

PHILIP GLAHN

Dividual Labor

Gregory G. Sholette

“Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance: Artists, Gentrification and New York City’s Lower East Side, 1979–1984”

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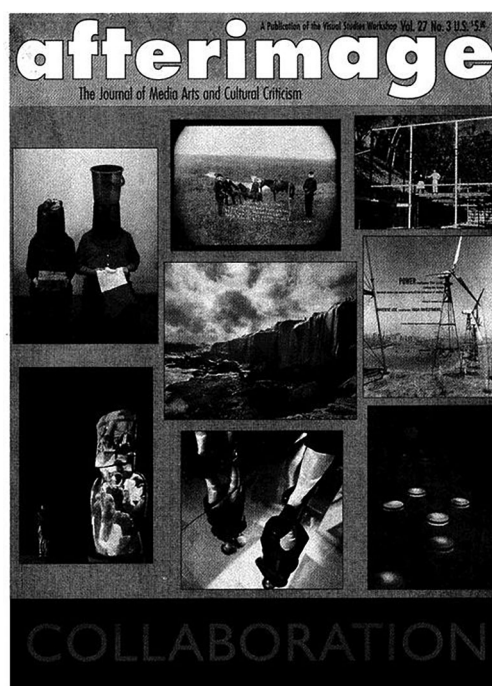
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“Counting on Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice”

Afterimage 27, no. 3 (November/December 1999): 18–20

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In 1998, artist, activist, and writer Gregory Sholette curated the landmark exhibition *Urban Encounters* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City.¹ The show was comprised of installations produced by six activist art collectives including Godzilla, ABC No Rio, and Bullet Space, featuring an information kiosk with an interactive historical database, a collection of posters and graphics wheat-pasted onto a makeshift street shack, and a video documentary with interviews of the groups' members. According to Sholette, the collectives' work, which had emerged out of the Lower East Side's 1980s activist culture, "continue[d] to assert the need for a socially engaged art practice that advances cultural diversity and the establishment of a democratic civic space of public debate and dissent."² Writing in the *New York Times*, Holland Cotter called the assembled installations "terrific: they are full of visual incident and historical information," while the collectives' practices had generated "political ferment and a lot of good art."³

Designed to "challenge conventional views of contemporary art," *Urban Encounters* provided a unique, critical engagement with art as aesthetic and political confrontation, or rather, a politics of aesthetic struggle that modeled possibilities for the ongoing social function of art years before "social practice" became an artworld phenomenon. Sholette and the activist groups featured pushed the boundaries of authorship and participation, asking both artists and audience to actively partake in the processes of knowledge and meaning-making, addressing pressing everyday issues like homelessness, gentrification, and discrimination, as well as entrenched dynamics of perception and relationality, of how the cultural logics of Reaganomic capitalism increasingly and fervently positioned the generalized Western self as individuated yet entangled and mediated spectator.

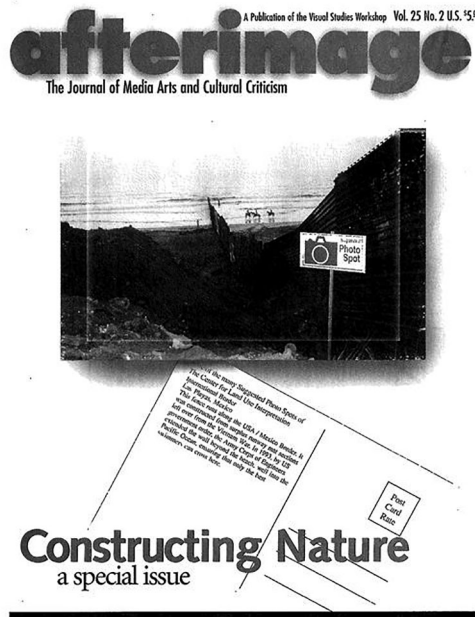
Sholette has elaborated on these politics in his writing, including the 1999 *Afterimage* article "Counting on Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice," as well as the earlier "Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance: Artists, Gentrification and New York City's Lower East Side, 1979–1984." At that time in particular, but arguably before and ever since, Sholette's work, in the *Urban Encounters* exhibition as well as his writing and his artwork—he was a founding member of the groups Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) and RepoHistory, while also maintaining an individual practice—was formidably Marxist, both historically specific and prescient. Sholette examined the complexities of urban life through the relationality of technology, labor, and subjectivity, or rather, the dialectics of individual and social subjecthood. The triangulation of technology, labor, and subjectivity is historically specific in that it traces the urban public sphere manifested at a particular moment and place as a complex site of struggle. The possibilities and limits of critically and productively engaging in the making of representation and self-determination, knowledge, and experience in 1980s New York

1. I was fortunate to work with Greg as an intern between 1997 and 1999 while he was curator of education at the New Museum. His thoughtful and critical practice, generous encouragement, and unwavering support significantly shaped my own work.

2. Gregory Sholette, *Urban Encounters*, exh. catalog (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art: 1998), n.p.

3. Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: Urban Encounters," *New York Times* (August 14, 1998), www.nytimes.com/1998/08/14/arts/art-in-review-urban-encounters.html.

City were determined by an infrastructure of interwoven material and immaterial factors and circumstances, including the mediation of what it means to be an individual working on and within one's environment. "Counting on Your Collective Silence" addresses the labor of the activist artist in particular, questioning the types of subjecthood available, the histories of cooperation and collectivization peddled and manufactured by an insatiable industry of entertainment and lifestyles and those who may have been neglected, suppressed, or not yet realized. During the conservative backlash of the Reagan and Bush years, a "hyper-individualism" permeated the arts economy and the art world's mentality, while technical advances like increasingly cash-free purchasing power and seemingly tailor-made consumer choices continued to interpellate the mass subject as an authentic, free, and singular self. Within this framework resistance feels impossible, as artists are encouraged ideologically and financially to discern themselves by working through an ostensibly original form of alienation, which, honed through the competitive production and distribution of the "work form," churns out a commodified reminder of the manufactured incompatibility of material experience and symbolic alleviation, perpetuating its own kind of conformity, belonging, or "collective indenture."⁴ The artist's signature practice becomes a technology of differentiation that assertively mimics and engrains the institutionalized separation between self and other, and between the various material and immaterial elements and networks that make up the complex infrastructure of urban life, including oft-competing, at times compatible, official and unofficial economies of production, the making and dissemination of goods and histories, images and imaginaries,



4. The term "work form," as the materially or immaterially reified product of artistic production, is Gene Ray's. See his "Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector," *Third Text* 1, no. 3 (May 2007): 247. The term "collective indenture" is Sholette's, "Counting on Your Collective Silence," 18.

information and perceptions. In its stead, many activist art collectives sought to enact “other models of work and of social (and even personal) responsibility” (David Thorne, qtd. in “Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 18).

Sholette found the groups’ works thoughtfully engaging in the precarious ecology of bodied and disembodied urban knowledge, taking into account the various mediations that forge the city fabric and the tools that help us navigate it. Decline and rehabilitation, decay and renovation, luxury condos and rooftop gardens, phony commercialism and “authentically ethnic culture,” mainstreamed attitudes and oral histories, municipal agencies and community archives, technocratic apparatuses of surveillance, and secret trails through abandoned lots were to be reckoned with in all their interlaced ambiguities and contradictions rather than reproduced as binaries. Art activists immersed themselves in the cacophony of sensations and sensibilities: “These ‘street’ settings presented their own artificial ecology, where competing species of images inhabited an environment of licit and illicit visual chaos of wheat-pasted hand bills, commercial advertising, signage from retail businesses, fluorescent graffiti, stencils, murals, and posters, some of which also presented anti-gentrification messages to the public” (“Nature As An Icon,” 17). To engage in a collective process of resistance meant to commit oneself to these abundant and intricate processes of “intelligence-generation” and navigation since, as new media scholar and anthropologist Shannon Mattern observes, “urban information is *made*, commodified, accessed, secreted, politicized, and operationalized.”⁵ Artists as/and members of the community work in “reflexive collectivity,” aspiring to a true form of social labor: *social* not only in the sense that making is shared and thus determined by a multiplicity of needs, abilities, and responsibilities, but beneficial to the collective in its plurality rather than any individual or group as singular, homogenous entity; *labor* in the sense of working to produce technological rather than technical, sociopolitical rather than stylistic changes—innovation of the new rather than renovation of the always novel (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 18).

Sholette’s work furthermore anticipated concerns that have intensified over the past two and a half decades. Under late capitalism and neoliberalism, the alienation that is the product of the discrepancy between the available and the promised, the given and the possible has magnified, as have the technologies that perpetuate the massification of hyper-individuation. The greater the reach and quantity of information provided by communication technologies and the more “optimized” our physical, political, and psychological public spheres are through shared data and the algorithmic anticipation and (symbolic) gratification of needs and desires, the stronger the longing for the paradoxical pair of safety in the fabric of the familiar and freedom in individual autonomy. Crucially, Sholette’s appeal to utilize the utopian “capacity latent within all productive activity” (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 20) remains as pertinent as ever. This capacity rests with the recognition that the question “who, we?” (Jacques Derrida, cited in “Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 20) must be reframed through new processes

5. Shannon Mattern, “The City Is Not a Computer,” *Places Journal* (February 2017), n.p., <https://placesjournal.org/article/a-city-is-not-a-computer>.

of how we relate to ourselves, one another, and to our environment—hence, a different economy and ecology of labor, of wielding of the tools at our disposal that allow for the construction of new logics and dynamics of being, both singular and plural. Ernst Bloch famously put forth the observation that “*Mensch* is not solid” and “much of the world is still unclosed.”⁶ This means that instead of seeking provisional alleviations through familiar unifying and “purifying” forms of being and belonging, of navigating self and space, what the practices of art activism can teach us is how to understand and engage our spheres of knowledge and experience as “heterogeneous” and “diverse” (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 18), “made up of partial meanings and irregular shards of history” (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 19). As we employ devices and technologies, be they art, (Google) maps, libraries, or data, it is paramount that we allow for an assessment of and subsequent working into what Mattern calls “the messiness of urban life,” as the city is “an assemblage of media forms (vaults, archives, monuments, physical and electronics records, oral histories, lived cultural heritage); agents (architectures, institutions, media technologies, people); and functions (storage, processing, transmission, reproduction, contextualization, operationalization).”⁷ The subjects in and of these environments (whether on a strictly urban level or those networked into various global infrastructures and flows beyond), connected via a multitude of what Donna Haraway termed our intellectual, sensory, emotional, and psychological “leaky distinctions” and transgressions, struggle to be contained by the ideological corset of the “individual” as unique, discrete entity.⁸ Conversely, the (art activist) collective is, as Sholette proposes, “not . . . a unity of differences” (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 19), but a logic of relationality among selves defined by an open and always unfinished subjecthood. If the “individual” is the dialectical complement to the “mass,” the *dividual* is a “subjectivity divided from itself and always already a part of something.”⁹

To Bertolt Brecht, the *individual* is defined as subject to the logic of indivisibility and thus division (*Einteilung*) by demarcation of where the self ends and the other begins, whereas the *dividual* is defined precisely by its divisibility, by its factual and emerging capacity to exist in constant material and immaterial permeability and interdependency with various agents, functions, and mediations and thus frame an emancipatory model of social subjecthood through a constantly working process of relationality.¹⁰ The artist’s contribution as part of these processes remains to provide new models, new technologies of mapping and working our dividual lives and to identify within them, to make

6. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* Vol. 1 [1938–47] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 195–6.

7. Mattern, “The City Is Not a Computer,” n.p.

8. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” [1983/4], in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.

9. Joshua Simon, “The Dividual,” *Arts of the Working Class* no. 18 (September 2021): 15. While in “Counting on Your Collective Silence” Sholette had originally quoted Gilles Deleuze’s mention of the “dividual” as a distributed subjectivity of the “society of control,” it is used here primarily for its emancipatory potential as discussed by Simon.

10. Bertolt Brecht, “Individuum und Masse” [1929], reprinted in Simon, “The Dividual,” 15.

perceptible and put in perspective the latent potentials to relate and engage, to trace existing connections in all their complexities and ambiguities, and to forge those that have not-yet become. Sholette's work—as scholar, artist, and teacher—has held steadfast in its dedication to the “cooperative work” done and still ahead of us (“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” 20). ■

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