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“Rhetorics of Resistance: Protest Speech, Public Space, and the Public Sphere”

When I went away to summer camp in the early 70s, each counselor gave his group a name: wolverines, hyenas, cougars. Our counselor, Tom, named us the Weathermen. We felt like losers at the time, but years later I realized Tom was a radical visionary. When I arrived at college in 1985, students had erected a shanty town at the center of campus to protest the school's investments in corporations doing business in South Africa. Twenty-three years later, and seven years into the “war on terror,” the campuses are quiet. My students are anything but apathetic, but after marching against the immanent invasion of Iraq in 2003, and volunteering for Kerry/Edwards in 2004 (their first first-hand experiences of American politics), they seem to have to come to the conclusion that the world is terminally screwed and resistance is futile. So they do some public service and hope they can make enough money to pay off their loans after they graduate.

I've been thinking about how things have changed since the Vietnam era in terms of how we imagine and practice protest. What is the role, Barack Obama notwithstanding, of rhetoric and oratory in an era of sound bites and reality TV? To what extent has media space replaced physical space as the site of the public sphere? What would it feel like to believe that one were part of a movement that could change the course of history?

It was with these questions in mind that I set out, in the summer of 2006, to stage a series of re-enactments of public protest speeches from the Vietnam era. I have completed six: Coretta Scott King in Central Park, NYC (1968), Howard Zinn on Boston Common (1971), Paul Potter on the National Mall (1965), César Chávez in Exposition Park, Los Angeles (1971), Angela Davis in DeFremery Park, Oakland (1969), and Stokely Carmichael outside the United Nations (1967). Each speech is delivered by an actor or performance artist to an audience of invited guests and passers-by and takes place at the site of the original event. Multiple video cameras document the event. I distribute the video online under open-source licenses, and exhibit video installations in art venues. At “Since 1968,” I will screen excerpts from some of the videos and talk about the project's conceptual and aesthetic dimensions.