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Taking Back the Plaque: The Art and Tactics of the Pocho Research Society



Monuments and historical markers are omnipresent across the landscape and demand our critical attention. Their presence in public space, their form, and message—be it subtle or overt—has the ability to enshrine one version of history while erasing others. For how often is it that one

comes across “official” markers that speak of resistance to power, particularly resistance to State power and the dominant historical narrative? But these often un-guarded sites are not as daunting and obtrusive as they first appear, for historical markers and monuments can and have provided the ideal location and canvas for public interventions and alterations.

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This essay examines one collective, the Pocho Research Society (PRS) that has done just this by dedicating their practice to altering existing monuments and creating new historical markers. In their own words, the PRS is “a collective of artists, activists and rasquache historians who reside in Los Angeles. Dedicated to the systematic investigation of space, memory and displacement, the PRS understands history as a battleground of the present, a location where hidden and forgotten selves hijack and disrupt the oppression of our moment.”¹

PRS is best known for installing its own plaques onto the surfaces of monuments and buildings (often next to the “official” plaque), in order to offer a counter perspective and a critique of not only the monument in question, but the form of the monument itself. In so doing, the PRS questions not only the legitimacy of how the dominant narrative of history is communicated in public space, but also the validity and the tactics of counter narratives.

The first PRS action, “ Operation Invisible Monument,” addressed this facet of their work. The project took place in 2001, and involved collective members installing plaques in the early hours of the morning at four sites. The plaques were made by screenprinting text onto sheet metal, and then adhering those onto monuments with cement, cordless drills, and bolts. The longevity of the signs depended on the location and how adamant property owners or city officials were about having them removed. Some plaques were removed within hours, whereas others are still up to this day.

One of the projects involved bolting a plaque to the side of a building on Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, informing the public that it was the former site of David Alfaro Siqueiros’ mural Tropical America, which spoke out against US imperialism in Latin America.⁽²⁾ Another action in the same region of downtown included cementing a plaque onto an existing historical marker at La Placita Olvera, which told a classic pioneer story of the “founding” of the city by European colonists, and failed to note that the plaza

has served as a gateway for newly arrived immigrants, both during the past and at the present time.

Another PRS action took place at Angles Point Vista in Elysian Park – a location that looks down into the Chavez Ravine and Dodger Stadium, home to a Major League Baseball team. The official marker simply recognized the benefactors who helped preserve the small park area. However, the PRS plaque “Displacement of the Displaced” (invisible monument #3), cemented right next to the official plaque, told viewers of the struggles that had taken place at the site. The text read: *View of the former site of the Chavez Ravine Community*

In July 1950, the fate of the working class, Mexican community of Chavez Ravine came into question when residents received a letter to vacate by city governmental offices. A heated struggle ensued as the governmental plan of creating a 3300 unit public housing project at the site came under attack by both residents and the private developers. The ensuing triangular battle eventually defeated the project as pro real-estate interests won out using a charged anti-communist rhetoric. In 1957, the land was offered to the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers for a future stadium, amidst protests and forced removals, residents eventually dispersed struggling to plant roots in other parts of the city.

The PRS sign (which stayed up for two weeks) was a direct challenge to the official marker and the colonial mindset that framed it. A PRS collective member notes that:

Monuments are the erection of history of the winner, the colonizer. In LA, Mexican history is so integral to this place yet it's not recognized. We don't have a museum; we don't have institutions that honor our historical presence and our experience. So our memory has survived in very guerilla-like ways or through art history or through songs, culture, or through activism, like those Chicano academics. That first generation were all activists; it was really a political battle to just write those histories, to make that experience be recognized as significant.³ Cementing plaques to problematic monuments is one method employed by the PRS to reclaim the past and demand accountability in the present. By adding a new plaque, the monument becomes more inclusive; a static site becomes open and representational to a broader range of opinions, and an authoritarian marker is both defaced and exposed as inadequate.

However, another tactic of the PRS is to put up markers that respond to relatively recent histories that have gone unrecognized or under appreciated. In these cases, the PRS does not set about adding a plaque to a problematic monument or a state marker. Instead, they create an “official” looking marker that acts as the sole historical marker for the site.

One example of this approach is a plaque that the PRS installed on the side of a building in the Highland Park neighborhood explaining that the building was the former location of a community info shop. The text read: *Former site of the Popular Resource Center*

The PRC created political, economic and cultural networks that extended the words and actions of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas to a working class urban barrio in Los Angeles. From 1994-1999, projects like a pirate radio station, a food distribution program, solidarity building activities, and cultural events helped to inspire a cultural movement that nurtured old and new forms of expression and integrated the indigenous with the urban, the spiritual and the political, and the North with the South.

The space was founded by Zack de la Rocha (the lead singer of Rage Against the Machine) and served as a vital hub for community activism and solidarity work between LA activists and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.

In this instance, the PRS plaque becomes compelling because it celebrates recent activism and breaks away from the all-too-common pattern in political art of celebrating only those iconic struggles and histories that took place in the distant past. In this case, the marker celebrates current struggles and advocates that they should both be celebrated and acknowledged for their significant impact. Additionally, the plaque celebrates the all-important role of community spaces and how they can help to build movements, create dissident culture, and serve as vital conduits in the growth and education of people who become radicalized within their walls.

This particular plaque also functioned as a critique of the gentrification occurring in the Highland Park neighborhood, a process that has accelerated over the past ten years. The neighborhood has increasingly become home to hipsters, musicians, and artists who have little to no understanding of the neighborhood's

past history. A PRS collective member notes that the plaque is a reminder to the new residents that they are not the first to bring activism and culture to the neighborhood.

Additionally, the plaque is indicative of the PRS approach, in that the plaques are meant to be stumbled upon by chance. They are short history lessons. The PRS puts them up and the viewer is responsible to do the rest. The question becomes: would the signs have a greater impact if the PRS received permissions to put them up, considering that they might last longer?

The PRS is steadfast against this idea for a number of reasons. A collective member interviewed noted that the PRS does not want to be slowed down by bureaucratic channels. Additionally, the member reported having seen too many examples of officially sanctioned public art being censored and stripped of its radical content. More importantly, PRS members asking for permission to add a plaque to the site or requesting an additional monument would only betray the politics behind the work.

The idea is not just to add one counter narrative to offset the other; it is to encourage multiple readings of history and to invite others to do similar projects. The PRS is fully aware that adding one plaque is not enough. The counter narrative is important, but it is the concept behind the work, the action of a person illegally defacing an “official” monument and challenging the State-version of history that is so vital.

The plaques thus become a form of cultural resistance and the process of a person stumbling across one of the PRS markers is the important breaking point. At first, perhaps, a viewer will be confused by the plaque because it is so obviously unsanctioned, but the illegal nature of the sign may likewise inspire the viewer to become more critical and thus more apt to challenge powerful institutions and ideas in the future.

In this regard, the PRS shares a great affinity with the approach of graffiti artists. By its nature, street art is an act of reclaiming public space, challenging private property and questioning laws that dictate what is and what is not permitted to take place in the public. One PRS member clearly echoes these concerns. She notes, “I think it is really important to challenge laws and challenge the reverence for private property.”⁴ Thus it is not surprising that one of the PRS plaques celebrates the work of graffiti artists.

The PRS plaque “Triumph of the Tagger,” which was installed in 2001 (and remains up to this day), transformed an uninspired monument that marked the past location of a railroad station into a monument that additionally celebrated graffiti artists and the act of defacing railroad property. The PRS plaque reads: Former Terminus Station Southern Pacific Railroad

During the late 1980’s an invisible army assaulted the city with spraycans transforming bland concrete walls into canvases filled with an explosive language of hard-edged urban forms, radiating color, and an abstract, coded lexicon. The most prolific, the Boyle Heights tagger known as Chaka single-handedly inflicted \$30,000 worth of damage to the Southern Pacific Railroad.

While some people might simply dismiss graffiti art as vandalism, the sign presents the polar opposite perspective: a deep respect for the art form – a message that one rarely sees in public. Additionally, the plaque raises larger questions concerning why graffiti is so criminalized and frowned upon, while other signs that dominate public space are not. A PRS collective member notes that “who decides what is legitimate or illegitimate in public space is a really important question . . . I didn’t decide I had to drive to work and see a thousand billboards. Who made these decisions? Who defines our landscape?”⁵

Thus the plaque (and the graffiti) becomes one of many competing voices set against the backdrop of officially approved markers and corporate messages—alternative messages that question their power, along with a broader critique of private property versus the public commons. Yet, the PRS plaque will likely have a marginal impact compared to corporate and State markers due to its scale, singularity and its remote location next to a series of railroad tracks.

However, all of the PRS signs gain an extended life through their documentation over the Internet and in the press. At times, the PRS will send out press releases to the media, which are targeted to specific reporters and papers that they feel will be sympathetic to the project. In each case, the decision to do a press report is site-specific to the goals of the project. Some are broadcasted—others are not.

The documentation of these projects allows the signs to be viewed outside of a local context. However, even then, the local context remains the essential part of the PRS approach. The monument

interventions all take place in Los Angeles – where the PRS collective members live.

In this regard, the investigation by the PRS becomes a research project about their own community and another way of asserting their right to claim a stake and ownership to the city. While the PRS could very likely do engaging work in other cities by researching other important histories, they are hesitant to do this given the fact that they would be outsiders to the community and not invested enough to visualize the history with a sense of conviction and ownership. Thus, the documentation becomes all the more vital since it serves to inspire other people to consider doing similar actions in their own cities. The PRS claims no ownership to the model of putting up plaques to reclaim history and this is the true essence of their work, the overriding concept that invites others to do the same. So as the city sleeps tonight – unguarded monuments, historical signs, and other symbols of public memory wait for your creativity and input.