



# REVOLUTIONIZING HISTORY

A Conversation with **Olivia Robinson, Josh MacPhee, and Dara Greenwald**

BY JESSE BALL

Artists Olivia Robinson, Josh MacPhee, and Dara Greenwald make the invisible visible, from daily routines to entire cultural moments. Passing through the streets of Troy, New York, the trio felt a mounting sense of dismay at the changing cityscape and the loss of visible history. So, they hatched a project to re-create the façade of a missing building and thereby trigger its psycho-physical space in the landscape as well as its historical context. An examination of possible sites led them to a two-fold prize—a vanished building and a revolutionary abolitionist.

Liberty Street Church was located at the corner of Liberty and Franklin; in 1840, it housed a black congregation and a whirl-

wind of a pastor, Henry Highland Garnet. That year, his leg was amputated, which only seemed to spur him on. He fired blistering sermons from the pulpit, preparing the way for his famous 1843 speech, “Call to Rebellion: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America.” This was not mere rhetoric: “You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers...you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces...we ask you, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust.”

For the artists, to find the spirit of Garnet—grandson of an African warrior prince captured in battle, amputee, ferocious orator—in the blank space of the parking lot laid over the holy ground of Liberty Street Church was a call to arms. It is hardly surprising that Robinson, who teaches at the Maryland Institute College of Art, would answer that call. Her countless projects, including initiatives in federal prisons, manage this exact blend of recall and revolution. Her work continually makes the point that communities must preserve themselves through action and memory. On May 30, 2008, Robinson, MacPhee, Greenwald, and a coterie of assistants set in motion a large-scale remembrance.



Opposite and this page: Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Olivia Robinson, *Spectres of Liberty: Ghost of Liberty Street Church*, 2008. Plastic, clear tape, fan, video projectors, speakers, and animation, 35 x 25 x 35 ft.

At the corner of Liberty and Franklin, a ghost rose from the pavement, trembling and expanding. Liberty Street Church, a symbol of African American liberty and the center of Garnet's struggle, long consigned to dust, was clearly visible against the night sky. Passersby stopped in droves, and cars slowed to note the powerful phenomenon—on the sides of the inflated structure, images and text, part and parcel of the pastor's battle, played for all to see: "Let our motto be resistance! Resistance! Resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance." At night's end, the ghost church subsided, and morning came to an empty lot. As Robinson says, "Art is in the bodies of those who experience it. At least this church, disappeared from living memory, exists again as long as those who saw it."

**Jesse Ball:** *Did you choose materials based on the needs of the structure, or did the structure evolve out of your expertise with particular materials?*

**Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Olivia Robinson:** Seems like a pretty synergistic combination of both. Olivia wanted to make inflatables related to Troy architecture, and our combined brainstorming led to the church, which led to the ghost church idea, which fit perfectly with a clear plastic inflatable, and our budget (which was zero).

**JB:** *Were there particular materials that you especially liked?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** We especially wanted social interaction—talking with people about the project, inviting them to come—the physical materials were given meaning by the social context that the project both highlighted and created.

**JB:** *Do the materials add to the metaphorical content?*



**DG, JM, and OR:** The plastic creates an amazing ghostly quality. We call this project *Ghost of Liberty Street Church*, and it's part of the "Spectres of Liberty" series. It seems both solid and permeable, opaque and transparent. The ropes holding the church seemed metaphorical as well—as if it needed to be held down because of the power of Henry Highland Garnet's words. The video/animation of words spilling out of Garnet's mouth and dispersing into the atmosphere was a metaphor for his thoughts dispersing across the social fabric.

**JB:** *The project combined physical structure, community event, and video installation, molding them into a single whole-cloth experience. Were planning and coordinating a big part of the process? Did you have to leave room for last-minute epiphanies?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Planning and coordinating were as important as working with the physical materials. We see organizing as part of our artistic process. We worked closely with a number of people and had an immense amount of help in preparing the structure, doing test inflations, working on the animations, acquiring the location, and promoting the event. With each interaction, each test run, ideas evolved and changed for the final installation. We were making decisions up until the night of the event. Even then, we did not realize how much room we had left for epiphanies from the audience. Steven Tyson, who erected the historical marker at the same site, gave an unprepared but extremely moving speech about the site and the event.

**JB:** *Did the public cause the work to change?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Yes, at the event, people asked us to speak and answer questions, which we had not planned on, and Tyson's participation was also unplanned.



**JB:** *You live at some distance from one another. Did that change the style of the collaboration?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** We used web technologies, a Wiki, and e-mail lists to help us organize, but what really brought the project to fruition was three weeks of face-to-face organizing and work, where we met almost every morning and determined what needed to be accomplished that day. We realized that for us, there is no replacement for face-to-face contact and brainstorming. That is absolutely necessary for us to take on projects of this size.

**JB:** *How did you negotiate the space of collaboration?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** We each have different skill sets, and we ended up working that out in different ways. By the installation, very little was solely the sphere of one person, but we each took on heavier workloads for different kinds of labor. In the process, we learned a significant amount from each other and about all of the expertise involved, including video, animation, documentation, graphics production, promotion, outreach, inflatable construction, printmaking, text editing, and labor organization.

**JB:** *Did the controversial material create any friction within your collaboration? Or were you all as respectful as three owls in a tree?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Luckily we tended to agree about the interpretation and understanding of the material. With this project, we were trying to inject historical specificity into a location from which it had been stripped, but we did not want to circumscribe the audience to only a single possible reading. So, we had to agree less on interpretations of history and more on the

Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Olivia Robinson, *Spectres of Liberty: Ghost of Liberty Street Church*, 2008. Interior view.

importance of how to share that history, letting the audience take from it what they could and would. We had long conversations about how much to explain and how much to leave up to interpretation.

**JB:** *Did you expect the physicality of the church to accomplish as much as it did?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** The physicality of the church was really impressive. Even after three or four test runs, we were still in awe of the size and form that this simple pile of plastic was able to take. It was amazing to see people interact with it. It is so simple yet so hard to wrap your head around how plastic sheeting and a fan can fill a parking lot three stories high.

**JB:** *How long did everything take, from start to finish on the day in question, including the preparation and clean-up?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Fourteen hours or so.

**JB:** *What is at the heart of your upcoming project?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** All of our projects have been about the challenge of re-animating history, pulling ideas,



Left and above: Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee, and Olivia Robinson, *Spectres of Liberty: Ghost of Liberty Street Church*, 2008. Exterior and interior views.

images, and lives from the past and reframing them so that they resonate in the present. Malcolm X once said, "Only by knowing where we've been can we know where we are and look to where we want to go." In the upcoming Syracuse project, we are working with Jermain Loguen's idea of the Open City from the 1850s. Syracuse has a rich, though not well-known history as a radical city in the 19th century. Today, it is full of social justice groups, such as the Peace Council, the oldest peace organization in the nation. The current groups and activities are less celebrated than those of the past. The past lends a certain legitimacy to ideas, especially ideas about change. Through a series of cultural events and a visceral artistic experience, we hope to celebrate and acknowledge the connections between past and present social justice work in Syracuse, while envisioning even more ways for the city to be Open.

**JB:** *How is the Syracuse project linked to Ghost of Liberty Street Church?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Both projects are built around the idea that the past of a location means something to the present. Some of these meanings tend to be over-determined and well represented, while others may be suppressed or mis-represented. We have found that the more strident, outspoken, and militant parts of abolitionist history are downplayed today, even though they might be the very aspects that speak most to current social conditions.

**JB:** *What did you learn from the Troy project that you are bringing to the Syracuse project?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** One of the tools wielded by art and culture is the ability to create a sense of wonder and inquisitiveness in an audience. Traditional his-

tory telling or political organizing can rarely do this. In Troy, we were able to create that sense of wonder, and we hope to do the same in Syracuse. We are turning everyday materials like plywood, car parts, and bicycles into giant analog animation machines.

**JB:** *What is the relationship between the form you have chosen—a workshop and large-scale zoetropes—and abolitionism?*

**DG, JM, and OR:** Abolitionism in upstate New York was not simply an idea, but an embodied set of interlocking communities and institutions that aided slaves in their escape to freedom and kept them out of the hands of those who wished to return them to their "masters." In Syracuse, this took the metaphorical form of the Open City, which was the call of abolitionist preacher Jermain Loguen. In the Open City, abolitionists would not have to live in fear for their beliefs and former slaves would not have to fear being captured and returned to the South in chains. Our workshop is an attempt to parallel this sense of community; we hope to use it as a platform to connect to others who are interested in the idea of the Open City, both as a historical concept and as an arrow that points to possibilities for the Syracuse of the present and the future. The zoetropes are a tool to animate this process, to visualize the Open City with a series of technologies developed in the mid-19th century, at the same time as the struggle to end slavery in the United States.

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