

Specters of Collectivism: A Conversation between Gregory Sholette and Elena Sorokina (NYC/MOSCOW: 2006)

ES: In your essay *Interventionism and the historical uncanny: Or, can there be revolutionary art without the revolution* written for the catalog, "The Interventionists..." * you explicitly quote some examples of the Russian avantgarde, specifically constructivism, which is one of the founding movements for the theories of modernism. What were your reasons for basing your reflections on this specific works?

GS: I was literally pulled in this direction Elena. But only after first attempting to apply the standard formula of generational succession to these artists. You know, the usual approach is to argue that the aesthetic insights of the last generation, my generation in this case, are challenged or expanded upon by the next. It just did not work in the case of the interventionists because there had been a historical break of sorts sometime in the 1990s. This is how it seemed to me:

The critical art produced roughly between 1968 and 1989 was focused primarily on the demystification of ideology by making hidden political and economic systems transparent through pedagogical, sometimes didactic means. Think of institutional critique or the deconstruction of representation or even some forms of conceptual, political art such as the work of Hans Haacke or Martha Rosler. By contrast, the so-called interventionist artist today has no allergic reaction to using the tools provided by the mass media or appropriating what Debord classically called "the spectacle." The interventionist designs and constructs tools and tactics for acting in the world from freeware and web platforms to portable shelters and activist "fashions." These apparatus enable others to *live* resistance and to participate in the intervention. And this pragmatic, tool-making sensibility is one of three factors that led me towards the comparison between today's artists and the Soviet avant-garde, the *Constructivists*, *Productivists* and *Engineerists* in particular. Second, perhaps most strikingly, the Soviet artists of the 1920s and early 1930s operated under increasingly hegemonic conditions of collectivized, socio-economic production, and the same totalizing development is true today, only the economic conditions are those of global capitalism. Finally, both the classical Soviet avant-garde and today's interventionist reveal a tendency to work together in collectives and groups. Although this last similarity is not unusual in itself for after all many artists' groups have emerged between 68 and today, there is something about the form that collectivism currently takes that is different from the 60's, 70's, and 80s in so far as it reflects not so much an ideological principle, but an emphasis on pragmatic and or tactical modes of production that is like an uncanny inversion of the Russian avant-garde, but also exactly what one would expect to emerge from within a world-culture dominated by deregulated markets and entrepreneurialism.

ES: But how far can we compare the political situation in which the Russian avant-garde worked and today's situation? The Russian avant-garde, especially at the beginning of the 1917 revolution, fully supported the new political power, even in it's most problematic expressions, such as the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Today, artists speak instead about resistance, exodus, alternatives and marginality. There is no desire to align with the existing power structures, nor is there any conceivable way for an artist to do so even if it was desired.

GS: The comparison I made is not ideological, but economic and structural. Just as a state-collectivist model came to dominate production in post-revolutionary Russia, state-sponsored capitalism dominates all forms of production today, but at the global level. This is why I made it a point in my essay to discuss these specific historical similarities under the figure of *unheimlich*, which I use in the Freudian sense of a phenomenon that is at once strange and familiar. Like the startled terror of catching one's own Reflection in a semi-dark room and thinking for an instant that it is an intruder. Today's activist art and Constructivism are in other words not a logical extension of one another, but a distorted, inverted image of one other. Let me be more precise. Whereas the Constructivists and other Soviet avant-garde artists developed architectural and design concepts dedicated to rationalized ideas of industrial production that were then spreading to all sectors of post-revolutionary society, today's interventionist artist by contrast creates pragmatic designs and cunning incursions aimed at *interfering* with the near-global hegemony of irrational, capitalist production. In other words, two practices that are expressively dissimilar, but structurally analogous.

In terms of how artists do or do not align themselves with the established power, or what they say about their relationship to institutional authority, it is important to acknowledge that historical circumstances shape cultural practices far more so than desire or good intentions. That is true nowadays just as it was in the years after 1917. In other words, while I am an unwavering believer in the necessity of artists to struggle and resist repression and injustice I am

also the first to admit that market forces and the culture of entrepreneurship so dominate our social horizon today that even interventionists cannot fully escape the gravitational pull.

ES: let us expand on the notions of collective work, which obviously relates to diverse interventionist practices. You describe modes of organization of interventionists using notions such as informal groups, or cells. These significantly differ from "artists movements", which were flourishing in the beginning of the century. *Modernity* was full of "isms", artistic movements or groups: that provided theoretical platforms for artists and subsequently allowed a categorization of individual artistic practices. Moreover, *modernity* was obsessed with the individuality of the artist. However, the Russian avant-garde actually took collectivism seriously – you might say it created an ideology of collectivity of sorts.

GS: An ideology of collectivity? Nicely put. And perhaps that is what sets the constructivists apart from the collectivism of other modernist movements? I mean in so far as *Italian Futurism*, *Surrealism*, or even *Dadaism* sought liberation through nationalism, or libidinal release, or an antithesis to culture itself? Whereas, by contrast, the Russian avant-garde self-consciously organized around collective production? Still, doesn't an ideology of collectivity makes transparent what lies beneath all constructions of the social, including those we take as axiomatic? I mean by this the figure of a collective body, be it the tribe, the god, the nation, 'we the people,' or even collective labor. And certainly, collectivism has never been so deeply embedded in daily life as it is now, in the era of *homo consumptionist*, and yet so invisibly? Just think of the way corporate marketers anticipate your so-called "individual" lifestyle based on your zip code, personal statistics, and credit card history. In other words, a certain "blind" collectivization has already become routine. Perhaps what is called for in response is your ideology of collectivism? Only this time carried out without treating the State, or The Party, as the absolute regulator? I do think something like that is pre-figured in the work of certain interventionists. The question now is how to move this model from the cultural to the productive sphere. And that will never happen just because artists will it so.

ES: Yet, with regard to interventionist practices, it seems to me that the contemporary notion of collectivity, as well as contemporary art "collectives," are very different from their predecessors.

Yes and no. The new interventionists do indeed resemble older organizational forms of collectivism. However, the resemblance is a type of performance. Unlike early 20th century collectives there is no strong ideology grounding them, no unified utopian concept inspiring them. Organizationally speaking these artists groups are in fact plastic, pluralistic and informal. They function every bit as peripatetically as any other 21st Century creative enterprise. This is the second point I tried to bring out in the essay. To put it another way, if we agree that the objective of modernism was always in the last analysis transcendent – either by invoking grand collective aspirations such as the creation of an entirely new society, or the construction of technological utopias, or by collectively rejecting such goals through the celebration of the unconscious of primitivism ---- then by contrast, contemporary collectivism is unified only by its invocation of collectivism as a type of pragmatic, group activity. Beneath this performance lies a certain healthy skepticism towards group identity itself. *The Critical Art Ensemble* puts it succinctly when they insist "cellular collective construction" produces "solidarity through difference."¹ That may be why we discover an entire taxonomy of organizational forms amongst interventionist artists today from bogus businesses to pseudo-bureaucracies to mock research centers and institutes including, the *Center For Tactical Magic*; *Bitter Nigger Inc.*; *The Church Of Stop Shopping*; *Bureau Of Inverse Technology*; *Carbon Defense League*. The Spanish-based group *YoMango* is itself a corporate brand or counter-brand that offers a line of clothes, accessories, and life-style tactics designed to liberate private property for collective rather than personal consumption, and *The Yes Men* have gone so far as to incarnate themselves as business executives and management consultants.

ES: But why this conscious play with institutional signification? The differences between the notion of collective and institution are very significant, I am thinking of the hierarchical organization typical of any institution, for example.

GS: Fredric Jameson once described post-modernist appropriation as surrealism without the unconscious. Certainly it is fair to say that post-war artistic practice is especially good at impersonation and mimicry. So if we recall Lubov' Popova words in 1921 that "as a result of the social and political conditions organization has become the objective of the new synthesis," then we might respond that the contemporary interventionist artist is similarly focused on the aesthetics of organizing, except today this takes the form of adaptive mimicry or camouflage. But note that many of these assorted organizational signifiers have an odd, archaic ring to them. They sound strange, like something left over from another age before to the advent of neo-liberalism, normalization, and enterprise culture. In other words, they seem like creatures from a prehistoric continent still operating by the rules of what Adorno termed administered culture. I find that interesting, especially in light of the fact that the contemporary interventionist is so at home in the world produced by globalization.

ES: Let us return to the interventionists and talk about a definition of this phenomenon. Since the term has been coined, and, let's say, popularized in your exhibition, a lot of artists started to call "interventions" what they otherwise would call "actions in public spaces" or "performances". What is your definition, do you want to think about it at all, or, rather, would you like to leave it completely open?

GS: Nato Thompson applied the term *Interventionists* to his exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) in 2004. Naturally the catalog for that exhibition retains the title. That is the short history of how I come to use the term. As to its logic, of course it has the failings of any constructed category to the extent that it labels a diverse group of practices under one concept or seeks to separate some types of art making from other types. Where I do find it useful however, is the way this term succinctly underscores a tendency that cuts across a range of publicly situated art practices, including those you mention above. In short, this tendency involves the design and release into everyday life of an assortment of objects, actions, and information systems that are first and foremost pragmatically tactical in their social and political intent, while only secondarily concerned with artistic or aesthetic categories if at all. Another term applied to some of this work is of course *tactical media*. According to the Critical Art Ensemble tactical media is any Do It Yourself, anti-authoritarian intervention that is "situational, ephemeral, and self-terminating." It may seem a minor distinction, but by focusing on the organizational and historical tendencies of such work, rather than particular procedures, a broader cultural trend comes into view. In other words, all tactical media may be interventionist, but all interventionists are not necessarily using tactical media. For example the interventions of performance artist *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* are situational, but not self-terminating in so far as his public persona, his "church" and choir, are institutions in their own right. This maybe a type of *tactical institutionalism* if you like, but it nonetheless contrasts strikingly with the cellular form of a group like CAE.

ES: How visible are these practices, according to you, and who historicises them? Usually, institutions are in change of art history, but most of the interventionist projects challenge institutions in an unprecedented manner. Some groups still give the institutional space a chance, trusting it as a "legally protected" alternative platform of free speech and expression, however, they prefer to work in the "real world". Here I would agree with you, the interventionists' desire to intervene into life and change things, as well as their indifference towards definitions of art and appreciation of "use value" does relate these practices to those of Constructivists and other groups of the Russian avant-garde.

GS: It is worth adding there are no proper histories of this type of work because its remnants tend to wind up archived in file cabinets, or today, on internet websites. In that sense we should think of these artists and art groups as constituting an artistic shadow zone, or what I have elsewhere described as a species of creative *dark matter*: that enormous mass of cultural activity that is only minimally visible within the mainstream art world, but whose gravitational force affects mainstream cultural institutions powerfully, if invisibly, much in the way an unseen cosmic dark matter holds together the known universe.

This is why I wrote how odd it is that "current historical circumstances are exactly opposite those surrounding the Soviet Avant-Garde, and yet simultaneously analogous in so far as the private interests of capital permeate the entire fabric of society now to the same degree collective ideals once saturated Soviet culture." We live in a comparatively smooth-surfaced, socio-economic environment today and I would suggest that critical, interventionist artists are like political structures without politics. That is to say, they *perform collective resistance* as a type of *cultural politics* by constituting a facsimile or model of what a radical, political collectivity might look like if one were to become possible. The horizon of what is possible has been drawn in around market interests. Academia is one of the last arenas where the type of administered, socialized public institutions still operate (the art world is already lost inside enterprise culture). Yet even universities are under terrific pressure to privatize learning by turning out commercially useful cultural producers. The battle lines are quite clear. Recent actions in France and the election of left-leaning governments in South America indicate that a better world is both desired as well as worth fighting for. It will be up to artists to decide how they choose to take part in that struggle.

* Thompson, Nato and Gregory Sholette (editors). *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. 155 pp., roughly 100 color plates. 4to, cloth. North Adams, MASS MoCA Publications in association with Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2004.

ⁱ "Observations on Collective Cultural Action"

Critical Art Ensemble: <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/15texts/cae.html>

Elena Sorokina is a New York-based curator and writer. She received her Masters degree in art history in Germany, and did the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Recently she curated the shows *Crude Oil Paintings* at White Columns and *Enemy Image* at Momenta Art, both in New York. Her show *Contested Spaces in Post-Soviet Art*, took place at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery. Sorokina has been writing for several European publications and contributed to *Artforum* and *Moscow Art Magazine*.

Gregory Sholette is a New York-based sculptor and multi-media artist, a writer, and founding member of two public art collectives: Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D, 1980-1988), and REPOhistory (1989-2000). He is currently co-editing the book *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* with Blake Stimson for (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and he is co-editor of *The Interventionists: A Users Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* with Nato Thompson (MASS MoCA & MIT, 2004).