

graffiti vandals
paint swastika
on Plymouth Rock



COMMENTS ON "NOMOS"

SPOKEN NOT WRITTEN BY

ROBERT MAHONEY
OCTOBER 1991

ESSAY ACCOMPANYING "NOMOS"
CURATED BY ROBERT MAHONEY
NOVEMBER 9 THROUGH DECEMBER 14, 1991

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152 WOOSTER STREET, SECOND FLOOR
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10012
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Comments on "Nomos"

"As I analyze it, there are four types of word art, or rather, there are four word forms. Text; what I call Copy; Logos; and then Nomos. Text comes in two forms, both modern and postmodern. The modern sense of Text is a work of literature, but also the parlance, the way of talking of a professional field. It's legalese, medicalese, the way art critics write; any verbal construct along those lines is the Text of that field. Texts from other fields have been used for 150 years to shore up what was considered by some writers the weakness or indefiniteness of the language -- for example, Dickens used legalese at some points to act as an overvoice for a novel; in his writing, at the turn of the century, Thomas Mann, and in another way, Theodore Dreiser, used what the Germans call redespreche, to create an overvoice in writing -- these are all textual strategies. When I say Text, it's about the entire structure of the system of meaning involved in that field. Then there is the postmodern view that there is no such thing anymore as the work of literature but there's only Texts, this thing you can enter from any number of directions (this is the analysis of Jameson), the Text being "renarrativized" depending on which way you enter it. Text is also the subject of deconstruction and semiotics, and in that sense everything is Text, verbal or visual; the Text exists to be taken apart, and deconstructed.

"Then there is copy, what I call "Copy." I use the word from advertising -- Copy, going back by way of Venturi's "Learning from Las Vegas." Words graphically distorted to capture the energy of the moment, the excitement of living now, words given graphic quality to create an immediate effect. This wordform was used by Russian revolutionaries, the constructivists, it was used in propaganda, it is used in advertising, to capture your attention -- it is also used in the Venturian sense, because there's an ergonomic quality to Copy, it's distorted and accentuated to capture your attention once, then if it loses your attention, it may try to capture it again: so, for example, the lettering on a billboard has larger lettering, and smaller lettering, you can see it from a mile off, one way, and from a half mile off you see it again, differently, so it's very much about an object passing that sign, and the letters are distorted to the trajectory and speed of the passage. Another example of Copy is the lettering on the bottom and top of cereal boxes: if you open up the box and spread it out flat, you see that the letters are going in all different directions, it's a purely graphic, almost cubist arrangement, but these letters are sized and spaced to capture you attention at every phase of pouring the contents from the box, or picking it up in the supermarket. In the real world, context orders Copy. A classic example of that being the way you see on the front of ambulances the word AMBULANCE spelled backwards because it's meant to be seen through the rearview mirror of the car in front of it, so the car will get out of the way. That's Copy.

"Copy and Text are deconstructive, and usually exist in the midlife phase of a culture, in the middle-of-the-story kind of circumstances. They are very much about things being OK and evolving into another phase. Two nodes: Text versus Copy, a whole modern and postmodern tradition has been volleying between these two word forms. Copy was involved in cubist art, the whole high-low construct of cubist art, collages; then went on through the collage tradition into Pop art where Ruscha used graphic letters from motion pictures, and Andy Warhol used letters from comic books. In the postmodern context an awareness of the infiltration and permeation of advertising to lower levels of our consciousness has been used by people such as Ashley Bickerton, with his logos and his particular constructs. That's one tradition, but it does have an up and down movement -- because it was secondary in the cubist period, it became primary in the Pop, with "The Big Pop". Now it's declined again, the Big Pop is over with, popular culture is no longer such a monolithic and pervasive force as it was conceived of in the '60s. Copy is currently surviving in the context of lurid tabloidism which has taken over our consciousness in other ways.

"Text was first used in the visual art context in the conceptual art of the late '60s by Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Barry. Weiner did not think of Text as simply something borrowed from literature or as a construct of bureaucracy and administration. He did not talk about the bureaucratization of art, he was interested in conceptual space beyond the act of making a work of art. He made a kind of earth art works in Vermont -- strings laid out on the ground that students destroyed, they were so outraged. He has said that it was such a revelation that he didn't even need to do the work anymore, simply expressing the idea was enough, so what he did after that was pull back from the making of the work, and in his notebook simply wrote out phrases for works of art, I think one was "A rope connecting Germany and France," then he would sell a page of his notebook to what he called the "receiver," the collector, and the receiver would then decide whether to make it or not. So it wasn't part of Weiner's action to make the work. He talked about the word as a quasi-conceptual visual construct that expressed the ineffableness of ideas in the world, and of the space beyond the idea, of words as something that expressed the almost invisible nature of that aura that follows an idea that may or may not be completed. The word for him was this skeletal manifestation of a constructed material reality: the concept in conceptual art. Robert Barry also used words in this way, he talked about words being able to get to those invisible spaces that exist all around us, and between us, but which we have no words

for. In an audio piece recreated at Julian Pretto a few years back words were just spoken off a tape and let die on the air, and the way they resonated in the space probed the space for those invisible places that we have no words for. Kosuth was more about the page and the text of professional fields and he went on to deconstruct text in that way. Since then, Text art has been reified, and in my view has become somewhat tiresome. I think the whole idea of reading a text on a wall is somewhat authoritarian. You always feel like you're a child being sent to the stand in the corner, that you are being forced to read something -- it's a very controlling thing. In the Soviet Union, for example, before the coup, newspapers were not readily available so they would just display them in front of the Pravda office, and you would have to stand there and read the newspaper. Well, it's very uncomfortable, it changes the way you read things, it forces you to accept things quicker, you don't get to think things through, or mull them over in leisure, sitting on your own couch, for example, so it is a controlling thing. I think it is this negative ergonomics that makes most free-thinking people respond badly to textual art: then of course there are those lost souls that need leaders, and love gazing stupidly at the handwriting on the wall. I think with Text in visual art there's a natural reification built into it, a natural reversal of the postmodern deconstructive strategy it purports to enact, which causes it to fail as art. Copy in art also seems to be fading away, or imploding into tabloidism.

"So I've said that Text and Copy volley between each other when the paradigm is secure, when things are moving along, when the market is developing, when we're in the middle of it, and everybody is writing about the same things. Then there are break periods, when, all of a sudden, something has definitely come to an end, something else has not yet come into being. It's in this kind of period of confusion that the fabric of Text and Copy that modernism and postmodernism supported is frayed and tears open. It's in these periods that there is a longing for another polarity of wordforms. The first of these is Logos, the other is Nomos. I derive my analysis of Logos and Nomos from Deleuze and Guattari's "A Thousand Plateaus," particularly the chapter on "Postulates and Linguistics." In that chapter they present a pragmatic linguistics based on the notion of what they call the order-word, the mot d'ordre, which as translated would tend to emphasize the imperative aspect of the word "order." They do say that the basic function of language is not the conveyance of information, or communication, but the transmission of order-words. These order-words come to us from the collective assemblage, they are always presupposed, they are not things that we create, but are things that come down to us. As a result, all of our so-called direct discourse is really the indirect discourse of the collective assemblage through us. Through a speaker: the pragmatics of that speaker become a determinant therefore on the nature of the development of the language.

In this context, the search for the ways of pragmatic variation supersedes the Chompskian search for constants and structures. Deleuze and Guattari also talk about the double direction of these order-words. The order-word can go towards a dwelling on constants, or go toward a dwelling on variables. I have simplified this particular bifurcation, naming Logos and Nomos as the two sides of the order-word. I don't want to make the supposition that the order-word is Logos, and something else is Nomos, however. Logos and Nomos are generalized names, that name the substrate of the space that these two directions of the order-word usually exist in, a tendency toward constant and major language, the power of the word, which occurs in the State space, or Logos space, and then there is the minor language, setting all the constants into a state of variability, a condition of continuous variation within language, instigated by pragmatics, and this happens in Nomos space, open field space, nomad space, and is the basis of what Deleuze and Guattari call "nomad thought." I'm making this linkage between one of the double directions of the order-word and the substrate space in which they exist in order to clarify the nature of the two different directions and indicate that there are different word forms I believe are generated from each.

"In this context, then, Logos is the word from the Father, it's the Law, "In the beginning was the Word," "America love it or leave it," it's the word that is passed down from the boss, it's the rules, in the imperative sense of the word. Nomos, on the other hand, is the fluxing word of the open space, it's the voice of the unheard masses, it's the voice of nature. It can exist in massive form, or in individual form, if someone is completely alienated from the ruling paradigm or discourse of the period, for example, then they will try some kind of subversive way to get their own view across, any way of doing that is Nomos, any situation where there is a low degree of articulation due to repression or degradation or reification and people are unable to articulate their feelings and can't say what they feel, and then there is some sort of word form, combining words and visuals in some twisted way that gets around that inarticulation and conveys their feelings in that lower form, that is also Nomos. In that sense I'm thinking of tattoos, certain forms of graffiti; all are Nomos.

"I collect images of Nomos, and the news is not all good. Nomos is the swastika that appeared on Plymouth Rock this past summer. Nomos can be very negative and awful. In Long Island there was a golf green that somebody, angry about Jewish people being admitted to a country club took his anger out on, and carved racial slurs into the green grass. This word did not have any conventional ground upon which to express itself, and so it exists in a state of groundlessness, usually a natural form: the linkage between the word in a very raw form and this natural

substrate is very much Nomos. In that sense the way black football players carve their names in the back of their haircuts, that is also a minor form of Nomos as expressed in a very rule-oriented construct, namely, the National Football League. Other forms of Nomos are children's drawings, at some points, or drawing your name in the sand, just marking your individual presence. And when they cement a new square of pavement, and people draw their names in the wet cement, that's Nomos. Rap music is a certain kind of Nomos form invading music as well. Nomos also involves the substitution of one voice or language in behind the voice of the establishment, or what you would expect, an alien takeover is implied; suddenly apparently normal people are speaking an alien language, and that's Nomos. I'm thinking of "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers"; in general, the horror films of the '50s were very much about this kind of Nomos, though it evolved in a horrorfilm reified way, often disguised as Logos.

"The art world being what it is, a field which filters out a lot of the rawness of the real world or popular culture, it's very rare to see raw, straightforward, and unmediated expressions of Nomos in the art world. That's just the nature of the art world. On the most conceptual level, in terms of the way in which I deal with Nomos in the most straightforward way, the collecting of images, I would like to have simply curated these raw actions against raw space: that would be pure Nomos, but again, the art world is not about that, but about creating a minor language which may set the major language of the art world (which is into Text and Copy) into a new phase of variation, and set off a Nomos-tic future. The artists I've chosen for this show "Nomos" are not pure unadulterated representatives of this kind of word form. All do types of word art that I would say relate to Text and Copy, sometimes they tend toward Logos, and I would say in general very sophisticated works of art usually involve an internal struggle between all these different word forms. I've discussed how this struggle enacts itself mainly in the context of works of literature, but I believe it also enacts itself in works of visual art.

Goldsmith's use of words is actually a classic example of what Deleuze and Guattari would call a minor language, which involves a reduced number of constants, some people call it an impoverished number of rules, and from that there is a burst of unbelievable variation. Deleuze and Guattari talk about Kafka having written in a very

degenerated German that was used in Czechoslovakia, and he took that reduced and very limited form of language and created all these variations. Goldsmith uses rhyming dictionaries to create blocks of text, that may go from one to four syllables across a page; it's a very limited set, very strict. In his first series he simply did sequences of words from rhyming dictionaries. What he's now done is to expand the polarities. The rhyming dictionary work could be considered a kind of Text art since it involves an import of dictionary texts used by poets into a visual construct. What he's done, by creating long columns of print, and by presenting these in large frames leaned up against the wall, is create these Logos forms, almost classical, intellectual-looking, imperative forms, almost tablets, commandments, which could be taken as Logos. But in that construct, and on the whole other side of the polarity, he has expanded the text with interleavings of all kinds of sayings, expressions, nonsense, things that occur to him, or that he gets from the radio, pop songs, a lot of it from low culture. So he's set up a construct where the polarities are really bouncing off each other. He's created an open field for language, which is why I consider this work as Nomos.

"Susan Silas by and large deals with all forms of word art, Text, for example, and sometimes she uses Copy. I actually in one review faulted her for using all these forms. I now see it more as a struggle in working through to a clearer form. I have had more thoughts about the way the different word forms work against each other. I would say now that a lot of her work is involved in the surreptitious use of Nomos. The work here involves a form of signage you would find in any commercial building lobby, or health club, a bulletin board -- it has a metal cabinet that you open up and memos are placed in there. In this one she blanks out the memo with a white piece of paper, and then the white pinstick letters that are always saying things like what office is on the tenth floor, or "have a nice day," now has a different voice. There is an implication that the managerial voice which usually rules this sign has been replaced by some other voice, that there has been a silent palace coup. This kind of feeling that there is another voice form present, means that Nomos has somehow invaded the closed field and turned it into an open field.

"Samm Kunce is a young artist who flips through tattoo books and when she finds tattoos that jump out at her and say something directly to her she extracts those from the truly thousands of tattoos that are reproduced in these books, and prints them on small canvases permeated with wax and other materials, that make the canvas look like flesh, creating paintings as tattoos. She

is recreating the rawness of tattoos, in painting, and she is staging on the canvas the articulation of feelings that could not be articulated except in tattoo form. I consider this a very simple form of Nomos and I think it refers in a very specific way to a constant and persistent subcultural form of Nomos as well.

"Suzanne McClelland is a young painter who I believe is one of the clearest practitioners of a type of abstract painting which deals with Nomos. Her work in some ways picks up on a fork of the road that Cy Twombly briefly went down, then let go. He went on to a more scriptive type of work which dealt with textual and graphic aspects of language art, although I lend more credence at present to the graffiti discourse into which his work was set in the Hi-Low show at MoMA last year than I did then. McClelland picks up on the road that Twombly did NOT take, and she unifies stroke -- an ergonomic stroke that encompasses the entire canvas -- and lettering, and this union of stroke and letter form recapitulates in the figure-ground construct the rawness of Nomos that you find in nature, where raw word and nature are somehow one. This produces on canvas a kind of ugliness that bespeaks the Nomos. A lot of McClelland's work has been done on boards, and the paint is smeared, it feels like a raw smear, any figure-ground relation is wiped away, gone: that, too,

recreates the groundlessness of Nomos. In THEM she uses a word that is very charged in terms of Nomos, a word of paranoia, anger, alienation from the group, or from the ruling discourse. For me it also relates to THEM!, the 1953 atom-bomb-scary sci-fi movie about giant ants invading the sewers of LA, so again it's an alien force pushing its materialization. Her work also bounces off kitsch moments in horror films where the possession of a body by the devil or a dark force is conveyed by a message weltering upon the victim's skin: the message really does come from a force field where you feel like there is something down there that cannot be articulated, and has been forced to the surface in a painful way.

"Dan Appel's table piece "M is for MOM" is a little more Text-oriented, and it also has aspects of Copy to it. The reference to Mother of course would also seem to be a reference to origins, Logos, but I believe this classifies as Nomos. It could be that Logos applies to the father, Nomos to the mother. The law which is passed down by the mother is often a different law than the one passed down from the father. As we've all experienced, the father wants us to go to law school, and make us responsible, productive citizens, he drives us hard; the mother just wants us to be happy and do what we want to do. It doesn't always work out that way, of course, but I leave open the possibility that the law of the mother is a different kind of law. It's the law of the open field, Nomos.

In this case engraving these words on a classic kitchen table means something. The table replicates that little zone where you were served your peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which Mom made for you, at which you spent all your time eating the eternal lunch. It becomes a symbol of being allowed to be what you want to be. I think the table form also reminds me of a seance, of a word or a sign that comes from another world, from the mother who may or may not be dead, or whom you do not communicate much with anymore, so the words here, even though, technically speaking, they have been engraved on the table, they seem to me to come up from below the table, and that also is indicative of Nomos.

"Lois Nesbitt has done a piece where she deals with how people handle the confusion and chaos of the contemporary urban New York scene, which is really a hotbed of Nomos expression. One of the ways they cope is to block it out, they whitewash it with a reactionary rhetoric, and the act of blocking out is a counterfunction of Nomos, a way of establishing your own way of meaning against impossible odds.

"Lisa Hoke has done a piece with ropes, where material and letter are unified: an indication that the letters simply burst out of the materials without premeditation, just came out of the rope, as in a magic trick. A line of poetry is spelled out, "To tie knots in the air," which is itself a Nomos thought, that the words are just part of nature, they're not making laws, they're emerging from the open field.

"In all these works, I am not saying that we have pure examples of raw Nomos, I AM saying that there are indications that there is this new word form, more and more apparent in the world, now reentering the art world. What this new word form could do is set the whole textual-deconstructive paradigm on its ear, as minor language, setting it in variation, demanding a more spontaneous, natural and expressive word form. Something that is not about one power group fighting against another power group, attempting to gain power over the majority, a minor Logos playing the major Logos' game, but what Deleuze and Guattari call the "becoming-minor" of the major discourse, by the action of the minor language upon it, affecting the major discourse in such a way that it all becomes minor language and variations are set off in a vast openness. This could open up the art world and make it an open field. It is purely coincidental in this instance that 6 of 8 artists in "Nomos" are women, but it certainly may be that the experience of women in the art world does not lend itself to the formation of Logos!

"I also wanted to mention the space of this show. The space is a gallery, but it is also a residence, it has a double usage; this double usage I have used as a parallel to the "double direction" of the order-word as analyzed by Deleuze & Guattari. One point Logos, one point Nomos, it becomes a gap space, a Nomos space, or an open field, because of this ambiguity. That has also influenced my choices, because I deal with spaces first, artists second. I asked Amy Hautt to deal with the space itself as a Nomos, a word form, a space that was not about making laws and passing judgments, but just about staging emergent form. The architectural element of three pillars and a ceiling beam on the far wall I thought was difficult to hang art in because it immediately becomes a framing element and it reinforces the field-ground and framing conventions, or Logos conventions, of the white cube gallery space. I thought that anything Nomos-like, in terms of paintings, put in those bays, would become more ordered than normal, because of the effect of the pillars. Hautt has anthropomorphized the interval between the beam and the wall, with white nylon, and then white flour, abstractly creating the impression that the wall is a body-form that is pregnant. In the middle bay Hautt has measured in her birth weight in flour, so that it hangs down, then sprinkled some on the floor, and with her finger

she has written her birth weight. Again, this reference to the mother was completely circumstantial, even coincidental. She was not aware that I had already chosen Dan Appel's "M is for Mother" piece. She might have been responding to the fact that when I brought her round to look at the space, Lisa Hoke also came by and she was with her new baby. And of course the gallery is new-again, and trying out a new life. This connection between female and Nomos is again circumstantial, this is how it worked out at the moment. My thesis is not that Nomos is a female thing, but it does occur where openness is, and you can draw your own conclusions from that. The result of Hauff's transformation of the beam and pillar construct, as well as Dan Appel's table, representing the furniture element that is in the room when the gallery reverts to a residence, and then Kenneth Goldsmith's piece, leaning up against the wall, acting as a surrogate, conceptual doorway into the space: it all converts the entire space into a Nomos, an open field, conveyed by and structured by that word form.

"The architectural conventions of the art world are so rigid, so law-like, so much about dispensing laws, each gallery in effect acting like a little government dispensing Logos, that it may be very difficult to create an open field within the art world. This show may be a premature show. I consider it a Nomos space, conceived of as an open field: it may generate some thoughts, and generate further pioneerings

of open spaces, or it may not be that way. The events which started me thinking along these lines after quite a long period in which, to defend my own personal constitution against a very difficult period, I had to become a walking Logos, very rigid, a kind of pseudo-neo-conservative, just to get by: what allowed me to break out from that was my first, immediate, and instinctual positive response to the revolutions of Eastern Europe in 1989. I wanted this show to open on the two year anniversary of the coming down of the Berlin Wall, simply to indicate that I believe that was the beginning of the period we are in, that was when whatever discourse, period or market we WERE in, ended, we are now in a new period, thrashing about between beginnings and endings, with Nomos and Logos in a polarized state: and Nomos in general seems to be rolling through the world, a vast domino effect of continuous variation, with walls coming down in many ways, making this the Era of the Big Change indeed, and I think the big change is that fields are opening up, Nomos is spreading. In word-art, therefore, only Nomos is effective and moving to me, right now.

- spoken not written by Robert Mahoney
New York City
October 18, 1991

she has written tonight: tonight's night is not the night of open space, of it may not be that way, the evening which started us thinking about these lines after quite a long period in which, to defend my own personal conviction against a very difficult period, I had to become a walking corpse, very rigid, a kind of pseudo-human, conservative, just to get by, what allowed me to break out from that was my first immediate and the first negative response to the revolution of Eastern Europe in 1989. I wanted this sense to open on the two year anniversary of the coming down of the Berlin wall, simply to indicate that I believe that was the beginning of the period we are in, that was when whatever discourse, period of market we were in ended, we are now in a new period, thinking about between beginning and ending, with hopes and hopes in a political state, and hopes in general seem to be rolling through the world, a vast domain effect of continuous variation with walls coming down in any way, making this the era of the big change indeed, and I think the big change is that walls are opening up, words is spreading, in word-art, therefore, only words is effective and moving to us, the art is not to encourage installations and we are now on a skill-well on, dipir or are quite taste in various cases, wall paintings that speak not written by Robert Rauschenberg, it will need to be justified very soon as you will see the art world, New York City, October 18, 1991, space, some of it is finished, I consider it as a premature show, it may generate some thoughts, and generate further pioneerings



MASSING IN MOSCOW, 50,000 protesters stage an anti-government rally.

Graffiti vandals paint swastika on Plymouth Rock

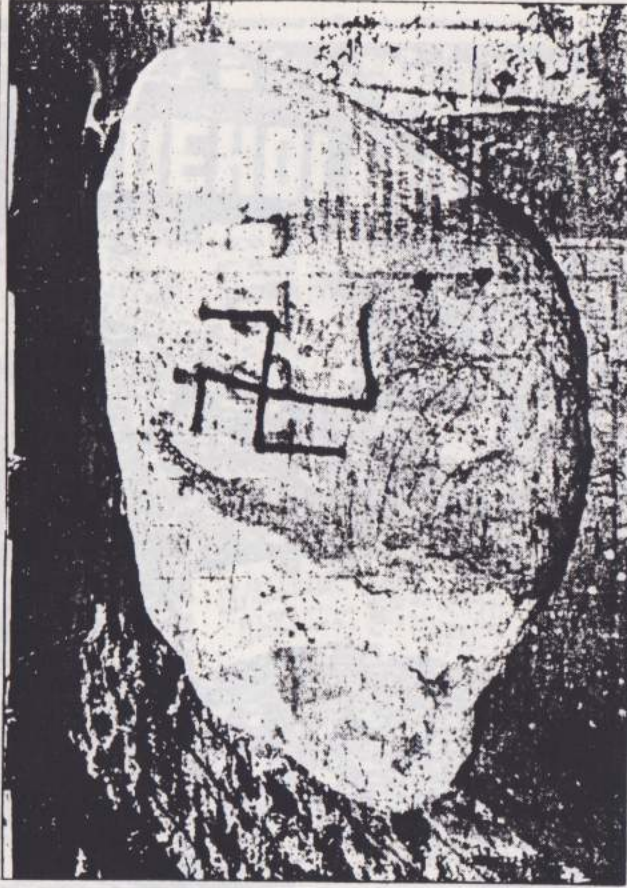
PLYMOUTH, Mass. — Vandals yesterday painted a swastika on Plymouth Rock, the symbolic landing place of the Pilgrims, and state officials said they are considering building a fence around the monument. "It's a very public rock and a public symbol, and young people seem to like to do vandalism where it's going to be seen and thumb their noses at society," said Charles Dane, regional supervisor for the Massachusetts Division of Forests and Parks, which oversees the landmark. Police Chief George Madsen said teen-agers spray-painted a black swastika across the rock at about 4 a.m. He said they were spotted by a fisherman, but fled before police could arrive. Police had no suspects.

Dane said spray-painted graffiti turned up on the rock about once a year. State workers scrubbed the rock clean of the graffiti, which was painted across the chiseled date of the Pilgrims' landing in 1620.

"It's too bad the people don't have better channels for their energies," Dane said.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith said the incident may be connected to a neo-Nazi skin-head organization that has become active in Massachusetts.

"To deface this historic monument to religious freedom with the symbol of anti-Semitism and racism makes this act an intention affront to Jews, blacks and others," said Leonard Zakim, the ADL's New England regional director.



Associated Press

PLYMOUTH SHOCK: Historic Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts was desecrated with a swastika painted across the date 1620, when the pilgrims landed there.