

SEDIMENTING SOLIDARITY: SIGNS FROM THE MADISON PROTEST

by

Melissa Seifert

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ABSTRACT
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Melissa Seifert

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The 2011 Wisconsin protest inspired the wide ranging production of handmade and commercially-produced signage. Five hundred signs were collected and preserved by the Wisconsin State Historical Society and others were obtained by the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Art historians and prominent art institutes have dismissed the aesthetic qualities of handmade signs, instead cataloging them as ephemeral historical artifacts. I argue that signs work similarly to other art forms in the modern era, such as advertisements and poster art, which have gained scholarly attention. This project uses the Madison protest as a case study in order to track the often wide and varied sedimentation of protest signs in the aftermath of social movements. While signs from Madison originally existed in the hands of protesters as communicative devices, they were also placed in storefront windows and home residences as symbolic reminders of solidarity. Other signs were placed in historical archives as artifacts of social discontent or (re)placed in museum spaces as conceptual works. The wide sedimentation of Wisconsin protest signs speaks to their versatility as functioning objects which worked as communicative devices using a language dependent on visibility, recycling, circulation, and community. It is important that the discipline of art history begin to recognize the worth of handmade signs as objects which archive the performative aspects of social movements as they continue to be created in moments of social resistance.

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For Jeffrey Hayes

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Introduction

Artists have long been using their media to resist hegemonic power structures. The makers of Dada's anti-art aimed to parody standards of the institutional art world while Soviet Agitprop posters were used to politically persuade masses to form solidarities and mobilize collectively. In the 70's Emory Douglas produced weekly political prints reflecting Black Panther resistance to police violence in black communities and in the 80's Keith Haring created street art addressing AIDS discrimination and expressing alternative sexual identities. Throughout the 80s and 90s the Guerrilla Girls plastered posters throughout New York City problematizing a sexist art historical canon and museum system while for three decades Martha Rosler visualized feminist rhetoric and opposed dominant gender constructions. Since the late 70s graffiti artists around the globe have resisted the privatization of public spaces by taking back city walls and trains. If non-traditional, politically conscious artists such as these and others have been accepted as legitimate subjects of art historical study, it is important that the discipline continually move towards a re-evaluation of the canon to include art makers whose work exists on the edge of normative definitions of art. Contemporary producers of marginal visual cultures must enter into the framework of the canon¹ even as their work generates conflict and controversy. Specifically, handmade signs from political protest movements offer a visual vocabulary which can be studied like other more traditional art objects through the lens of art history.

This study explicitly reads protest signs from the 2011 political demonstrations in Madison, Wisconsin as expressive cultural products of resistance. Beginning in mid-

¹ The art historical canon can be defined as an exclusive set of established aesthetic standards which define and validate art objects and production as evidenced by the selective contents of prominent art historical textbooks such as Helen Gardner and Fred Kleiner's *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*.

February 2011, such artistic objects, including signs, sculptures, and other forms of media, overwhelmed the Madison Capitol building and its surrounding square; individuals as well as organizations adopted visual media as one of their weapons of revolt. Taking the activist signs from the Wisconsin uprising seriously can teach us much about the art, culture, people, politics, solidarity, and spaces of social movements. It is necessary to expand the canon of art history to include these types of political expression both within the existing literature on poster art and political graphics and as a creative mode which emphasizes DIY aesthetics and populist tactics of placemaking. The Madison protest exemplified the ability of resistant communities to create varying messages which acted, through color, text, and image, as signifiers of solidarity and cultural products of a public; but the inefficacy of electoral politics from the perspective of protestors suggests the inability of signage to accurately address long-term solutions.

In late March, 2011, protestors were ordered to leave the Capitol building in Madison, WI after occupying the space for months. After the last of the activists had been escorted out of the building, a surplus of ephemera including posters, signs, and pamphlets were left as discarded remnants. Some were collected by Sarah Stolte and Sonia Kubica, two Art History PhD candidates from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who then organized and curated an exhibition of the works cleverly titled “SolidARTity.” Others were compiled by the building’s administrators and given to the Wisconsin Historical Society archives (WHS). Curators from the archives then selected several posters and signs that fulfilled specific categories of interest they identified. These selected signs make up the Wisconsin budget bill controversy and recalls collection housed in the WHS archives. The research for this project is based on both the

objects from that archive and on those from the ‘SolidARTity’ exhibition catalog (whose content is also now housed in a separate collection at the WHS).

Political posters have been examined seriously by scholars in various disciplines, including art history, exploring a long tradition of political poster making tied to public art and advertisements in the modern period. Poster art has usually been understood as relatively mass produced (in the sense that print makers can print and reproduce quickly and economically) and something designed to be wall fixtures. For this reason, the study of poster art often excludes handmade posters created for individual use; a history of handmade signs is minimal if not nonexistent. Recently, a series of global and local public uprisings (for instance the events of the 2011 Arab Spring – including the uprising at Tahrir Square and the Tunisian Revolution – as well as the 2011 Wisconsin demonstration and the 2012 Occupy Wall Street protest) have revealed popular discontent with contemporary politics and authoritative structures. These events suggest an interest in resisting and subverting contemporary power formations which preserve the strategic unequal distribution of economic, social, and political control by those in power.

Photographic evidence of these social uprisings confirms the prevalence of activist homemade signs. Images of numerous other historically contentious events in the modern world (including Civil Rights marches, May ‘68, ACT UP demonstrations, NOW actions, Tiananmen Square, Seattle ‘99, and Immigrant Rights marches) similarly show a consistent interest among participants in sign making. While the ubiquity of social movement signage often overwhelms images of such events, visual culture, as a frame for understanding protest, is frequently overlooked. Studying homemade protest signs as art objects is important not only for the expansion of the discipline of art history but also

because it addresses existing issues which will continue to be pertinent as populations repeatedly resist dominant structures of control. As art objects, handmade signs will likely continue to be made as moments of protest consistently emerge globally and locally. The signs in Madison are characteristic of past and present popular protest signage; they were made with on-hand and/or recycled materials, they were created for individuals by individuals, and they often expressed personal concerns which speak to collective interests through text and image.

For example, in bold letters one sign proclaims “In Wisco We Drink Beer, Not Tea!” (Fig. 1) These letters are colored in red marker on white poster board. The sign shows indications of active use as part of the upper portion (seemingly where another word would have been) have been damaged and remnants of blue tape (which functioned as a damage-free hanging device inside the State Capitol) are visible. Although the maker of the sign is unknown, the emphasis, through underline, on the words “Not Tea” visually labels the creator as anti-Tea Party and within this context, anti-Budget Repair Bill. The sign also connotes pride in Wisconsin’s extensive brewing history, boasting a state-wide identity based on a presumed common preference for beer. This sign, like most others included in this study, exemplifies a DIY and homemade style which often relies on the use of recycled, inexpensive, and found materials (in this case, a cardboard box and markers). It also utilizes rhetoric which specifically addresses the maker’s interest in beer while also appealing to localized identity formations, based on Wisconsin’s reputation as ‘the beer and cheese state.’ Thousands of signs, similar to this one, were created for and at the Madison demonstrations. Hundreds of them still exist in the Wisconsin Historical Society and at various other archives across America (the

Smithsonian also currently maintains a small collection of Madison ephemera). The importance of these objects is beginning to be recognized as prestigious institutions have begun to preserve them. However, scholarship is more prone to dismiss handmade signs as too ephemeral for critical analysis. The signs from the archives need to be discussed and contextualized in terms of the Wisconsin protest to address a gap in the scholarly discourse surrounding the visual and cultural aesthetics of the event.

Dropping the Bomb

Before observing specific signage and reviewing relevant literature, it is important to briefly synopsise the events which make up the ‘Wisconsin Uprising.’² After Governor Walker’s February 11 announcement that he intended to limit public employee’s rights to organize and collectively bargain as part of his budget repair bill, tens of thousands of protesters flocked to the Capitol to become active agents in solidarity and struggle.³ Many of these enthusiasts bore signs, banners, flags, and sculptures and wore designated t-shirts and costumes in order to position themselves as active components of the collective fight against Governor Walker’s proposed bill. On February 16, approximately thirty-thousand gathered at the Capitol.⁴ On the next day, concerned that Republicans were attempting to pass legislation without allowing for sufficient time for public assessment or dispute, fourteen Senate Democrats fled to Chicago in order to prevent a quorum for a vote on the Bill; the state representatives did

² In popular literature, the 2011 events at the Madison Capitol have been called ‘the Madison Moment’ (see Robert Johnston, 2012) and ‘the Wisconsin Uprising’ (see John Nichols, 2012 and Yates, 2010). However, throughout this paper I often refer to it as the Wisconsin protest or demonstration to avoid associations with militancy.

³ John Nichols, “The Spirit of Wisconsin: How Scott Walker’s Union Busting Spurred a Popular Uprising,” *The Nation* (March 21, 2011): 13.

⁴ Lila Shapiro, “Wisconsin Protests: State Police Pursue Democratic Lawmakers Boycotting Vote,” *Huffington Post* (February 17, 2011), <http://www.webcitation.org/5wb2DI4JL> (accessed October 20, 2012).

not return to Wisconsin until early March. On February 23, *Buffalo Beast* editor Ian Murphy placed a prank phone call to Governor Walker claiming to be billionaire ally David Koch, one of Walker's largest corporate supporters and a dedicated union buster. During the twenty-minute phone call, Walker discussed methods to get the absent Senators to return as well as strategies to cripple public employee unions, promising never to negotiate and joking about using a baseball bat to protect his office against political rivals.⁵ This widely publicized call, along with the fleeing of the fourteen Democratic senators, who thereafter assumed the iconic title “The Dem Fourteen,” became the basis for many protesters’ ‘Do-It-Yourself’ (DIY) signage projects.

By February 26, the crowd grew to upwards of 150,000 (including some Tea Party members who were present to counter-protest) firmly establishing a community of resistance within and around the spaces of the Capitol building.⁶ Demonstrators organized a waiting list where dwellers were invited to testify against Walker’s legislation at an all-hours “People’s Mic” inside the Capitol. Protesters began occupying the building twenty-four hours a day and transformed it into a community space by posting signs, laying down blow-up mattresses, and designating eating, sleeping, and ‘family’ spaces as well as first-aid and information stations.

On March 10, Walker’s bill passed the State Senate 18 to 1, repealing state workers' rights to collectively bargain over pensions and health care, limiting pay raises of public employees to the rate of inflation, ending automatic union dues collection by the state, and requiring public unions to recertify annually. The State Assembly passed

⁵ Ian Murphy, prank phone call to Governor Scott Walker, February 23, 2011 (<http://buffalobeast.com/?p=5045>).

⁶ Austin Thompson, et al. ed. “Chronology of the Wisconsin Struggle,” in *Wisconsin: From the Front Lines of the Labor Battle*, XI (San Francisco: PLS Publications, 2011).

the law with a vote of 53 to 42. On March 12, a record of approximately 185,000 people occupied the Capitol grounds.⁷ By June 14, the number of protesters at the Capital was approximately 5,000 and by June 16 the number was down to roughly 1,000.⁸ Although smaller amounts of demonstrators remained at the Capitol throughout the following months, strategies shifted to focus on a campaign to recall the governor.

Between November 15 and January 13, 2012, more than one million signatures were collected for the petition to recall Scott Walker, making him the third state Governor to face recall in United States history. On June 5, 2012, Walker won the recall race, taking 53 percent of the vote, against Democratic candidate Tom Barrett (the same candidate he beat in the 2010 state elections). The Wisconsin uprising signaled an important shift in contemporary labor movements, marking “the strongest union fightback in decades.”⁹ Thousands of union-made signs were strategically disseminated throughout the crowd while equal numbers of homemade signs adorned the environment.

The visual culture of protest at the Capitol took on multiple forms including signage, costume, sculpted objects, installation, and performance. Many scholars have theorized images, *visuality*¹⁰, and visual culture.¹¹ Mirzoeff defines visual culture in an “interactive” sense, highlighting “those moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racial identities” which do not “depend on pictures but

⁷ Thompson, “Chronology of the Wisconsin Struggle,” XI.

⁸ Matthew Rothschild, “Wisconsin Demoralized, Demobilized,” *The Progressive* (June 17, 2011), <http://www.progressive.org/wx061711.html> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁹ Caneisha Mills, in Thompson, Austin, et al. ed. *Wisconsin: From the Front Lines of the Labor Battle* (San Francisco: PLS Publications, 2011), IX.

¹⁰ The term ‘visuality’ is used here in Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans definition as “the visual register in which the image and visual meaning operate.” See Hall and Evans, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 4.

¹¹ For example, John Berger (1972), W. J. T. Mitchell (2013), Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans (1999), and Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999).

on [a] modern tendency to picture or visualize existence.”¹² He argues that it is “a tactic rather than an academic discipline. It is a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life.”¹³ Visual culture and the aesthetic of social movements should be seen, in the context of mass protest, as artistic tools of resistance. This includes sound and action – intuitive and choreographed performative acts of occupation and procession in and around the Capitol – however, I intend to focus exclusively on signs and posters as forms of alternative media with emphasis on handmade signs that denote the do-it-yourself (DIY) element of the protest.

Examining the currency and pertinence of this form of visual culture can push the traditional boundaries of art historical scholarship by introducing new objects, which challenge the definitions, processes, and values of art. Thinking about handmade signs as art objects will allow art historians to broaden the scope of the discipline by looking beyond stereotypical definitions of artists as reinforced by the canon. New descriptions of art and artists should include people who do not necessarily identify as artists so that the sometimes simple act of creation merits aesthetic relevance. A literature review of social movement aesthetics, political poster art, and the Wisconsin uprising reveals an absence of overlap between scholars. Whereas social movement historians fail to address cultural expression, poster experts fail to closely analyze homemade signs such as those found at Madison. In order to address this problem, the signs will be framed within the discourse of DIY aesthetics and will be theorized as pieces which performed important work, and as communicative media which built a community identity using a specific

¹² Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

rhetoric to familiarize and occupy space within the Capitol. The volume of attendance, enthusiasm, and group cohesion in Madison has rightfully been recorded in history books; however, the breadth of cultural expression during the protests should also be approached from an art historical perspective in order to examine the tactical use of images and aesthetics as tools of resistance.

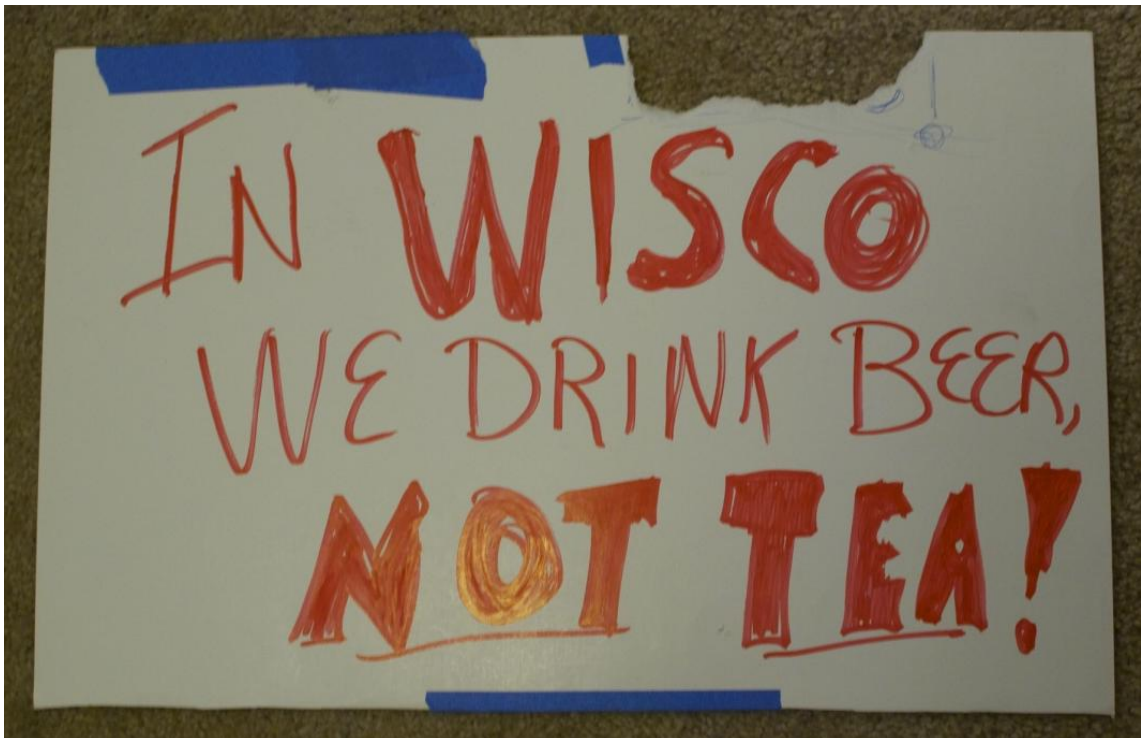


Figure 1

Chapter 1: Social Movements, Poster Art, and the Wisconsin Protest

As topics of scholarly interest, social movements, poster art, and even the Wisconsin Uprising have each received considerable attention yet the overlap between these subjects has been minimal. While this project seeks to address the importance of handmade signs during protests, and specifically during the Madison Moment, it is useful to first review prominent literature in each area in order to expose significant gaps in the scholarly discourse.

Social Movement Scholarship

Various theorists have written extensively on the subject of social movements. Although notable cases of social movement scholarship exist as early as the 1840s¹⁴ and continued to emerge throughout the 1950s¹⁵ the contemporary study of collective action became prominent in the late 1970s with works by Charles Tilly, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Sidney Tarrow, and Ernesto Laclau.¹⁶ In 1978, Tilly's extensive study *From Mobilization to Revolution* set out to analyze collective action or "the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests."¹⁷ He argues that "collective action usually takes well-defined forms already familiar to the participants, in the same sense that most of an era's art takes on a small number of established forms."¹⁸ Tilly's

¹⁴ See Lorenz von Stein, *Socialist and Communist Movements since the Third French Revolution* (Leipzig: O. Wigand, 1842); *The History of the French Social Movement from 1789 to the Present* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1959); and Rudolf Heberle, *Social Movements: An Introduction to Political Sociology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951).

¹⁵ Rudolf Heberle, Ralph H. Turner, Herbert Blumer, and Theodore J. Lowi all produced important works between 1951 and 1971.

¹⁶ Other notable contributions include: David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, eds. *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

¹⁷ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978), 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

suggestion is ironic here as he dismisses the possibility that protest signs, as ‘well-defined forms’ of collective action, might also be assessed as visual art forms. However, his argument that protests depend on a pre-established standard “repertoire of collective action”¹⁹ is useful because it provides explanation for varying degrees of contagion and spontaneity often prevalent during social movements.²⁰ In Madison, many of the elements of the uprising were traditional (marches, petitions, speeches, occupation) while others were spontaneous (a March 12 tractor parade, Ian Murphy’s prank phone call, a state-wide teacher sick out).

Perhaps more useful to the study of collective action in Madison is Piven and Cloward’s 1979 study *Poor People’s Movements*. In their first chapter ‘The Structuring of Protest’, they suggest that protest is “not a matter of free choice; it is not freely available to all groups at all times, and much of the time it is not available to lower-class groups at all.”²¹ Piven and Cloward recognize class-based circumstances as directly tied to protest tactics, organization, and outcomes. The authors also argue that protest movement actors experience a transformation in consciousness and behavior.²² They become consciously critical of authoritative systems and begin to realize their own agency to affect their conditions. Protesters begin to behave in unordinary and/or defiant ways because they find power in collectivity and believe that their actions are supported by a majority.²³ The author’s analysis of the behavioral shifts linked to protests explains the range of artistic behaviors evidenced by homemade protest signage during acts of

¹⁹ Tilly uses the notion of a “repertoire of collective action” to describe the various forms of demonstrations including marches, occupations, speechmaking, strikes, petitions, and other avenues for articulating claims.

²⁰ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 151-158.

²¹ Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

social resistance. Many sign makers in Wisconsin were acting out of the ordinary by using image and text to express themselves.

In 1983, Sidney Tarrow published *Struggling to Reform* in which he defines social protest movements as “groups possessing a purposive organization, whose leaders identify their goals with the preferences of an unmobilized constituency which they attempt to mobilize in direct action in relation to a target of influence in the political system.”²⁴ The author proceeds to examine the formation of group solidarities, leadership, and organization however he stops short of addressing social movement tactics. In Tarrow’s 1994 study, *Power in Movement*, he introduces the notion of a “cycles of contention” which he insists explains a continuation of popular interest and participation in social movement opportunities.²⁵ He posits that “the process of diffusion in protest cycles is not merely one of “contagion”...it also results when groups make gains that invite others to seek similar outcomes.”²⁶ In relation to the study of signage, Tarrow writes about “collective action frames” of meaning which he suggests, building from David Snow’s argument, causes movement organizers to orient their campaigns “at the intersection between a target population’s culture and their own values and goals.”²⁷ This notion of cultural encoding to produce meaning is useful as a way to understand how commercially produced signs drew on cultural values to address collective as well as specific needs. Some signs in Madison framed the struggle in terms of family values and

²⁴ Sidney Tarrow, *Struggling to Reform: Social Movements and Policy Change During Cycles of Protest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

²⁵ Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics* (Cambridge: New York, 1994), 24.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 122-123.

Wisconsin's labor roots while others framed it as a fight for workers' rights. Homemade signs, however, were much more specific in their framing.

In 2004, Tilly produced his first full length study specifically dedicated to social movements. In his third edition of the book, the author and Leslie Wood define social movements as “distinctive forms of contentious politics—contentious in the sense that social movements involve collective making of claims that, if realized, would conflict with someone else’s interests...”²⁸ According to Tilly and Wood, social movements emerge from a combination of three elements including campaigning, social movement repertoire, and WUNC displays (or demonstrations of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment).²⁹ These factors work to form collective identity and solidify direct group claims. Although the authors do not refer to signage, it would likely fall under the category of repertoire. Signs and slogans can be understood as recycled and reused devices in an expansive social movement repertoire.

The notion of SM repertoire also emerges in Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke's article “‘Get Up, Stand Up’: Tactical Repertoire of Social Movements.”³⁰ Taylor and Van Dyke posit that tactical repertoires are “interactive episodes that link social movement actors to each other as well as to opponents and authorities for the intended purpose of challenging or resisting change in groups, organizations, and societies.”³¹ Two modes of action can be differentiated during social movements: insider tactics and outsider tactics. Insider tactics, usually non-confrontational, include “boycotts,

²⁸ Tilly and Leslie Wood, *Social Movements, 1768-2012* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013), 3-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁰ Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke, “‘Get Up, Stand Up’: Tactical Repertoire of Social Movements,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A Snow, Sarah Anne Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, 263-293 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

dramaturgy, lawsuits, leaflets, letter-writing campaigns, lobbying, petitions, and press conferences.”³² Outsider tactics, usually confrontational, include “sit-ins, demonstrations, vigils, marches, strikes, motorcades, symbolic actions, boycotts of classes, blockades, and other illegal actions.”³³ Taylor and Van Dyke suggest that three central elements—contestation, intentionality, and the construction of collective identity—always exist in moments of protest.³⁴ The authors detail a thorough description of protest aesthetics and actions which show how signs, as tactics, work to construct identity and form connections between people.

The prevalence of a community culture formed during social movements is further explored by Ernesto Laclau in his study *On Populist Reason*. He presents his theory of the constitution of populism; he suggests that when people with unsatisfied demands perceive that others have equally unfulfilled demands “an equivalential relation is established between them” resulting in “a widening chasm separating the institutional system from the people.”³⁵ This relation (or “plurality of demands”) forms an internal frontier or “equivalential chain,” which makes up a broader social subjectivity he calls “popular demands.”³⁶ Laclau draws the conclusion that populist identity can only emerge with “the expansion of the equivalential logic at the expense of the differential one.” So, a particular identity emerges from a collection of differences.³⁷ In order to assure “an equivalential articulation of demands” (which forms a ‘people’ or community) the universality of the whole must be determined when dealing with masses of differing

³² Ibid., 267.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 268.

³⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 73-74.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 78, 81.

identities. According to Laclau, an equalizing chain of demands forms an antagonistic front, or the notion of society as “two irreducible camps structured around two incompatible equivalential chains.”³⁸ With the formation of this equalizing identity, power relations can be challenged and repositioned so that protesters may claim space and clearly identify and visualize political problems. The notion of equivalential chains and antagonisms is useful in order to understand how individuals adopt certain elements of struggle, especially when dealing with wide ranging identities, which they deem most relevant to forming an identity that could promote solidarity. Signage at Madison regularly reflected a wide range in individual identities among demonstrators even as collective identities emerged.

For Walter Nicholls, social movement communities are based on the formation of networks which rely on both weak and strong ties. Weak ties, such as common grievances which “loosely connect[s] actors,” work to permit activists to cooperate and coordinate their actions. More importantly, strong ties “generate forms of ‘social capital’ like *norms, trust, emotions* and *interpretive frames*.”³⁹ The author adds, “weak ties help circulate information to different activists, and strong ties enable activists to contribute their scarce resources to risky collective struggles.”⁴⁰ Many of the commercial and handmade signs from Madison reflect the strategic use of both weak and strong ties to form networks between individual activists and between organizations and activists. While the aforementioned scholars thoroughly analyze resistance by theorizing about identity, collectivity, and populism, identifying tactics and strategies of organization, they

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Walter Nicholls, “Place, Networks, Space: Theorising the Geographies of Social Movements,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (2009): 83. (author’s emphasis)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

stop short of addressing signage or banners which have been noticeably present in almost every case study of protest they reference. To address this problem, it is important to observe relevant literature regarding protest signs and posters.

Political Art-Making: Posters/Performances/Projects Scholarship

Discussion of signage in scholarly literature about protest is minimal. This is not surprising since protest signs are seldom regarded as valuable objects of analysis; the same is true of art-historical studies of signage. Often these forms of visual culture have been overlooked or dismissed as too ephemeral for thoughtful analysis. However, much scholarship does exist pertaining to political posters as art forms.⁴¹ These studies have focused on radical wall posters most often found in urban areas. While these provide thoughtful and intensive investigations of poster culture, a crucial difference can be noted between these and homemade protest signs. Most studies of wall posters isolate certain popular and recognizable signs, usually attributed to practicing artists or printmakers; the poster becomes one in a large portfolio of (usually) graphic works. To the contrary, I argue for the importance of DIY signs created by non-traditional artists.⁴²

Some authors have written about the cultural products of social movements. T.V. Reed looks to cultural production as a channel for social change and suggests that social movements “form strong cultures of their own, called “movement cultures,” which offer alternative modes of...our collective civil and civic lives.”⁴³ Reed also alludes to a

⁴¹ Notable works include those by Lipsitz (2001), Tom Wilson (2012), Russ Davidson (2006), Chon A Noriega and Holly Barnet-Sánchez (2001), and Malcolm Frost et al. (2006), among others.

⁴² Many creators of signs in Wisconsin do not refer to themselves as artists so it is not useful to label them as such. For this reason, they cannot be analyzed as ‘outsider artists’ or even as amateur artists. Instead they are activists who felt compelled by the struggle to express themselves through the media of signage. For this reason, they will be referred to as non-artists, non-traditional artists, or sign-makers.

⁴³ T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xv.

problematic gap in scholarship where social movement and cultural studies scholars fail to interact. He focuses on American movements on the Left and writes specifically about struggles associated with civil rights and black power, women's rights, Chicano/a and American Indian rights, gender equality, and anti-globalization. The author theorizes social movements as counter-cultures that produce cultural texts (literature, poetry, music, and visual art) and inform general American culture.⁴⁴ Reed's chapter on ACT UP's graphic arts, including posters, is useful as he introduces an inherent link between the "cultural and political dimensions of movement activity."⁴⁵ He writes about the "Silence = Death" slogan and the iconic pink triangle image as borrowed cultural products. This illustrates a history of image recycling and appropriation during social movements which was also prevalent in Madison.

Some scholars have produced works specifically highlighting sign and poster culture. *Signs of Change*, published in association with Exit Art – a cultural center based in New York – by Dara Greenwald and Josh Macphee, is the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the same name produced by Exit Art. It offers a comprehensive collection of "ephemera, graphic design, and social and political documents."⁴⁶ In their introduction, the authors suggest that "[o]ut of both desire and necessity, people who previously did not consider themselves media or art producers emerge from struggles as artists, designers, and video makers...and dozens of other new identities."⁴⁷ They define these art producers as "new movement artists" and their products as "action-art."⁴⁸ While

⁴⁴ Ibid., xvi.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 179- 191.

⁴⁶ Dara Greenwald and Josh Macphee, *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s to Now* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16, 21.

Greenwald and Macphee's study is important as a thorough compilation of social movement posters, providing full color prints and brief commentaries, it primarily addresses digital, lithographed, and/or silkscreened prints. *Signs of Change* suggests that the most important signs produced during social movements are created by printmakers and graphic artists. This assertion presumes that art does not result in action in the sense that the act of art-making does not take place at the moment of contestation or in the space of resistance but rather happens in a studio away from the action. This problematizes the authors' use of the term "action-art". I seek to break down this idealization of the trained artist and suggest that handmade, on-site, and spontaneous image making might be more linked to the actions associated with protest than many printed signs.

Liz McQuiston also published a two book series focused on political graphics; the first covers images since the sixties and the second during the digital age. The author dedicates her first volume to the rich history of posters, pamphlets, and other forms of pre-digital graphic media informed by war, peace, ecology, and sexual politics.⁴⁹ In her second volume, *Graphic Agitation 2*, she maps the emergence of new technologies in the nineties including "faxes, mobile phones, the internet and the world wide web" which became "'power to the people' tool[s] of the 1990s."⁵⁰ New channels for activism, solidarities, and collective organization were possible and facilitated a global network of resistance. McQuiston identifies new protest methods such as online zines, text messaging, websites, and hacking which she suggests existed alongside with and were

⁴⁹ Liz McQuiston, *Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics Since the Sixties* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1993).

⁵⁰ Liz McQuiston, *Graphic Agitation 2: Social and Political Graphics in the Digital Age* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), 6.

complimentary to more traditional forms of direct action.⁵¹ The author also alludes to the problem of accessibility; realistically, not all new technologies have the capacity to reach a global population, access is only a reality for those who can afford it, and new media simply does not appeal to everyone. This is part of the reason why more familiar and accessible forms of resistance, such as homemade signs, are still prevalent during social uprisings. McQuiston's studies focus on graphic wall posters, advertisements, and new media and provide a rich historical context of graphic poster art throughout the modern period.

Other studies focus more on the function and political work of posters. *¿Just Another Sign?*, published in conjunction with *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, an exhibition organized by the University Art Museum at UC – Santa Barbara focuses on Chicano posters as forms of resistance. In the introduction to the book, Chon Noriega explains that as a medium “the poster exists somewhere between the unique art object and the mass media. It blends the formal qualities of both in order to reach an audience neither cares about: urban exiles in search of community.”⁵² George Lipsitz' suggests, in his essay in the same book, that posters are not just pictures, they are:

multiples designed for quick, inexpensive production and mass distribution. They are created for use in everyday homes and offices, on bulletin boards and lamp posts, in schools and community centers...[t]hey nurture and sustain collective memory by commemorating important moments...⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Chon Noriega, “Postmodernism Or Why This is Just Another Poster” in *Just Another Poster?*, ed. Chon Noriega, 23 (University of Washington Press, 2001).

⁵³ George Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano” in *Just Another Poster?*, ed. Chon Noriega, 72 (University of Washington Press, 2001).

Both authors recognize the ability of posters to communicate to a broad and popular audience and suggest that they facilitate community and collectivity. Lipsitz' essay refers specifically to poster art of the Movimiento Chicano, but his assertion that posters play a vital part in "constructing organic solidarity and in defining collective ideology" is directly relevant to a variety of social protest media including signage in Wisconsin. He posits that posters are important as statements which use common symbolism and iconography to remind participants of their similarities and shared cultural past.⁵⁴ Lipsitz posits that "[s]ocial movements...open up artistic production to people previously excluded from access to arts education and resources," adding that "[t]hey bring together artists and activists."⁵⁵ While this is true, they also make activists into artists by blurring the borders between art and activism. He proposes that rather than "thinking about Chicano poster art as 'community-based art making,' it is more productive to view it as a form of art-based community making."⁵⁶ Madison ephemera should be assessed in this way to better understand how it worked by relying on cultural references to create links between participants through visual media. Community building frames in Madison often referenced protester's bonds as badgers, cheese eaters, and beer drinkers.

In his essay "Paper Walls", Tom Wilson analyzes posters as "alternative and experimental means of communication for dissenters."⁵⁷ He poses several stimulating questions: since salvaging posters defies their intended purpose, does their co-option "mean their political fervor has been defused for good?"⁵⁸ Wilson alludes to the problem

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 82, 84.

⁵⁷ Tom Wilson, "Paper Walls: Political Posters in an Age of Mass Media," in *West of Center*, ed. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, 163 (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 164.

of poster exhibition outside of an original (often political) context: while protest posters are often originally displayed in public spaces in order to address a broad community, their exhibition in museums and galleries effectively renders the objects autonomous from social movements.⁵⁹ These questions will be useful in later chapters which examine the acquisition and exhibition of Madison signs by historical archives and the ‘art world’. The author also introduces the idea of a “dialogic exchange of cultural and political ideas” between poster makers.⁶⁰ Many sign-makers in Madison copied, co-opted, and appropriated the ideas, icons, and symbols of their fellow activists to successfully generate an array of usable imagery.

One problem within the existing literature on activist art and posters is a common assumption that sign-makers are not capable of creating art objects, or rather that their products do not permit scholarly attention as such. In the 80s, after decades of cultural unrest, Lucy Lippard wrote her essay “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power” in which she identifies the pervasiveness and efficacy of activist art throughout the sixties, seventies, and into the eighties.⁶¹ Evidently, the author is not referring to street activists or striking demonstrators. She writes about a long list of artists who take on activist labels because their work subverts dominant power structures and resists the status quo. This is not to say that some artists were not involved with street protest or other demonstrations, but rather to suggest that activist art can be defined in varying ways – while this project aims to define one type of activist art as homemade signs, Lippard defines it in reference to self-proclaimed and institutionally recognized artists. Although

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁶¹ Lucy Lippard, “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

she offers a useful view of art as a “communicative exchange” between artists and communities, the author’s study again illustrates a common resistance to including handmade sign-makers into discussions about activist art.⁶²

For Nina Felshin, activist art “both in its form and methods, is process – rather than object – or product-oriented” utilizing “formal strategies—collaboration among artists, public participation, and the employment of media technology in information delivery.”⁶³ She adds that it “often employs such mainstream media techniques as the use of billboards, wheat-pasted posters, subway and bus advertising, and newspaper inserts...to subvert the usual...”⁶⁴ The author, like Lippard as well as Greenwald and MacPhee, centers her definition on printmaking and other art forms which may be dispersed through “media technology” (although she does allude to activist performance art as well). The term activist art has emerged in art historical scholarship as a way to explain how politically conscious artists react to and are informed by social resistance. The implication of this statement is that activist’s creations are only art if they are produced by established artists – Suzanne Lacy, the Guerrilla Girls, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Peggy Diggs, and certain artist collectives are a few significant artists in Felshin’s collection. These examples of art activism are characterized by artists *becoming* activists. The signage in Wisconsin challenges this assumption by proving that activists can produce cultural products and be acknowledged as art makers.

Analysis of the signage in Madison necessitates a different category of activist art in which activists become artists. Felshin does go further by including ACT UP’s Gran Fury graphics and WAC (Women’s Art Movement) posters and thereby includes the

⁶² Lippard, “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” 342.

⁶³ Nina Felshin, *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 10-11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

possibility of non-traditional artists as creators of activist art; however her analysis differs from mine in that she discounts homemade on-site works. In her introduction, the author points to the irony of her book title, she writes “the proper answer” to her title question “But is it art?” is: “But does it matter?”⁶⁵ She implies, somewhat paradoxically, that while the book is about expanding the canon of art history to include activist art, work created by activists should not have to be labeled art to be taken seriously.

The aforementioned authors have traced the extensive history of activist art including political poster-making and performance. They demonstrate that wall-posters have been used as political tools as well as artworks throughout the modern era and that the overlap between artist and activist was and is common. This argument should be expanded to include other forms of imagery in public spaces such as advertisements and announcements which generally carry specific ideological meanings. In other words, art history and visual studies have extensively dealt with objects which have a similar purpose and function as protest signs. This study brings a related object to the study of art, one that is public, spontaneous, and often temporal.

Cardboard Canvases: Scholarship on DIY and Homemade Aesthetics

A small vein in recent scholarship pays specific attention to contemporary activist signs by non-traditional artists, as forms of protest-based media. Ariella Azoulay’s essay “A State of Civil Emergency” analyzes the production and wide-ranging use of homemade activist signs made during social movements around the globe, noting the ways in which demonstrators create public places within private spaces.⁶⁶ She suggests that the “act of constructing private space in the heart of public space” is the “declaration

⁶⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁶ Ariella Azoulay, “A State of Civil Emergency” *Artforum International* 50, no. 4 (2011): 230-235.

[by citizens] of a *civil state of emergency*.”⁶⁷ The author describes a homemade cardboard sign (rather than the usual “bulk-printed poster”) worn in New York’s city square as a “necessary accessory” voicing a “personal justification” and “enabl[ing] citizens...to understand what they experience privately as part of a general structure of oppression.”⁶⁸ Azoulay makes an important point when she suggests the necessity of signage to individuals and to protest communities. The ubiquity of homemade and commercially produced signs in moments of protest, and specifically in Madison, confirms this claim. For Michael Taussig, the corporeal relationship between demonstrators and their homemade signs at OWS emphasized the “centaurlike quality” of protesters as “half person, half sign.”⁶⁹ Both authors argue for the necessity of protest signs as irreplaceable objects which signify participation.

In his more recent article “A Qualitative Quilt Born of Pizzatopia”, Josh Macphee also examines the materiality and ubiquity of cardboard signs constructed from discarded pizza boxes during the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement in New York.⁷⁰ The author emphasizes the significance of DIY sign-making which relied on the consistent influx of pizzas resulting in an abundance of discarded cardboard delivery boxes. As a graphic designer and artist, the author notes his discontent with the visual qualities of homemade signage but recognizes that this was not their purpose.⁷¹ Macphee recalls the array of art supplies and cardboard which allowed anyone to participate by making a sign. Comparing sign rhetoric to Facebook, he suggests that they became “real world

⁶⁷ Ibid., 232 (author’s emphasis).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Michael Taussig, “I’m so Angry I Made a Sign,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 2012): 75.

⁷⁰ Josh Macphee, “A Qualitative Quilt Born of Pizzatopia,” in *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*, ed. Kate Khatib, Margaret Killjoy, and Mike McGuire, 23-29 (Oakland: AK Press, 2012).

⁷¹ Ibid., 25.

‘status updates’” which fostered communication and networking.⁷² The fact that the author feels compelled to distinguish handmade cardboard signs from ‘real’ and “successful, or compelling, political graphics” speaks to a general refusal among traditional art-makers and historians to accept handmade signs as cultural art products. Macphee’s account of the OWS protest evidences the DIY qualities and spontaneous process of sign making at protests and speaks to the various art-making spaces which emerge within social movement communities. These studies offer useful conclusions about the efficacy of DIY signs but do not observe specific signs or look closely at their form, function, or mode of production. Observing these aspects makes for a better understanding of their varied functions and effect on the lived experience of demonstrators.

The Madison Moment: Scholarship on the Wisconsin Demonstrations

A number of books and articles have emerged about the events surrounding the Wisconsin uprising. These writings collectively illustrate the importance of the events to political theory, labor and union history, and social movement strategy but a discourse regarding the visual culture and signage aesthetics during the protest has yet to emerge. Dennis Weidemann’s book, *Cut from Plain Cloth*, is the only work that specifically focuses on the visual elements of the protest.⁷³ The volume offers a comprehensive and striking collection of photos but visual analysis of sign aesthetics or exploration of individual sign-makers is minimal. Instead, the author pairs images with brief dialogical writings which suggest a nostalgia and optimism for those pictured; Weidemann recognizes the significance and pervasiveness of signs (as well as costumes and sculpted

⁷² Ibid., 29.

⁷³ Dennis Weidemann, *Cut From Plain Cloth: The 2011 Wisconsin Workers Protests* (Fitchburg: Berens House, 2011).

objects), but lacks a deeper interest in their communicative work as visual sources of resistance. *Cut From Plain Cloth* is useful as a thorough visual documentation of the uprising; almost every photo includes multiple homemade and commercially produced signs. The compilation of images works as a primary visual source reflecting the interior and exterior spaces in and around the Capitol at the time of the protests and demonstrates my claims, in later chapters, about the physical transformation of that space through the influx of cultural products.

Most other studies about the protest focus on politics, labor history, and social movement methods. *Wisconsin Uprising*, edited by Michael Yates, offers sixteen essays by various labor organizers, radical journalists and editors, professors, and activists. In his introduction, the author instigates a call to arms; he suggests that in order to improve their circumstances readers must educate themselves, devalue the power of electoral politics, organize workplaces, control their own unions, and demand democracy.⁷⁴ His brief foreword is telling of the volume's content which focuses on labor struggles, trade union politics, and progressive tactics of organization. The book is divided into three sections; the first section offers detailed first-hand accounts of actions at the Capitol including brief descriptions of individual signs and slogans. While the authors are not specifically interested in visual analysis, they use signs to exemplify specific points about the rhetoric of working class values and rights. This is useful as a way to think about handmade signs as communicative media which used a common visual and textual language to address individual and communal needs.

⁷⁴ Michael Yates (ed.), *Wisconsin Uprising: Labor Fights Back* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 23-25.

Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle also edited a compilation of essays centered on the Wisconsin events titled *It Started in Wisconsin*.⁷⁵ The book is composed of fourteen essays including photos and comics and offers a thorough historical perspective of Wisconsin political activism, labor history, and union roots. The editors are invested in the cultural and social implications of the uprising; a few articles concern the role of music and media, education, and youth culture (in fact, pop culture icons Tom Morello and Michael Moore both write entries). Like Yates' work, signage is again referenced only minimally by a few authors and usually for the purpose of identifying collective claims. Among the authors, Kim Scipes, in her essay "Wisconsin and U.S. Labor," uses signs in order to suggest their mirroring of popular sentiments; she observes that some were printed union signs while the majority were handwritten or painted. The author explains that "[m]any of the [homemade] signs were obscene...[o]thers were more general...and many were specifically anti-corporate."⁷⁶ Although it was not Scipes' intent to analyze signage, her brief reference to the handmade signs is valuable as it speaks to their prevalence and capacity as forms of communicative media.

Erica Sagrans also produced an anthology of essays titled *We Are Wisconsin*. The book combines over forty short essays (some just twitter or blog posts) by a range of authors including activists, farmers, political theorists, journalists, Democratic elected officials, and union members.⁷⁷ In her introduction, Sagrans writes that "this book is for the people who were not there...it is for those who merely caught glimpses of the

⁷⁵ Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, *It Started In Wisconsin: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Labor Protest* (New York: Verso, 2011).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁷⁷ Erica Sagrans, *We Are Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Uprising in the Words of the Activists, Writers, and Everyday Wisconsinites Who Made It Happen* (Minneapolis: Tadora Books, 2011).

Wisconsin protest through the mainstream media...⁷⁸ Two authors, David Dayen and Ben Brandzel, specifically describe signage inside the capitol. Dayen offers descriptions of specific signs as he attempts to describe the interior space of the Capitol building; he notes that the walls were covered.⁷⁹ Brandzel writes about signs as he makes a more general argument about the communicative power of signage, for instance some signs called on protesters to remain non-violent and others asked people to be respectful of the building, one read “Remember, this is OUR house—so let’s keep it clean!”⁸⁰ Although each essay is brief, Sagan’s book offers the most useful descriptions of homemade signage especially as the authors take note of their arrangement within the Capitol which is reflective of their function in space.

John Nichols book *Uprising* covers the Madison protest as a labor union success story.⁸¹ The author explores the implications of the event and argues for the impact of Madison activism on demonstrators in Cairo and later on Wall Street. The author’s references to signage, not unlike Yates and Buhle’s, are brief and often used to solidify a theme. Four particular protest signs are quoted at the beginning of certain chapters throughout the book. They are not directly referred to as objects but rather are used to introduce popular culture into the author’s framework. Nichols also refers to signs throughout his chapters as he describes events. He uses signage (however minimally) to show instances where protesters adapted their slogans to address changing occurrences. This point is relevant as a way to understand how sign makers continually adjusted their

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 38-40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

⁸¹ John Nichols, *Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, from Madison to Wall Street* (New York: Nation Books, 2012).

products to address new happenings; this also reflects the easy and quick process of homemade sign making.

Weidemann, Yates, Buhle, Sagrans, and Nichols all present the Madison resistance thoroughly and eloquently; they perceive the event through frames which emphasize political science, labor history, radical unionism, and social movement theory. Buhle and Sagrans introduce culture and media but none of the authors have approached the Madison moment with emphasis on DIY aesthetics or the work of signage. This perspective will allow three disciplines, political science, art history, and social movement studies, to converge in order to illuminate their overlap and forge a dialogue between political theorists, art historians, and activists.

Chapter 2: The Critical Work of Signs: Making Place In and Around the Capitol

The signs under analysis here are currently being held in the Wisconsin State Historical Society's archives in two different collections. Most are part of the Wisconsin Budget Bill Controversy Poster collection and a small portion are from of the Project Lodge "SolidARTity" exhibition collection. The archivists have separated the signs, even though they come from the same space, time, and had a similar purpose, due to the acquisition process. The former collection was acquired directly from the Capitol building while the latter was donated later by the organizers of the art exhibit.

When the Madison Capitol building was closed in early March of 2011 and all protesters were ordered to leave, thousands of signs (and other ephemera) remained taped to the walls and piled on the floors. The Wisconsin Department of Administration along with local police and maintenance staff proceeded to clean the interior space of the building. All remaining signs were collected and moved to the basement of the Wilson Street State Office Building two blocks away from the Capitol. On March 7, the Wisconsin State Journal posted a press release on Madison.com titled "Claim Your Sign," it read:

Those wishing to collect protest signs removed from the Capitol can pick them up beginning Tuesday at 1 W. Wilson St., Room B527. The room will be open from 1 to 4 p.m. each day through Friday. Representatives from the State Historical Society will be on hand to observe but will not remove any signs for preservation until after 4 p.m. Friday, the Department of Administration said. Signs remaining after the public and Historical Society have taken their pick will be discarded.⁸²

Everyone in the community was allowed to access the remaining signs; since very few people could provide proof of their signs, it is likely that many people took

⁸² Madison.com, "Claim Your Sign," March 7, 2011, http://host.madison.com/claim-your-sign/article_31ec2134-4920-11e0-9499-001cc4c03286.html (accessed February 27, 2013).

signs based merely on interest. Representatives from the Historical Society collected certain signs which specifically adhered to their categorical interests – for example, categories included signs which reference Scott Walker, the budget bill, teachers, worker’s rights, solidarity, and local and global support. As the press release suggests, the signs left after the four day period were discarded. The WHS focused their collection on homemade signs rather than those made by unions and organizations. Other signs in the collection were donated by demonstrators who felt compelled to preserve their creations in what is now called the Wisconsin Budget Bill Controversy Poster Collection which holds roughly 475 protest signs at the WHS archives. Many of the signs in my analysis are part of this collection.

The other portion of the signs analyzed here are part of the Project Lodge “SolidARTity” exhibition collection which is also housed in the WHS archives. This collection is separate from the other since it is meant to preserve signs which were part of an art exhibit in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. The show “SolidARTity,” curated by UW–Madison art history doctoral candidates Sarah Stolte and Sonia Kubica, ran from March 1 through March 9 of 2011. In late February, Kubica was alerted by the UW-Madison Teaching Assistant’s Association (TAA) that the Capitol police would be closing the building on the evening of February 27 to clean and remove all signs. That afternoon, she and the TAA scoured the Capitol and “chose relevant works that met both [their] aesthetic and historical criteria.”⁸³ She adds that they waited to take certain signs and were careful not to remove signs which were still useful, since the capitol was full of

⁸³ Sonia Kubica, email correspondence, February 26, 2013.

active protesters at the time. Other signs were left as donations in response to a call advertised by Stolte and Kubica. In an interview, Stolte commented that the show was necessary for many reasons, stating that “protests are a rich resource for finding and making art. I believe that protests inspire creative energies.”⁸⁴ Stolte’s interest in protests as a place to “find art” is legitimated by the fact that many activists reused, recycled, appropriated, and traded signs while at the Capitol.

It is important to note that because of the processes of clearing the capitol space, allowing participants to claim signs, and discarding additional signs, the WHS’s collection composition of signage is not reflective of the mass of assertions, witticisms, and proclamations that circulated in and around the Capitol. The collections are most reflective of curator’s and archivist’s particular interests and valuations based on fulfilling their categorical standards to preserve certain aspects of the uprising through signage. Likewise, my selection of signage serves the purposes of this project which focuses on homemade signs that suggest state, city, and community belonging and solidarities; certain signs, more than others, accomplish crucial work to communicate camaraderie, build community, and formulate a social movement identity.

This notion is adopted from Lipsitz who argues that posters should be used in social movements as “vital forms that performed important work in the struggle for social change.”⁸⁵ The signs at Madison functioned to “perform important work” to build solidarity, alter the environment, and signify community

⁸⁴ Sarah Stolte, email correspondence, November 13, 2012.

⁸⁵ Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Social Movement,” 73.

formation. For Julia Bryan-Wilson’s activist artists “commit to political change and their belief that art matters—that it *works*.”⁸⁶ Her application of the term ‘work’ to suggest the functionality of art pieces that perform labor is useful when thinking about how activists utilized their signs as functioning communicative devices. Both Lipsitz and Bryan-Wilson suggest, in varying ways, the ‘work’ of art. The activist signs in this study were objects that performed the critical *work* of creating and signifying community, building solidarity, and altering space.

Activist signs functioned to alter and transform space within and around the Capitol square; these signs fit within the frame of Arto Haapala’s essay on aesthetics, familiarity, and space. On all sides participators would have been surrounded by homemade signs whether static or in motion. It is important to think about how these signs worked collaboratively to signify solidarity, build community, and make place. The Capitol space became a symbol of home for activists as a way to reject Scott Walker’s affiliation with the Capitol and as a representative of the state; a familiar place for activists was, by proxy, an unwelcoming place for the governor. Thinking of signs as performing work gives them greater agency as tools of communication and allows us to understand why they were so prevalent and useful at Madison.

Observing photographic documentation of historic social movements reveals the ubiquity of homemade signs during occasions of social resistance throughout the modern period. An image from the 1920s of suffragettes picketing for women’s rights on Fifth Avenue in New York City successfully captures the importance of signage as a

⁸⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 3.

“necessary accessory” for the body during moments of protest.⁸⁷ (Fig. 2) Another photo of a civil rights rally inside the Madison, Wisconsin Capitol from 1961 similarly shows how people have historically voiced their concerns through sign making. Handmade signs read, “Democracy Not Hypocrisy” and “Equality of Opportunity Now” – men, women, and children were present and communicating their grievances through signage. (Fig. 3) An additional photo, taken of Pro-Choice and Pro-Life leaders at a reproductive rights rally in 1992 is littered with demonstrator’s homemade and commercially made signs – one reads “Abortion Kills Children” while another conversely proclaims “This Clinic Will Stay Open.” (Fig. 4) These images speak to a long and persistent history of homemade and commercially produced activist signs (and thousands of images of social unrest similar to these would show the same emphasis on products of cultural expression). While all of these photos document aspects of important struggles throughout history, scholars have generally failed to address the visual culture, including posters, homemade sign, buttons, and pamphlets, which overwhelm each image. These visual sources reveal that handmade protest signs are not a new phenomenon and that they play an important role in instances of struggle and should be deemed worthy of visual analysis. The signs at the Madison Capitol bring this argument into the present.

Some signs were hung on the walls of the Capitol making them immobile but still able to inform the physical experience of activists within the space. Other signs moved; they were carried (sometimes in procession), traded, and appropriated taking on active roles in the struggle yet remaining connected, through their content, to individual activists and creators. Some overlap exists between mobile and immobile signs; many works were originally created with connections to the creator’s body (perhaps tied around one’s neck)

⁸⁷ Azoulay, “A State of Civil Emergency,” *Artforum International* 50, no. 4 (2011): 232.

only to later be taped to an interior wall of the Capitol – Azoulay and Taussig’s suggestion that signs act as bodily accessories during protests is relevant especially when analyzing signs that are worn. It is impossible to disconnect Madison signs from the space which they occupied. For this reason, I focus on how signs worked as they were arranged in space (at the expense of analyzing their formal visual qualities).

It is important to recognize that many of the salvaged signs cannot be attributed to a particular creator, but rather they belonged to the ‘cause.’ This was evident in the frequent trading, copying, and disposing of signs. Most were likely made with limited time, in low budget mediums, and by untrained artists or creators; these pieces had little or no monetary value, yet, because of what they represented – anti-Walker, pro-union, radical activism, solidarity – they were in high demand as symbols of involvement and participation. They were aneconomic objects which required no means of exchange or repayment.⁸⁸ This challenges traditional art historical notions of authorship and the artist as genius. This approach is problematic in this case because it allows the possibility of overlooking individual’s specific and personal ways of dealing with Walker’s legislation, but it is relevant as a way to understand the frequent trading, giving-away, appropriation, and discarding of often personal signage. Although many signs were individually created with personal factors in mind, these works embodied a shared negative reaction to Governor Walker’s Budget Repair Bill (with the exception of some Tea-Party demonstrator’s signs). Radical DIY artworks could be (and were) traded and given away to ensure that they were fully utilized as elements of the protest. Some sign-makers

⁸⁸ This term is borrowed from Jacques Derrida’s 1994 study *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. He suggests that the giving away (gifting) of objects inevitably results in a circle of exchange. The term aneconomic refers to the possibility of giving without the necessity of return payment or gifting.

salvaged and appropriated ephemera they found in trash piles.⁸⁹ It is suitable to conceive of these sign-makers as anti-artists in the sense that they often do not label themselves as traditional artists, nor do they call their signs ‘art’. Also among the many homemade signs were commercially-produced signs. Large unions, corporations, and special interest groups hired graphic designers and built upon past slogans to create and distribute commercial signage to a wide audience.

*Institutionally-Produced Signs*⁹⁰

Labor unions like the AFT, AFL-CIO, AFSCME, and other radical groups such as the IWW, among others, distributed mass-produced signage with particular slogans and specific color combinations to make their presence known and to endorse group solidarity during the Spring protests (in many cases, representatives were passing out free signs). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) produced blue signs that read “Wisconsin Deserves the BEST” while passing out blue t-shirts with the AFT logo; the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) distributed red signs with a blue Wisconsin-shaped fist declaring “Stand with Wisconsin,” (Fig. 5) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees’ (AFSCME) ubiquitous green sign simply proclaimed “It’s About Freedom!”. Madison Teacher’s Inc. (MTI) produced logo signs that read “Solidarity!” while the Wisconsin Teachers Association (WTA) handed out hundreds of signs reading “Stop the Attack on Wisconsin Families!” linking bright red stop signs (as universal signs of warning) with suffering families under Walker’s plan. (Fig. 6) WTA’s sign also demonstrates the recycling of

⁸⁹ Kimi Ishikawa, email correspondence with author, November 29, 2012.

⁹⁰ While using the term ‘institutionally-produced’ to describe certain protest signs is problematic in that it groups together often incredibly different means of production, it is used here to describe signs which were created by varying unions, organizations, small interest groups, and other collectives with the means to produce printed material in large quantities.

past local protest imagery. An image from 1968 shows a march led by Milwaukee-based Civil Rights leader, Father James Groppi, with local school children holding signs against bussing segregation. (Fig. 7) The Madison signs designed by WTA utilized a similar image and composition as those held by the marchers in 1968 – both signs use a centralized bright red stop sign to catch viewer’s attention and imply caution.

Also recalling past slogans, the Wisconsin Educators Association Council (WEAC) printed and distributed red signs citing the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention and stating, “Governor Walker: The Whole World is Watching.” The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) passed out symbolically colored black and red signs boldly suggesting “General Strike” with the iconic image of the black cat (suggesting wildcat strikes and radical unionism). The Wisconsin Law Enforcement Association (WLEA) bore signs declaring “Cops for Labor,” and the Teamsters parked two semi-trailers facing the Capitol, symbolically painted with their Teamster logo overlapping American flags while members handed out signs to “Stop the War on Workers.” The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) produced signs which clearly affiliated demonstrators with the organization with a blank space for personalization. Protesters were encouraged to write or draw their own demands or images – one protester drew multiple stick people with signs reading “I was fired”; a central figure seems to yell “Scott: Why did you do this?” (Fig. 8) Local firefighter’s unions, police unions, the United Steelworkers Union, teachers unions, and sewer workers unions – to name a few – were present and bearing visual signifiers of solidarity. These groups used their union dues, ostensibly, to create visual imagery in bulk,

producing group affiliation at the Capitol through color-coordinated signs, slogans, buttons, stickers, postcards, and garb.

Commercially-produced signs were distributed on a large scale (in many cases, representatives were passing out free ones at tents set up around the Capitol square). It is important to note that very few mass-produced products specifically referred to Scott Walker (only one, created by the WEAC, explicitly singled out the governor). Instead, unions tactically used words such as ‘family,’ ‘war,’ ‘attack,’ ‘solidarity,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘Wisconsin,’ and ‘we’ to link unionism to solidarity and freedom, framing the struggle against Walker’s legislation as one which threatened family values, Wisconsin identity, and historic freedoms. These signs reflected one aspect of the common front against Walker.

Aesthetically, the majority of commercially-produced signs embodied simple slogans with minimal color and text, which could be easily read and cheaply produced. It is important to realize that graphic designers were commissioned to create many of these compositions. For example, the iconic blue Wisconsin fist (the AFL-CIO’s visual contribution – Fig. 5), which became a symbol of state unity for protesters and solidarity, was designed by UW-Milwaukee Peck School of Arts graduate Carrie Worthen who now works as a graphic designer in California. When asked about the intersection between art and politics, the artist stated:

Communication arts (graphic design) and politics have more in common than you might think. As a politician you've got a message to convey quickly, simply and clearly—too much flourish or disorganization and it's muddy. It is exactly the same when designing a poster, a brand or

website. The things people actually hear and pay attention to are clear, simple, and strong.⁹¹

Undoubtedly, designers and unions understood the importance of poignant visuality. Worthen described the blue fist illustration as something “meant to feel rough, irregular and handmade,” suggesting an interest in presenting a mass-produced image with DIY qualities.⁹² The Wisconsin shaped fist became widely copied by handmade sign-makers, taking on a variety of colors and textual associations. While these commercial signs were important, the thousands of homemade signs are perhaps most important in understanding the role that visual culture played at the Capitol and more generally to the solidifying of a community of resistance.

Handmade Signage

Artist prints can also be considered to encapsulate a DIY aesthetic in that they are often designed and hand-printed by individuals. Professional printmakers, including two local artists Nicolas Lampert and Colin Matthes from the JustSeeds Collaborative,⁹³ created a series of political-activist prints in response to the governor’s legislation. They offered these as free downloadable online graphics enabling and encouraging democratic participation. These prints offer artistic compositions and clever illustrations accompanied by slogans like “Wisconsin Workers United Against Union Busting” and “Superbowl Champions of the Labor Movement” referencing the 2011 Superbowl winning Green Bay Packers. (Fig. 9 and 10) During and after the protests, these artists printed hundreds of homemade signs in support of Wisconsin workers. They distributed

⁹¹ Willy Thorn, “Creator of the Blue Fist Speaks Out,” *Express Milwaukee* (Wednesday, June 8, 2011), <http://www.expressmilwaukee.com/article-15057-creator-of-the-blue-.html> (accessed May 13, 2012).

⁹² Thirdthing.com “Stand With Wisconsin/Campaign Materials,” <http://thirdthing.com/projects/branding/stand-with-wisconsin> (accessed May 13, 2012).

⁹³ A geographically dispersed group of 24 printmakers dedicated to creating work that reflects a radical social, environmental, and political stance.

these at demonstrations, posted them inside the Capitol, gave them to local businesses for storefront display, and delivered stacks to labor union buildings.⁹⁴

The necessity of producing excess signage was also an obvious tactic for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Teaching Assistant Association (TAA). The union created hundreds of spare handmade signs with marker on poster-board to disperse to empty-handed activists in the crowd. This tactic was similar to those used by unions as well as the JustSeeds Collaborative who distributed large amounts of signage, postcards, and stickers to those in the crowd. A massive amount of accessible and free visual culture was widely disseminated over the early weeks of the demonstration, illustrating the vitality of cultural production and the ease with which participants could visually express their claims through a vast vocabulary of signs and slogans. Whereas commercially produced visuals portrayed broad demands and slogans with which people could generally identify, individual protesters produced unique and specific demands and statements that created their own visual language on a smaller scale.

Whether created by the TAA, large unions, or the JustSeeds Collaborative, multiple groups produced multiple signs for the express purpose of distribution. Signs were necessary for every individual at the protest; anyone without a sign had no excuse. The objects created by the TAA and the JustSeeds Collaborative lie somewhere between the commercial and handmade modes of production. While their signs were created by individuals, their modes of dissemination separate them from the handmade signs which this project seeks to emphasize. The signs in the following paragraphs are unique in that they are each specifically created, likely instantaneously, by and for their makers. To adopt again from Greenward and Macphee, the process of identity transformation which

⁹⁴For more information and for free downloadable prints, visit www.justseeds.org (accessed May 15, 2012).

emerges from moments of struggle produces new movement artists, like those in Madison. This “challenges the common notion of the individual artistic genius and creates more flexible definitions of who is or can be an artist.”⁹⁵ The following hand-made activist signs expand standards of artistic value and in many cases embody a non-traditional aesthetic in which message and language overpower color, line, and composition.

While many protesters carried their signs, others taped them to walls or attached them to sticks. The inherently corporeal relationship between signs and their makers is important because protesters physically activated their works through movement. The continual movement of thousands of bodies around the capitol ensured the pervasive presence of signage. Signs worked with one another through their occupation of the Capitol to take and transform space. Regardless of the inclinations of their creators, they built a common visual culture of resistance. Sign-makers usually based their compositions on humorous pop culture references to film, literature, television, music, and political events. Famous fictional rivalries such as Harry Potter against Lord Voldemort and Luke Skywalker against Darth Vader were employed, implementing an ‘us versus them’ narrative that clearly distinguished a border between good and evil.

Hot topics in the contemporary political arena were perhaps most notably commemorated in signage and slogan. For example, the *Buffalo Beast* prank phone call prompted the creation of posters stating “Less Koch-head, More Cheese-head!” and “Walker Has a Koch [pronounced “coke”] Problem.” Signs dedicated to commending Wisconsin’s fourteen Democratic senators were also in abundance. A connection between Madison and the political resistance in Egypt was also frequently found on signs

⁹⁵ Greenward and Macphee, *Signs of Change*, 14.

expressing a sentiment of the global scale of solidarity. As the demonstrations continued, media coverage reflected the prevalence of homemade signage, sculpture, and costume at the protest and a visible increase in DIY signage is notable. Participants were reminded of their expressive agency at an increasingly personal level by making clever and creative signifiers of their discontent.

Visually, handmade signs were simple in style, form, and composition and were often nearly monochrome and consisted only of text. They were used in varying ways, most functioned without hand-held devices or with some sort of fastening attachment (often ribbons or rope for hanging around one's neck) connecting the sign to a body. There were also some placards (signs mounted on sticks), which had the added function of increasing visibility since they could be easily elevated. Other signs were fixed to walls, as evidenced by remnants of blue tape (a specific hanging device used on the inner walls of the Capitol building). Some signs were mobile, suggesting a corporeal connection to their creators, while others were immobile as attachments to the interior space of the Capitol; in effect, signs directly modified demonstrator's spatial experiences.

One sign simply declares "Listen to your teachers!" in thick, bold font drawn with black permanent marker. (Fig. 11) Although the creators of most other signs in the WHS archives are unknown, this sign was created by Nancy Marie Mithlo, an associate professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, for her daughter. The sign is constructed out of a used and flattened banker's box top, an object which she admits is "a standard part of [her] life as an academic."⁹⁶ The recycled material used to create this sign speaks to the economic aspects of activist signs. Homemade imagery allowed protesters of varying classes to participate more equally. Even those without the

⁹⁶ Nancy Marie Mithlo, email correspondence with the author, March 31, 2013.

means to create more elaborate signage could (and did) use the blank backsides of mass-distributed signs to write their own messages of solidarity and “maximize visibility.”⁹⁷

Mithlo states that protest signs articulate one’s core belief through “a brief and powerful (maybe even poetic) message.”⁹⁸ This particular sign’s explicit call for student spectators to “listen” to their educators, while simple and straightforward, worked to advocate support for teachers and build solidarity between educators and other workers. But it also spoke directly to the governor and his administration, referencing his publicly acknowledged educational deficiencies (Walker dropped out of Marquette University and never received a college degree)⁹⁹ or calling for him to literally listen to (and hopefully negotiate with) the demonstrators, many of whom were Wisconsin educators. Mithlo does not consider herself an artist because, as she states, “artists are professionals who spend the majority of their time making art.”¹⁰⁰ This definition, mirrored by MacPhee and Lippard, limits the power of activists as producers of artistic expression and reflects resistance by art historians to analyze such products.

Another sign, by an anonymous maker, proclaims on one side “Farmers: Thanks for the Food” and on the other “Walker: Thanks for Nuthin”. (Fig. 12) The sign is composed of white poster board and black and red marker. The artist accentuated the word ‘food’ in red, suggesting an emphasis on the important work of farmers – the labor of providing food. By reinforcing the vitality of farm workers, the sign advocated for the crucial service of all workers and specifically excludes Governor Walker’s labor in an address which diminishes his productivity to “nuthin.” This example introduces another

⁹⁷ Laura Godden, email correspondence with the author, December 5, 2012.

⁹⁸ Nancy Marie Mithlo, email correspondence.

⁹⁹ Mari Jo Buhl, “The Wisconsin Idea,” in *It Started In Wisconsin: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Labor Protest*, ed. Mari Jo Buhl and Paul Buhl, 21 (New York: Verso, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Mithlo, email correspondence.

notable characteristic of portable activist signs: they have two visible and usable sides. Many signs were decorated on both front and back sides so that a message would be easily identifiable in the round. This sign clearly requires viewers to see both sides to understand the full message; however, viewing one side without the other would still have functioned to convey either a pro-farmer (worker) stance or an anti-Walker stance.

For other sign-makers, simplicity was the best method. SuAnn Senso, a retired elementary teacher from Neenah, Wisconsin, created her signs in much the same way she constructed bulletin boards over her thirty-three years of teaching. She suggests that to “make a point” signs “should be noticeable, easy to read and to the point.”¹⁰¹ One of her signs reads “Forward Not Backward” and is cut in the reversed shape of Wisconsin, to suggest that Walker and his administration were moving the state backwards. (Fig. 13) Her reason for using the Wisconsin outline was to emphasize her identity as a Wisconsinite and to insist that the struggle was “a Wisconsin issue first and foremost” especially since the governor was “touting...that all of Wisconsin was behind him ...and that the only protestors were shipped in from out of state by the unions.”¹⁰² Though she does not label herself as an artist, her long history of making letters and images for bulletin boards to appeal to and hold the interest of elementary students prevails in her sign. Senso recalls that she did not have a sign during her first visit to the Capitol, even though a plethora of commercially produced signs were easily accessible for use. She describes these signs, stating that they were “all the same and...pretty small” and functioned to make “a statement of cohesiveness...not a personal statement. They attracted attention in one way - conformity. But I wanted to make a personal

¹⁰¹ SuAnn Senso, email correspondence with the author, February 22, 2013.

¹⁰² Ibid.

statement.”¹⁰³ Senso’s early experience at the Capitol was influential in her decision to create handmade signs.

One double-sided placard boldly proclaimed “Scott Walker Makes Me Sick!” on one side while the other displayed a mass-disseminated sign created by the Madison Teachers Inc. (MTI). (Fig. 14) The sign is constructed from a piece of tag board stapled to a MTI sign (which featured the MTI logo under which read “Solidarity!”). These two signs were mounted, back to back, on a wooden stick. The addition of a holding device allowed for signs to be increasingly pronounced because of their ability to be elevated above a crowd. Placards were rarer in Madison since some authorities considered wood (or other hard material) handles to be potentially dangerous or used a weapon. The creator of this sign, Kimi Ishikawa (a fourth and fifth grade teacher at Olson Elementary School in Madison) recalls being informed that police were not allowing signs on sticks into the Capitol. In response, she broke off the stick and kept the sign – ironically, the signs now has a sharp wooden edge where it was broken.¹⁰⁴

Ishikawa used blue and pink markers to assert her claim. The word ‘sick’ is differentiated and emphasized through its color and larger size. Her claim that the governor caused nausea demonstrates anti-Walker solidarity on two levels. First, it declared a blatant personal disapproval of his actions (so much so as to cause illness). Second, it referred to the organization of a statewide four-day sickout by the Madison Teacher’s Inc. starting on February 17 (some UW doctors issued sick notes to teachers to legitimize their absences and a few held signs stating “I’m a doctor, Need a note?”).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Kimi Ishikawa, email correspondence, November 29, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Lee Sustar, “Who Were the Leaders of the Wisconsin Uprising?,” in *Wisconsin Uprising: Labor Fights Back*, ed. Michael Yates, 81 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

Ishikawa recalled that she picked up the sign on February 15 from “a huge pile of discarded MTI signs on sticks.” She stated that “I was calling in sick, so that's why I made the sign that said ‘Scott Walker Makes Me Sick.’”¹⁰⁶ Stolte’s statement that protests “are a rich resource for *finding* and making art” gains increased relevance in the context of Ishikawa’s process.¹⁰⁷ The educator found a sign on the ground, which she “thought that was a huge waste,” and decided to make use of it by personalizing it to reflect her own grievance. The repurposing and appropriation of signage was a frequent occurrence in Madison.

Ishikawa describes the “very teacherly” process and aesthetic of her sign which she said was drawn with “Crayola washable markers – whatever we had at home.”¹⁰⁸ Her method of selecting materials based on “whatever” was available reinforces the DIY and spontaneous practice of protest sign creation. Though the identities of most sign-makers are unknown, Ishikawa’s identity as a teacher is important, not only in relation to her message, but because it again illustrates the fact that a vast amount of homemade signs were created by non-artists.¹⁰⁹ It should also be noted that prior to the uprising, she was not particularly political; Ishikawa describes herself as a “52 year old teacher and mom and voter and pretty apathetic politically until this all happened.”¹¹⁰ As an individual, she challenges the stereotype of protesters as overtly political radicals. Ishikawa became politicized in response to the budget proposed legislation and her sign illustrates her spontaneous reaction.

¹⁰⁶ Ishikawa, email correspondence.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Stolte, email correspondence, November 13, 2012. (my emphasis)

¹⁰⁸ Ishikawa.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Another mounted sign disowns the governor by proclaiming “Walker is a Weasel, not a Badger!” with emphasis on the word ‘not’. (Fig. 15) Constructed from recycled cardboard, the sign’s message, written with black paint, is again minimalist and blunt. It immediately identifies Governor Walker as the “other” and the enemy. In doing this, the message also clarifies and honors local identity. The badger identity refers directly to UW-Madison’s sports mascot, a source of local Madison pride, and also appeals to state pride as it is Wisconsin’s state animal. The badger was used to separate the populous from Walker and his politics. Labeling of the governor as a weasel purposefully associated him with the idealized characteristics of the animal: cowardice and trickery. The previously mentioned signs have been characterized by a corporeal connection to their creators. They were mobile and moved with the hands of their makers, in a sense, as extensions of the body. Other activist signs worked as wall hangings.

Inside the Capitol building, hundreds of signs decorated columns, walls, stairwells, and office doors. Out of respect for the building’s preservation demonstrators began promoting the use of blue masking tape as a posting device (the bright blue tape also became building code for “do not remove”).¹¹¹ In fact, signs were specifically made to enforce this logic; one such smaller sign was taped to a wall pleading “Please use only blue tape.” (Fig. 16) Although this sign was not created according to political affinities, in a sense it functioned to advise the collective arrangement, decoration, and aesthetic of other hanging works.

Many other signs hung on the Capitol walls also spoke directly to demonstrators. One sign, which would have likely hung around the neck of its maker, communicates to

¹¹¹ John Nichols, *Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, from Madison to Wall Street* (New York: Nation Books, 2012), 51.

fellow-protesters “Please remember – this is a PEACEFUL protest!!! no violence!” while the other side, directed at Walker states “You can’t scare me, I work with high-school students.” (Fig. 17) The sign is large and is made with white poster board and black, red, orange, and green markers. Blue ribbon is tied through two holes at the top corners of the sign, allowing it to be worn around one’s neck. It exemplifies the varied uses of signs; not only were they used to speak directly to the governor, they were also used as modes of communication between protesters. Many signs in and around the Capitol specifically spoke to other protesters – this one communicates a message of non-violence and demonstrates activists’ self portrayal as nonaggressive.

At one point, the Capitol was closed while protesters were still residing inside. One sign pleaded with authorities, asking “Can you let the rest of our friends in? We are lonely and getting quite smelly.” (Fig. 18) The red sign reflects camaraderie between protesters – the friendship the sign reflects new protest-based acquaintances which were made in Madison. Demonstrators entered into a new and unfamiliar space when they entered the Capitol building, however it was familiarized by the aesthetics of the signs.

Another, with a small remnant of blue tape at top, calls out “Hey Everyone! It’s 3am, let’s be considerate of our “neighbours” and shut up! (I’d like to sleep at least 3 hours tonight) – Thanks.” Even though it shows evidence of wall tape, the other side reads “Solidarity – Be kind!!!” (Fig. 19) Signs like these suggest the formation of a community and a movement culture in which demonstrators addressed their fellow-activists as neighbors and begged for a silence that could only be achieved by collective adherence to such a complaint. They also demonstrate a reflexive engagement between signs and spectators; they made the viewer aware of their role as a protester and solicited

a response (for example, to be quiet and/or kind). All of these signs would have worked to inform the spatial experience and actions of protesters. While many signs referenced the development of a protest community within and around the Capitol, some signs also acknowledged the familiarity and home-like qualities which emerged from such alliances.

By occupying the Capitol, protesters significantly altered the interior space of the building. On March 3, after an Art March around the capitol, Lindsay Christians used her press credentials to get inside the locked Capitol and post additional signs; she noted that “every available wall had a sign on it.”¹¹² Imagine, before the space was closed, the echoing sound of beating drums and choreographed chants led by megaphone, the smell of donated Ian’s pizza, vegetarian soup, or cheap hotdogs, and the warmth of thousands of bodies packed together in a sea of red. Marble columns and stone balconies were plastered with handmade and commercially-produced signs as well as banners proclaiming political affinities; outside, a massive crowd holding signs and some wearing costumes marched around the building. At night the floors of the Capitol were covered by blow-up mattresses, sleeping bags, pillows, blankets, and exhausted bodies. Signs, postcards, and stickers were passed out or made on-the-spot, encouraging aesthetic participation and signifying solidarity.

The space in and around the Capitol was modified into a materially and culturally vibrant space. Scholarly definitions of (and debates around) public space and the public sphere are wide-ranging – Hannah Arendt stands out. She argues that public space relies on people’s collective actions, stating that action “create[s] a space between the

¹¹² Madison.com, “Arts March Inside” (March 3, 2011) http://host.madison.com/arts-march-inside/image_a503c10e-45d8-11e0-9c6f-001cc4c03286.html (accessed February 15, 2013).

participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere.”¹¹³

Arendt’s concept of space is useful because it illustrates how the Capitol became a truly “public” space because of actors and their actions. Nelson Lee further argues that “[space] is the real geographical context at which politics (people’s action) occurs, and hence it constrains, or empowers politics.”¹¹⁴ Madison protesters were able to create public space through their collective actions while finding political empowerment within that space. Activists plastered the building’s walls with their colorful signage and through this spatial transformation and ‘de-normalization of place’ they gained collective power which allowed them to voice their opinions and resist the power of authoritative structures.

The signs from Madison performed crucial work to collectively build community and form, to borrow from Sophie Watson, a democratic culture which relied on a “mutual respect, trust and solidarity.”¹¹⁵ Arto Haapala’s essay “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday” offers a valuable framework for the utility of such signs. He theorizes the ways in which people familiarize or place themselves within new environments and how aesthetics influence this. He suggests that when entering new surroundings “we start to construe connections that are significant to us” in order to “place ourselves into an environment.”¹¹⁶ The author also adds that “[w]hen we have created enough familiarity, when things do not appear as strange any more, when the region is our home region,

¹¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 200.

¹¹⁴ Nelson K. Lee, “How is a Political Public Space Made? – The Birth of Tiananmen Square and the May Fourth Movement,” *Political Geography* 28 (2009): 41.

¹¹⁵ Sophie Watson, “Cultures of Democracy: Spaces of Democratic Possibility,” in *Spaces of Democracy: Geographical Perspectives on Citizenship, Participation and Representation*, ed. Clive Barnett and Murray Low, 212 (London: Sage Publications, 2004).

¹¹⁶ Arto Haapala, “The Aesthetics of Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place,” in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith, 46 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

heimat, then we have concretely rooted ourselves in the milieu.”¹¹⁷ Haapala’s premise can be used to describe the varied ways that the Madison Capitol building changed over the course of the protest through the use of aesthetics.

The Capitol rotunda was filled both day and night with active bodies; in fact, hundreds of protesters resided in the building twenty-four hours a day. An often quiet, institutional space was transformed into a vibrant public and familiarized space. Michel Foucault wrote that:

Space is important in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power....It is true that for me, architecture...is only taken as an element of support, to ensure a certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations.

Foucault theorizes architecture as an element “of support” which surrounds “people in space.”¹¹⁸ In this sense, the material elegance of the Capitol’s architecture can be disregarded; what happened within the architecture is more important. Foucault also describes the ways in which space is essential to power relations: to take space is to take power. Tim Cresswell also links space directly to power formations, especially as spaces undergo alterations which challenge their original function. He states that “by taking control of particular spaces and making use of them for quite different ends than they are otherwise intended to serve, protests are transgressive: they momentarily shatter the bounds of normality of particular places.”¹¹⁹ The Capitol building was used, atypically, during the protest to house demonstrators (for example, certain government offices were used as eating spaces while others operated as day-care spaces). The central plan

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, 252-256 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹¹⁹ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 165, 175-176.

architecture of the Capitol provided protesters with a medial assembly space while the inner dome and rotunda functioned to provide multiple levels for protesters and their signs. Changing the function of these areas turned the building from an official space to a common space. Signs worked within these spaces to further de-normalize the Capitol from an institutional space into a democratic space.

Transformed into an arena of solidarity, the Capitol building assumed the qualities of an artistic site-specific installation. Traditional art-historical definitions of ‘installation art’ focus on the transformability of space and the installation of “individual elements arranged within a given space” in which “the setting is as much a part of the work as the things it contains.”¹²⁰ Installations offer “an experience of experience.”¹²¹ In this regard, the interior space of the Capitol became an installation site for artistic collaboration. Regardless of the body count, (the daily number of demonstrators fluctuated) remnants of activity were ever-present and witnessed on walls plastered with banners, posters, and sticky notes, rendering the space colorful, inventive, and transformed. In addition to signs, activists installed flags, blow-up mattresses, pillows, blankets, yoga mats, and lawn chairs – these everyday objects suggest a link to domestic spaces. Although they may simply have reflected the living needs of the Capitol’s occupants, they also may have rendered the interior of the building familiar and, in a sense, home-like.

For Jennifer Johung, the concept of spatial homemaking, in relation to architecture and public interaction, reflects “a desire to be in place and to belong at

¹²⁰ Phaidon Press Editors, *The Twentieth Century Art Book* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 1996), see glossary.

¹²¹ Harriet Hawkins, “‘The Argument of the Eye’? The Cultural Geographies of Installation Art” *Cultural Geographies* 17, no. 3 (2010): 334.

home.”¹²² In her book, *Replacing Home*, she addresses the “architectural formations of home and the systems of homecoming and homemaking.”¹²³ She writes about a “longing for a return to intimately familiar spaces” in order to create a sense of “belonging across ever-new sites.”¹²⁴ Many activist signs reference this homemaking in the Capitol which made the space familiar and inviting for activists, resulting in the creation of a temporary community. Through this spatial transformation and de-normalization of the otherwise unfamiliar Capitol into a welcoming space, demonstrators gained collective power over place which allowed them to form coalitions and resist the power of authoritative structures. Homemade signs, whether in hand, mounted on a stick, or taped to a wall, through their diverse use in space and ability to alter the building’s aesthetics, worked as a significant factor in this familiarization and homemaking. It is useful to think of signage and community as dialogical; signs at Madison worked as forms “of art-based community making.”¹²⁵ The use of terms like “us” and “we” (homophonically synonymous with “WI”, Wisconsin’s acronym) were used through art to form a community identity based on state-wide and worker recognitions. By establishing a set of social, political, ethical, and identity-based images and discourses that pertained to and called for (an imagined and temporal) community, many signs embraced unifying terms to form group cohesion among otherwise strangers.

One sign commanded “Keep Our House Clean,” illustrating the familiarizing of the interior space to the extent that it became home-like. Some protesters actually cleaned the capitol space as they might their own living spaces. Other signs also

¹²² Jennifer Johung, *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), x.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

¹²⁵ Lipsitz, 84.

reflected this message of community ownership of the Capitol and more broadly a pride in the state of Wisconsin; a popular activist chant declared, in repetition, “Whose House? Our House!” A corresponding sign proclaimed “No Way! Scotty, this is our house.” (Fig. 20) The last two words are emphasized by a red outline suggesting the transformation of the Capitol space into one owned by the people and the movement. A similarly informed sign depicts a simplified drawing of the Capitol with text labeling it “Our House” while below another drawing of an outhouse is labeled as “Walker’s House.” (Fig. 21) Simple and direct, the sign again suggests a familiarization of the Capitol. This is not to suggest that activists actually felt a sense of comfort or intimacy in the government building as they might experience in their own home. Rather these signs show a clear differentiation between the activist community in the Capitol, who used the rhetoric of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (protesters versus Walker) as a means to communicate that the governor was unwelcome and should feel unfamiliar and not ‘at-home’ in the Capitol. Had the Wisconsin protests taken place primarily in the streets and without access to architecture, activists would not have been able to apply such domicile-related language. Protesters emphasized their occupation of the architectural structure of the Capitol by specifically labeling the space with words like ‘home’ and ‘house’; they utilized the notion of homemaking to suggest familial bonds which the space was supposed to foster. References to the building reflect the physical taking of that space at a particular time; after the protest, signs were resituated in new spaces on a local and national scale.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

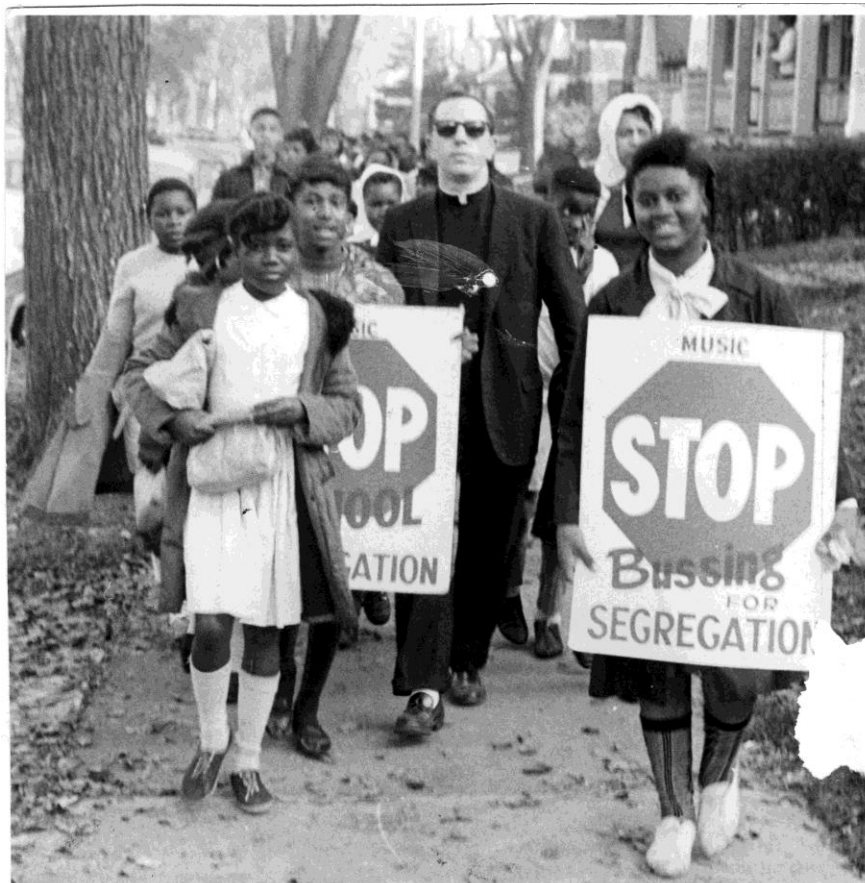


Figure 7

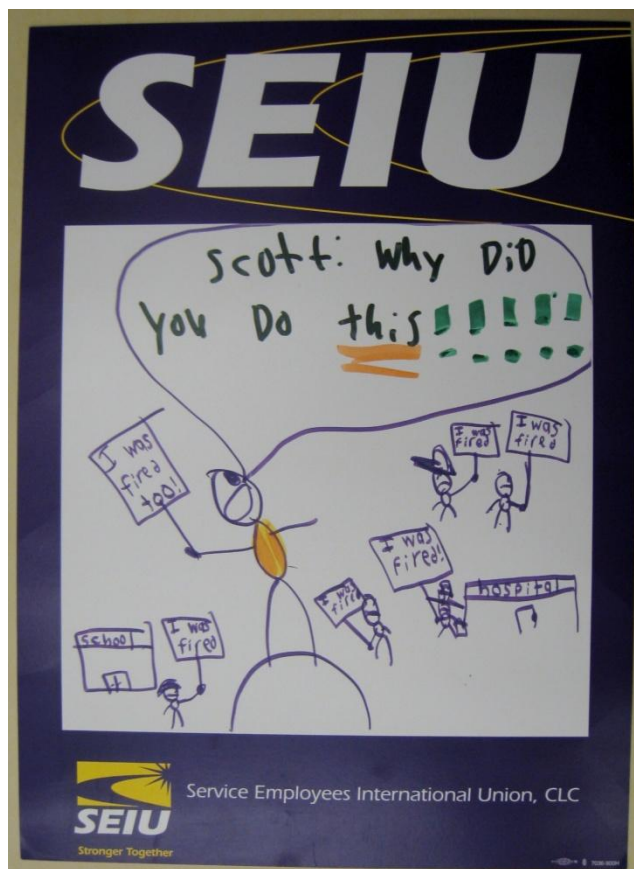


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

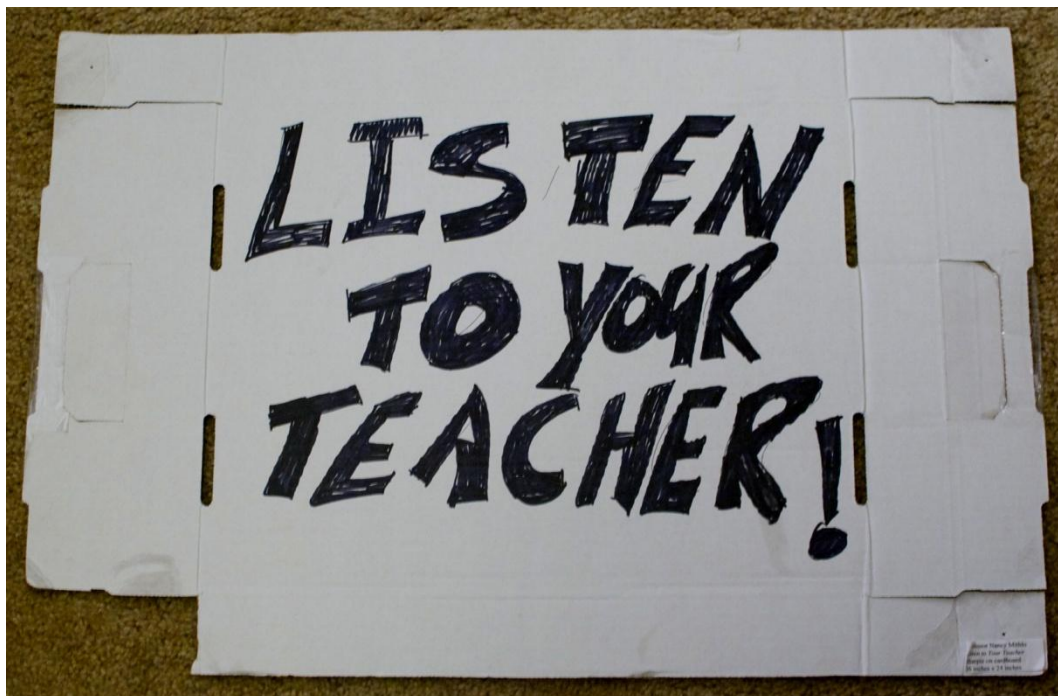


Figure 11

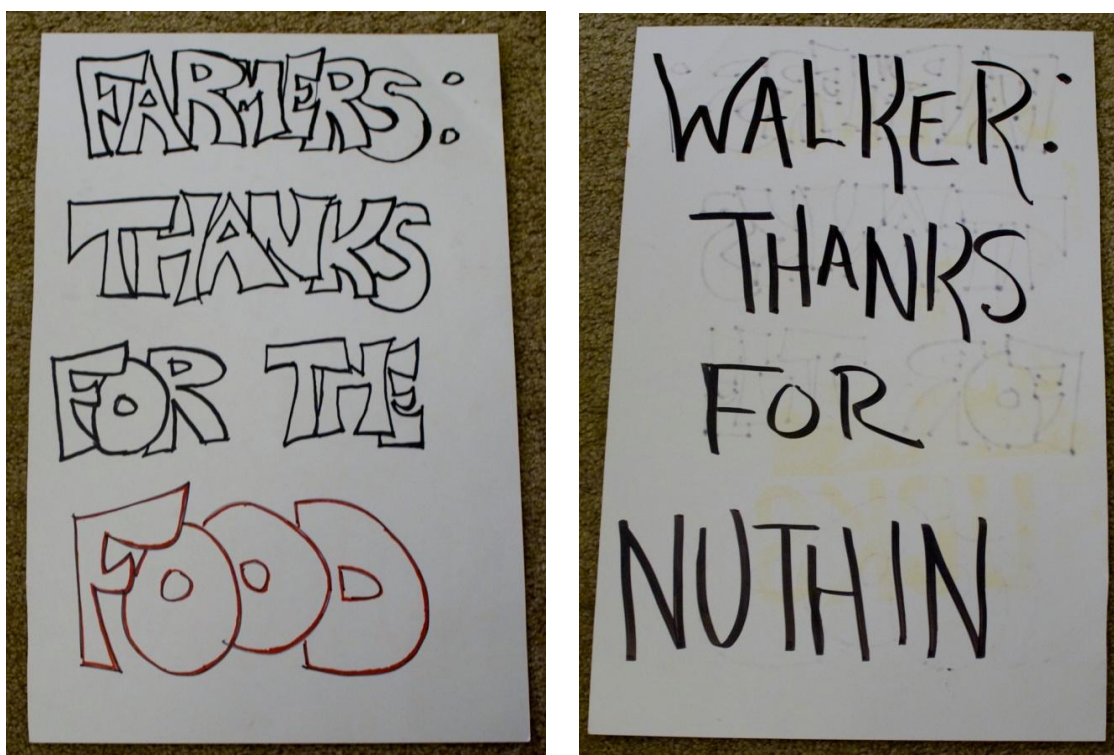


Figure 12 (Front and Back)



Figure 13



Figure 14

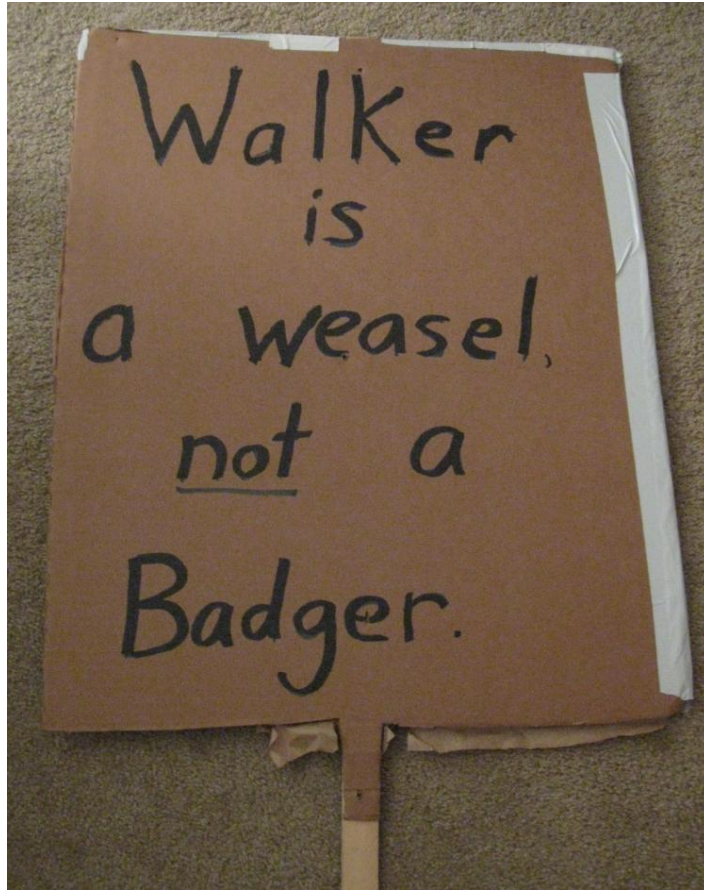


Figure 15



Figure 16

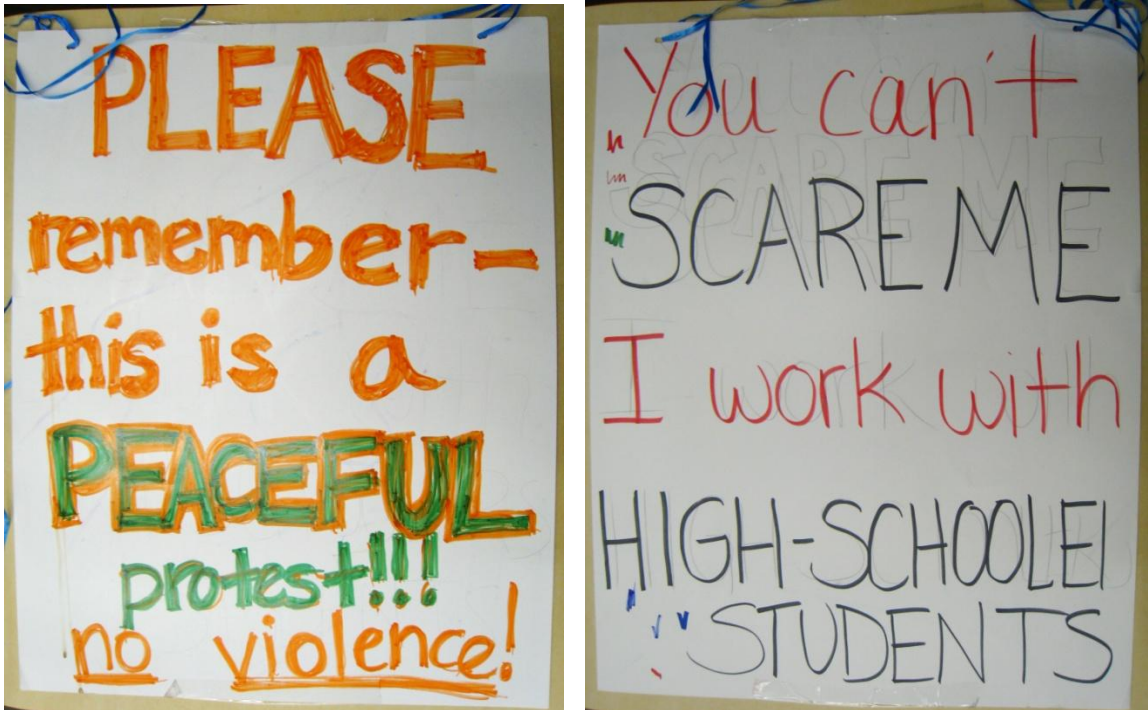


Figure 17 (Front and Back)

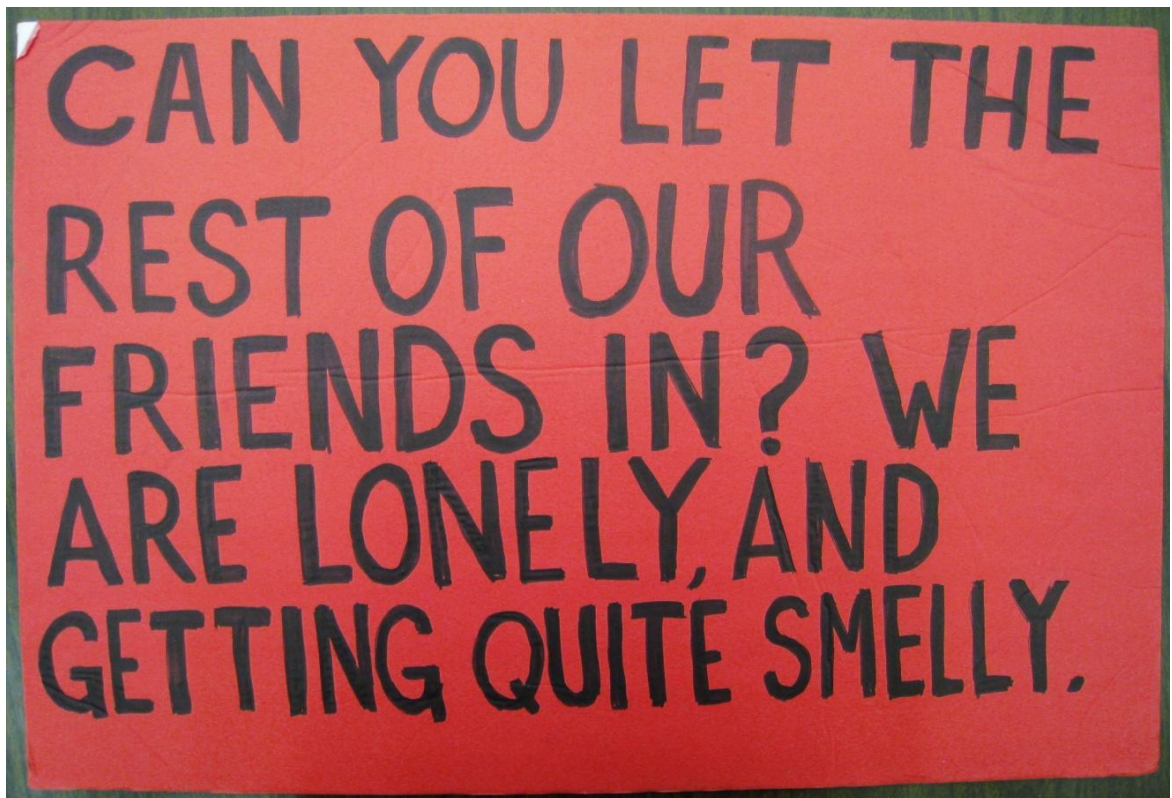


Figure 18

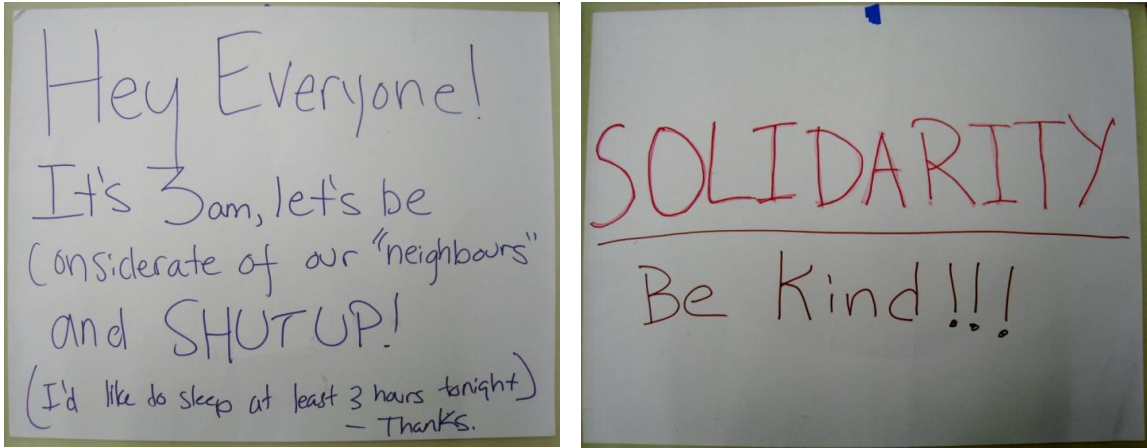


Figure 19 (Front and Back)



Figure 20

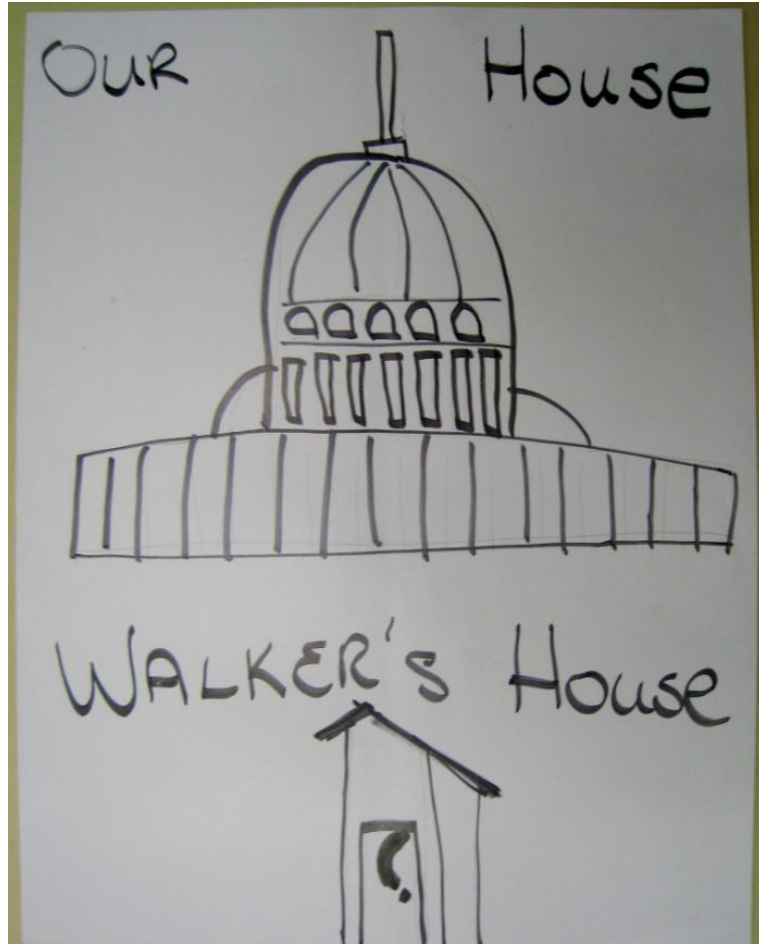


Figure 21

Chapter 3: Sedimented Signifiers of Solidarity: (Re)placing Signs

Post-protest, many pieces of visual culture were salvaged and re-used at personal residences as reminders of solidarity and as signifiers of support in the fight to recall Walker. The objects used to alter space in Madison have become important in everyday places. Two years later, the impact and persistence of the visual culture created during the Madison protest remains widespread and the signs work to make new places of solidarity. Handmade and commercially made protest signs were *re*-placed in new settings around Wisconsin.¹²⁶ Pierce and Martin define place-making as “the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live.” The authors elaborate to suggest that place-making is an “inherently networked process, constituted by the socio-spatial relationships that link individuals together through a common place-frame.”¹²⁷ In the aftermath of the uprising, imagery from Madison has come to embody the networks, actions, relations, and spatial experiences of those who were there. Activists made place in Madison and recreated that ‘experienced geography’ by taking signs from the Capitol to their personal residences for display. The term ‘re-placing’ is useful in relation to the notion of place-making since signs were placed at new sites and effectively *re*-placed to function in both existing and new ways. They reflected simple and direct political affinities, they worked to recall a collective Wisconsin memory of the events of 2011, and they both claimed and solicited solidarity against Walker in the recall campaign.

¹²⁶ Johung offers an assessment of the term ‘replacing’. She suggests that “replacement identifies an infinitely extendable act of being in the place of something or someone again, without fully taking that site’s or that body’s place...” See Johung, *Replacing Home*, xv.

¹²⁷ Joseph Pierce and Deborah Martin, “Relational Place-making: the Networked Politics of Place,” *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 36 (2011): 54.

To borrow from Lipsitz, posters “create networks for people with the same images in their homes, in their neighborhoods, and at their places of work...posters call attention to the interiors of the places [they] live and work.”¹²⁸ Activists (re)placed their signs from the Capitol in their residences for display, further personalizing signs and associating image with experience in space. For example, the thousands of signs distributed at the Capitol have found resting places in storefronts, residential windows, bars, and have inspired the mass disbursement of anti-Walker and solidarity buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts. Whether walking to the bus stop or to class, visible remnants of resistance persist over two years later.

This wide decentralization and (re)placing of signs can be understood as the sedimentation of imagery. Lise Nelson uses the term ‘sedimentation’ as it “refers to the process through which discourses (including ‘identities’, political vocabularies, and practices) deployed in moments of collective action and protest, are translated and socially embedded by a variety of actors in place.” She adds, “the concept captures change over time...and it highlights the unevenness and open-endedness of these processes...linking time and space, and providing a unique entry point for assessing the political-cultural ‘ripple effects’ of collective action and protest.”¹²⁹ This notion is applicable to the signs that traveled, changed, and (in some cases) were co-opted after the protest, leading up to the 2012 recall election, and thereafter. It allows scholars to decenter analysis of the protest away from a single place, Madison, so that the signs can be read in relation to new and more extant geographies where their meaning can expand and address wider issues. Signs were sedimented throughout Wisconsin and, in some

¹²⁸ Lipsitz, 80.

¹²⁹ Lise Nelson, “Decentering the Movement: Collective Action, Place, and the ‘Sedimentation’ of Radical Political Discourses,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1 (2003): 561-562.

cases, throughout the country. They exist more densely in certain areas (depending on political affinities) than others and are used for a variety of means.

While many signs distributed and created at the Capitol have found resting places outside of their original setting, most of the visual remnants on display are those signs created by unions, printing collectives, and other organizations. Notably visible in Milwaukee after the uprising was the iconic AFL-CIO sign as well as an MTA sign which proclaims “Stop the Attack on Wisconsin Families!” Signs from the JustSeeds Collaborative also became public fixtures in many local businesses and individual residences in the protest aftermath. (Fig. 22 and 23) Since many of the signs used during the protest were handmade, it is interesting to find that not many of these found permanent display outside of the Capitol; instead they were replaced by their graphically designed counterparts. Most activist signs voiced personal and specific claims which in the context of the uprising spoke a common language identifiable between demonstrators. However, outside of this context, some particularly specific and personal signs became vague and difficult to interpret. For instance, one cardboard sign spotted at the protest read “Scotty Doesn’t Know” in black marker. This sign, which specifically referenced the theme song from the 2004 film *Eurotrip*, did not voice a specific claim about Walker or his legislation and was less readable. This may account for the wide display of union/organization signs which voiced straightforward claims in bold colors and legible fonts and functioned to register with a wider public.

Recall Walker efforts, which officially began on November 19, 2011, also spurred an increase in the visibility of anti-Walker/anti-Budget Bill propaganda while specific recall campaigns dominated Wisconsin news headlines and political conversations. The

‘Occupy Wallstreet’ campaign also impacted anti-Walker sentiments as signs and slogans created in the wake of the Madison protests were re-used and revamped to cater to the Occupy movement. For instance, in Milwaukee, a small community park (Garden Park) was occupied from October eighth, 2011 to February 2012; signs in the park reverberate with those at Madison proclaiming “Recall Walker!” and “It’s About Freedom!”

Since many post-protest publically displayed signs were commercially produced, they worked to illustrate cohesiveness in communities around Wisconsin; they voiced a consistent message and created a “network of people with the same images” both in personal and public spaces.¹³⁰ Lipsitz suggests that “[a]s historical documents [signs] become indicators of what we choose to remember and a reflection of our identity as well as our past.”¹³¹ The display of signs after the protest illustrates Lipsitz’ point that signs also work as nostalgic reminders of a past, a place, and a community of solidarity. These signs also informed a future as their display signified support for the Recall Walker campaign which resulted in the collection of one million petition signatures between November 15 and January 13, 2012, making Walker the third state Governor to face a recall election in United States history. On June 5, 2012, Walker won the recall race against Democratic candidate Tom Barrett, taking 53 percent of the vote. Many signs have been taken down since then; however, a few are still visible in Madison, Green Bay, Milwaukee, and elsewhere.

¹³⁰ Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Social Movement,” 80.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

The Varied (Re)placing of Signs

While homemade and commercially produced signs have been used in varying places including the Capitol and later protesters' homes and places of business, they have also found homes at various institutions. The majority of salvaged signs are preserved in the Wisconsin State Historical Society but other smaller collections of Madison signs exist around the country. Others were acquired by the Smithsonian Museum of American History. In early March, the museum sent curator Barbara Clark Smith to Madison to obtain objects which "document, in general, occasions when American citizens interact with their government and petition the government or ask for change."¹³² She collected a few dozen posters and signs with she chose based on the museum's "desire to collect a representative sample of common signs from the protest."¹³³ In response to my inquiry about their value as art, she responded that they were not "acquired...as art objects, and so we did not privilege handmade or particularly well-designed or even striking signs."¹³⁴ The museum plans to use some of the Madison ephemera in future exhibitions on the themes of popular participation in political protest movements. Smith's assertions suggest that 'common signs' from the protest – those which have been chosen as representative visual artifacts of popular participation – are commercially produced, not handmade. It is important to question the valuation of mass-produced signs as reflective of popular and common participation. I challenge the effectiveness of this acquisition philosophy because it overlooks the visual qualities, wit, humor, candor, and serenity of handmade signage by individuals and instead values group, organization, and union signs

¹³² Barbara Clark Smith quoted by Jim Stingl in "Protest signs support historical perspective," (March 10, 2011), <http://www.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/117780623.html> (accessed February 25, 2013).

¹³³ Barbara Clark Smith, email correspondence with the author, February 25, 2013.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

which reflect carefully crafted slogans, recycled imagery, and often coded language. While it is true that handmade signs also often include reused images, language, and slogans, these elements are often varied and appropriated during the personal process of creating handmade signs. For instance, two handmade signs which both declare “Kill the Bill” may have different visual qualities even though they employ the same recycled slogan.

The fact that the Madison signs were not acquired as art objects is also indicative of a disconnect between the disciplines of history and art history. The Wisconsin Historical Society collected hundreds of handmade and commercially produced signs while the Smithsonian collected a few dozen, but neither the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison nor the Milwaukee Art Museum (as homes of the two most extensive art collections in the state) acquired any signs. In regards to the acquisition of protest signs, Andrea Selbig, a registrar at the Chazen Museum, states that:

there are some things that we do not collect because those items are collected by other departments on campus (WHS, Memorial Library Special Collections, HLATC, Union Galleries). Ephemera is usually directed to Special Collections.¹³⁵

While the museum’s collection does include some objects that “could be considered political art and/or protest art,” Selbig’s suggests that the Madison signage was purely ephemeral and therefore more suited for preservation in the Library’s Special Collections or the WHS. Regardless of the mainstream ‘art world’s’ continual refusal to accept protest ephemera as art objects, many small-scale art spaces have organized exhibitions based on activist art. Although less powerful in terms of informing the valuation and

¹³⁵ Andrea Selbig, email correspondence with the author, April 3, 2013.

critique of art objects, smaller art establishments have resisted the trend to ignore ephemeral handmade protest signs.

Apart from the “SolidARTity” show, an “Art in Protest” arts festival, organized by the UW-Madison extension School for Workers, was scheduled to take place from March 29 through the 30, 2012 at the Pyle Center on campus to commemorate the one year anniversary of the Wisconsin protest. However, the exhibition was “indefinitely postponed” due to pressure from Republican State Representative Steve Nass. Mike Mikalsen, Nass’s chief of staff, suggested that “[i]f something were to occur [related to the exhibit] that would anger the Republican side or conservatives around the state, it would make it hard to continue to work cooperatively” with the university.¹³⁶ The exhibit was moved to a local community center, disconnected from the university.

Signs from Occupy Wall Street have also been displayed in art settings; one show, “Signs of Occupation,” at the County Fair Building in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco presented hand-printed or painted signs or banners from any Occupy protest. Another show held in the old JPMorgan building in New York, titled “No Comment,” aimed to combine paintings, prints, cardboard signs, and performances inspired by OWS. The show was hosted by non-profit art organization Loft in the Red Zone.¹³⁷ More shows like these exist around the country, often in cities with active Occupy movements. These exhibitions foreground important questions: why is it that small art spaces celebrate aesthetics in handmade protests signs while renowned museums continue to overlook

¹³⁶ Matthew Rothschild, “Wis. Republican Pressures UW School of Workers to Cancel Labor Arts Exhibit,” *The Progressive* (February 21, 2012), http://www.progressive.org/republican_pressures_uw_school_of_workers_cancel_labor_arts_exhibit.html (accessed February 27, 2013).

¹³⁷ Ben Davis, “Occupy Wall Street’s “Creative Coordinator” on Using Art to Spread the Protest’s Spirit,” *ArtInfo* (October 12, 2011), <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/38834/occupy-wall-streets-creative-coordinator-on-using-art-to-spread-the-protests-spirit> (accessed February 27, 2013).

them? Is the preservation of the art market so built on the notion of the “artist genius” that artistic value can only be defined in relation to capital? When collected, these works do not accrue monetary value (which often motivates the organization of art institutions) unless they are connected to a saleable, recognized artist. Some artists have worked to merge art and political products of cultural dissent.

Activism and art institutions have collided on many occasions. In the early 70s the Art Workers Coalition pressured museums in New York to take a political stance during the Vietnam War while forcing the alteration of acquisition practices and admission fees. In 2011 a New York-based action group stemming from the OWS movement called Occupy Museums! organized a series of demonstrations at art museums in order to challenge “economic injustice in institutions of art and culture.”¹³⁸ While groups such as these have challenged prominent museum’s exhibition practices, activist art has made its way into mainstream art spaces under the guise of conceptual art. Sharon Hayes’s recent show at the Whitney, *There’s so much I want to say to you*, combines various and often disparate yard signs and protest placards to create an environment which is meant to examine the interactions between language, communication, and politics. (Fig.24) The open-plan installation, which was displayed from June 21 until September 9, 2012, complicates definitions of public and private space while drawing attention to their overlap. Sign topics range, including some which call on viewers to vote and elect certain local and national officials while others promote real estate properties. Hayes aims to investigate the ways in which people interact and exchange information through different types of media. By juxtaposing varying signs, the artist appropriates political messages and pressures viewers to assess their present and future

¹³⁸ For more information visit <http://occupymuseums.org/>.

resonance. Included in Hayes' assortment of objects is one blue "Recall Walker" yard sign. The sign was originally placed in a yard, likely in Wisconsin, but through its attachment to Hayes it becomes part of an art piece. Viewers are challenged to read each sign in relation to multiple surrounding signs.

Another New York-based street artist from North Carolina, Adam Void (who often works under the pseudonym Avoid Pi) collects and reconfigures handmade signs in order to construct new meanings and facilitate new discussions about "functional aesthetics". The artist uses the term 'functional aesthetic' to describe "how things look when we're *not* concerned with how things look but rather with how things function" in moments of urgency as forms of communication.¹³⁹ In his series "Another Way" the artist compiles handmade OWS signs, political campaign signs, homeless signs, and traveler signs from varying social groups and locations. Void has exhibited his works in various galleries throughout the country and especially in New York. One piece is composed of multiple found cardboard signs which have been purposely arranged to read "We Accept – Homeless and Hungry – The Most Honorable Occupation – Will Prevail." (Fig. 25) Another states "Wake Up America – B.S. Consulting is Bankrupting – The Whole American Economy – Think – Closed – Banks." (Fig. 26) Each piece is composed of between eight and twelve different handmade signs with text in varying fonts, colors, and line thickness; the signs are bound together using found binding wire. Void is interested in bringing objects from "the margins of society...to an audience that may not otherwise be able to see them."¹⁴⁰ The artist calls attention to overlooked forms of artistic communication by collecting handmade refuse and forces viewers to confront

¹³⁹ Adam Void, personal interview with the author, April 8, 2013 (my emphasis added).

¹⁴⁰ Void, Artist Statement, <http://www.avoidpi.com/index.php?/project/statement/> (accessed April 3, 2013).

the objects they often discard or abandon. By traditional art historical standards, Void's work challenges definitions of aesthetic and beauty. In fact, one of his works, *Another Way 5*, was thrown away by movers in transit from the (E)merge Art Fair in Washington D.C. on account of its resemblance to trash.¹⁴¹ (Fig. 27) The aesthetic employed by Void's work is rooted in intention, a quality often overlooked by the traditional art community.

The notion of a 'functional aesthetic' is useful when evaluating the work of protest signs because it allows a focus on purpose rather than beauty and artistry; this also mirrors traditional definitions of design which often rely on functionality. Instead signs should be valued for the urgent work that they perform. Void's use of signs is linked to his personal history of sign making as a traveler and active Occupy advocate. He suggests that signs work to increase one's odds of getting what is desired and that "certain words and colors function better than others" as form of communicative media.¹⁴² The artist implies that handmade sign makers are artists, even as they continually deny it; he adds that "people can make art and not know it...by making a set of decisions for one reason or another...intention generates aesthetics."¹⁴³

Both Hayes and Void create work through the reconfiguration of political placards and handmade signs and both are revered as artists who create validated artworks. Their projects challenge contemporary traditional processes of art assessment and blur the borders between art and political expression. They also illuminate issues surrounding the archival status and institutional valuation of handmade protest signs as collectible objects which are in some cases accepted and in others rejected by certain

¹⁴¹ Void, interview, April 8, 2013.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

institutes. Does the placement of non-art objects in art museums make those objects art? Much like Marcel Duchamp, almost a century earlier, Hayes and Void use the museum space to legitimize objects which the 'art world' otherwise often chooses to reject. Void suggests that the handmade signs he collects are functional art objects before they enter art spaces.¹⁴⁴ However, many large scale art spaces reject this claim. Protest signs are made accessible in certain institutions, like the WHS and the Smithsonian, because of their political and historical value instead of their functional aesthetic. I argue that protest signs should be incorporated into the discipline of art history as objects which broaden our understanding of visual urgency in daily life and offer a different aesthetic language based on purpose. One question emerges from this project: does activist art exist, and is it recognized as such, if it is created by non-artists? It is important that contemporary art historians continue to explore new avenues of cultural production which exist in unexplored places by non-traditional creators. How is it that signs like those from Madison and other instances of social disturbance can sequentially exist in the hands of protesters as communicative devices, in storefront windows and home residences as symbolic reminders of solidarity, in historical archives as artifacts of social discontent, and finally in museums as conceptual compositions which problematize the politics of language and space? The wide sedimentation of Wisconsin protest signs speaks to their versatility as functioning objects which worked as communicative devices using a language dependent on visibility and community.

¹⁴⁴ Void notes the importance of authenticity to his work and proposed that although the signs which comprise his work are created by other (nameless) people, his personal experience of creating travelers signs and Occupy signs makes him 'part owner' of discarded signs. In fact, the artist often donates proceeds from sold artworks back to certain community organizations, arguing that in such instances "value should be shared."



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24:
 Installation view of Sharon Hayes: *There's so much I want to say to you* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 21-September 9, 2012). Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins.



Figure 25

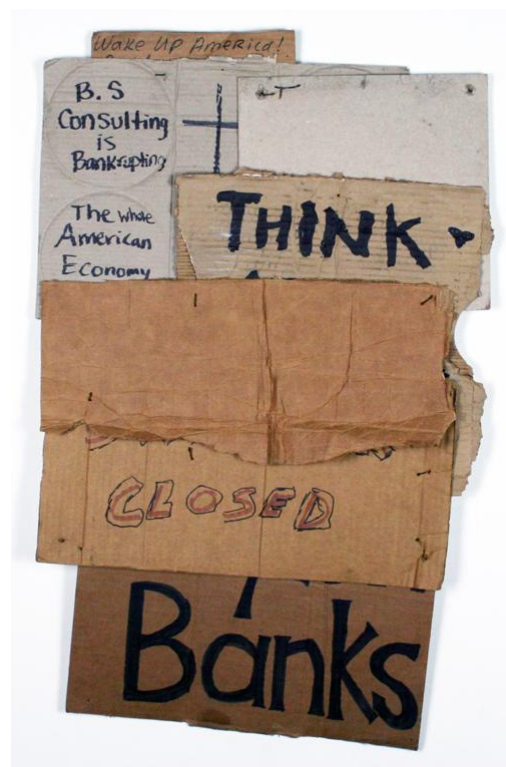


Figure 26



Figure 27

Conclusion

Lipsitz points to the frequent overlooking of political posters by scholars when he writes that “the amateur” status of poster artists and art collectives and the historical, political, and social specificity of their images devalue posters as art in the eyes of many critics.”¹⁴⁵ A similar problem exists and generally accounts for the diminished visual value of handmade activist signs. This is evidenced by the minimal scholastic attention they receive. The vast display of signage in February, 2011 at Madison has proved the importance of the role of visual culture to mass resistance movements and has also exemplified the creativity, wit, humor, and intelligence of teachers, firemen, students, nurses, probation officers, garbage collectors, and public employees alike. Unlike traditionally defined ‘pieces of art’, the artworks from Madison could not be sold or bought and were small investments, meaning that they could be traded, given away, or even discarded as long as they had fulfilled their utility as representations of solidarity and resistance to Walker. They also allow us to think about the avenues through which multiple images work in collaboration with one another. The power of signage was dependant on quantity – one sign alone worked to represent an individual while thousands worked to empower a populace. This way of thinking about collaborative signs challenges the discourse of the autonomy of art objects and allows them greater agency. They illustrate much about the art, culture, people, politics, solidarity, and spaces of social movements. It is important that protest signs begin to be seriously analyzed as cultural and art historical objects which support solidarity formation and spatial transformation.

¹⁴⁵ Lipsitz, 83.

The post-protest sedimentation of imagery is evident throughout the Wisconsin landscape in the windows of residences, bars, and shops – most obviously during the June recall efforts. Signs were also (re)placed in small art exhibits and later in the Wisconsin Historical Society as well as the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Some signs were collected, reconfigured, and (re)placed as artworks in large art institutions by recognized artists. However, these works are exhibited and collected in relation to these artists' oeuvre and are overlooked as objects by a more general public. Simultaneously, large art institutes generally reject the reading of handmade protest signs as art, suggesting that they belong in historical museums because they are not produced by artists.¹⁴⁶ I argue for reframing the definition of activist art to include non-artists so that handmade signs can be read similarly to other art objects which speak a visual language. The multiple and varied placing of these signs suggests their wide-ranging valuation both as art objects and as historical artifacts.

While many authors have offered a framework for the analysis of the Wisconsin protest, they often illustrating the importance of the uprising to labor and union history, political theory, and social movement strategy while disregard visual culture and signage aesthetics. I argue for an emphasis on handmade aesthetics and populist tactics of placemaking as a useful framework to study the work of protest signs. In his essay regarding graffiti art, Joe Austin suggests that “what is at stake in modern art is actually located (and alive) outside and beyond the velvet ropes, in shared public space itself.”¹⁴⁷ This argument can also be applied to protest signs; he further proposes that “illegally

¹⁴⁶ As stated earlier, University of Wisconsin professor of art history Nancy Marie Mithlo defines artists as “professionals who spend the majority of their time making art.” In other words, regular people making signs during social movements cannot be defined as artists.

¹⁴⁷ Joe Austin, “More To See Than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets,” *City* 14, no. 1-2 (February-April, 2010), 43.

placing work on public walls is a significant contribution to, even a step forward for, modern art.”¹⁴⁸ The future of modern art can be found in the streets, or rather, outside of gallery spaces, and in spaces like the Capitol in Madison. It is important that handmade protest signs are written about as art objects because they present a new set of artists (non-artists), aesthetics (functional aesthetics)¹⁴⁹, and spaces (public and contested) which contribute to new ways of thinking about the circulation, utility, and reuse of images.

The level of attendance, enthusiasm, and group cohesion in Madison has rightfully been recorded in history books; however, the breadth of creative expression during the protests should also be approached from an art historical perspective in order to fully examine imagery and aesthetics as tactics of resistance. If art historians can evaluate their worth as readers of the visual world and base the legitimacy of their work on primary source images, the visual culture of protests should be accepted as a crucial supply of readable imagery which reveals much about people, politics, culture, and identity formations in time and place. With the probable permanence of global uprisings, aesthetic strategies of resistance, including handmade protest signs, will continue to be developed. Thinking about handmade signs as art objects will allow a necessary broadening of the discipline of art history in order to rewrite exclusive and canonical definitions of artists as “professionals who spend the majority of their time making art.”¹⁵⁰ New definitions of art and artists should include ordinary people in the streets so that even simple acts of production are valued for their functionality and purposive work. Activist art will not disappear; it is important to generate new ways of reading signs as

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴⁹ Void, interview.

¹⁵⁰ Mithlo, email correspondence.

integral tools of resistance that visualize and communicate political claims while collaboratively fostering networks of solidarity.

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