

New Left-Wing Melancholy: Mark Tribe's "The Port Huron Project" and the Politics of Reenactment

Paige Sarlin

The journal *October* sent a questionnaire to artists, critics, and art historians in the summer of 2007. The central question, and the one they reprinted on the cover of the issue that contained all the responses, was: "In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?" The questionnaire and the published responses served as an answer to the lack of attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that had marked the journal during the previous three years.¹ A journal other than *October* might never have felt the need to address contemporary political conditions. But this journal had been founded with a strident statement of purpose. In 1978, the editors claimed the cultural arena as a site for political action, one in which philosophical and aesthetic questions were not pre-given but rather crucially important, with potential political consequences. Seen in that light, their gesture to justify and remedy an absence of cultural attention to the Iraq War simultaneously appears particularly significant. In one part of the questionnaire, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, the author, asked if the absence of the draft explained the difference between the character of the protests against the war in Vietnam and the protests against the war in Iraq.² This question invoked a range of criticisms within the responses (including a criticism from me, as a member of the group 16Beaver).³ And so in the introduction to the special issue, Buchloh and coeditor Rachel Churner devoted a small section to defending themselves from the various objections and qualifications that were raised about their use of the comparison with Vietnam. They argued that the analogy that they drew upon was intended to "encourage action" through raising a generational question: What is it that we are doing that is different and how can the awareness of this difference be productive?⁴ Mark Tribe's "The Port Huron Project" was cited in a

Framework 50, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, pp. 139–57.

Copyright © 2009 Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan 48201-1309.

footnote in this section, serving as an example of “how protest informs intellectual history and how significantly we have internalized the intellectual paradigms from that generation.”⁵ Tribe’s project both served as proof of the influence of historic protests on cultural producers and simultaneously validated Buchloh and Churner’s use of the historical comparison in their questionnaire and analysis of the responses to the war in Iraq (figured as the “absence” of a mass movement). But what, one might ask, is the relation of “The Port Huron Project” to the history that it reenacts? And, more significant, what is at stake in the comparison of the contemporary response to the war and the left-wing political activity of the late 1960s that *October* and various other cultural institutions have invoked and explored over the last year, which was the fortieth anniversary of 1968? Tribe’s project gives a blank form to the differences and the similarities between then and now, assuming a form of resonance and significance that the project then re-produces and amplifies. Without questioning the utility of the comparison, Tribe’s project works to elaborate itself not in relation to the specificity of the past or the present, but somewhere in between, in relation to this structure of analogy. In this way, the project shares with *October*’s questionnaire and special issue a lack of clarity about the specific ideological and political character of the social movements of the 1960s (and the American left more broadly). “The Port Huron Project” gestures toward a general sense of the politically radical character of the historical period that accompanied the escalation of the American war in Vietnam and the marked increase in the level of class and social justice struggles in the United States and on a global scale. This use of analogy trades on the association with this “radical” history, but it sidesteps the myriad of difficult questions that generic references to protest, the New Left, or social movements of the 1960s could raise with respect to the contemporary antiwar movement.

October’s questionnaire comes tantalizingly close to the question that Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin asked in their 1972 film *Letter to Jane: An Investigation About a Still* (FR, 1972): What role can artists and intellectuals play in building a movement to stop the war?⁶ It seems that any formulation that seeks to oppose or respond to the Iraq War must inevitably confront a comparison with Vietnam and the antiwar movement that that war engendered. But the ubiquity of the analogy highlights the need to consider how this deployment of history fits into a left-wing political project with respect to the war. The recent spate of art projects that use historical reenactment to consider the resonances between the 1960s and the present and the number of retrospectives and exhibitions that investigate and commemorate the political activism of the New Left could all be seen as participating in this “response.”⁷ In this essay, I read the invocation of the protest movements of the 1960s as a form of what Walter Benjamin termed “left-wing melancholy,” a response to the war in Iraq that treats the apparent absence of an antiwar movement in an oblique manner. More than simply an update, this

new "left-wing melancholy"—or, as I term it, New Left-wing melancholy—fetishizes the history of the New Left as a way of avoiding addressing the present. Looking to the past, the practice of reenactment has the potential to generate a new relation to the present, to wrench us into a more proactive relation to the on-going crisis of military occupation and brutality. But Tribe's reenactments are exemplary of how the reproduction of history can substitute for an analysis of specific histories. In the case of Tribe, the reproduction of a form of protest through the staging of speeches erases the politics and labor of organizing and movement building and in doing so points to a particular relation to history, one that is explained by Michel Foucault's concept of the *archive*. The cultural left, as represented by *October* and various other galleries and museums, has embraced the reenactment and the structure of historical analogy to '68 as a form of "political" engagement or response to the U.S. military and police actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. This form of historical analogy perpetuates an image of the New Left that obscures the specific histories of the social movements of the 1960s and the relation to the history of the left that the New Left sought to establish. As a result, the reference to the past functions to forestall an examination of the very real challenges to building a contemporary movement, some of which stem from the inheritances of the New Left and its rejection of previous modes of class-based analysis, but many of which derive from the varied developments in the world and on the left in the intervening years since 1968.

On his website, Tribe describes "The Port Huron Project" as "a series of reenactments of protest speeches from the New Left movements of the 1960s and 70s."⁸ Tribe's choice of title and this short description lay bare the central mechanism of decontextualization that grounds his "project." Under the rubric of reenactment, Tribe's project involves a process of selection, performance, documentation, and distribution of these speeches. Video documentation is the primary form that this project takes; but the website is integral to the work, organizing the materials that define the project in terms of its production and its circulation. This focus on the mediated and re-mediated aspects of culture continues Tribe's engagement with new media and forms of networking that began with his role in the cofounding in 1996 of Rhizome.org, a web-based resource for artists. Thus far in the series, six protest speeches have been reenacted: Coretta Scott King's April 1968 speech at an antiwar demonstration in New York City, Howard Zinn's speech about civil disobedience delivered on Boston Common in 1971, Paul Potter's April 1965 speech at an antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., César Chávez's speech at a demonstration in Los Angeles in 1971, Angela Davis's speech delivered at a 1969 Black Panther rally in Oakland, California, and Stokely Carmichael's speech in front of the United Nations in 1967 as part of a national mobilization against the Vietnam War. In the material provided on his website, Tribe is quite explicit about the elements that constitute a reenactment for this project: a location, a speech, a performer, invited guests, and the presence

of cameras and various other recording devices. The events are advertised through news articles, emails, and other networks (the project has a MySpace page as well as now being supported and promoted by Creative Time, an arts organization in New York that orchestrates large-scale public events and exhibitions). As a result, audiences of varying sizes attend the events and are featured prominently in the documentation of the events. Available on Tribe's website as well as on YouTube, and distributed via DVD, the videos of these events have also been installed in galleries and on large-scale video screens—for example, in Times Square.⁹

The title of Tribe's "project" is taken from the Port Huron Statement, a document written in 1962 by members of Students for a Democratic Society, a group of American student activists who were working collectively to create a new formation on the left, a student movement that would break with historical modes of organizing and analysis.¹⁰ The publication of the statement was the announcement of this project, a call to bring into being a new student movement. The Port Huron Statement offered both an analysis of the past and an articulation of a range of convictions. In the document, the authors asserted that both the act of writing and the document they produced were part of "the search for truly democratic alternatives to the present." The collective authors were more committed to "experiments" than traditional methods of organizing and analysis. The Port Huron Statement was a public utterance, the performance of a break with the Old Left as well as an attempt to bring something else into being. The "New Left" is thus a contested term as well as a fiercely fought transformation. It signals the emergence of a group of young radicals and activists who believed that the poor and the students, not the workers, were capable of transforming society. The document, the publication of which is often cited as one of the founding moments of the New Left, called for and attempted to perform this break.¹¹ The New Left became the umbrella term for the emergence of new groups of radicals who aimed at transforming society as well as relations, analyses, and strategies as a whole on the left. The New Left can thus be contextualized as an historical designation. But the movements that were lumped under this label were never singular nor homogenous, and even SDS, the organization that developed out of the conference that produced this document, was itself characterized by a set of debates and divisions, all of which have been documented and scrutinized by various critics.¹²

In this way, the Port Huron Statement can be read as a rhetorical and practical break with history and ideology. Turning this break into a project about the relation between the present and the past is a provocative, if not strange, gesture. In some respects, it is the very vagueness of the designation of the New Left that enables this sort of project to be possible. By titling his work "The Port Huron Project," Tribe suggests that his work maintains some affinity if not a form of continuity with the project laid out in this document. But Tribe's "project" is not a political project. It is the work of an artist

who is taking history as his subject. So while it articulates a series of goals, assumptions, and values, as any political project does, the sense of vision and direction are tied entirely to the realm of cultural production and reproduction, not the transformation of culture or society per se. The procedure by which a political project is transformed into an aesthetic or cultural practice thus becomes evident. Tribe's project inscribes an event that was conceived as the establishment of an origin for a new political formation as little more than a label. It neither represents the process by which this New Left came into being nor contextualizes the break that the SDS members sought to create with the Old Left through their manifesto (and their organizing activities). It does not enact the project that the statement announced (the creation of a new movement) but instead repeats some of the speeches that the movements produced.¹³ In this way, Tribe's work offers a clear demonstration of a procedure by which the political and social movements of the 1960s are invoked, decontextualized, and, I argue, depoliticized.

When Tribe transforms the Port Huron Statement into his "project," he indulges in what Walter Benjamin called left-wing melancholy. In a short essay from 1931, Benjamin characterized left-wing melancholy as "the transposition of revolutionary reflexes . . . into objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption."¹⁴ This reification is akin to fetishization in that it makes of an aspect or part of the former left-wing politics an object that can be put into circulation without disturbing the status quo. These partial historical references neither question the past nor call attention to the possibility for the production of a radical future. For Benjamin, left-wing melancholy produces an "attitude to which there is no longer in general any corresponding political action."¹⁵ It is as if the very lifeblood that made the gesture significant is cut off; the movement or symbol is severed from its context, the political activity and movement that gave it meaning in the first place. Benjamin calls this a "transposition," a "metamorphosis" in which a "means of production" is made into "an article of consumption." By ignoring this dynamic "context," Benjamin argues, left-wing melancholy enables "complacency and fatalism" even as it appears to comment upon the present.¹⁶ Through an examination of the poetry of Erich Kästner, Benjamin isolates a certain kind of historiographical procedure that makes the political past into an object, rendering both politics and history in a particularly conservative manner even as it espouses a more radical allegiance through both its self-definition and its choice of subject matter. Benjamin's critique of the way in which Kästner's poetry transforms political history into a hollow form does not rest on aesthetic grounds. Benjamin does not argue that left-wing melancholy is the inevitable result of an art practice that seeks to treat political subject matter or history. On the contrary, Benjamin's argument is that Kästner's poetry makes visible a relation to history that exists within the sphere of art and politics. By designating a process that afflicts the political realm and the cultural realm, the concept of left-wing melancholy helps to

describe the ways in which the processes of cultural production are never ideologically neutral.¹⁷ “The Port Huron Project” exhibits the characteristics of left-wing melancholy in the way that it both isolates and monumentalizes protest speeches, rather than the activities or movements from which these speech acts issued. As an example of New Left-wing melancholy, Tribe’s project perpetuates a version of history that evacuates and renders lost the very political activity that made the speeches significant.

In essence, reenactment involves two procedures, the decontextualization and subsequent recontextualization of the past in relation to the present. In Tribe’s case reenactment does not interpret the past, but re-presents it, repeating a series of “protest speeches” from the past. Reenactment constructs a temporal dislocation and thereby has the potential to operate as a form of historical intervention. But Tribe’s project, as made evident on his website, does nothing more than collect various resources. Tribe’s project repeats well-worn artifacts of the ’60s antiwar and social justice (civil rights) movements, simply resurrecting the textual remains of those movements without accounting for the labor that produced the movements, nor their very ideological relation to history. In this respect, Tribe’s project is similar to Sharon Hayes’s series “In the Near Future” (2007), in which the New York-based conceptual artist photographs herself in the historical locations of protests holding placards from those earlier moments of resistance. Hayes, like Tribe, refers to her work as “performance,” as a staging of an action; but the source material that they both draw from relies almost exclusively on the documentation of events, images, and texts from recognizable moments in the history of large and varied social movements. These works trade on the power of decontextualization but do not seek to question the process of depoliticization that these documents from the past have already undergone, nor the operation of circulation and reproduction that continues and entrenches this particular form of depoliticization. Tribe’s project, like the work of Hayes, exhibits a particular form of New Left-wing melancholy that makes visible the reproduction of hollowed-out forms. In doing so, they support a kind of political inertia in which history is represented as an ineffectual loop of repetition and circulation.

In the case of Tribe’s “The Port Huron Project,” this process of decontextualization and depoliticization is evident on the project website, which functions as a repository. The project website makes available the “source” material for each of the reenactments in addition to the video documentation and media commentaries.¹⁸ But Tribe’s notion of “source” is shaped by an allegiance to the open source movement; he defines a source in terms of its reproducibility, its status as technologically accessible, not historically determined. The website of “The Port Huron Project” presents a mediography and a list of New Left speeches that provide a context for Tribe’s practice in relation to other artworks and texts, but it also reveals the limitations of his research. The discursive formation of the New Left stands in Tribe’s work without qualification. The speeches are assumed to constitute it, and the individual artifacts



Figure 1. Mark Tribe, Port Huron Project 3: We Must Name the System (US, 2007). Speech by Paul Potter, April 17, 1965. Reenactment, July 26, 2007, National Mall, Washington, D.C. Photo by Meghan Boudreau. Courtesy of the artist.

of “protest speech” are placed in relation to one another, thus comprising an aggregate of documents, statements, and documentation that come to stand for the New Left movements. Within the frame of the website, the specific context and ideological character of the individual movements from which each of these speeches spring is less significant than their status as part of the general category as a whole. In this way, this history is presented as a treasure trove from which to choose not the product of various struggles and, most significant, not the work of organizations and groups of people.

Tribe’s project illustrates the place of such artifacts in what Michel Foucault calls the archive. The archive, as Foucault defines it, is “the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and fields of use).”¹⁹ An amalgam of systems of classification (with respect to production and use), the archive shapes what can be seen and known about a given historical period and the present. The archive works by structuring what it is possible to understand and describe through the establishment of distinctions and differentiations. “The Port Huron Project” demonstrates the productivity of the archive, how the histories of the left and the New Left are re-produced and circulated by various means. In this respect, Tribe’s project makes visible a certain form of relation to the 1960s, not simply as a grouping of various objects (though his project presents them as such), but as a mode of apprehending politics itself. In his restaging of

these protest speeches, Tribe calls our attention to the way in which discontinuities on the levels of function and appearance shape our understanding of both the present and the past. His project exposes the way in which particular kinds of statements, as well as particular images, continue to mold ways of knowing, apprehending, and reading.

But “The Port Huron Project” does not question any of the categories it enlists; it simply reproduces the classifications that it employs. In Tribe’s project, the status of the statement, the conditions of its production, its political or ideological specificity, complexity, and context, are never engaged. This suggests that left-wing melancholy may be a term that can be used to describe a certain form of historically based aesthetic and cultural practice that deploys the archive rather than questioning it. By not questioning the classifications that organize and underpin the practice and its inscription, Tribe’s project does not make space for the production of difference. It closes down the possibility for radical change in the present that could be predicated on reading the past differently. As Wendy Brown rightly points out in her essay from 1999, Benjamin’s epithet is reserved for someone who is “attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal—even to the failure of that ideal—than to seizing the possibilities for change in the present.”²⁰ The depoliticizing of the past enables a depoliticized relation to the present. For a recent article in the *Boston Phoenix*, Greg Cook interviewed Mark Tribe and asked him why he chose not to deal directly with the war in Iraq. Tribe’s answer is instructive. He is quoted as saying that the form of reenactment allows him to deal with “more levels,” a phrase suggesting a parallel to Foucault’s notion of the archeological levels at which history should be analyzed. Unfortunately, while Tribe invokes these levels, the work itself does not question the operations by which these “levels” are already implicated in a cultural operation of general decontextualization.²¹

By choosing speeches that have already been re-produced without concern for all that surrounded and produced the speech, Tribe does not challenge the functioning of the archive. Textual remains provide the basis on which categories such as history and politics are conceived. Texts can be reproduced, excerpted, anthologized, reprinted, and analyzed. The conditions of performance and reproduction are less easy to “preserve.”²² With respect to “protest” speech, this operation of erasure is particularly significant. For the work that makes a “protest speech” into an event is precisely the work of organizing and constituting that audience. All the activities that went into “building” the events, constituting the crowds, anything that might indicate that politics is a process, a form of labor, are entirely obscured in Tribe’s documentation. When a protest is reduced to the text of a speech, the activity of production is not merely subsumed into a commodity; it is voided and effaced.²³

This process of what Rebecca Schneider calls “retroaction” is particularly significant in the case of Paul Potter’s speech, given the status of the

speech as the primary "document" of the April 17, 1965, March on Washington to Stop the War in Vietnam, the first demonstration sponsored by SDS. An excerpt of the speech was printed in the *National Guardian*, an important left-wing newspaper, on April 27 in its coverage of the march (along with the speech delivered by I. F. Stone, an Old Left luminary, at the demonstration). The publication of the speech was in many respects a response to the vicious debates (and sectarianism on some parts of the Old Left) that had threatened to undermine the march.²⁴ Potter's speech was then reprinted in its entirety by SDS as a pamphlet that circulated widely for the next few years. The mass reproduction of the speech was not a matter of preserving the speech for history, but rather of using the speech to help shape the present and the future, to bring people together and to build a movement that could "name the system" in order to change that system. The strategic choice to use the reproduction of the speech as an organizing tool helped to ensure that this speech would come to mark the emergence of SDS not only as a national force in the building of the anti-Vietnam war movement but also as a "representative" of the New Left. In the various anthologies of documents and speeches of the era, the speech is referred to by the title "We Must Name the System." This phrase as well as the sentiment it presented became emblematic of the New Left as a whole.²⁵ By substituting "the system" for capitalism, Potter offered the crowd a different form of analysis than the Marxism that dominated the Old Left. But more than just a shift in terminology, Potter's call to "name the system" helped to establish a new rhetoric of politics. Potter addressed a crowd that was no longer conceived of along class lines. Instead, he appealed to the varied convictions of those assembled to form the basis for a new politics as well as a new movement. Opposition and naming became motors of change as well as the activities that could produce alliances and affinity. In this way, the reproduction of the speech inscribed speechmaking as a form of political innovation.²⁶ But Tribe's reenactment makes no gesture to the specificity of the history of this text, and his reference to the "always-already" mediated stance misses the political significance that reproduction and distribution can have when they are considered in relation to their historical conditions.

As a form of performance, reenactment has the potential to call attention to the process of production, the labor and the very bodies that came to constitute the movement. But the focus of Tribe's project is documentation, not performance. Tribe's reenactments transform aspects of a range of struggles into media objects to be circulated and consumed, distributed within the press and art worlds. Tribe has stated explicitly that the goal of the project is to produce political speech and history as "spectacle," to set historic documents into the flow of contemporary media (corporate and otherwise), and to disperse repackaged images and words into the contemporary world of media. As a result of his form of publicity, his work has received prominently placed media coverage in a number of national newspapers.²⁷ But the mode of documentation does not reveal or release new information about the past.



Figure 2. Mark Tribe, *Port Huron Project 4: We Are Also Responsible* (US, 2008). Speech by César Chávez, May 2, 1971. Reenactment, July 19, 2008, Exposition Park, Los Angeles. Photo by Davis Jung. Courtesy of the artist.

Instead it calls attention to the apparatus of production and reproduction of the project itself. The media representations of the “speech-events” are circulated as products, and all the forms of labor other than that of “documentation” or filming are absented. The project’s website is a monument to the efficiency of the integrated circuits of the art world, corporate media, and the web in proliferating the circulation of nothing new.

Mark Tribe is explicit about how “The Port Huron Project” represents his attempt to catalogue a range of similarities and differences between the present and the past. As he states in numerous interviews about the project, his goal is to create a form of estrangement both from the past and the present, to produce “strange resonances.”²⁸ During the performance of the reenactments, the audience is the only part of the proceedings that is not overdetermined. In the documentation of these performances, the filmed audience registers moments of disjuncture, when the “now” of the reenactment and the “then” of the speeches don’t add up. The video documentation catalogues the moments when “something happens,” when the names referred to are unrecognizable, or when the movement or the march is cited. In watching the video works on the web or in the gallery, the resonance is doubled: the viewer shudders because the filmed audience shudders, engaged not in analyzing the speech but in searching out breaks in continuity. By situating the same words in relation to two new audiences, without considering the process by which either the speech or the audience was constituted, the performance becomes



Figure 3. Mark Tribe, Port Huron Project 6: Let Another World Be Born (US, 2008). Installation at "Democracy in America" exhibition, Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times. Courtesy of the artist.

a kind of echo chamber. The activity of politics as a mode of social relation, as both labor and performance, is repressed, overlooked, and forgotten. As a result, the absence of a politically engaged crowd, the very masses and movements that produced and attended these "protests," becomes palpable. This difference between then and now is the absence of the very movements from which Tribe draws these speeches. But the very structure of Tribe's project ensures this difference. By focusing on the text of the speech and the location as the primary aspects of what constitutes the "event," he relegates the "building of the audience" to the work of public relations, the result of a media campaign, not the stuff of grass-roots politics and face-to-face connections. Watching "Port Huron Project 3: We Must Name the System" on the website, one notices how the thin crowd of "listeners" corroborates a kind of fatalism. The "documentation" of the paltry audience speaks louder than the inspirational rhetoric. The video of the reenactment offers ostensible proof that the high points of activity of the 1960s cannot be re-created.

In the gallery installation, the depiction of the crowd functions differently. In the installation version of the project, two large screens fill one side of the gallery, angled in such a way as to refigure the space of the gallery as the viewing space for a performance. The panoramic set-up makes it feel like the viewer is within the bounds of the "reenacted" protest, oriented toward the one screen that features the "speaker." The gallery installation thus provides a location or site in which Tribe's reenactments are recontextualized in relation

to two audiences: the filmed audience represented on one of the two screens and the video viewer. The angled screens activate the space with a sense of proximity and event, transforming the empty space of the gallery into a space of possibility into which various “protestors” could come. Producing a space of inclusion, the work invites the viewer to participate in something different than a fiction. The retroaction of the video, complete with its resonances and dissonances, produces a feeling of being at a “protest.” The sense of social action, the affective response, works to produce an illusory connection between the viewer and the filmed audience. But the speech does not actually offer the possibility of a new relation to the past; as a result, the sense of the present becomes subject to scrutiny. Figured and positioned as a consumer, a passive listener, the viewer is neither a social actor nor a historical agent, one with the power to produce change. Instead, we are the receptacles for the repetition of a speech act. And when the speaker calls on “us” to become involved, we become aware that there is no other “us” to connect with, there is no place or movement for “us” to turn to within the gallery space.

In the installation version of Tribe’s “Port Huron Project,” I read an attempt to consider the riddle of the mass mobilization of February 15, 2003, and its inability to stop the war. Like *October*’s questionnaire and special issue, as well as Sharon Hayes’s “In the Near Future,” the reference to the protest movements of the 1960s serves as a form of gesture toward action, a kind of provocation. Tribe’s mode of investigation is to repeat speeches from earlier protests, to see if they might still catch fire, or to see what it was about them that did stop their war—implying, of course, that those speeches and that historical period offer clues that could unravel the problems of the antiwar movement today. But instead of raising the question of what makes a protest significant, of what gives it value within a movement, or within history, Tribe simply offers a series of already depoliticized documents to a culture that continues to work on these documents to keep them inert and incapable of creating a new relation to the past or the present. Tribe’s form of empty reference demonstrates how the general continuities and discontinuities with the historical anti-Vietnam War movement serve to prevent us from asking harder questions about what it would take to end this war and to do more than simply rename the system that needs these wars in order to operate.

“The Port Huron Project” is about “history,” not an engagement with the making of history or historiographical operations. In its invocation of research and the archive, the project represents not only a New Left-wing melancholy about ’60s protest speeches, but also a kind of melancholic appropriation of the very subject of history and politics. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx quotes Hegel when he writes that the facts and figures of history always “occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”²⁹ This frequently repeated quotation is often cited as a way to gesture toward the ironies of history; but in the case of the analogy between Iraq and Afghanistan and the war in Vietnam, the stakes of the historical comparison

are nothing less than human life. This apparent repetition can be considered a farce only insofar as historical specificity, ideological significance, and human cost are factored out, and to some extent this is precisely the operation that New Left-wing melancholy performs in the realms of politics and culture. By not staging any part of the relation between these speeches and the history of the movements they address and invoke, "The Port Huron Project" perpetuates the notion that political speeches are the key generator of political activity and opposition. But the facts are that the "protest speeches" that Tribe reenacts are only one small part of the actual organizing that built and galvanized the peace movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.³⁰ Through the absence of this kind of political and historical specificity, Tribe's practice enables a haziness that makes room for nothing more than echoes and cynicism: fatalism.³¹ The reproduction of "difference," the display of discontinuities, is held up as generative, something new, to be valued and celebrated within the field of culture. However, attention (and repetition) is given to these events and speeches from the New Left because they have almost no ability to disrupt the standard operating procedures of a society at war and in serious economic crisis. Under these conditions, what do instances of New Left-wing melancholy, of historical reenactment and other forms of reference to the 1960s, reveal about the character of our present left?

Reenactment has the potential to move beyond the production of a footnote to history, both with respect to the New Left and building an antiwar movement. Focusing on the labor involved in these movements, speeches, and designations might not entirely avoid the problems of documentation, and the ways in which documentation makes of performance, labor, and history an object to be exchanged. But this shift in focus would produce a different notion of history, a course of action different from reiterating and recirculating a given conception of politics as image and text and reinscribing documents that have already been inscribed into history. Reenacting organizing as opposed to protests or speeches might actually have the potential to stimulate change, difference, if for no other reason than that it would be offering a different set of documents to the archive, documents that could challenge the very operations of history and the role of the archive in the production of the status quo.

By way of conclusion, I want to point to one recent practice that has turned to the archive of the Vietnam era with a conception of politics as organizing, and most important, a different notion of the role of new media and publicity in the construction of an audience. In March 2008, Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) organized a weekend of testimony in Washington, D.C., that was modeled on the series of Winter Soldier hearings that Vietnam Veterans Against the War had organized in 1971 and 1972 to collect evidence of the effects of the atrocities that the soldiers witnessed and took part in while serving in Vietnam. One of the unofficial commissions was filmed and made into the film *Winter Soldier* (US, 1972). As in 1971, IVAW organized



Figure 4. A group photo of all the members of Iraq Veterans Against the War present at Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan, March 15, 2008. Photo by Mathieu Grandjean. Courtesy of IVAW.

a series of hearings throughout the country but chose to produce the first one for an audience of cameras, microphones, and many other individuals with the expressed intention of garnering media attention. Unlike the original Winter Soldier, the IVAW testimonies were streamed online during the events and continue to be available for listening and watching.³² The IVAW fully embraced mediation and documentation, using the web as a way to connect with “distant audiences,” particularly enlisted men in Afghanistan and Iraq. The focus of IVAW is on organizing resistance within the military, having recognized that one way to stop a war is to organize resistance among the people who are actually doing the fighting. This organizing strategy is a lesson from the Vietnam antiwar movement, in which the GI resistance and veterans movement played a crucial role. Their choices to stream the events and to release the film as a series of web episodes have all been made with the activation of their audience in mind. This conception of movement building derives from a conviction that politics is not solely a consumer activity, but rather a practice that comprehends that the power of people resides in their power to produce and create, to connect and to organize. Unfortunately, like the original Winter Soldier, the mainstream American press has all but ignored this reenactment. An example of an event from the antiwar movement, these statements are inseparable from the site of their production. The words and images produced by these soldiers do not repeat what has been heard and recirculated; they constitute new instances of political speech. The documentation of these hearings challenges history and power.

Registering more than just formless opposition, they produce an articulate sense of the need to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and all the activities associated with them, at home and abroad.

In the analysis of the relation between New Left-wing melancholy and historical reenactment, there are two tasks: to anatomize the absence produced by the project and to make of the absence something productive. The New Left-wing melancholy of which Tribe's project is exemplary reveals how the radical past has not been safe from a system in which the resurrection and rumination over the left-wing movements of the 1960s has helped to cover over the extremely urgent work we face in the present. But *Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan*, while not calling itself a reenactment, demonstrates a mode through which history can be repeated so as to disturb the present. The "performance" of history can create a rupture in the safe contemporary evaluations of the past and conceptions of the future, and help build an antiwar movement and a movement that would transform the system in which wars are necessary.

Paige Sarlin is an artist and filmmaker who was awarded a Joukowsky Presidential Fellowship by Brown University, where she is currently pursuing her doctorate in Modern Culture and Media. She is also the curator of Magic Lantern Cinema in Providence. Her work has been exhibited internationally; her first film, The Last Slide Projector, premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2007.

Notes

Special thanks to Jonathan Kahana, Rebecca Schneider, Patricia Ybarra, Patricia M. Dickson, Erika Balsom, and Eric Triantafillou for their comments and suggestions.

1. In his response to *October's* questionnaire, Yates McKee broaches the question of the potential "bad faith" of the journal in attempting to ameliorate their lack of attention to the contemporary conjuncture. But he demurs by calling attention to the magazine's history with respect to the "Visual Culture Questionnaire" in *October 77* (Summer 1996). McKee, in "In What Ways Have Artists, Academics, and Cultural Institutions Responded to the U.S.-led Invasion and Occupation of Iraq?" special issue, *October 123* (Winter 2008): 110. I prefer to recall a special issue published in 1987 and edited by Douglas Crimp. Under the title "AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism," it gathered a number of essays and responses that dealt directly with the relation between AIDS activism and cultural production. This 1987 issue, like the most recent special issue, could be read as both an admission and a corrective. The designation of a "separate" issue indicated that in its standard operating procedures this journal did not and could not attend to the realm of cultural activism (or political activism). Instead, at a moment of exceptional pressure, it could attempt to address this institutional gap by examining how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or AIDS, "intersec[t] with and requir[e] a critical rethinking of all of culture," as Crimp writes in his introduction to the 1987 issue. Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism," in "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," ed. Douglas Crimp,

- special issue, *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 15. The differences between these two issues are too numerous to state, but I would like to cite the earlier issue in an effort to underscore the significance of the war for this generation of thinkers, a conviction that Buchloh and Churner also make explicit in their introduction.
2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Rachel Churner, "Introduction," in "In What Ways Have Artists, Academics, and Cultural Institutions Responded to the U.S.-led Invasion and Occupation of Iraq?" special issue, *October* 123 (Winter 2008): 9.
 3. I was invited as a member of the group 16Beaver to respond to the questionnaire. 16Beaver (Ayreen Anastas, Rene Gabri, Benj Gerdes, Jesal Kapadia, Pedro Lasch, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Paige Sarlin), in "In What Ways Have Artists, Academics, and Cultural Institutions Responded to the U.S.-led Invasion and Occupation of Iraq?" special issue, *October* 123 (Winter 2008): 153, 154.
 4. Buchloh and Churner, "Introduction," 7.
 5. *Ibid.*, 9.
 6. In their film, Godard and Gorin pose the question in the following terms: "What role can artists and intellectuals play in the revolution?" The film consists of a voiceover commentary on the photograph originally published in *Paris Match* that came to be branded the Hanoi Jane image. The photograph shows Jane Fonda listening to two Vietnamese people. The image was circulated widely as an example of celebrity militancy and opposition to the war in Vietnam. In the film, Godard and Gorin take issue with this simplistic reading and critique the way in which the image celebrated thinking over action, appearance over labor.
 7. Mark Tribe contextualizes his own work by presenting a "mediography" in the form of a wiki page linked to his website. Mark Tribe, Sebastian Gallese, and Helena Anrather, "Port Huron Project Mediography," Port Huron Project Brown University Wiki, June 26, 2008, <https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/MarkTribe/Port+Huron+Project+Mediography>. This page provides an extensive list of works that use reenactment as a strategy, including the work of Ant Farm, Nancy Davenport, Jeremy Deller, Sharon Hayes, An-My Le, and Kerry Tribe. In terms of exhibitions and retrospectives that treat 1968 in the United States and abroad, there are far too many to list, but by way of example I mention a few exhibitions and film retrospectives: *Protest in Paris 1968: Photographs by Serge Hambourg*, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, March 12, 2008–June 1, 2008; *1968: Then & Now*, curated by Deborah Willis, Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Photography & Imaging, New York University, New York, September 2, 2008–November 22, 2008; *1968: An International Perspective*, curated by Richard Peña, Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, April 29, 2008–May 14, 2008; *40 Years After: Filming the '68 Revolution*, curated by Charles Coleman, Facets Cinémathèque, Chicago, August 22, 2008–August 28, 2008.
 8. "Port Huron Project," <http://nothing.org/php>.
 9. Tribe has titled each of his videos with a line from each of the speeches, so the works that constitute the series are "Port Huron Project 2: The Problem is Civil Obedience" (US, 2007); "Port Huron Project 1: Until the Last Gun is Silent" (US, 2006); "Port Huron Project 3: We Must Name the System" (US, 2007); "Port Huron Project 4: We Are Also Responsible" (US, 2008); "Port Huron Project 5: The Liberation of Our People" (US, 2008); and "Port Huron Project 6: Let Another World Be Born" (US, 2008).

10. First published as a manifesto, this sixty-page document was widely circulated and excerpted throughout the '60s and '70s. Anthologized and annotated, a full version of the text currently resides at the SDS website.
11. There are a number of other moments of origin for the international New Left, including the founding of the journal *New Left Review* in Britain in 1960. For a more detailed accounting of that history, see Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group, *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On* (London: Verso, 1989).
12. If there is one thing that the New Left can clearly designate, it is a relation to the Old Left. In 1968, Carl Oglesby, the president of SDS who directly succeeded Paul Potter, wrote: "The New Left is properly so called because in order to exist it has to overcome the memories, certitudes, and the promises of the Old Left." Carl Oglesby, "The Idea of the New Left," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove, 1969), 13.
13. A statement, according to Michel Foucault's definition, is not merely the issued declaration, the publication or recitation of a series of sentences, but rather something which "can be assigned particular modalities of existence," something which enters and operates within and in relation to other discourses. Considered from a Foucauldian perspective, "The Port Huron Statement" is a statement that originally operated as one unit within a field of statements, actions, and movements that were working to produce a break with the Old Left. In this way, then, the statement attests to "the field" known as the New Left, but it is also precisely this "field" that has enabled the reproduction of this particular "statement" to appear to have meaning that is entirely divorced from the context of the Old Left. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 107.
14. Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy" [1931], in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 305.
15. *Ibid.*, 305.
16. In her resurrection of this term, Wendy Brown focuses on the work of melancholy, attaching significance to the politics of these emotions. I believe that Brown's call for an investigation of the political character of the emotion of melancholy is a direct inheritance of the New Left's break with older notions of the site of struggle. One can understand the desire to move into the realm of feeling evinced in this call, published, as it was, in 1999, before the so-called "Battle in Seattle" at the World Trade Organization protests of that year and before the American prosecution of the most recent Iraq and Afghanistan wars. But in this present moment, I believe it is imperative to assert the significance of organizing and labor *within* political movements as a way to un-think our notions of politics as entirely subsumed in image and media production. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 19–27.
17. For Benjamin, works of art are always the product of a process or mode of production even though they may conceal the very labor that gives them shape and value (and thus the class character of their mode of address).
18. The project is presented self-consciously as an "open-source" project, not only in terms of its distribution and the open-source media format used in the DVDs, but also in that the "source" materials for the reenactments—the speeches—are made available explicitly to be reenacted by others.

19. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 129.
20. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy."
21. In the same article, Howard Zinn criticizes Tribe's work for not being more historically specific and, as a result, ineffective and defeatist. Greg Cook, "Back to the Barricades: Can Reenacting Vietnam-Era Protests Help Us Rethink Iraq?," *Boston Phoenix*, October 22, 2008.
22. Tribe's project demonstrates clearly what Rebecca Schneider has theorized about the relation between the archive and performance. She writes, "The archive itself becomes a social performance of retroaction. The archive performs the institution of disappearance, with object remains as indices of disappearance and with performance as given to disappear." Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100.
23. *Ibid.*, 100.
24. David Dellinger, "The March on Washington and Its Critics," *Liberation* 10, no. 3 (May 1965): 6–7, 31.
25. See *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo Teodori (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969); Peter B. Levy, *America in the Sixties—Right, Left, and Center: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 174–77; Michael W. Flamm and David Steigerwald, *Debating the 1960s: Liberal, Conservative, and Radical Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's, 1995), 229–32; Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left, 1950–75: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's, 2005), 95–98.
26. See Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, "Paul Potter and the Cultural Turn," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 209–23.
27. To cite just a few of the favorable reviews: Randy Kennedy, "Giving New Life to Protests of Yore," *New York Times*, July 28, 2007; Diane Haithman, "Port Huron Project Reenacts Seminal Events of the 1960s," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2008; Christopher Knight, "Mark Tribe's Port Huron Project via Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2008; and Holland Cotter, "With Politics in the Air a Freedom Free-For-All Comes to Town," *New York Times*, September 22, 2008.
28. Kennedy, "Giving New Life to Protests of Yore."
29. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.
30. Howard Zinn responded to the reenactment of his speech by criticizing Tribe's choice to compare a speech that was given at the height of the antiwar movement, after years of political education, demonstrations, critical media coverage, and solidier militancy, with what was a relatively early moment in the fight to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cook, "Back to The Barricades."
31. In his book *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*, Arnove discusses his choice to title his book after Howard Zinn's prescient 1967 book *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*: "No historical analogies are ever exact; but the parallels between Iraq and Vietnam are significant." He devotes his first chapter to the elaboration of similarities and differences, but the rest of the book supplies reasons to support the

immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq, offering information and arguments that are specific to Iraq. Anthony Arnove, *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal* (New York: New Press, 2006), xvi.

32. KPFA streamed the audio of the hearings during the proceedings and the archive is still available at <http://warcomeshome.org/wintersoldier2008audioarchive>. In addition, IVAW's website has testimony videos and a live blog. The website has links to the various other Winter Soldier events, including the testimony that was given before Congress on May 14, 2008. All this information is located at <http://ivaw.org/wintersoldier>. The texts were published in book form in 2008. See Iraq Veterans Against the War and Aaron Glantz, *Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008). In addition, the whole weekend was documented by David Zeiger, the filmmaker who made *Sir! No Sir!* (US, 2005). His film has been released as a series of web episodes at <http://thisiswherewetakeourstand.com>, starting in July 2009.