

Activism against Nostalgia and Self-Defeatism: Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*. *Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*

Carlos Garrido Castellano

When the Indignados movement became an acknowledged pivotal force of Spanish civil society, a question emerged among those involved: how might it be possible to ensure the movement's sustainability without giving up being students, professors, blue-collars, etc.? Gregory Sholette's new book, *Delirium and Resistance*, touches on this very point yet and, in contrast to a general sense of despair, it does so with a tone of salutary and moderate optimism. *Delirium and Resistance* is a book about art, but it is also about how to believe in artists after the watershed of market domination. It is a book on the transformative potential of art written from moments of crisis. Activism, Sholette writes, 'is a process of recovering what the past has betrayed'.¹ Yet *Delirium and Resistance* also summarizes the experience of someone who has been on the barricades enough to relativize both the seemingly endlessness of pessimism and precipitation of euphoria. It is, ultimately, a book written by an artist who has dared to try out many of the ideas on art, power, society and transformation instead of simply enunciating them.

The book gathers impressions and histories emerging from four decades in the trenches. Focusing on disparate issues and periods, the essays collected in *Delirium and Resistance* can be read as an account of the perseverance of artists and activists operating both within, outside and against the institution. For Sholette, these experiences constitute a sort of 'phantom archive filled with practices and practitioners either too political, or simply too anomalous for mainstream cultural institutions to acknowledge in any complex way'.² This is not trivial, for it points to a relation between radical, transformative practices and art institutions that is unable to be simply reduced to oppositional terms. Looking backwards, Sholette contends that although haunted and pursued, the particles of that phantom archive have a tenacious, sinewy condition that makes them resistant to assimilation. In other words, no matter how trendy art activism might become for curators and mega-institutions, there always will remain an unpalatable, radical essence unable to be devoured. The histories gathered in this volume serve as example of the multifarious (often successful) strategies employed by socially-committed creators to escape museums' ability to 'manage dissent'.³

But *Delirium and Resistance* is (also) much more. Its value lies not just in collecting the histories of art activism, but rather in problematizing the position of such histories within the art world and within social movements. The former of these emerges, precisely, at the centre of one of the most interesting contributions of Sholette's theorization. The first of three parts of the book,

¹ Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*. *Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Kim Charnley (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 38.

² G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 49.

³ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 50.

entitled 'Art World', tackles these issues. The contradictions of our art world, the need to consider creative processes and agencies as part of a broader entity, a 'world', and the urgency to envisage alternative totalities through resistant practices emerge as this section's main ideas. It is comprised of three texts each focusing on the relationship between economy, art education and activism, where the insights of authors such as Marc James Léger or Yates McKee and the action of collectives and movements such as Global Ultra Luxury Faction, Liberate Tate, ACT UP or Madame Binh Graphics Collective are analysed.

The first text, 'Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: Within and Beyond the Post-Cold War Art Museum', revises Sholette's experience as founder of and participant in the Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D) and REPOhistory art collectives alongside issues raised by Dan Peterman's *Universal Lab* project (2000). The essay draws on the inclusion of PAD/D's archive in the Museum of Modern Art's collection and the contraposition of REPOhistory's public installation *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City* (1998), to the taming operations of institutional critique in order to explore the capacity of art to parasite museums and cultural institutions. In a moment when 'even the most formal art claims social relevancy', the point that Sholette insists on here is that, although threatened, art's agency is still at play when radical politics penetrate the institutional realm.⁴ The second text focuses on Occupy Museums and its series of 2012 interventions against New York art institutions' compliance with neoliberal capitalism. In this text, eloquently concluding with an 'and then', Sholette argues for the necessity of Occupy Museums and similar initiatives to develop an active, propositional side to complement the oppositional elements of protest and intervention. The last text in this cluster, written for the book, is one of the most brilliant and pertinent contributions, examining issues of debt and the 'oversupply' of art students. In it, the Sholette's central notion of 'bare art' is defined. Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben's bare life, bare art is art deprived of all symbolic effectiveness, reduced to merely another resource, to manageable and minimal data. The seemingly paradoxical increase of both debt and the number of art students is treated as part of an iceberg-like system that sustains its 1% by submerging the greater part of its body. In this sense, Sholette argues,

*there are exactly as many artists as the system requires for reproducing itself, just as there always are in a market-driven artistic economy. What has changed is the capacity to conceal this fact as the privileged status of art, its autonomy, and the exception it represents to capitalist markets is subsumed by post-Fordist enterprise culture.*⁵

The second part of *Delirium and Resistance*, 'Cities without Souls', focuses on gentrification. The four essays comprising it gather the transition between a moment of faith in the regenerative potential of artists to a point when they realize that the enemy is us. Connecting the transformative aspiration of socially-engaged art with its increasing appropriation by urban planners

⁴ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 35.

⁵ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 54.

initiating *through art* a chain of expulsions, this section looks to genealogies of social practice for potential ways out of this logic. Exemplary of juncture is the 2004 essay 'Mysteries of the Creative Class, or, I have Seen the Enemy and They Is Us'. Therein, Sholette's argument starts by discussing the appropriation of a REPOhistory street sign before shifting its attention to the historic financialization of Manhattan. The 'creative class' here is no longer represented by a group of marginal artists inhabiting multicultural neighbourhoods but rather a group including a select number of 'rag-to-riches' inspired creators whose activity encompasses capitalism without contradictions. Their success, however, is not without its own hauntology. If this essay ends with the dream of creatives and blue collars colluding in the privileged space of capital, the following one sketches a moment when this dream came true. Published in the midst of Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) effervescence, 'Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology: The City of (Dis)Order Versus the People's Archive' is both timely and persistent. The essay delves into OWS' materiality to explore the bridges and connections with other mo(ve)ments of emergence. Instead of conceiving artists' involvement in the revolt a novelty, Sholette situates this commitment as part of a potentially, more long-lasting, solidarity:

Or is art's occasional venture into radicalism something else altogether, perhaps an inescapable phase of aesthetic investigation that ironically must jettison aesthetic investigation itself (or temporarily seem to discard it)? Must it be the case that, when artists take their turn on the barricades, along with the partisans and oppressed, the dispossessed and the evicted, they are there because, aside from playing for the enemy, they simply have nowhere else to go?⁶

The final essay in this part, 'Art after Gentrification', provides one of the most realistic and less optimistic sections of the book. It analyses cases of socially-engaged artists (Theaster Gates) and projects (Assemble Collective and Conflict Kitchen) that have soaked through the barriers of 'mainstream' economies of prestige and recognition. The essay reinforces the idea that despite the recent interest in social practice the art market remains a conservative system privileging individually authored object-based and conceptual approaches over daring collaboration. The text's main interest, however, lies in bringing politics of race and class into the discussion of socially-engaged art. Whereas in previous texts difference was only considered 'from outside', that is, as part of the outsiders affected by artistic projects, in this case (particularly in the examination of Gates's projects) it is located at the centre of the equation. I will return to this topic.

The third and concluding part of the book, 'Resistance', comprises an affirmative counterpart to the tactical strategies presented in the previous one. The four texts included represent a body closely connected to Sholette's previous books, *Collectivism after Modernism* (co-edited with Blake Stimson in 2007) and *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (2010). Towards this end, the eighth essay constitutes something like a prehistory of *Collectivism after Modernism* whilst the ninth furthers Sholette's concept of artistic dark matter in a moment when it is 'becoming clearer'. (Dark matter

⁶ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 123.

defined as the creative force of the unseen mass of creative labour excluded from the visible top of the art system.) But it is in the two concluding essays where this section gains momentum.

Whilst the context discussed in *Delirium and Resistance* is marked by the global appeal and appropriation of socially-engaged and activist art, Sholette's book remains positive about the irreducible condition of committed art agencies. Deriving this both from a decades-long participation in activist causes and from a knowledge of resilient forms of global creative practice, his approach to these processes succeeds in acknowledging both the importance of previous experience and the singularities and unpredictability of emerging forces. This is the position from where the 2014 text 'On the Maidan Uprising and *Imaginary Archive*, Kiev' arises. On the occasion of the installation of Sholette's *Imaginary Archive* in the Ukrainian capital, documenting processes associated with the Maidan Revolution, the text delves into the heterogeneous alliances informing cultural masses during protest movements, reflecting on how 'mass political-cultural uprisings today are seldom the sole province of political progressives',⁷ producing an imaginary 'permeated with hopes as well as resentments'.⁸

'Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn', the text that ends the volume and gives it its name, stands as one of the sharpest insights on socially-engaged art altogether. Delving into the contradictions of social practice in the moment of its maximum acceptance, it both psychoanalyses and performs an autopsy on the turn in order to uncover a point of departure. Psychoanalysing the dead, the text transforms the 'there is no alternative' appropriations of social practice into a lattice where present and former, successful and otherwise initiatives converge in unexpected ways. Throughout the essay Sholette urges for a reinvention of socially-engaged art's future, one that can only occur through refashioning its genealogies. Here he superbly transforms this challenge into a question by asking: 'How might our narrative about social practice art collectivism be imagined differently?', or perhaps better yet, 'How can it be shifted away from the market-based notion of "community as consumer-based demographic" that often, surreptitiously dominates it"?'⁹ Sholette undertakes by examining Nato Thompson's 2004 exhibition 'The Interventionist', a landmark in the debates on art activism and tactical media that have nevertheless repelled serious examination ever since. Sholette's essay connects 'The Interventionist' to the trajectory of its curator and to the complex positioning of its host institution, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. The project, however, is conceived as the beginning of a future of more critical and more committed art experiences and experiments; in short, as a fertile stimulus for hypothetical yet possible trajectories of social practice. Under this view, socially-engaged art would not only be alive, it would be so in a way subjected to the confluence of past and present experiences, of heterogeneous crossings and nurturing afterlives.

⁷ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 206.

⁸ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 208.

⁹ G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 230.

Precisely this point emerges as one of the book's most promising exits. Dealing with a neighbouring subject – particularly with how European thought arrogated in exclusivity a sense of universality and timelessness – Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that 'it is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries'.¹⁰ Could it not be possible to apply this analysis to artistic traditions as well? Activist and socially-engaged art are often judged only by (and therefore reduced to) its momentary success or failure, defining impact within the temporal and spatial coordinates in which they are produced. In contrast, 'more conceptual', 'less engaged' artistic practices are more easily incorporated to analytical counterpoints, their influence spanning across locations and epochs. In Sholette's view, the trajectories and possibilities enacted by social practice become denser and deeper not only because they are embedded in the production of 'real life', but also because their consequences are extended and sought after beyond their most evident and immediate expressions.

Delirium and Resistance closes not without leaving some questions open. One of these has to do with the global application of the ideas of dark matter and bare art. As some of the critical voices have pointed out, the replacement of the working class by a creative one is not a homogeneous reality. How are international art activists connected to the precarious situation of workers building museums in the Middle East? What kind of hierarchies and tensions can emerge when emancipative initiatives are developed through transnational cooperation? How are protests articulated geographically, spatially when heterogeneous communities are involved into a similar cause? What happens when socially-engaged and collective art projects play outdoor, intervening in not always well-known realities? *Delirium and Resistance* deals with these questions and reproduces examples of solidarity between US artists and Global South causes that are located at the epicentre of histories of racial artistic practice. However, a further exploration of potentialities and contradictions of these alliances would complete the otherwise thorough fresco painted by Sholette.

These questions, it is worth noting, are not weaknesses but rather doors left open (many of which are addressed by Sholette himself in other texts), calling for an observant compromise with the reality and the experience of transformation beyond momentary trends, collapses and deliriums. Sholette revisits past experiences of activism without any sense of idealized nostalgia, critically repositioning them as a sharp lens through which we can confront horizon-less present. His insight provides a rare mix of emergence and history, strategy and conscious planning, enthusiasm and patience, a conjunction highly appreciated in a moment of superabundance of theories and ideals of emancipative action, not always followed by realist assessments of present political and cultural configurations. 'Amnesia attacks and ongoing reinventions of the wheel', Lucy Lippard writes in the book's foreword, 'are two things that

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

have plagued social activist art and the left for as long as I can remember'.¹¹ To avoid both things, *Delirium and Resistance* moves across different generations and geographies of engaged practice, seeking to explore alternative *endungen* and linkages binding failed and successful initiatives together, always grasping the resilient condition of their transformative potential.

Gregory Sholette. *Delirium and Resistance. Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.

¹¹ Lucy Lippard, 'Foreword: Is Another Art World Possible?', in G. Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, xvii.