

Greg Sholette: Do It yourself Art Action Kit! (includes interchangeable tools and body parts)" by Jeffrey Skoller © 2004.

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The Greg Sholette art action figure comes out of the box a seemingly genteel, artist type, slightly bohemian looking, with a nicely trimmed beard (included) and wearing a tweed sport jacket (optional). Only the wrestling shoes (included) belie his true nature. In an instant he has removed his coat, and unpacked his artist action toolbox (included) and things begin to happen. Sholette's toolbox comes with the requisite brushes and chisels as well as self annotated pocket-sized editions of Brecht, Benjamin and the Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film. The kit includes Sholette's own multi-media art works combining elements of sculpture, photography, drawings and text as well as copies of his writings on the history and theories of contemporary arts activism that inform all of his work. The Sholette Kit reflects twenty years of experience in cultural organizing that has created some of the most innovative artist's collectives of the last two decades. These, along with his activities as an exhibition curator, college educator, professional toy model builder and a public intellectual tirelessly speaking for alternative relationships between art practice and the public sphere has made the Greg Sholette art action figure paradigmatic of the post-studio artist/thinker/activist who emerged from the 1980s.

If the dominant history of the American art world of the last twenty years is identified with the "re-materialization" of the art object to be bought and sold in the high stakes art market, linking art practice with high finance and the spectacle of US celebrity culture, then there is also a counterhistory of that period that can be identified through the post-studio art practices as embodied by Sholette. Such counterpractices have been less concerned with the commodification of culture and artistic auteurism than with working to create art committed to critical practice and to redefine the role of the autonomous artist into citizen participant, asking questions rather than simply making commentary. He asks: in what ways does art perpetuate dominant ideologies and work to discourage dissent? In what ways can art practice be used to disrupt and expose the naturalized social structures that operate—often invisibly—within daily life. How, in political terms as well as in the most personal ways, might artists work to integrate aesthetic practice into everyday life? Of course, these questions are not new and have been asked by socially engaged artists and thinkers from Brecht and Heartfield to Haake and Rosler. As a child of this history, Sholette's practice continues a tradition that focuses on art making as a mode of production deeply tied to the material conditions of our society. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1934, "Rather than ask, 'what is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?' 'I should like to ask, what is its position in them?'"¹ Similarly, Sholette explores what it means to be an artist in his own time—rather than maintaining the idea of timeless autonomous individual expression (as if such a notion were possible).

Since 1980, Sholette has produced an extraordinary body of work that not only includes the individually produced works of art seen in this exhibition, but also numerous essays theorizing relationships between social and political issues and their aestheticization.² In all of his work he examines what it means to place art practice at the service of social

transformation and to engage the issues of the day in aesthetic terms. In what ways do the meanings of social histories and political issues change as they enter into institutions of culture, from the museum or university to the highly controlled streets of a specific community? Combining theory with practice, Sholette is not simply interested in what it means to make politically thematic art, but also what it is to make art politically. Practice itself becomes a discourse that opens beyond the individual artist working alone in his studio. Looking toward earlier models that focused on collective activity, such as the Berlin Dadaists, Russian constructivists, and the New York Photo League, and also in the contemporary context, of such collectives as the Critical Art Ensemble, The Art Workers Coalition, Paper Tiger TV, Group Material, Gran Fury, the Guerrilla Girls, among others, Sholette has extended his practice into collaborative, collective and community based projects. Often working collaboratively with the artist Janet Koenig, he has created installations and public art projects in which the labor of research and production as well as the creative problem solving is shared. One such collaborative piece, *disLOCATIONS* (inSITE94, 1994), a site specific installation at the Tijuana/San Diego border, looks at histories of resistance at the border at the turn of the twentieth century, creating links between past events and the current situation at the US/Mexico border.

“How do we work together?” must always be the first question for cultural workers struggling to transform any society. Sholette’s work with artist’s collectives subverts the idea of individual authorship entirely, exploring the creative dynamics within the group of artists while making public art projects that includes members of the community in which they are working. Sholette was a founding member of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution) in the early 1980s. PAD/D created a series of exhibitions taking up specific political issues facing their community in New York City, such as the “Not for Sale Project” which examined the contradictory ways artists both facilitate and disrupt the gentrification of poor, urban neighborhoods. PAD/D’s activities included an archive of international activist art projects to preserve the histories of such practices, and a reading group for artists to explore relationships between theory and practice. In 1989, Sholette co-organized the collective REPOhistory a forum for developing public-based art projects. Their object was to retrieve and relocate hidden historical narratives at specific locations in New York and elsewhere by creating counter-monuments, actions and events. In making art for public spaces, artists are thrust into the political workings of the community. They are forced to become curators, educators and politicians as they engage with neighborhood organizations and city governments rather than museums and galleries. Public art projects such as the REPOhistory’s *Lower Manhattan Sign Project* (1992), *Civil Disturbances* (1998) and *CIRCULATION* (2000) in New York City, and *Entering Buttermilk Bottom* (1995) in Atlanta, GA, brought together political activists, academics and artists, doctors, lawyers, unions organizers and historians, all working in their communities to confront their own submerged, half forgotten histories “to provoke critical and multiple readings of the past.”

Sholette has preferred to exhibit his own work in collaborative exhibitions largely in not-for-profit galleries organized around specific issues rather than foregrounding himself as a solo artist. His work has been part of many of the defining political art exhibitions of the last twenty years, including: *Disinformation: the Manufacture of Consent* (1985),

Power and Money (1987) “*Unknown Secrets: Art of the Rosenberg Era*” (1988); *Committed to Print* (1988); *If you Lived Here* (1989); *Artists of Conscience: 16 Years of Social and Political Commentary* (1991), *Carnival in the Eye of the Storm, War/art/New Technologies: KOSOVO* (2000); *Critical Mass* (2002). This current exhibition brings together, for the first time, a collection of Sholette’s non-collaborative work made since the mid-1980s — much of which was created for these earlier exhibitions. Together, they show the ways his ideas about practice are transformed, through the play of materials, forms and visual signifiers, into art works. It might be said that Sholette’s art works constitute theory by other means, a different kind of rhetoric, engaging a wide range of political histories and art world events. They comment on the transformation of social and political events into commodifiable aesthetic objects, raising questions about what it means to “do” political activism in the context of the museum and gallery.

The imagery in *Culture and Barbarism* (1990), and *Men: Making History: Making War: 1954* (1987) cuts across history, bringing seemingly disparate events into relationship. Walter Benjamin’s famous adage, written at the height of Nazi conquest in Europe, applies here: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁴ These pieces examine the paradoxical ways in which the high mindedness of the institutions of culture becomes a mask for the brutality with which the American ruling class, the financiers of these institutions, maintain political power. *Culture and Barbarism* (1990) resurrects the memory of the Ludlow Colorado massacre of 1915 in which over twenty striking miners and their families who were attempting to organize a union were killed by company guards at the order of mine owner John D. Rockefeller. Sholette connects Rockefeller’s attempts after the massacre to resurrect his image as a humanist philanthropist with his family’s founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Connecting these historical moments to the present, Sholette, whose own art work was shown at MOMA in 1988, considers how artists and their work are always implicated in a complex set of relations that connects them to the economic and political histories of their culture even as they try to transform them.⁵

Men: Making History: Making War: 1954 (1987) is a triptych combining photographs of hand made models and faux bas reliefs based on archival photographs from the American cold war politics of 1954: A sculptural miniature based on a photograph of Roy Cohen during the Army McCarthy hearings; a bas relief depicting the CIA overthrow of the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz; another bas relief image, sculpted from a LIFE magazine photo of Jackson Pollock creating one of his famous abstract drip paintings. The juxtaposition of these events connects the famous abstract expressionist to cold war politics through Rockefeller sponsored international art exhibits of North American art — especially in Latin America. Such traveling exhibitions of abstract art were used to demonstrate US cultural freedoms — in distinction to conservative Soviet style socialist realism — while deflecting attention from the brutal anti-communist political repression in the US and surrounding countries of the time.

In Massacre of Innocence (1989), Sholette raises crucial questions about the ethics of the redemptive nature of art. In this chillingly beautiful meditation on the horrors and atrocities of war, he has created a photographic panorama of lush and colorful images of

jungle flora and fauna, an idealized movie set of a utopian Shangri-la. As we look closer, however, we see it is all fake, an artificial construction. Amongst the faux shrubs and flowers are images of the murdered Vietnamese children at My Lai, toy plastic soldiers and dolls. Surrounding the piece are lists of places throughout history where children have been killed in wartime massacres — from Latin America to South East Asia and elsewhere. The rhetoric of the necessity for convulsive violence to create a better world for our children is shown as a hollow rationalization for their victimization. Sholette's work suggests that the transformation of historical events into aesthetic objects, a transformation that attempts to redeem historical horrors through the promise of a higher form of aesthetic consciousness, often only diminishes or distorts the reality of their occurrence. In the words of Leo Bersani this can create the condition for "[t]he catastrophes of history to matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art itself gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function."⁶

A highly trained sculptor who also spent several years as a professional model builder for toy and advertising companies, Sholette uses the materials of model building to create a faux lexicon of actual forms that refer to this redemptive impulse to create and hold onto cultural knowledge. In *Culture and Barbarism*, Sholette uses the traditions of the diorama — a scale model of the Museum of Modern Art is juxtaposed with a miniature encampment of the striking miners who were murdered — to suggest the discourse of historical display familiar in natural history museums. Similarly, Sholette explores the use of archaic bas-relief sculpture that in other eras was used to depict heroic scenes of battle. In *The Massacre of Innocence* Sholette works with the mise-en-scene of movie and stage design that at a distance seems real, but whose ersatz nature becomes clear upon close inspection. With all of these forms, he creates unsettling relationships between the timeless monuments to past events built of stone or brass and their cheesy plastic recreations — faux antiques that seem to be falling apart as soon as they are made. Sholette is not simply making objects; he is also playing with the ways objects function as signifiers of social memory. On a grand scale, institutions such as museums, libraries and archives, housed in majestic edifices, are created to provide that function. On a more quotidian level, natural history dioramas, brass plaque markers, bas-relief narratives, souvenirs, and toy models are also imbued with the energies of memory and history. As Sholette writes:

I have chosen to work with these familiar, 'middle-brow' forms because they navigate a narrow line between irony and innocence, the sentimental and the uncanny. Like portable icons I imagine these mementos invoking sentimental longings as well as everyday life and small-scale histories.⁷ The unifying interest in all of Sholette's practice is transformation. He is not only concerned with the most idealistic possibilities for social transformation, but also with how the meanings of events and images transform as they move through time. His art works take up the ways in which events in the world are appropriated as subject matter, become aestheticized, and finally are turned into commodities. In his *Jacob Riis Series* (1995/96), Sholette considers ways artists appropriate images intended as documentary evidence and transform them into aesthetic spectacles, often erasing the original political intent behind the imagery. In this work Sholette uses photographs made by the 19th century liberal social reformer Jacob Riis,

who photographed the squalor in which the underclasses lived in the hope of changing it. As time has gone on, such documentary photography has become part of a fine art genre in which their meaning as documents of a social critique recedes, while sentimental, empathic rendering of human suffering takes precedence. Sholette has created five photographic panoramas of his own miniature dioramas based upon a Riis' photograph of a group of children playing around a water barrel on the New York City's Lower Eastside. Sholette uses Riis's photograph as a springboard to consider the way social groups and classes are objectified within the cultural imaginary, suggesting multiple narratives for both the images themselves and for what is going on in them. Sholette uses the three dimensional model as a kind of movie set through which he can examine the image from the position of the street kids, from that of the photographer who is seen as a character in this scene, and from the viewer who is voyeuristically implicated in the spectacle of squalor. Different panels in the series reference early cinematic genres that appropriate the social inequities of urban life as the *mise-en-scene* of "real life", use of images of impoverished street children in mass entertainment like the "Bowery Boys" and "Spanky and Our Gang", and more nightmarish visions of urban life such as Fritz Lang's *M*. This kind of appropriation of the image of poor children is an artistic tradition that spans the rise of popular art from the urban realist novels of the nineteenth century to current hip-hop movies set in the urban ghettos from Los Angeles to New York. Throughout the diorama there is the enigmatic image of the photographer (Riis) setting up the pictures, many of which were clearly posed for dramatic and /or aesthetic effect. Social reality, for both Riis and Sholette, is seen as a series of simulations, appropriated, aestheticized, and re-imagined. The *Jacob Riis Series* is particularly unsettling because it is so engaging to look at. The complete five panel series runs nearly 30 feet long and is beautifully crafted. The models are so playful, imaginative, and meticulously made that one becomes conscious of the ways materials and modes of representation heighten our sense of ourselves as spectators of art works. Simultaneously they force us to confront the contradictions of having an aesthetic experience at such a distance from the social realities that the pieces depict.

In the most recent work in the exhibit, *i am NOT my office* (2002), Sholette continues to explore his use of such hand-made "meta-objects," this time taken more directly from popular culture. For this piece Sholette has created models that emulate homemade "garage kit" action figurines based on sci-fi and action movies and comic book imagery in order to connect his work with the sub-cultures of amateur art making. Such creative sub-cultures also include home-made 'zines and websites, music and video scratch mixing, home movie making as well as various craft practices. Referring to this kind of work as the dark matter of the art world, Sholette contends that although it remains largely outside the discourses of the art world, it maintains a symbiotic relationship with that world which is both creative and economic. The majority of contemporary creative activity, he feels, takes place as this sort of *dark matter* art, indicating the widespread desire that people have to participate in creative labor whether or not they are acknowledged as legitimate artists.⁸ The installation *i am NOT my office* explores such notions of artistic *dark matter* in possible relationships between activist art forms created by trained intellectuals and artisans such as himself and the more informal creative work of the amateur artist/hobbyist who exists quite apart from the art world. Sholette is

interested in the potential such non-professional artist cultures might have for creating unexpected forms of autonomous, politically engaged activist art that might occur outside of centralized art world contexts such as museums and galleries.

“*i am NOT my office* brings Sholette’s longstanding interests in collaboration together with his faux model building aesthetics and reflexive ruminations on the life of the artist in today’s society — in this case as the consummate multi-tasker. To create the piece, Sholette sent questionnaires to a range of office workers asking them to describe their fantasies of the kinds of “super powers” or prosthetic devices they wished to possess in order to be able to do their personal creative work while completing the tasks they were being paid to accomplish on company time. People desired the power to stop time, as well as wanting a range of cybernetic enhancements of their bodies, from detachable ears and multiple limbs to brain implants which enhance intelligence and memory. From these fantasies, Sholette began making drawings and then models, creating enhanced action kit figures that turn into working class versions of the fantasy artist/worker hero. Sholette, who earns his living as an arts administrator and professor, aligns himself with those who also struggle to balance routine administrative work with creative art making and imagines his own spleen transforming into a huge tentacle that could continue to work on his drawings while his hands do the voluminous administrative tasks that his job requires. *i am NOT my office* considers how, on the one hand, artists must juggle the multiple roles they play in order to maintain a creative life, and, on the other, how the suppressed or latent creative energies of people doing routine jobs not generally associated with art making, are expressed in the work place. In political terms, it asks how the surplus creative energy of workers at highly structured jobs can be harnessed for self and community empowerment. More overtly than in his other pieces, Sholette engages a lexicon of aesthetic forms that exist outside of high culture in an attempt to reflect more precisely the desires of those outside of his own cultural and class milieu. As a professionally trained artist he has no illusions about becoming part of the world of amateur art making — nor is it really his interest. Rather, as he writes, “I can borrow and re-tool examples of this informal culture for purposes of social critique and reflection.”⁹

With *i am NOT my office*, as in much of his work, Sholette can be seen as a postmodern pasticher playfully emulating and appropriating other forms of cultural imagery to create new hybrids between high and low cultural forms. At the same time, he is the consummate modernist attempting to place aesthetic activity at the service of an even more ambitious project, that of transforming society. In doing this Sholette is not simply trying to create an image of how others struggle to live a creative life. He is also reinvigorating high art discourses by connecting popular fantasy with utopian notions of a society that satisfies the material needs of a work force and cultivates the liberatory potential of personal creative expression. If the realm of fantasy is a stage on which contemporary culture can be re-imagined as a humanizing force which places democratic creative expression at the service of the most idealistic aspiration for social transformation, then the Greg Sholette Art Action Kit, like all the other action kits fighting for social justice and new ways of living together, is not simply a fantasy — but a necessity. Now’s the time!

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1 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" Reflections. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich. 1978. pp. 222.

2 See Sholette's website for a complete bibliography of his writings, many of which he has made available on line.

3 See REPO history website for detailed histories of their community based projects between 1991 and 2000.

4 Walter Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" *Illuminations* New York Schocken Books. 1969. pp256.

5 As part of the exhibition *Committed to Print* The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1988.

6 Bersani, Leo. *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1990. p1.

7 Artist's Statement: See Sholette's website.

8 Sholette borrows the term from the science of cosmology, which refers to the theory that there has been an enormous amount of invisible material created by the Big Bang, which has never been directly perceived but can be inferred by the errant motion of astronomical objects in outer space. For a complete discussion of Sholette's analogy see "Dark Matter, Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere" in *Marxism and Visual Art Now* London: Historical Materialism. Forthcoming, 2004.

9 Artist's statement from the exhibition "Critical Mass" The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2002.