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# Participants of *campbaltimore*, USA

In Discussion with

Gregory Sholette

Baltimore, Maryland is a primarily working-class, port city close to the nation's capital. Long dependent on shipping, it remains a largely impoverished and racially segregated city with fifty-six percent of its male African-American residents incarcerated. Like so many other cities in the United States and Europe, Baltimore is undergoing rapid gentrification aimed at attracting professionals, service and cultural workers. In the summer of 2005 several meetings took place involving a dozen or so art students from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Seeking to examine their own place within this broader urban context they were simultaneously inspired by the work of curators Chris Gilbert and his partner Cira Pascual Marquina who were, at the time, serving as curators at two local cultural institutions, the Baltimore Museum of Art and The Contemporary. The study group set out to explore the relation between art and activism, and eventually became engaged in local struggles against gentrification, police surveillance and the prison industry. Influenced by the tactics of Reclaim the Streets as well as other DIY and tactical media collectives, the group chose the name *campbaltimore* and set about organising a series of carefully researched exhibitions, publications, political meetings, social gatherings and street performances that culminated in the transformation of a portable utility trailer into a mobile kitchen, information centre, stage, sewing workshop, video studio and outdoor cinema. The trailer was used to reclaim public spaces and initiate social and educational events in collaboration with other activists across the city. Last summer, the trailer was stationed outside Red Emma's, a local anarchist bookstore, when the police intervened. Eventually, several key members of *campbaltimore* began to question what they saw as the limits of tactical and artistic interventions. This in turn led to the dissolution of the group as members decided to confront a similar range of political and urban problems either individually or in smaller units. What follows is a discussion with two former members who describe the short-lived yet highly energetic collective, as well as



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

their own ambivalence regarding artistic interventions and collaborative practice.

**Gregory Sholette** Could you briefly describe how you came together?

**Scott Berzofsky** We were all art students in Baltimore who decided to stay in the city after graduation instead of moving to New York or attending an MFA programme as most people do. Three of us started collaborating on a research-based project about urbanism in Baltimore, and others began to meet as part of a study group that Chris Gilbert organised in conjunction with his two-year cycle of exhibitions called 'Cram-Sessions' at the BMA. 'Cram-Sessions' was about testing the agency of the museum exhibition as an organising tool, using the gallery space for workshops and meetings about collectivity, activism and self-organised education. Over time the two groups merged, based on what I think was a shared desire for some kind of community or discourse that we felt was missing outside of school. We initially intended to work together organising discussions and events, but eventually we began to collaborate directly with local activists in Baltimore, partially through our participation in two exhibitions organised by Chris's partner Ciria Pascual Marquina at the Contemporary Museum. These exhibitions, '(Re)living Democracy' and 'Headquarters: Investigating the Creation of the Ghetto and the Prison Industrial Complex', extended the experiments of 'Cram-Sessions', engaging explicitly with local political struggles around housing, gentrification, day labour, policing and prisons.

**GS** Why the name *campbaltimore*?



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

**SB** At first we were resistant to naming our group at all, thinking that we could avoid institutional and market co-optation by not producing a pre-packaged identity. But at some point we decided to create a website and that forced us to come up with a name. In some ways the name *campbaltimore* was invented arbitrarily, but it did obviously refer to the city in which we were working, as well as to other things like a campus or campaign.

**GS** Would you say that the training of your group as fine artists influenced the work you all did as activists? And if so, can you be specific and tell me how and what your group did that you think other types of professionals might not have been able to do?

**Nicholas Wisniewski** Generally speaking, even the most traditional forms of fine art training such as painting can teach a kind of un-alienated working process that is social, critical and utopian. Art schools are very supportive and liberating environments for experimental practices – like laboratories for invention, production, play, research, drifting, whatever. But they can also be quite conservative places that promote regressive desires for individual recognition, institutional legitimacy and market success.

**SB** Two other features of an art school education that could have contributed to the way we worked on projects are learning to be good self-educators and the ability to work on projects in a responsive and self-reflexive way, without knowing what the final outcome will be. Another thing that distinguished our approach from that of other activists was that we were not focused on one specific issue, such as housing



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

or labour, but rather worked to seek out the connections and relationships between multiple issues.

**GS** Organisationally speaking, did you have a model in mind for the way you functioned as a collective?

**SB** One of the first times we spoke with you, Greg, I remember talking about how the history of organisational models has not been adequately written, and as a result groups are left to ‘reinvent the wheel’ time and time again. This was the case in my experience, where we were searching for a model without much direction. But we did have some contact with the 16 Beaver group,<sup>1</sup> and their practice informed our discussions about self-organisation and collectivity.

**NW** It was pretty chaotic. I think the best way to understand our organisational structure is that there was no one model. Depending on the situation we tended to appropriate models from different places. There was never a consensus about group process, it was more of an ongoing negotiation. In a sense, all of our activities were attempts at self-organisation, experimenting with different tools for facilitating communication and building solidarity.

1 16 Beaver is the address of a space in New York’s Financial District initiated and run by artists to maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production and discussion of a variety of artistic, cultural, economic and/or political projects, see <http://www.16beavergroup.org/>

2 <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>

**SB** We tried to be as horizontal and democratic as possible in our internal group process, but in reality hierarchies and centralised power formations emerge if there is no structure in place to protect these principles. Jo Freeman gives a good analysis of this tendency in her essay ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’,<sup>2</sup> arguing that there is no such thing as a ‘structureless’ group and that such concepts often work to mask uneven power relations. It is much easier to talk about ideals of horizontality and democracy than it is to enact them. In our case, while we talked constantly about these ideals, big decisions were sometimes made by a centralised group of individuals who lived together and would establish



campbaltimore, Trailer Project, 2006, multimedia, photo: Gregory Sholette

an informal consensus before addressing the rest of the group. In the future I'd try to avoid this by establishing clear structures for decision-making from the beginning. We often have an aversion to establishing structures because we associate them with oppressive forms of authority, but they can be useful tools for ensuring accountability, transparency and equality within a group.

In our collaborations with other groups and individuals we were very inclusive and open to people's ideas, in some cases to the extent that we sacrificed our own authorial agency. This was another major challenge: as artists with a relative degree of privilege and an 'outsider' status in relation to some of the groups we worked with, many of us felt reluctant to impose our own ideas out of fear of being perceived as arrogant or exploitative. In this way, we sometimes risked becoming passive facilitators of other people's projects, leading to the frustration of some in the group who felt their creativity was inhibited. While we must always be cautious of the many potential problems associated with community-based projects (just read Miwon Kwon or Grant Kester's critiques of such work), we also can't be over-sensitive and allow them to paralyse us and pre-empt any attempt to invent something new.

**GS** How hard was it to make contact with some of the activists you worked with in Baltimore as privileged 'outsiders' and as college students? Did any simply refuse to work with you?

**SB** We made contact with activists and organisers through a process of informal networking, meeting one person who would refer us to another and so on. People were generally receptive, more so than I would have anticipated. Of course, we were greeted with some scepticism as young white artists (Baltimore is still extremely racially and economically

segregated), but there were no cases of straight-up rejection that I can think of. Some of the African-American community activists with whom we are now friends have said that they initially told us the superficial stuff they thought we wanted to hear, and became more honest and critical only later, after learning more about our political positions.

**GS** In terms of your relationship to the institutional ‘artworld’ – with the exception of the Contemporary project with Pascual Marquina – were you able to draw other resources from the Baltimore artworld or the cultural press to use for your work?

**SB** We did attempt to instrumentalise whatever minimal resources and cultural capital we had as artists by diverting visibility and access to the media towards activist initiatives (Brian Holmes’s essay ‘Liar’s Poker’ was a key reference here).<sup>3</sup> For example, if a reporter wanted to do a story on one of the exhibitions we worked on we would encourage them to contact the organisers and activists who had collaborated on it, and on a few occasions this resulted in some free publicity or in the broadcasting of an oppositional viewpoint rarely voiced in a mainstream newspaper like the *Baltimore Sun*. Still, this strategy can be risky because of the mainstream or cultural press’s endless capacity to absorb and neutralise criticality. Some activists would say that ‘any publicity is good publicity’, but I’m not sure this is always the case.

**NW** For this reason, we have also worked to establish our own media by starting a free quarterly newspaper called the *Independent Reader* in collaboration with Baltimore Indymedia. The first issue was published with leftover funding from the ‘(Re)living Democracy’ exhibition, as an alternative to a conventional catalogue. It has since developed into a sustainable project of its own, with each issue providing a critical analysis of a local problem and documenting activist initiatives that respond to the problem. It’s about using engaged research and communication as an organising tool, similar to other publications like *AREA Chicago*.

**GS** What was your relationship to these institutions like – the museums, the media, arts administrators – especially when they began to understand the political aim of your work?

**SB** Some figures in the Baltimore artworld, which is fairly provincial and conservative, did seem irritated by the work we were doing, and we quickly got tired of answering predictable questions like, ‘why is this art?’. But other curators and arts administrators have been quite supportive, so I don’t want to generalise. I think an observation by Martha Rosler is relevant here, namely that the artworld will support ‘critique in general’ but grows less tolerant of critiques about specific local issues. This was the case with ‘(Re)living Democracy’, the exhibition we worked on with Lasse Lau about housing and gentrification in Baltimore, during which board members at the Contemporary Museum were opposed to our plan to board up the windows of the institution in a symbolic gesture of bringing the impoverished margins of the city to the centre of the affluent cultural district. They did finally allow us to do it

3 Brian Holmes, ‘Liar’s Poker,’ online at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000943.php>

after Cira threatened to resign, and after they probably considered the negative publicity a censorship scandal would generate.

In that same exhibition, we displayed eviction notices signed by the CEO of a local development corporation that is working with Johns Hopkins University to build a biotech park in a poor African-American neighbourhood in East Baltimore, using eminent domain to displace hundreds of residents. The CEO and officials from the university visited the museum and were apparently quite angry. So we have probably made some enemies.

**GS** Was this a project you worked on with a non-arts community group or one of your own design?

**SB** This was a collaboration between *campbaltimore*, Lasse and several non-arts groups and individuals in East Baltimore including the Save Middle-East Action Committee (SMEAC), an organisation of residents who are being displaced by the biotech park project; Glenn Ross, a local housing and environmental justice activist; KIDS/TEEN SCOOP, a youth-run newspaper; and the Rose Street Community Center, a really active grass-roots organisation involved in everything from neighbourhood clean-ups to operating a transitional house to organising an awareness campaign about homicide in the city.

**NW** We should also point out that our experience working with Cira when she was acting director at the Contemporary Museum was remarkably free from the usual bureaucracy one finds in art institutions. All of this took place during a period of crisis within the institution right after the director unexpectedly resigned and Cira, who had been assistant curator, took on the role of acting director. Her new position gave us [*campbaltimore*] tremendous autonomy as well as full access to the institution's offices and other resources. In addition, Cira identified herself primarily as a participant in our group and *not* as a museum director. So there was a short period of time when the roles of artist, activist and arts administrator truly became blurred. But once the new director was hired our relationship with the museum became much more restricted and antagonistic. We had to play the whole game of justifying our budget expenses, defending the notion that what we were doing was 'art' and constantly resisting the demand to produce representations of activities that happened outside of the museum.

**GS** It seems that your group went in a very short period of time from one based on informal organising and tactical do-it-yourself actions to rethinking the possibility of sustained political work within a specific urban site. But what were some of the key factors in deciding to disband the group identity known as *campbaltimore*?

**SB** For some in the group, the notion of being branded as an 'art collective' became too much of a compromise of political and ethical ideals. In fact, several people have rejected the invitation to participate in this interview based on those same ideals, arguing that such engagements are a distraction from more urgent activities, and that they ultimately perform an affirmative function in relation to the existing order by

presenting an illusion of oppositional culture which symbolically compensates for the actual powerlessness of cultural producers to stop or even slow the destructive course of Empire or military neoliberalism or whichever term you prefer.

In some ways I share this analysis, but we must also avoid essentialist dichotomies such as art versus activism or complicity versus critique. While I reject most aspects of the commercial artworld and the gallery–magazine–museum system that supports it, I still think that the field of contemporary art has some potential to be a space of relative autonomy (and funding) for experimental practices and critical discourses. I would also add that people operating within the ‘activist world’ should give equal scrutiny to the non-profit industrial complex which sustains their activities.

NW I think the group dissolved for several reasons. There was obviously the ideological split regarding the use-value of working within the artworld, where some people took a position of total negation towards the art context in favour of other work deemed more radical or revolutionary. In addition, after a period of intense collective activity during the summer of 2006 ended and we were unable to reconstitute a common project, many questions and differences began to emerge about the direction of the group. We received a couple of invitations to participate in art/academic contexts outside of Baltimore, and the debate about whether or not to accept them became a point of serious contention. We struggled with the task of managing our group image, constantly weighing the potential use-value of symbolic capital against the perceived ethical compromises of career advancement. Ultimately, the group identity of *campbaltimore* and the notion that we had to operate as a unified body in which all decisions were made by consensus became too much of a burden and limitation. So we decided to drop the name and continue working together in a more organic, less centralised way that could accommodate difference and dissensus. Some of us still collaborate on projects like the *Independent Reader*, some are working on an urban farming project and others are starting a community radio station. So in many ways our work has not changed, we have just reconfigured the way we think about it.