



above: Dave/PEZ, (de)Appropriation Wall, 2003  
below: (de)Appropriation Wall in 2003

## (de)Appropriation Project

Bruce Tomb

# This project began as maintenance on the FACADE of my home and workplace.

Sometimes I call it an archeographic collage. The local alternative paper calls it the "democracy" wall because it rallies against the slew of wars and injustices. It is a public art platform that has a life of its own.

The building, constructed as the Mission Police Station in 1950, was sold through public auction in 1996 after it had been sitting empty for a number of years. The old precinct was known for civil-rights abuses. A new station was built six blocks away to replace it. While empty, the austere modern institutional building sustained a fair amount of vandalism and was further stigmatized. After moving in, I was preoccupied by daily maintenance on the Valencia Street facade, removing the endemic graffiti with chemicals. Inside, the holding cells are still intact, and are also covered with graffiti on every possible surface, including the bars. Most of the writings are monikers from the neighborhood gangs.

The Sisyphean nature of the endeavor to maintain the Valencia Street facade became apparent with nightly tagging. I have a high regard for graffiti as it has evolved over the recent decades, but this graffiti remained "dog piss." About a year into my maintenance attempts, the City of San Francisco asked me to participate in their Graffiti Abatement Program, which was just as ineffective. After I opted out of this service upon the city's request to be paid (the work had been free up to this point), the city threatened a lien against the property based

on complaints from the neighbors. Faced with a local maintenance issue, I knew I needed to find a way to do the wall in a manner in which I could find some satisfaction both the process and the outcome. An experiment began.

The first "action" I contributed to the wall, in late 1997, was a sky-blue checkerboard pattern corresponding to the ceramic tiles of the original facade. This cut up the wall into calligraphic fragments. Of course, the wall was quickly overwritten, and soon the layering evolved. Some of these early actions were documented.

When the postering shifted to wheat paste, it became clear that something interesting was emerging. I began taking pictures in early 2001. The spectrum and content of the work on the wall began to broaden, including territorial markers, artistic doodles, political posters, community-based screenprinted posters, stencils, and unique hand-painted posters. There were episodes of intense political material, then remarkable purely artistic work. Often the collage would be a complete jumble, and then someone might make a bold work that tied everything together. Some I loved and some I didn't. Nothing lasted very long in either case. "Fuck the Homeless! Save the Town!" posters with the mayor's picture were particularly inflammatory. I told the city that I now considered the wall a public art project and that regardless of content it must be protected under the First Amendment. This must have been a compelling argument. The following night three new posters were placed that remained there for well over a year.

At this point, I see my role as somewhere between curator and curator of a public collage authored by many. The cultural nature of the monumental collage produced on this wall has a graphic impact that resonates with the media-intensification of some modernist architecture. Works by Constructivist architects, such as the Vesnin brothers' design for the headquarters of the Leningrad Pravda newspaper (1928) and Aleksandr Rodchenko's designs for kiosks and radio towers, as well as agitprop are precedents for the wall's style and function. What some regard as a gesture of defacement, I see as a protest against contemporary models of urbanism and notions of public and private space.



