour zones" of global cities, while Neil Smith acidly describes them simply as the "revanchist city."²⁰ Beneath its cosmopolitan shell a vengeful provincialism stands guard against the return of any visible symptoms of the "failed" liberal welfare state of old: homelessness, graffiti, illegal drugs, prostitution, and general signs of disorder. Tellingly, and ironically, the 1990s actually produced more homeless New Yorkers than had the 1980s, although unlike the previous decade these men, women, and children were no longer a palpable presence in parks, streets, or subways. However, by criminalizing such everyday acts as sleeping in public, and by increasing penalties for loitering, the city effectively made its homeless problem "disappear."²¹

Invisibles

After leaving office Giuliani formed a security-consulting firm known as Giuliani Partners, LLC (and police commissioner Bratton formed his own Bratton Group, LLC). Among other clients was Mexico City, where officials were introduced to a series of "Quality of Life" and "Broken Windows" urban crime-prevention tactics similar to those used in New York City, including the elimination of panhandlers and "squeegee men," as well as control of graffiti.²² The widely publicized failure of Giuliani's program in Mexico City not only suggests that crime reduction in 1990s New York City was not solely attributable to increased policing and control of public space, but also raises doubts about the role of corporations and wealthy individuals in what were previously considered public institutions and democratically controlled policies. After all, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was merely an overt symptom of a far more sweeping ideological shift towards deregulation and the privatization that, ironically, was never as free-market based as its neoliberal proponents claimed. In practice, the economic and social restructuring of post-industrial cities involved a great deal of corporate welfare, including massive subsidies to real estate and financial firms as well as

culture producers such as “design houses, advertisers, publishing, and music and television production.”²³ Meanwhile, the disappearance of unwelcome *signs* of public disorder and class division within New York and other socio-economically overhauled global cities—from graffiti and broken windows to panhandlers, “squeegee men,” and cross-dressing prostitutes—coincided with a marked interest by contemporary artists and their followers in representing those marginalized populations forgotten or suppressed by mainstream institutions and their official histories. A singular case in point was the 1992 installation *Mining The Museum* by artist Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. Invited by the museum to intervene in their collection, the Afro-American/Caribbean artist juxtaposed slave shackles, Klan hoods, and tribal African weapons with colonial-era pewter mugs, nineteenth-century perambulators, and miniature naval sloops. By literally staging a return of the repressed, the exhibition drew an unprecedented audience including many from the surrounding African-American neighborhood who had previously ignored the museum.²⁴ The following year, German artist Lothar Baumgarten inscribed the interior spiral of Frank Lloyd Wright’s iconic Guggenheim Museum with a string of North American indigenous tribes, and Hans Haacke made an explicit reference to the Venice Biennale’s links to 1930s fascism by demolishing the floor of the German pavilion. Several years earlier neo-Nazis had fire-bombed Haacke’s ironic memorial to Austrian fascism *And You Were Victorious After All* in Graz. Similar mnemonic interventions took place in public space. Native American artist Alan Michelson arranged a circle of stones in downtown Manhattan to mark the perimeter of a now absent Collect Pond, once a source of fresh water in New Amsterdam, but soon polluted from chemical dumping by nineteenth-century tanneries, slaughterhouses, and breweries. Similar attempts at prodding public memory were carried out by Dennis Adams in New York, with his neo-constructivist bus shelter memorializing the state-sponsored execution of Jewish “atom spies” Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and in Europe with *The Algerian Folie*, a flatbed truck Adams fitted out with images invoking French colonialism and installed outside the Centre Georges Pompidou in a gentrifying Paris of 1989. Several years later Christian Boltanski produced a melancholic reference to the Holocaust by stacking lost luggage on towers of steel shelving inside New York’s Grand Central Station. Meanwhile, Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar forced an increasingly global museum-going audience to confront photographic portraits of anonymous gold miners in South America; Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko projected images related to historical and political violence on buildings and public memorials; and in one inconspicuous corner of Hamburg, Germany, Jochen Gerz and his wife Esther Shalev-Gerz’s *Monument Against Fascism* gradually descended below ground to completely vanish from sight between 1986 and 1993.

Appropriating museum displays, monuments, and train station lobbies were not the only tactics of these archival interventions. Like REPOhistory some artists made use of the authorial power vested in administrative signage in an effort to subvert orthodox history. Beginning in the mid 1980s, indigenous artist Hokeayevi Edgar Heap of Birds began erecting his own metal signs, placards, and billboards that made reference, sometimes enigmatically, to the erasure of Native Peoples from the face of the North American landscape. Between 1984 and 1995 architectural historian Dolores Hayden and collaborators produced *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* about the little-known histories of Black sharecroppers, women laborers, Chicanos, and Mexican Americans in the Los Angeles valley; and on Chicago's South Side, artist Daniel Martinez produced a series of metal signs that, together with a street carnival, publicly memorialized the labor and ethnic history of the city's Maxwell Street market, once teeming with African-American vendors and now packed with upscale condos. The project took place under the umbrella of *Culture in Action*, a city-wide art installation organized by Mary Jane Jacob in 1993 that also included 100 small boulders arranged by Suzanne Lacy on city streets embedded with official-looking metal plaques that commemorated women of diverse backgrounds, both living and dead. Most of these historical marking projects were temporary in nature, however, in June of 1993, a series of 17 official-looking street signs appeared in a Berlin neighborhood ominously declaring that Jews were no longer permitted to use public swimming pools, were banned from wearing expensive jewelry in public, and that it was now illegal to sell them cigarettes, cigars, or pets. Each ruling was dated between 1936 and 1945. The posted warnings appeared in a part of the Schöneberg district once home to many Jews including Albert Einstein. Among the signs was the infamous decree of September 1, 1941: *All Jews over the age of 6 must wear a yellow star with the word "Jew" on it*. Two Berlin-based artists, Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, designed the provocative markers as part of a memorial to the extermination of Berlin's Jewish population. The project, entitled *Places of Remembrance (Memorial in the Bavarian Quarter, Berlin-Schöneberg)*, aroused shock and anger from many residents, who envisioned the reunited Berlin not as a place haunted by the ghosts of National Socialism, but as Germany and even Europe's new cultural and political center.²⁵ Remarkably, Stih and Schnock's *Places of Remembrance* was not a guerrilla intervention, but an officially commissioned memorial by Berlin's Schöneberg district to commemorate its disappeared Jews. Official monuments and museums to the Holocaust, to Jewish Heritage, and to other victims of European Fascism exploded throughout the Western world in the post-Cold War years, with examples in Los Angeles and the District of Columbia (1993), Austria (1996), New York City (1997), and, perhaps most anticipated of all, in Berlin, where the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, designed by American architect Peter Eisenman, was completed

in 2005 after ten years of competition and controversy. Notably, one of the failing bids for the Berlin memorial was submitted by Stih and Schnock, who proposed a fleet of buses that would travel to sites associated with the persecution of the city's Jews. "A giant monument has no effect and ultimately becomes invisible," Schnock commented; on the other hand, giving people a way to "visit the authentic crime scenes would be far more effective."²⁶ As much as his comments point to the late capitalist, or some would say, post-modern emptiness of historical meanings and interpretation, Schnock also makes an oblique reference to the politics of the archive, and a certain invisibility that paradoxically appeared less and less willing or capable of remaining invisible. At the same time this eruption of historical and ethnic otherness (the two were frequently represented together) into contemporary artistic subject matter signaled a palpable shift within the trajectory of the avant-garde.

Hal Foster observed at the time that artists were increasingly seeking ways to incorporate anthropological methods and its discourse into their practice.²⁷ Describing this shift as the "ethnographic turn," Foster cautioned that as much as this tendency sometimes challenged cultural orthodoxies, it could also substitute what amounted to a privileged alterity for the work of critical disinterestedness, the ultimate measure of aesthetic value. Foster begins his critique by returning to the roots of artistic radicalism in the twentieth century by reminding us of Walter Benjamin's influential 1934 essay "The Author as Producer" in which the Jewish-Marxist theorist calls upon class-conscious artists and anti-Fascist intellectuals to politicize the content of their work while simultaneously revolutionizing their methods of cultural production. Benjamin urged active engagement with the new, visual and technical capabilities brought about by the mass reproduction and distribution of news, photography, and cinema, which he believed could meltdown and reconstruct all previous cultural forms while redefining or eliminating stagnated disciplinary boundaries. Benjamin, Esther Leslie summarizes, exhorted "critics to become photomontagists, authors to become critics, critics to become authors, practitioners to become theorists and theorists practitioners."²⁸ A politicized avant-garde must produce a new, radical cultural agency, one that betrays its class of origin (the bourgeoisie) in favor of working-class objectives, while actively developing an apparatus of artistic organization that can be continuously modified and expanded upon far beyond any merely propagandistic function. Foster contrasts this politically engaged artistic program with the quasi-anthropological art of the 1990s, concluding that the latter appears to be a fetishization of Benjamin's project insofar as the radical collapsing of authorship with political functionality (think Brecht or Heartfield) now turns almost entirely upon the subversive shock of ontological displacement. Artists were no longer tasked to re-function artistic form and content; radicalism was now simply, perhaps even matter-of-factly, embodied.

Without entirely dismissing the subversive intent of this gesture, or, conversely, uncritically embracing Benjamin's displaced proletarian modernism, Foster warns that this idealization of otherness could lead to "a politics that may *consume* its historical subjects before they become historically effective."²⁹ And yet, suggested Fredric Jameson, it was the very possibility of historically informed political agency that was threatened with erasure by what he called post-modern pastiche: the schizophrenic play of historical and cultural signifiers uprooted from any connection to memory or to narrative.³⁰ This "surrealism without the unconscious," did not ignore the past, instead it spectacularized such imagery, approaching history not as a project to be analyzed and worked upon, but as a conceptual stumbling block, perhaps *the* impediment (along with class) standing in the way of some new, de-essentialized social agency. Which is to say, it was not that the avant-garde's romance with the world beyond art had ended, rather, some artists had merely shifted their focus from the diachronic to synchronic plane as an old dream of historically driven class consciousness gave way to the apparently static category of a missing *other*. And yet, the projects of REPOhistory, Haacke, Michelson, or Stih and Schnock, among others, clearly deviated from this post-modern tendency by intentionally challenging a certain historical amnesia, even provoking strong, at times violent public responses to their short-lived appearance. Indeed, such work appears to belong to a wave of historically engaged mid 1980s and 1990s visual culture that sharply contrasted with an increasingly dominant post-modern pastiche that, as elaborated upon by Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and other Marxist intellectuals, treated history as a reservoir of floating images detached from memory or meaning. At the same time, this nameless counter-tendency also appears linked with a broader artistic and scholarly response to those who denied the veracity of certain historical events, including most notably the Holocaust. The films of Claude Lanzmann and Dan Eisenberg and the art installations of Ellen Rothenberg all examine mid-twentieth-century Jewish history through techniques of reportage, montage, and poetic imagination without reducing the historical narrative to a post-modern cascade of disconnected signifiers.³¹ Meanwhile, a curiously premature illustration of this anti-post-modern tendency is found in the largely ignored work of former Art + Language group member Terry Atkinson, who as early as the mid 1970s turned away from making conceptual art to produce a series of more or less realistic history paintings depicting the trauma of trench warfare amongst British working-class soldiers during World War I. Atkinson's anomalous career even suggests a very different, antithetical reading of post-war painting when contrasted with the highly celebrated works of German painter Gerhard Richter.

REPOhistory perceived the ranks of invisible *others* as poor immigrants, slaves, abolitionists, radicals, feminists, trade unionists, indentured servants, child-laborers, and the forgotten narratives of transients, native people, and gay, lesbian,

and transgendered activists. In reality, these disenfranchised minorities shared nothing so much in common as a mutual superfluosity to the mainstream public sphere: its electoral process, its history, but also its museums, cultural institutions, and official educational curricula. Indeed, the public debate over how to teach American history from a culturally “inclusive” perspective also rose to new heights in the early 1990s.³² It was at this time that the contemporary art world was confronted with its own geographical and ethno-historical centrism as a rising tide of once-excluded artists outside the US and Western Europe were propelled by the dictates of an unprecedented globalization into the markets of the culture industry. It is impossible therefore to dismiss Foster’s trenchant analysis as a response to the loss of critical privilege, a kind of white man’s panic. Still, what Foster did not anticipate was the degree to which the process of substitution and reification he so cogently identified would itself become a pivotal, virtually automated function of art under neoliberal enterprise culture. The “ethnographic turn” soon morphed into a series of “turns,” and turns within turns, including the “outsider artist” turn, the social-relational turn, the interventionist and the “green” turn, and so on and so forth—each seemingly new rotation of contemporary art’s privileged subject seeking to economize on an increasingly prosperous art market (that simultaneously produced an exponential flood of surplus artists and artworks).

Between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, sales of young, emerging artists, especially painters, grew at a phenomenal rate. Anti-theoretical, a-political, and deeply entrepreneurial, the deregulated neoliberal economy reinforced artistic tendencies markedly different from the austerity of conceptual and minimal art in the 1960s and 1970s. Chin-tao Wu describes this change in art world values as *enterprise culture*. But the art market tumbled badly at the start of the 1990s in a delayed response to the stock-market crash of 1987. And then, once again, keeping pace with the fortunes of the financial sector, contemporary art sales rebounded at an even more accelerated rate, this time spurred on by Clinton’s so-called new economy.³³ However, between the rise of the Internet that some described as a new cultural commons commingling high and low culture, professional and amateur, plus the massive export of finance capital to developing nations with their own emerging contemporary art scenes, a formerly invisible sphere of imaginative productivity challenged the seemingly well-anchored offices of Western intellectual authority. Something was spilling out of the archive. And conventional methods of managing this excess did not appear to be holding. Perhaps most evident in this respect was the rapidly fading power of academic critics and cultural theorists who claimed to be the primary interlocutors between artists and institutions. Suddenly a breed of fluid and largely independent curators began to build and shape artistic careers much as the art critic had in previous years. “The era of the curator has begun,” wrote *New York Times* art critic Michael Brenson approvingly, while Foster soberly mused that these wandering curators mirrored the rise of the equally

nomadic artist ethnographer.³⁴ But it is unlikely this usurpation would have been possible without the increasing power of a new engine of art world expansion: the international art biennial. Within two decades of 1980 the number of these urban art fairs doubled in number to include Havana, Johannesburg, Vilnius, Istanbul, Berlin, Dakar, Tuzla, Porto Alegre, Liverpool, Fukuoka, and Gwangju province in South Korea, among other, once marginal art world outposts. It is possible, in other words, to see the revolving privileging of art world subjects not as an inversion of entitlements, or as the triumph of some vengeful, historical Id over an orthodox canonical ego, but as an economizing maneuver in which real artistic meaning appears to be displaced “somewhere else,” only to return to the art world’s stockroom of cultural capital with value added. That this machine-like circuit resembles the deregulated operation of deregulated finance capital—invest in an underdeveloped region of the globe, boast that capital has made infrastructural improvements and increased multiculturalism, actively deplete these same regional economies through “open” borders and so-called free market policies favoring wealthy nations, then remove the primary investment at the first sign of economic contraction—is perhaps secondary to a radical transformation the ethnographic turn produced within the world of arts administrative apparatus.

Increasingly the art world resembled the “transnational” corporate sector and was becoming unfixed in space (or so it appeared). A different, more flexible and enterprising approach to arts management was called for as artist’s working conditions, always precarious at best, began to resemble that of other post-Fordist industries dependent upon outsourcing and just-in-time production methods.³⁵ At the same time, capital’s geographic fluidity and dependency on information networks was altering the very image of cultural consumers and the globalized workforce. Images of multiethnic harmony began to appear in print and television advertising, perhaps most dramatically in the series of commercial images shot by Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani for the Benetton corporation.³⁶ In the white suburbs of America, young people embraced inner-city hip-hop culture once contained within what Jeff Chang calls the necropolis of the 1970s South Bronx.³⁷ Individuals of divergent gender, sexuality, ethnic and class backgrounds were a now graduating in waves from a plethora of art programs in schools and universities. Many came from lower-middle or even working-class families where high culture was a distant, even despised phenomenon. They felt no allegiances to the formalist traditions emerging out of either European modernism or the New York Abstract Expressionist School, but instead relished comic books, pulp fiction, movies and television, children’s animation, home-crafts, plastic molded figurines, and, in certain ethnic communities, graffiti writers, low-rider automobiles, even seashell embedded alters to the virgin of Guadalupe (*Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*), exactly the sort of *objet d’art* that Greenberg abhorred as kitsch.³⁸ The art world filters meant to prevent this kind of imagery from entering

into serious consideration had begun breaking down as early as the 1980s with the East Village Art Scene's adoration of banality and glitz. By the early 1990s, with the financial success of the Young British Artists (YBA) and former Wall Street commodities broker turned artist Jeff Koons, these aesthetic filters were in virtual collapse. Images of serial killers, rotting melons, spin-paintings, ceramic statuary of animated cartoons sent sales of contemporary art to record heights. It was not only a matter of once-rejected content. The sheer quantity of cultural practices by artists, amateurs, mass media, science, overwhelmed previous systems of reception and interpretation. The art critic was forced to either completely ignore this trend, or somehow address four simultaneous and dramatic changes in their field of knowledge including 1) an explosion of professionally trained young artists, many from subaltern backgrounds, 2) a seismic shift in artistic taste that virtually mocked the classical model of detached aesthetic judgment, 3) the extraordinary global capitalization of the contemporary art market, and 4) the diminishing power of critics, interpreters, and theorists to shape this new enterprise culture. One response within academia was the rise of cultural and visual studies, both of which were far more influenced by media criticism and the social sciences of anthropology and sociology than they were by art history, including its Marxist or social-historical variations.

Both the "ethnographic turn," and its criticism, came at a moment of convergence between the forces of capitalist globalization and an electronic form of communication and memory enhancement that rejected the policing of culture's archives. A vast surplus of artistic producers armed with a powerful means of self-representation seemed to be asking: Who gets to produce culture, for whom, and why? The processes of cultural democratization Benjamin sought to harness for the Left now verged on near total attainability, though sans ideology or class-consciousness. No doubt these seismic changes added to the apprehension of art critics.³⁹ Nevertheless, in the year before his death, Craig Owens had directly sought to address the implications of this broader cultural shift for visual artists by pointing out in 1989 that globalization was turning the once "displacing gaze of colonial surveillance" back upon the colonizers themselves. Drawing upon a range of theorists somewhat peripheral to the art world, including Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Owens' critique focused on the many who fall outside the globalization juggernaut. Citing Spivak he prophetically argued that Western artists and intellectuals must begin to confront the growing visibility of "subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals, and the communities of zero workers."⁴⁰ Five years later a group of indigenous people descended from Mayan Indians in the poor, rural Southern state of Chiapas declared autonomy from the Mexican government. Rather than rely strictly on armed struggle, as in previous anti-colonial insurrections such as those in Cuba, Algeria, Southeast Asia, and Peru, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation

broadcast their political platform—a form of participatory, libertarian socialism opposed to corporate globalization—via the Internet. But this interruption from below did not remain strictly virtual. Soon a series of massive, carnivalesque demonstrations took shape in Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, Prague, taking up many of the same demands as the Zapatistas: decentralized collective action, local economic control, and political autonomy from globalized capitalist markets. Sometimes referred to as “*the movement of movements*” these highly decentralized and ideologically diverse protests recalled the scale of marches against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, and against nuclear weapons in the 1980s. However, unlike many of these past actions the new spirit of resistance appeared cultural first, and political second. A generation of art school graduates confronted the ruins of the public sphere and its panoptic spaces branded with trade names and ringed with surveillance cameras. With nowhere else to go they decided to misbehave. As Brian Holmes puts it, “the image of pink-feathered dancers expressively disrupting the commerce of a Zara store in Milan sums up this new combat perfectly.”⁴¹ Meanwhile, despite differences of education, language, class, or geographical location, the participants in this counter-globalization campaign were able to coordinate their actions using the same, networked information technologies essential to transnational capital. The prosthetically enhanced power of memory and communication so essential to the forces of globalization, entrepreneurship, and just-in-time productivity had come home to roost.

Urban Ghosts

No doubt inspired by the unleashing of this once shadowy archive, and by the capacity of the Zapatistas and other marginal groups to make their presence visible on the world stage, a new generation of artists began to intervene in public spaces, often doing so illegally sans permits. Some of these projects were inspired directly by REPOhistory’s *détournement* of urban sign systems; others simply invented a similar approach to marking public spaces. The Pocho Research Society in Southern California bolted an imitation metal plaque to a building on Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles to mark where David Alfaro Siqueiros 1932 anti-imperialist mural *Tropical America* had been painted over by local businessmen. The group carried out its action without permission in order to “pay homage to historic erasure.”⁴² Towards the other end of the state, at 55th and Market Streets in Oakland, California, the Center for Tactical Magic (CTM) collaborated with artist Jeremy Deller and former Black Panther David Hilliard to install, illegally without permission, a yellow and black metal sign graphically commemorating the traffic light post on which the sign was posted.⁴³ In 1967, after the deaths of several school children by speeding automobiles, the residents of this African-American neighborhood requested a traffic signal be installed.

The Oakland City Council delayed action, whereupon a group of Black Panthers began acting as crossing guards, holding back traffic and allowing children to safely cross to school. Within two months a stoplight was installed.⁴⁴ Perhaps most ambitious of all, a group of twenty-something artists and DIY amateur historians illicitly installed a series of signs at ten sites around Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, a post-industrial city that began its own economic restructuring in the late 1970s much like New York. Calling themselves The Howling Mob Society (HMS), this informally organized collective chose to commemorate the tumultuous and largely spontaneous Railroad Strike of 1877 in which an estimated quarter of the city’s population—all mostly unemployed—participated. The signs which meticulously mimic official historical markers have titles like “STATE VIOLENCE INCITES RIOTING, SIEGE AT THE 26TH STREET ROUNDHOUSE,” and “TWENTY MURDERED AND A CITY RISES UP.” Thanks to “Google Maps” software the group’s website includes an interactive graphic of each site with a pop-up window



The United Victorian Workers Union was an ad-hoc collective of artists, activists, and academics that came together in the Winter of 2005 to correct the historical misrepresentations of Troy, New York’s annual Victorian Stroll. Video documentation can be viewed at www.daragreenwald.com/uvw.html (Organized by Bettina Escauriza, Dara Greenwald, Ryan Jenkins, Josh MacPhee, Amy Scarfone, and Marshall Tramell). Image courtesy Amy Scarfone.

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offering the text of every sign.⁴⁵ On the same website HMS describes its mission as wanting to give a voice to those marginalized and buried by history, but they go an important step further by seeking to draw “links between historical narratives and current social conditions in order to bring to light the systems of oppression still firmly imbedded in our society.”⁴⁶

Meanwhile, in Troy, New York, a group of placard-carrying protestors dressed in nineteenth-century garment workers’ clothes inserted themselves into the city’s annual Victorian Stroll: a city-boosting event sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce in which the “historic downtown” is transformed into “a magical stage of song, dance, and family enjoyment.”⁴⁷ Describing themselves as The United Victorian Workers Union the ad-hoc group of local artists and activists carried signs printed in historically appropriate typeface that called for an eight-hour work day as the disarmed business leaders and politicians dressed in Victorian garb looked on in dismay.⁴⁸ In a different context, on the streets of Buenos Aires, a groups of artists working with local activists called HIJOS deployed site-specific signs focusing public attention on individuals responsible for “disappearing” some 230,000 people during the 1970s Argentinean military junta’s anti-Leftist campaign, or “Dirty War.” Part of a broader activist campaign known as *escraches*, involving performances, posters, and projections, the street marker projects by the collectives GAC (Arte Callejero, or simply Street Art Group), include graphics that mimic traffic signs such as a yellow, diamond-shaped plaque with an arrow that points towards the home of a former torturer and that even provides the distance to his domicile, or signs that boldly state the name of an individual Junta member with the label GENOCIDA or Juicio y castigo (judgment and punishment); “completely invisible to the art world as ‘art actions’; nevertheless they gave the *escraches* identity and visibility.”⁴⁹

Outlaws

At a much-publicized 1997 celebrity “roast,” in which politicians and press parody each other in a carnival atmosphere, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani came onstage as “Rudia,” a blonde women wearing high-heels, a pink satin dress, and an unlit cigar protruding from his lipsticked mouth. “Rudia” or variations thereof, would make several appearances over the years, including immediately after Giuliani’s second reelection as Mayor in 2000 when she appeared as a matronly shopper in a department store videotaped flirting with real estate developer Donald Trump who gropes Giuliani’s false breasts before the camera.⁵⁰ Trump, along with the city’s other major real estate developers, received millions in tax breaks during Giuliani’s two terms in office. The video became a viral hit on YouTube. But even as the Mayor played at cross-dressing he was successfully blocking passage of an anti-discrimination law aimed at transgendered people’s civil liberties.⁵¹



On more than four occasions, as Mayor of New York City and afterwards, Rudolph “Rudi” Giuliani dressed in drag as “Rudia,” a female alter ego he once described to reporters as “a Republican pretending to be a Democrat pretending to be a Republican.” Image copyright *N.Y. Daily News*.

In a final unprecedented act before leaving office Giuliani moved the mayoral archive accumulated during his eight years in office to a private storage facility in Queens. Journalists and historians were prevented from accessing its several thousand boxes of public papers. Only after hiring a private archivist did he return the municipal archive (presumably intact) to the public. Several years later the former New York City Mayor declared his candidacy for President of the United States. In April of 2003, no longer dressing in drag, Giuliani stood beside fellow neoconservatives and refused to condemn the looting and burning of the Baghdad library and museum as American and other coalition troops stood by without intervening.⁵² The archive continues to establish authority over who gets to speak and who has access to visibility. Its juridical power is only eliminated when its contents are confiscated, censored, or reduced to ashes.

Citing the work of Michel Foucault, the art historian Richard Meyer insists that attempts by mainstream society to control the image of the deviant have backfired, producing instead a proliferation of unanticipated counter-images.

Homosexuals, he writes, have frequently adopted and re-staged mainstream society's negative representation of them as a kind of semiotic warfare in which the marginalized embrace society's negative stereotypes as a tactic of rebellion. This act of representational appropriation travels "outside" the law, literally returning an "outlaw representation."⁵³ Likewise, many of the public signage projects described here also appear ontologically ambiguous, even perverse. They are queer signs. Not surprisingly these urban *hauntings* and acts of *unforgetting* generated resistance from the "Quality of Life" city that had sought to soak up or expunge visible signs of capitalism's social failings—the paperless, marginal workers, the dispossessed, redundant, disappeared, and even the street artist—even as it simulated, in hygienic form, the incubation of a certain manageable artistic creativity. In the case of REPOhistory and similar historical marking projects this confrontation with the counter-archive appeared only briefly, like something frail that was destined to disappear underground once the city of (dis)order was fully ensconced. Indeed, this *other* archive is always elsewhere in time: either in a past that we can never have immediate access to, any more than we will someday stand directly facing Plato's animating fire, or in a promised future that may or may not ever take shape.⁵⁴ In which case Marsha P. Johnson comes to us as our mid-day ghost, speaking a counter-discourse in a strangely familiar vernacular that mixes activism and theatrical excess, militancy and camouflage. It is precisely the cunning idiom of a certain "surplus" population whose modest desire simply to cope sometimes erupts into outright disobedience.

"There is no political power without control of the archive, of memory," insists Derrida, adding that "effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."⁵⁵ Inevitably we are reminded that history, rather than being read as a string of inevitabilities, might be thought of as so many lost opportunities, and that a certain kind of cultural activism may be conceived as a process of recovering these other memories, regardless of whether they are orphaned or suppressed, real or imaginary. And yet the "archive itself" always appears just missed, somewhere prior to or long after the moment we try to ascertain its meaning. That after all is its particular sense of promise. But if we did attempt to redeem the overlooked and the discarded memories that entranced Walter Benjamin, to sniff-out their "social utopian investments," as Esther Leslie suggests, how and on what basis would we go about this rescue?⁵⁶ Film scholar Jeffrey Skoller proposes one possible answer by revisiting Benjamin's figure of the brooder (*der Grübler*), the ragpicker as modern allegorist who seeks to construct "some structure of meaning" out of the chaotic jumble of the past by endlessly shifting its random detritus, yet all the while remaining "tormented by his own inability to remember what any of it means."⁵⁷ Still, any salvaging operation depends upon some kind of jurisdiction, some interpretive economy linked to the

politics of the archive. Generals exposed for war crimes in Argentina, a street sign marking Wall Street’s former slave market, the spontaneous “labor uprising” at a holiday fair in upstate New York, or the temporary memorial for a transgendered street-activist in a city selectively forgetting its own past—these varied projects have drawn upon the jurisdiction of an *other*, outlaw archive, briefly re-animating this dark-matter social production within the public consciousness like an accursed gift that nevertheless appeals to an ongoing dream of collective redemption.⁵⁸

Epilogue

The NYCDOT permit required that REPOhistory regularly check on its signs for maintenance and safety reasons. Group member Tom Klem reports that while some of the project signs were damaged or vandalized, the Johnson marker always remained intact. However, it did have a tendency to fade because of its exposure to the sun. On two occasions Klem replaced the Johnson sign. But when he arrived in the Meatpacking District with a ladder and tools he was confronted by transgendered prostitutes. They assumed he was there to remove the memorial. In short, they had adopted the REPOhistory sign, telling him it told their story and what “it was all about.” In the end, when the official permit had run its course, Klem simply left the Johnson memorial where it was, and where it remained for several more months before finally disappearing.