

**Ele Carpenter, 2005**

*Intervention & Revolution, Interview with Gregory Sholette & Nato Thompson.* In: Eds: S. Cook, B. Graham, V. Gfader, A. Lapp. *A Brief History of Working with New Media Art: Interviews with Artists.* The Green Box, Berlin. (2010). P111-127.

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Interviewer: > Ele Carpenter

Interviewees: > Gregory Sholette & Nato Thompson

Gregory Sholette spoke about 'Interventionist Art: The Creative Disruption of Everyday Life' at the Literary and Scientific Institution in Bath, organised by Dan Hinchcliffe at ICIA. Ele Carpenter interviewed him after the lecture, and emailed particular questions to Nato Thompson, which have been added to the text.

Ele Carpenter: What was your political catalyst for getting involved in art activism?

Gregory Sholette: Politically I came along on the cusp of the Vietnam War generation. I registered for the draft, but didn't serve. I moved to New York City in 1977, sharing an apartment with a woman who was then 81 years old. Her name was Sophie Sarah and she was born in Russia. She had a large apartment on the Lower East Side and rented out a room to me. Sophie was an amazing woman who was involved in the Labour Movement. She was a member of the Socialist Party in the US then joined the Communist Party when those ranks split after the Russian Revolution. She had an incredible history, and re-educated me about an American history I knew very little about. Meeting Sophie gave me an alternate analysis of history that was complimented by my studies with Hans Haacke, who was my professor at The Cooper Union. Initially I wanted to study with him because I thought he was still exploring natural systems as art. Then I discovered that he was doing politicised work, and at first I was opposed to it, I didn't understand why this work would be 'art'.

EC: Did you see that as a shift from the aesthetic to the political, or an integration of the aesthetic within the political?

GS: I think I spent a lot of time trying to question the formal issues that related to art, probably far more time than was necessary, or was good for me. Like many of my contemporaries I tried very hard to look for other examples of work, not just Haacke's, for different models of how to make art more political.

EC: One of the questions in the Interventionist Manual was: What spheres do you find appropriate for your work?

GS: Well, I've come to England to lecture at the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University College London among other venues, so part of the answer is my effort at educating Art Historians as well as the public about this type of work and its history. Still, I try not to write in the vocabulary of 'high' critical theory, hoping that younger people, will become interested, but also so that people don't keep re-inventing the wheel, or if they want to reinvent the wheel, they know the history.

My own art practice is not generally interventionist: It tends to be more involved with making things - sculptures, short films, photographs - which means that I function in different and even contradictory roles or spheres of activity.

EC: You talk about re-inventing the wheel in terms of practice. I'm interested in the point of hybridity between art-activists and artists. Do you see hybridity as a building block towards social and political change? So that it's not simply about re-invention or repetition but about building a network? Or is that too strategic a view of what might be happening?

GS: I think it's really 'The' question. I spoke during my lecture today about Political Art Documentation / Distribution, or PAD/D (1980-1986) and building political networks was precisely what they were trying to do: to connect art-activists with activists who would actually rejuvenate, or put back together, a sense of unity or community on the Left. When I say 'The Left', I mean what was left over from New Left, May '68, the Women's Movement, the Gay movement, the Anti-war Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement.

PAD/D sought to be the catalyst for unifying these scattered elements of political opposition, which I think was heroic but also quite misguided, both historically and from a political point of view. It was in fact the Right that was organising very concrete networks to create its own coup within U.S. politics, so that by the 80's the Left was completely collapsed as a political option.

Why was PAD/D's analysis mistaken? Because artists are not the vanguard of anything except aesthetics, politically they tend to borrow, replicate and mirror situations, not create conditions for lasting social change. For example, What is most interesting about these younger artist's collectives and interventionist practices today is the way that they mimic institutional and organisational structures that we normally wouldn't pay attention to, including even corporations and how they operate within our lives. The Critical Art Ensemble reverse engineers flows of power, thus making its social effects manifest. YOMANGO overdoes the idea of life-style branding. The Yes Men develop exaggerated business personas. And perhaps, because neo-liberalisation has pushed out actual, public social institutions, you have a lot of new art projects that resemble archaic institutional models, false communities, bureau of investigation and so forth. As if a discarded realm now offers space for artistic occupation.

The point I'm making is that artists don't create political movements per se. They reflect on them, or perhaps in this case they are keeping a pilot light burning when there isn't

much of a political movement happening, at least in Europe and the US. Perhaps this will lead to something?

EC: I think that there is a frustration and disappointment with traditional forms of activism so artists and activists are being more creative in their direct -actions, thinking more conceptually about how they intervene in culture, and this is a tactical manoeuvre. So I wonder if artists are mirroring the activists or vice versa?

GS: It's probably an impossible question to answer. But I think that both, to some degree, are mirroring the times we are in. The kind of entrepreneurial capitalism that emerged in the neo-liberal period is also interventionist. Consider the way interventionist artists typically consist of small groups, or cells, that are very mobile and tactical, not unlike the dot.com start-ups of the 90s whose business philosophy stood opposite that of the big lumbering corporations such as IBM.

EC: Let's talk specifically about the Interventionists Manual and Exhibition.

GS: I should make it clear that I had nothing to do with curating the show. Nato and I originally proposed to the Museum a more historical exhibition about activist art, which would include the work that I was showing you today (PAD/D, REPOhistory etc) and there weren't too interested in doing that. So Nato went on to do the Interventionists and we developed the catalogue together instead.

EC: Was there resistance from artists or art-activists to taking part in the Interventionists exhibition?

GS: That would be worth talking to Nato about.

EC: OK, perhaps I could also ask Nato about queries from funders. Particularly with the Steve Kurtz and the Critical Ensemble Case, were there any concerns?

Nato Thompson: There's a fundamental misconception that political art is somehow antithetical to art funding. The Interventionists exhibition was, in fact, quite easy to fund. The National Endowment for the Arts and other funding agencies switched a lot of their grants towards community and educational values, so the Interventionists exhibition fitted quite nicely. In fact, granting organizations were not that concerned about the political nature of the work itself. I did have some resistance from artists in participating and for reasons that I am quite sympathetic. There is always concern that, as opposed to producing a pedagogic experience, an exhibition only participates in occluding the radical potential of the work displayed. The anarchist collective YOMANGO were very specific that they didn't want their shoplifting bags to be fetishized as hallowed art forms; instead they wanted to present them as models for others to take advantage of. So we had free handout patterns for making one's own bag. An other group, whose name I can't reveal, were concerned that they gain a lot of social leverage out of not directly declaring their

political agenda and so they decided to not be in the show. In terms of the CAE case, the funders didn't inquire whatsoever. There was obviously concern on our end, but the funders, no.

GS: The Kurtz case happened as the show was going up. But I think that it is worth noting that when the FBI approached the director of the museum, Joseph Thompson, he didn't flinch or back down. He stood by the exhibition and the artists and that was really something given that since 9/11 we have seen so many cases of curators and arts administrator's self-censoring themselves after being visited by federal agents or simply from public pressure. Let me add that the new printing of the Interventionists Manual book (the first batch is largely sold-out) also has a new introduction about the Critical Art Ensemble case.

EC: Can you remind me what happened at the opening of the exhibition?

GS: The FBI served subpoenas to a number of people who are either part of Critical Art Ensemble, or are associated with Steve Kurtz, in order to get them to testify before a grand jury. Assistant Attorney General William Hochul is doing all in his power to see Kurtz behind bars for some period of time, and the whole investigation is clearly purely political. (See <http://www.caedefensefund.org>)

EC: Greg, do you describe yourself as a curator?

GS: No, not usually, I've done it occasionally for financial reasons. Even the show at the New Museum (Urban Encounters, 1998), was organised when I was briefly employed as their Curator of Education. Still, it wasn't really curating per se, and this is something some people criticised me for. I selected the artists groups, but then gave them almost carte blanche to do whatever they wanted within a certain budget and space, as well as following rough guidelines to do with representing historical influences. So that was my approach to curating. This would also be true for REPOHistory, where anybody that wanted to be part of the project could be part of it. We didn't ask for proposals, we didn't look at people's artwork; we just collected artists, or better yet gave them an organized resource to work together on a project.

EC: So would you describe your role as a facilitator of a collective effort?

GS: Yes. I hope so, some of the time.

EC: I'm looking at the effect of new technologies on this whole area of practice. Nato, can you describe the significance of technology in the Interventionists Exhibition?

Nato Thompson: In terms of technology, the show did highlight a lot of design work. The technology that lends itself to tent making was particularly present. Design itself embraces the utilitarian aspects that are endemic in much of the work in the show. We

also highlighted the work of the Institute of Applied Autonomy who produce technologic interfaces for street protest and enhancing personal autonomy. However, there weren't many web sites, and net-based work. They are difficult to display in galleries and my experience is, they don't benefit from gallery presentation: they are often broken and people can always check from home.

EC: Greg - one of the questions in the Interventionist Manual was: How does technology function in your work and what is your relationship to technology?

GS: It has been on my mind a lot, because when I arrived in the UK my computer crashed! I do a lot of work by email and hardly use the phone any more. I've just set up a website which has a lot of resources on it. I also use movie making equipment and Photoshop in my artwork - so I would say that I'm very dependent on digital technology. And clearly that's the case for a lot of artists - but not all of them. For example Critical Art Ensemble has said in the past that they didn't see any point in demonstrating in the street, and that they were working within the electronic frontier. But there was a very funny comment that someone from the Chicago-based artists' group known as Temporary Services made when the incident happened with the CAE and FBI: there was a call for a demonstration in front of the court house, and TS found it was ironic that CAE needed people out in the street. You know it is complicated.

EC: Are you involved with open source at all in New York?

GS: I'm not directly involved, but I do have Creative Commons copyright on my articles on my website.

EC: Do you know of any relationships between open source and more performative activist groups in New York?

GS: I'm not sure. The Institute for Applied Autonomy and the Bureau for Inverse Technology (BIT) are both involved in developing software in an activist mode. I will say that the ethics of open source, if not the specific practice, is very common to most of the artists that Nato and I describe as 'interventionists' in our book.

EC: There's been a lot of debate in England about the relationship between artists and activists using independent media and open source and free software, and how those dialogues and patterns work. Obviously theoretically there is a close understanding, but in a practical sense activism comes from a Luddite history of anti-technology, and a fear of technology being used to control. This is combined with a suspicion of the arts as a bourgeois recreational activity, so there's a history of a lot of conflict. The collectives that see the potential for collaboration are quite small, but very passionate and visionary, and are driving projects forward. But they are quite difficult to find out about, especially at an experimental stage. I don't know if you know of any similar projects in the US?

GS: I'm probably not the right person to ask; whilst I do have an interest in this, it's not what I've been pursuing in my research. But historically you put your finger on it - and

it's worth noting that the generation that I come from, the 70's and 80's, were, generally speaking, very suspicious of technology, to the point where the emphasis was on public populist forms of intervention, posters, graffiti etc. Using mainstream technology and mass media seemed to be fatally tainted to many of us, because the form itself was part of the problem. With a couple of exceptions, younger artists have steered directly into the Society of the Spectacle, finding ways of piggy-backing off the networks mass media has created, instead of outright rejecting them. (One historical exception to this generational reading in the States has been Paper Tiger TV, and Deep Dish TV, both of which got into using guerrilla media of various kinds as far back as 1980.)

EC: Do you think that these practices have influenced interventionist practices?

GS: Which practices?

EC: Projects like BIT and the Centre for Applied Autonomy, and how they think about the potential of technology, such as how to subvert or hack into technology for tactical means. Or the way in which technology changes the way in which we think about communication (if it does?). I wondered if there is an influence of this work on interventionism?

GS: Absolutely. A lot of Interventionists are committed to making work through the Internet or through other kinds of digital and analogue technology in the same spirit. But maybe there's more caution these days, the enthusiasm for the Internet and new technology has died down, and there's caution about the limitations of its initial promise as a new, electronic form of the public sphere. Geert Lovink, a co-founder of Nettime, has written about that reality adjustment in a particularly inspired way I think.

EC: I think there's a shift in the UK, where people involved in new media and open source programming are adopting 60's and 70's ideology about working collectively, communally and collaboratively, where everything is 'open' and 'gift economy'. Coming to these ideas through technological structures, and taking them back into physical public space. So people like Heath Bunting and Kate Rich, who were once perceived as at the forefront of 'computer' based new media art in the UK, are now working in parallel economies. Heath Bunting is making a recipe book of free food that you can find around the city of Bristol. Kate Rich's Feral Trade project distributes coffee from a collective in El Salvador and sweets from Iran through friendship networks. They are articulating the same ethics but in a more pragmatic way, going back into a social sphere. And a lot of this kind of work seems to be about survival.

GS: It is interesting to see how artists are taking on the role of re-creating social structures that are now gone or under extreme pressure from the forces of privatization.

EC: I like your reference to Tatlin's quote about not 'old, not 'new' but 'necessary' art, and I'd like to apply that to technology: to describe 'necessary' technology.

The open source movement has a lot of rhetoric and utopianism. I've just done a Mute Open Source workshop and I now feel quite cynical about it! It's not 'open' at all, unless you are a high level programmer. But open source ethics are enabling different creative business and trade models to develop to the point where the practice is only marginally described as art.

Do you have any examples of interventionist practice that have transferred entirely to the public realm? Where artists have given up the art context, or perhaps an art context is no longer relevant in defining their work?

GS: I don't know if they have left the art context to be in a non-art context, they might never have really tried to become part of the art world in an indirect way. The Centre for Urban Pedagogy, based in Brooklyn in New York, are a good example of what you are after. They are primarily architects and urban design people with a few artists involved. They do make exhibitions, but they also develop workshops with younger people about re-envisioning urban space. I don't think that the art world has any interest or knowledge of this group. In the UK there is Lorraine Leeson, still unknown in an art context dominated by the yBa. In Austria Wolfgang Zinggl of the group WochenKlauser is now in the Austrian parliament.

Some of this same disconnection with the Art context was also true of REPOhistory (1989-2000). REPO never really got much art world press, instead most of the press was from the mass media, such as The New York Times, The Village Voice, or Time Out NY and so forth. The few things that were written in art journals were by people involved in the group, including myself.

EC: Do you feel that you have to write your own history?

GS: Yeah, absolutely. I think you have to write your own history to some degree. Obviously there are disadvantages in that you have certain blinders on, but I do think that, under the circumstances, these histories will have to be written by people who are involved in making them. They are the ones with the knowledge of events for better or worse. Still, these alternative art histories are gradually becoming an area of interest for some younger scholars.

EC: In the UK increasing numbers of artists and curators are moving into academia, doing PhD's as a way to write about and archive non-gallery, based practice, including new media and activist performance, sound art, in fact any non-object based practice. At the same time, socially engaged art practices have now become orthodox. If not at the activist end of the spectrum, but the need for public engagement of artwork within a wider public space, intervening with other discourse or popular forms, even if they are 'relational aesthetics' situated in the gallery. I wondered if you had a sense of where things are going...what you see as the new radicalism...?

GS: I don't think that artists lead the charge when it comes to political change. Given the lack of any broad-based political movement at the moment, artists are not going to

change anything by themselves. The art world though has always picked bits and pieces of things that it wants, to represent certain kinds of concerns, to show that it's not out of touch with what is going on. At the end of the 70's no one was interested in social or political issues, but by the end of the 80's everybody was making political art. You could see art that looked like a formalist minimalist installation, and you would read the description and it would be something political... the mind boggles. What we are going through now is a cyclical process. It's bubbled up from below and the art world eventually must take notice. Now I think it's becoming more centred within the institutional art world because the art world doesn't produce anything - it has to capture it. And when it does, it tends to reify or ossify these activities. For example take Temporary Services gift economies in out-of-the-way places in Chicago and elsewhere. They are little known interventions not flashy or oriented towards the art scene. But inside the art world you have something that resembles relational aesthetics referred to as radical. But it's not - it is an artwork, and it's an interesting artwork, but limited to that world.

EC: I agree that relational aesthetics operates first and foremost within an art economy.

GS: What Temporary Services and other groups do is pretty much outside the art economy, and I don't think that the art world can completely take over those functions without dismantling itself. Once you really take seriously the idea that creative activity also takes place outside strictly professional legitimisation in museums and galleries, then you begin to undermine the whole logic of the commercial art world. (And that is really the only art world that matters today in the neo-liberal era. So, although I think that you are right - that it is becoming more orthodox, and will become more orthodox, or as Tom Franks has labelled it: an anti-orthodox capitalist orthodoxy. And it reaches back into the 60's as advertising agencies were already looking at the counter-culture to stimulate sales. Think of the way the VW Beetle was sold as a revolutionary hip means of transportation. Capitalism always recovers this stuff very quickly, but some things are difficult to absorb.

EC: Thinking about the long term - what do you hope will be the political and social legacy of your work?

GS: Personally my work aims to give this type of interventionist and activist art some degree of historical resonance as well as a way to read it that makes sense in a larger social and historical framework. But it is also a reading that critiques these practices, and is, in its own way, an intervention into the established notions of art history, which tends to reinforce the value structure of the commercial art market by guaranteeing certain names rise to the top like cream. Challenging that process is my ideal. Obviously, if I wish, I would like to see a very different kind of world, where people aren't exploited, aren't hungry, where people don't have incredibly meaningless jobs, walking around like zombies in shopping malls staring at things because that's all they really have in their lives etc. I don't know if you can lay all the blame on capitalism per se, but certainly questioning the way that operates has to be part of it.



EC: Everyone agrees that they want some level of change?

GS: Not everyone.

EC: OK some people are quite happy with the way things are. But I think a lot of people would like change but they don't think it's possible so they give up. They don't feel that they have any political voice or rights, or capacity, so they can't engage, and devoid any responsibility for change. It's a mass condition.

Talking about revolution, another of the questions in the Interventionist Manual was: Can there be radical art without revolution?

GS: That was taken from my essay.

EC: That's right - and you said yes there could be radical art without revolution because art won't lead a political movement.

GS: I think we can call it 'radical art' in its intentions, even if its actual ability to be radical is probably very limited. I think I ended my answer by saying that you can't really expect a revolution but you have to keep trying.

EC: But I'd like to turn that around and ask you: Can there be revolution without radical art?

GS: Yes, I think there could be.

EC: Well, I'd like to disagree, because art can change the way in which we perceive culture and cultural values, and that transformation is essential, and needs to take place at the same time, or before, revolution can take place. The problem with radical politics is that it falls into party politics and is instantly polarised, whereas art can deal with cultural complexity. Of course issues of sustainability are economic but they are also cultural.

GS: But the question you asked me was: can there be a revolutionary situation without radical art? - Not whether the kind of revolution that we would like to have happen, could take place without revolutionary art. That is a different question.

EC: Maybe radical art is not a condition of revolution, but part of the process?

GS: Maybe, but I'm not sure that art needs to be there, even if of course I hope it would be there. Let's not forget that radical art has played roles in revolutions that we don't particularly care for. Mussolini's Fascism had a very radical art movement associated with it, as did the Bolsheviks. At least some of the art was connected to that cultural violence. The Serbs Epic Poetry is lovely to listen to, until you realize that it's about slaughtering Muslims. Even the Bolshevik revolution had lots of problems some of it amplified by the artists. The relationship of art to politics is just a lot more complicated than saying culture is always a good thing, and that its absence is unforgivable.

EC: This is where preventing art from becoming simply a tool, or a representation of a political movement is really important. And these things have been heavily resisted by contemporary artists getting involved in activism, because traditionally the activist movement uses art as an illustration, or simply as a tool, without engaging...

GS: I don't know how many times I have been involved in political organisations and when I said 'I am an artist what can I do?' they would say 'make some flyers for us'. As soon as anything more interesting was proposed the activists just didn't get it. Still, I think it's much better now in the era of counter-globalization politics. And, as you say there are many activists who recognise the political value of cultural tactics.

EC: And you can say the same things about technology.

GS: Absolutely.

EC: Nato Thompson described artists as tool providers. Are you aware of any artists open source tools or projects in the Interventionist exhibition?

GS: The Interventionist Manual enabled us to promote the idea that 'you can do this too'. And the interest in the amateur, DIY, and tactical media, runs through a lot of the work. The whole thing about tools is complicated, because of the art world and the notion of aesthetics that comes to us through German Philosophy. There's one idea where any functionality or usefulness in art is considered a lesser aesthetic: Kant for example considered architecture a minor art because it was always in the last instance functional and therefore not capable of producing a transcendent aesthetic experience, so there was traditionally an artistic hierarchy. (We still see this hierarchy expressed in the way larger survey museums such as the Metropolitan Museum are organized.) So today the battle line today is over this question of artistic purpose in society: 1. Is the art object autonomous because it has no function, or 2. Because it seeks to be reintegrated with the life world and no longer perceived as art? What's ironic of course is that those kind of function-less art works - Modernist artworks—have become utilitarian objects for capitalism in a very overt way. Seemingly neutral Modernism became the culture of post-war western expansion. So this whole notion of instrumentalism is a tricky one. There is something to be said for the notion of autonomy both in its political sense in that you can separate yourself, and say ok - I can function without command from above, I can determine my own future, and also some notion of aesthetic autonomy, which should be looked at carefully now that it is largely disappeared and not simply disposed of.

EC: I think that's right, and it's a brilliant point to end on.

Ends.