

## Port Huron Project

### Background

When I started teaching at Brown University in 2005, I was surprised by how little antiwar protest I found on campus. It was clear that my students objected to American involvement in Iraq and the Bush administration's disregard for civil liberties, but they seemed to believe that resistance was futile. It is not hard to imagine why. In 2000, they witnessed a presidential election that appeared to many to have been stolen. In 2003, many students participated in the largest antiwar protests in history (the BBC estimated that six to ten million people in sixty countries protested the imminent invasion of Iraq on February 15 and 16 of that year), but the Bush and Blair administrations were undeterred. In 2004, many students worked on the Kerry campaign, only to see Bush reelected by a narrow margin amid accusations of voting fraud.

The absence of a contemporary youth-led antiwar movement is often attributed to the lack of a military draft, to greater economic uncertainty, even to the rise of the Internet as an alternative to face-to-face interaction. But it seems to me that this absence is symptomatic of larger cultural, intellectual, and political dynamics as well. Slavoj Žižek argues that "Things look bad for great Causes today, in a 'postmodern' era when, although the ideological scene is fragmented into a panoply of positions which struggle for hegemony, there is an underlying consensus: the era of big explanations is over... in politics too, we should no longer aim at all-explaining systems and global emancipatory projects" (*In Defense of Lost Causes*, 2008). In the face of the widespread abandonment of what Alain Badiou calls the "communist hypothesis,"<sup>1</sup> it has become increasingly difficult to sustain sweeping radical agendas. It appears that the time has passed for the revolutionary strategies that inspired the New Left, and we have entered an era in which tactical resistance defines the horizon of possibility.

By the 1990s, the left had fragmented into a multitude of micro-movements. Today's students stage small protests focused on specific issues or pursue public service. For them, the "massive social movement" that SDS President Paul Potter called for in "We Must Name the System"<sup>2</sup> exists only as history. Yet the legacy of the New Left movements of the 1960s and '70s continues to inform the ways in which radical politics is imagined and practiced.

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<sup>1</sup> "The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour... The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away." Alain Badiou, "Communist Hypothesis." *New Left Review* 49, Jan/Feb 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Potter delivered this speech on April 17, 1965 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. I staged a reenactment of it in July, 2007.



We Must Name The System: Paul Potter 1965/2007. National Mall, Washington, D.C.  
Photo by Meghan Boudreau.

In the *Port Huron Project*, I seek to engage this legacy in all of its unresolved complexity by reanimating largely forgotten protest speeches. I adopt the form of historical reenactment to intervene in public space and contemporary political discourse, producing experiences of temporal juxtaposition in which the complexity of historical transformations (such as the decline of radicalism in the face of a rising neoliberal consensus) are rendered evident. Ken Johnson, chief art critic for the *Boston Globe*, articulated this effect as an “odd sense of chronological dislocation... for though the speaker seemed to be addressing people in the present, he was, in a theatrical sense, speaking to an invisible audience, a crowd with a very different sense of the moment.”<sup>3</sup> My aim in the reenactments is not to hold up the New Left as an ideal, but rather to create situations in which the New Left’s specific political positions, as well as its spirit of political urgency and utopian possibility, might be grasped intellectually, through rhetoric, and aesthetically, through embodied experience.

When I started the project, one of my goals was to inspire the younger members of my audience to get involved in protest—not to adopt the tactics of the New Left, but to invent their own movement and their own forms of resistance. As the project unfolded over the course of two years, it became clear to me that this implicit possibility was one of the main reasons the project elicited such enthusiastic interest from presenting organizations, journalists, and others. It also became apparent that the reenactments, and the videos and installations based on them, conveyed more ambivalent messages: that a new radical movement may well be impossible in contemporary America; that although New Left analyses of capitalism, imperialism, and racism may apply as much today as they did forty years ago, the revolutionary solutions the New Left imagined are beyond us; that tactics such as marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience are no longer effective.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Ken. “Rallying ‘Round the Past.” *Boston Globe*. 22 July, 2007.

Reenactment has been taken up as an artistic form with surprising frequency in recent years. The most prominent example is *The Battle of Orgreave*, a large-scale reenactment of a 1984 conflict between coal miners and police in South Yorkshire, for which Jeremy Deller won the 2004 Turner prize.



Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001.

Other examples of recent reenactment-based art include *Dolores from 10h to 22h* (2001), by Coco Fusco and Ricardo Dominguez, in which the artists reenacted the interrogation of a Tijuana maquiladora worker; and the *Milgram Reenactment* (2002), Rod Dickinson's recreation of a notorious 1961 psychology experiment in which students were ordered to administer electric shocks to volunteers. Recent survey exhibitions of contemporary reenactment-based art include "Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History" at MASS MoCA (2006), "Playback\_Simulated Realities" at the Edith Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg, Germany, "History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance" at the HMKV in Dortmund (2007), and "Re-enactments" at the DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art in Montreal (2008).

### Reenactments

I began working on the project in June 2006, and completed post-production in February 2009. The first reenactment, a 1968 speech by Coretta Scott King in Central Park, New York (presented by the Conflux Festival), took place in September 2006. The second and third reenactments took place in July 2007: a 1971 Howard Zinn speech on Boston Common and a 1965 Paul Potter speech on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. I staged the final three reenactments in July, August and September 2008: a 1971 speech by Cesar Chavez in Exposition Park, Los Angeles (presented by Creative Time and LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions)); a 1969 speech by Angela Davis in DeFremery Park, Oakland (presented by Creative Time and the Oakland Museum of California), a 1967 speech by Stokely Carmichael outside the United Nations in New York City (presented by Creative Time). These events were commissioned by Creative Time. The Los Angeles event was co-presented by LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions).



The Liberation Of Our People: Angela Davis 1969/2008.  
Photo by Rick Bronson.

All six reenactments were staged at the sites of the original speeches. The speeches were delivered by actors or performance artists to audiences that included people who came to participate in the reenactment and passers-by. The speeches were given in their entirety based on original texts, transcripts, or audio recordings. The performers did not attempt to look or sound like the original speakers; I directed them to wear their everyday clothes and to deliver the speeches in their own voices. I made no attempt to theatricalize the performances or to create any illusion of returning to the past. I also did not try to conceal or naturalize the crew and their cameras and other equipment—on the contrary, I considered them to be integral to the overall spectacle. My skills and resources improved over the course of the project, but my basic approach to producing and documenting the reenactments remained consistent. My guiding principle was to realize the central concept—delivering historic protest speeches at their original locations—in a straightforward manner without self-conscious gestures or aesthetic adornments.

My approach to the documentation was similarly direct. I recruited professional photographers to take stills. In shooting and editing the single-channel videos, I adhered fairly closely to contemporary conventions of commercial video production. I chose not to include interviews, found footage, or other common features of documentary cinema, and avoided the tropes of avant-garde cinema and art video. My goal was to keep the viewer's focus on the reenactments rather than the videos' facture.

## Media and Public Engagement

The *Port Huron Project* is also a meditation on the role of media in protest politics. In 1968, protesters outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago chanted “The whole world in watching.” Two years later, Jerry Rubin wrote, “You can’t be a revolutionary today without a television set – it’s as important as a gun! Every guerrilla must know how to use the terrain of the culture that he is trying to destroy!”<sup>4</sup> Today, major newspapers and television networks ignore most political protests. Activists can no longer rely on mainstream media to carry their message—they must become media makers themselves, extending the reach of embodied actions by representing them in grassroots media networks. Videos of all of the *Port Huron Project* reenactments are now available under open-source licenses on YouTube, Vimeo, and the Internet Archive.



*We Are Also Responsible: Cesar Chavez 1971/2008*. Exposition Park, Los Angeles.  
Photo by Davis Jung.

Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight articulated this aspect of the project in his review of *We Are Also Responsible: Cesar Chavez 1971/2008*: “it’s the scripted, taped and electronically distributed nature of these performances that is distinctive... The *Port Huron Project* is a kind of digital samizdat, a technological twist on the distribution of political leaflets that is as American as Tom Paine and as revolutionary as farmers and small-businessmen toppling the combined power of George III and the East India Co... Activism seemed futile when, despite the hundreds of thousands of people flooding into city streets around the world in protest before the invasion of Iraq, the ill-fated war went on. Yet there’s a difference between old models based on mass culture, which had their zenith in the 1960s era of these original speeches, and the new ‘niche culture’ of our high-tech present. Mass culture

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<sup>4</sup> Rubin, Jerry. *Do it!* New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.

is effectively over. The possibility for closing the contemporary gap between activism and the individual is underway in the netroots—activist blogs and other online communities, including artistic ones.”<sup>5</sup>

The *Port Huron Project* functions as a work of public art in two ways: it intervenes in the physical public spaces of the parks and streets where the reenactments take place, and it engages the civic discourses of the public sphere when it elicits reactions in the media. The *Port Huron Project* received substantial media attention in 2008. Coverage included: reviews in two leading art magazines, *Artforum* and *Frieze*, and several newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Village Voice*; features in *New York Magazine* and *Paper Magazine*; and stories on three different *National Public Radio* programs. A complete list of press coverage, with links to the articles, can be found at <http://nothing.org/php/press>>. A PDF containing a selection of reviews can be downloaded at [http://kebabaquarium.com/files/press/press\\_compilation\\_brown.pdf](http://kebabaquarium.com/files/press/press_compilation_brown.pdf)>.



Installation in the “Democracy in America” exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City, 2008.  
Photo by Sam Horine.

## Exhibitions

In September 2008, an installation featuring video shot at the Cesar Chavez, Angela Davis, and Stokely Carmichael reenactments was included in “Democracy in America,” a major group exhibition organized by Creative Time at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Knight, Christopher. “Mark Tribe’s Port Huron Project via Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.” *Los Angeles Times*. 25 July, 2008.

<sup>6</sup>More information on the exhibition: <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/democracy>>.

My intention was to reproduce the reenactment as an immersive counter-spectacle. The installation uses surround sound and two high-definition video rear-projections to produce an effect of spatial correlation between the reenactment and the gallery. The installation visitor feels herself to be *almost* part of the reenactment audience—nearby yet separated by a screen. This separation reproduces in technological form the performative mediation inherent in reenactment as an artistic form, as well as the historical distance that separates the reenactment from the original event.

In August and September 2008, videos of the Cesar Chavez and Angela Davis performances were shown on a large high-definition video screen in Times Square as part of “At 44<sup>1/2</sup>,” a program organized by Creative Time. For this screening, I made videos using only close-ups of the performers, and adding closed captions (because there was no sound), cable news-style graphics, and a text crawl.



The Liberation of Our People: Angela Davis 1969/2008. “At 44 ½,” Times Square, New York City. Photo by Sam Horine.

I made these modifications so that the videos would convey the information essential to the project. I wanted viewers to be able to understand in a glance that they were seeing reenactments of Vietnam-era protest speeches. The following email from a passer-by was forwarded to me by Creative Time: “Yesterday, I stood on Broadway trying to figure out what was going-on. First the intense expressions on the giant close-up attracted my attention. Then the words – clearly aggressive politics – and from another time. Yet the image was brand new in HD quality. Could someone really be saying this somewhere in the USA today?”