

Note: Some of these readings, assignments, and the date of guest speakers remain flexible. In every case advance notice of changes in the syllabus will be given if possible

Contemporary Art Issues
The Cooper Union School of Art, Fall Semester, 2006
Gregory Sholette instructor
Wednesdays 2-5 Room 504F

Contemporary Activist Art and Enterprise Culture: Disenchantment, Hopes, and Tactics

Gregory Sholette, instructor

From tactical media and interventionism to collectivism and community based art, this class will critically survey the theory and practice of recent, politically engaged visual culture while simultaneously locating it within the recent history of mainstream contemporary art. Taught by a co-founder of two, influential NYC art collectives —*REPOhistory* (1989-2000) and *Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D)*: 1980-1986— we will focus attention on such questions as: How do we define the public sphere in an increasingly privatized society? Is culture jamming and Hacktivism the new, cutting-edge of artistic practice? Why are so many younger artists today choose to work together in groups and collectives? Why has it has reemerged today in the age of globalization, neo-liberalism, and the homeland security state? Another principal aim of this course is to introduce students to the realm of critical theory and how it relates to their future role as cultural producers.

Recommended books:

The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life.

Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette eds. (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT Press, 2004.)

Conversation Pieces Community and Communication in Modern Art.

Grant Kester. (University of California Press, 2004.)

Week One: Introductions: Class expectations, plus a basic outline of course content and requirements.

Part I: Memory as Resistance

Week Two: Post-modern memorials?

What is the function of public memory as expressed formally by memorials and monuments, but also informally through temporary shrines, graffiti, performances? Is it possible to commemorate the past in the post-modern period, or as Adorno argued, after Auschwitz? What is community in this sense, and how does the public memorial define or construct that notion? We will go on a virtual tour of Berlin and visit the new Hans Haacke memorial to Rosa Luxemburg now under construction.

Reading: Theodore Adorno, Black as an Ideal. (From the book, *Aesthetic Theory*.)

Week Three: The Future as present imperfect?

Mainstream movies such as *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, and *V for Vendetta* interpret the future by using a pastiche combining the past and present, its architecture, signage, sounds, and social formations. A somewhat different approach to envisioning public space as a site of memories, some resistant, some informative, was taken by the artists collective REPOhistory between 1989 and 2000. We will continue our discussion of memory, space, and resistance by looking at and discussing these different representations of public history.

Please review *V for Vendetta* on DVD if possible.

Lucy Lippard, "Anti-Amnesia;" assorted newspaper clippings; website: www.repohistory.org

Reading: selected interpretations of Jürgen Habermas and his concept of the *Public Sphere*.

Week Four: Public Sphere and its discontents

What is happening to the concept of the public sphere in an age of privatization? What role does art play in this change? Can artists help salvage public space as something more than nostalgia for a lost past?

Readings: Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity.

Assignment: Write a three-page paper on a topic TBA due for week five.

Part II: Defining Terms

Week Five: Tactical Media

How do we define engaged cultural tactics as opposed to strategies within the means of production, communication and distribution? What is Tactical Media? Is it an entirely new approach or does it have historical precedents? Why is DIY: Do It Yourself and amateurism a key element in its design approach?

Readings: Nato Thompson, "Art as Social Catalyst;" David Garcia, "Tactical Media;" Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication;" *Las Agencias*, "Tactical Embarrassment."

Week Six: Art as Social and/or Political Intervention?

What are the differences between direct and symbolic action,? Between utilitarianism & irony?

Readings: Lucy R. Lippard, "Art Workers Coalition: Not a History" Gregory Sholette, "Interventionism and the historical uncanny: Or; can there be revolutionary art without the revolution?" in the book: *The Interventionists.*

Assignment: Write a three-page paper on a topic TBA due for week Seven.

Week Seven: Administered Vs Enterprise Culture?

The new-liberal revolution of the 1980s discarded the traditional liberal notion of social welfare and with cam efforts to eliminate or minimize institutional bureaucracies while supporting entrepreneurial endeavors in business as well as organizational form. What are the implications for this change on notions of public art, design, and utility?

Readings: TBA

Part III: Case Studies

Week Eight: Gran Fury: Cultural activism and the AIDS epidemic

What tactical types of approach to interventionist graphic design were developed by anti-AIDS activists in the mid to late 80s, and how did these both appropriate, and become appropriated by mass media?

Readings: Richard Meyer "This is to enrage you: Gran Fury and the Graphics of AIDS activism"

Week Nine: REPOhistory: Mapping the Shadow City.

More on the *REPOhistory* collective and how its urban signage/memory projects worked with city agencies, and historical preservation, but soon came up against the neo-liberal privatization of the public space in the late 1990s.

Readings: Philip Glahn, "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice and the Possibilities of Critical Articulation." Lucy Lippard, "Anti-Amnesia;" assorted newspaper clippings; website: www.repohistory.org

Week Ten: Yomango: Taking your desires for reality?

When is anti-social behavior a form of social criticism? Is it possible to develop brand names and interventionist products that defy the rules of capitalism by using the very logic of capitalism?

Reading: TBA

Week Eleven: Make Way For The Hip, Global Citizens Of Tomorrow: East Village 1980s

What is the relationship between real estate and art? Why is a bohemian lifestyle attractive to artists and how is that being mass marketed today? Defining the “East Village Art Scene?”

Readings: Alan Moore and Jim Cornwell, “The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York,”
Rosalyn Deutsche, “Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,”
Sholette, “Mysteries of the Creative Class, Or, I have Seen the Enemy and They Is Us.”

Part IV: Interventionism after 911

Week Twelve: Interventionist art in an age of Enterprise Culture?

How does art that aims to be political, activist and resistant confront the complexity of modern (and post-modern) forms of ideology, mass culture, media and globalization? Is that even possible? The case of the Critical Art Ensemble and the FBI will be discussed in detail.

Readings: Theodore Adorno, “Commitment”
Brian Holmes, “The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique.”

Week Thirteen: Administrating Social Critique

How have arts administrators, curators and art educators respond to the recent wave of interventionist art? Can institutions be rethought to better reflect engaged artistic practices and if so how might they be reinvented or re-imagined?

Readings: Hans Haacke, “Museums, Managers of Consciousness”
Sholette: “Snip...Snip...Bang, Bang: Political Art Reloaded.”

Week Fourteen: Class Presentations.

Week Fifteen: Final Class Presentations.