

JULES BOYKOFF & KAIA SAND  
*Southern Maryland Sign Project*

Drawing from Kristin Prevallet’s investigative poetics, Heriberto Yépez’s “context poetry,” and John “Eddie” Welch’s sign murals, we have conceived of a sign project for St. Mary’s County, Maryland. This region is isolated at the tip of a peninsula shaped by the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. Although located only 70 miles south of Washington DC, it is home to Amish and Mennonite communities, “watermen” (as people who live by fishing, oystering and crabbing are called here), and—until a recent buyout by the state—tobacco farmers.

We are interested in the social mark signs can make. Placing a sign into the public is an act of submission: one releases art into the social commons. Thus, as Yépez eloquently writes about in a recent essay for *Tripwire*, destruction is part of the performance.

Nevertheless, we weren’t prepared for how quickly (in less than two hours) this sign would be pried from the post:



Although we cannot suppose the intentions of the sign remover, we do know that dissenting views regarding military aggression can arouse ire in St. Mary's County. In the early 1940s, the federal government created the Patuxent River Naval Air Station on thousands of acres known as Cedar Point, displacing farmers and watermen and erasing hamlets. In the 1990s, while the Clinton administration closed a number of bases around the country, it greatly expanded Pax River (as it is called locally), widening its scope of activity and increasing its personnel. Currently, Pax River generates half of the steady paychecks in the county as well as 85% of its tax revenue. For local politicians these figures serve as political grist. US Congressman Steny Hoyer, the Democratic Minority Whip, has said, "Thinking of St. Mary's without Pax River is really impossible."

The military's power consolidation is highly visible, right down to the many-miled barbwire fence that starkly prevents access by the non-military locals, but there are many other power brokers in the county. For instance, the Jesuits—who were among the first colonists in the area in the 17th century and who owned slaves until the 1830s—are major landowners. They, in fact, lease waterfront property to the Navy.

Meanwhile, the many local watermen have struggled recently with the near extinction of oysters and ever-slimming crab population. Some county residents live in trailer parks and lone trailers exposed to car traffic, and the "flattops," a local housing project, is comprised of dilapidated houses, many of them appearing condemned but nevertheless occupied. Clearly, many people do not own wealth in the county, so we posted this sign deep on the peninsula, about five miles from the tip:



(This is the only sign that remains intact in the over two months since we initiated the project.)

Next we placed a “Bush/Cheney in ’04 Four More Wars” sign in a high-traffic intersection through which commuters to and from DC must pass. We added this sign to one of the high-density sign groves that crop up in the county, hoping to cash in on the legitimacy that such sign clusters provide. In a sense, the context of other signs provided cover for ours. Additionally, we used stencils to make our signs look more ‘official’ and therefore possibly lengthen their public lives.



Then we went to nearby Leonardtown, the county seat, which dons a World War I monument that segregates the

“White” from the “Colored” troops. Again, we employed the Sign-Grove-Method. Fozia Qazi, a Kashmiri mathematician and artist, provided the artwork for this piece. This sign was removed after about a week. We later recovered it—battered and scuffed—from the underbrush, where it was left for lost.



We completed Phase I of the Southern Maryland Sign Project by sinking the sign pictured below into the Hurricane-Isabel-softened earth on Willows Road, a smaller rural byway. The sign riffs off a statement from the North Korean Foreign Ministry in January 2002: “The US loudmouthed supply of energy and food are like a painted cake pie in the sky.” At least this is the translation that appeared in the *Washington Post*.



This project continues. As we try to normalize marginalized discourse through the legitimacy that stenciled signs provide, we remain open to other ways of angling into poetic and political possibility. After all, signs can be somewhat of a paradox in St. Mary's County: several restaurants exist *without* signs—such as Courtney's, a fishing restaurant marked only by word-of-mouth. A Greek restaurant is mysteriously located with an understated sign that says, "Pizza," yet locals know it is the best place around for Greek food. As we chart the evolution of our current signs, we will continue to push how our public poetry might interact with this local landscape.

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*Heriberto Yépez's essay "Contexts and Signs of an Urban Visual Poetics" (Tripwire, Winter 2000-2001) lays out his thinking on Context Poetry. For over 75 years, John "Eddie" Welch has been painting sign murals that aim to educate young people about history, and his work is currently exhibited at the Visionary Arts Museum in Baltimore.*

*See also:*

*Hammett, Regina Combs. History of St. Mary's County, Maryland: 1634-1990. Ridge, Maryland: self-published, 1991.*

*Murphy, SJ., Thomas. Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717-1838. NY: Routledge, 2001.*