Section 1: ARTWORLD

Introduction: Welcome to Our Artworld

Figure 2. Protest placard from Occupy Wall Street, NYC, 2011. (Courtesy Chris Kasper.)
Having died twice, the artist is neither modern nor postmodern, yet caught in the order of time conditioned by her relation to the symptom, her relation to the art world.

Marc James Léger

How does the growing embrace of socially engaged art practice by mainstream culture relate to unprecedented fiscal indebtedness among students and artists? And what do we make of provocative claims that Occupy Wall Street was in fact a contemporary art project? Part I examines these entwined issues through the common denominator of our art world, a term difficult to define, yet ubiquitous in use. For people directly involved in it, the art world is a familiar space (or system, or economy) that stands apart from the so-called real world, and yet is also increasingly entangled with the real world (which curiously appears less and less real itself of late). This introduction argues that the art world must be analyzed as a “totality” whose features are simultaneously more exposed and less exceptional thanks to the broader crisis of deregulated capitalism and erosion of liberal democracy at the start of the 21st century.

City of God

One phrase, the artworld, appears throughout this dissertation with great frequency and for two reasons above all. First it designates a field of cultural practice, and second it delimits my chosen area of critical enquiry. Most often the expression is used in a commonsensical way; appearing with adjectives such as “contemporary,” “mainstream,” “institutional,” or “elite” preceding it. It was not until after my early essays were completed that I further qualified what the art world actually means in this work. In 2007 I wrote:

---

By the term art world I mean the integrated, trans-national economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennials, and trade publications that, together with curators, artists and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks.\(^8\) Two features of this definition color my subsequent research into contemporary art. First, is the implied lack of impartiality evident from the definition’s focus on the art world as a set of business relations within a capitalist marketplace. No doubt this bias has its roots in my own development as an artist, writer and activist lending all my writings a partisan, anti-capitalist tendency, but also an essayistic, at times polemical tone. Likewise, most of my writings engage with the absence/presence of a countervailing sphere of invisible or overlooked art production and its history, a missing mass that makes the art world possible in the first place. Thus, my point of view has primarily been one constantly looking up, from down below, or looking in perhaps from a marginalized but parallel dimension of artistic dark matter. The second contention made here is that the art world is an integrated system of production, and not, as some post-modernist critics contend, merely a bundle of overlapping practices, discourses or subcultures with varying degrees of autonomy, connectivity and interdependence. For even though the art world may appear piecemeal, it is, as is capitalism, a totality that is typically visible only as localized phenomena or in a fragment, which is, Adorno cautions, “that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality”.\(^9\) Or, to place a bit of spin on a maxim by György Lukács, despite its fragmented semblance our art world is an objective totality of delirious social relations.\(^10\)

To clarify this point, it is helpful to consider a famous definition of the art world, made by the philosopher Arthur Danto in a celebrated meditation on Warhol’s Brillo Boxes. As Danto put it, “the art world stands to the real world as the City of God stands to the Earthly city.” In order to gain admission, Warhol’s Brillo Boxes required an indiscernible difference to mark them out from other mass-produced commodities (although Warhol’s boxes were, in fact, built from wood and silkscreened, an issue that Danto overlooked). Danto’s solution is devastatingly simple: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world”.\(^11\)


\(^10\) György Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, MIT Press, 1972.

This definition of the art world is very well known, but its full implications are rarely discussed. In the opening stages of his thought experiment, Danto introduces “Testadura,” the “philistine” who cannot see the artwork, just another object. It is helpful sometimes to remember that very few people are born speaking art theory, or reeling off the lineage of contemporary art. That is to say, we are all “philistines” at some point. It is art education that shows artists the City of God, though it doesn’t let them through the gates. Instead, perhaps, it reveals the art that seems now to be everywhere: in the underwhelming objects, in gatherings, even perhaps in an Occupy Wall Street (O.W.S.) protest. Stranger still, this art has been stripped bare, first via a long process of artists questioning the power relations that inhabit the theories that they inherit, and second by the myth-melting processes of capital. To understand these contradictions, it is necessary to view the art world with Testadura’s bluntness as I do, from “below.” The key axis of this section therefore, is between the art school, where everything is learned, and the museum, where initiates forget they ever had to learn anything as they perform the rituals of art.12

Danto’s Artworld thesis appeared in 1964, and since then these cultural rituals have been integrated into those of capitalism. Architectural historian David Joselit has recently suggested, a new wave of museum construction seems to “function as the art world’s central banks.” Designed for cities “around the world by star architects like Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Jacques Herzog, and Pierre de Meuron”:

in a time of economic instability, precipitated by world-wide financial failures since 2008, people now see art as an international currency. Art is a fungible hedge. [that] must cross borders as easily as the dollar, the euro, the yen, and the renminbi.13

Perhaps it was Haacke’s real estate mappings, real-time projects and critical provenance tracings of Monet and Seurat paintings in the early 1970s that first indicated all that what was once so solid, including works of art, were beginning to melt into thin air. “There is nothing so edifying,” writes W.J.T. Mitchell “as the moral shock of capitalist cultural institutions when they look at their own faces in the mirror”.14 And along with notions of cultural privilege the idea of artistic autonomy was also dissolving. Since then, these moments of break-down and

demystification have only accelerated. To this assault was added museum interventions by Art Workers’ Coalition and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, artistic deconstructions by Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, the cultural utilitarianism of Artists Placement Group, theories of institutional critique from Art & Language, museum maintenance performances by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and the dematerialization of art world privilege via Lucy R. Lippard’s copious writings. A bit later on came the critical practices of Martha Rosler, Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, Mary Kelly, Allan Sekula, Fred Lonidier, Conrad Atkinson, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (A.M.C.C.), Art Against Apartheid, the militant art journals Red-Herring and The Fox, and still further on P.A.D./D., Black Audio Film Collective (U.K.), Group Material, followed by John Malpede’s L.A.P.D. (Los Angeles Poverty Department), Bullet Space, Artists Meeting Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, Guerrilla Girls, and Gran Fury, so that by the end of the Cold War a process was unfolding whereby the previously unseen (I do not mean unseen as in un-seeable, but instead intentionally unseen) conditions of cultural labor began to be foregrounded. All of this was paralleled by the rise of a social history of art in the U.S. and the U.K. starting in the 1970s with figures such as T. J. Clark, Carol Duncan, Alan Wallach, Linda Nochlin, Frances K. Pohl, Andrew Hemingway, Fred Orton, and Griselda Pollock.

Rather than new, as the avant-garde is often defined as new, this self-critical artistic work represented a disenchanted revelation of the power that sustains the normal art world. At the same time, these moments of resistance were spurred along by real-world political actualities and changes in the working conditions of art as capital subsumed artistic practices into its own forces of production. On the one hand, this process has stripped art bare as critical artists who have labored for decades to reveal the workings of power within it finally triumph. On the other hand, the speculative incursions of 1% oligarchs who want to put the “City of God” to work as a kind of eternalized asset class have turned autonomous art into an unregulated investment market. And here we arrive at the central observation of this thesis. Culture’s internal aesthetic character is now manifest as so many flagrant, unconcealed and utterly ordinary attributes, so many data points so that the desire by 1960s artists to transform their elite social position into that of a “cultural worker” has finally been fulfilled. Today artists are simply another worker, no more or less. We might best describe this new mise en scène as simply “bare art,” the laying bare of art’s autonomy and exceptionality as illusory under current circumstances.
Ironically, the activities of critical artists have been assisted by capital’s own hegemonic reach in which it “mobilizes to its advantage all the attitudes characterizing our species, putting to work life as such,” explains Paolo Virno, or as Jameson explains following Marx, capital is “the first transparent society, that is to say, the first social formation in which the “secret of production” is revealed”.\footnote{Branden W. Joseph, “Interview with Paolo Virno”, Grey Room, 21, Fall 2005, 35; and Jameson, Representing Capital, 17.} The secret of artistic production is also revealed to be social production, a disclosure that has occurred as the pursuit of surplus value comes to dominate all fields of human activity. Like a hallowed covenant we reluctantly pledge ourselves to follow, there is little time or need now for older, ideological facades and cover stories. Claustrophobic, tautological, our bare art world is our bare art world is our bare art world. It emerges in successive and accelerating states of shadowless economic exposure following capital’s ever-quickening swerves from crisis to crisis –the oil crisis and stagflated 1970s, the Savings & Loan meltdown 1980s/1990s, the Dotcom bust in the 2000s, Argentinian default at about the same time, and of course the “great recession” starting late in 2007 with 8.7 million lost jobs between 2008 and 2010. But this does not mean all artists like it. As Caroline Woolard of bfa.M.F.A..phd asked with added incredulity, “what is a work of art in the age of $120,000 art degrees?”\footnote{BFAMFAPhD/Caroline Woolard, “Pedagogies of Payment”, The Enemy, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2014: http://theenemyreader.org/pedagogies-of-payment}

Clearly a growing number of previously invisible cultural producers have begun to see themselves as a category in and for themselves as the social nature of art is unavoidably made visible. Like some weird redundant agency, this no-longer dark matter is commonplace—the art fabricators, handlers, installers whose own art practice always takes a back seat—and simultaneously bristling with a profound potential for positive change as well as an unpredictable and deep-seated sense of resentment. Tuition-indebted artist and co-founder of Occupy Museums Noah Fischer sums up the situation with frustration:

> The contemporary art market is one of the largest deregulated transaction platforms in the world—a space where Russian oligarchs launder money, real estate tycoons decorate private museums for tax benefits, and celebrities of fashion, screen, and music trade cash for credibility.\footnote{Noah Fischer, “The Dark Arts”, The Enemy, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014: http://theenemyreader.org/the-dark-arts/}
Occupy Museums has responded by literally entering the public areas of cultural institutions and staging O.W.S. type protests focused on issues of labor and social justice that address both the media (whose reporters are tipped-off before the intervention takes place), and the audiences of cultural consumers (who happen to be present when the action takes place).

**Pushing-Back.**

Capitalist communication networks serve to quicken and thicken these resistant formations so that groups such as W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), Occupy Museums, Gulf Labor, Debtfair, Art & Labor, MTL (Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain), De-Colonize This Place, and bfa.M.F.A..phd.org among others openly acknowledged that they are indeed an art labor force whose work should not simply benefit the 1% of the art world's global superstars and mega-galleries. Speaking as artist and organizer of W.A.G.E., Lise Soskolne bluntly lays out the view of a bare art world from below:

> Even though it is made up of a for-profit and a non-profit sector, the world of art is an industry just like any other. All of its supporting institutions, including philanthropy, contribute to its perpetuation and growth as such, and all those who contribute to its economy by facilitating the production and distribution of art products, including and especially artists, are wholly unexceptional in their support for and exploitation by it. The role of art and artists within this multibillion-dollar industry is to serve capital—just like everyone else.  

While some artists organize for better “working conditions,” others parody enterprise culture, cunningly montaging the leftovers of a broken society into “mock-institutions”: D.I.Y. organizations that sometimes work as well as or better than the bankrupt institutions their founders initially sought to mimic. Debtfair derides the concept of the Art Fair by offering an open-invitation to all artists in Houston, Texas, to submit work while also relaying their level of student debt:

---

18 Lise Soskolne, “What is wrong with the art world and how would you fix it?” unpublished W.A.G.E text introducing WAGENCY project, 9/24/2016

19 Mock-institutions or simply mockstitutions is a neologism and a concept elaborated on in my book *Dark Matter* (Pluto Press, 2010) and refers to artists or artists’ groups who ironically appropriate institutional title—such as school, center, bureau, office, institute and so forth—purposely parodies institutional realities as a critical intervention. See also: http://www.veralistcenter.org/art-and-social-justice/glossary/28/mocksituation/
Total debts amongst the artists are tabulated in a running tally while identifying the institutions in which these debts are rooted, [thus] while many feel isolated by their economic reality, Debtfair works to build solidarity and community around our shared economic conditions.\(^{20}\)

At this point, we must pause to consider how these forces of resistance actually exist within an art world that is so intimately tied to the interests of the 1%? And consequently, does the past, present and anticipated future defeat of artistic opposition just return U.S. to the age-old complaint of co-option, where every vestige of resistance is pre-deceased, because it will only find itself serving the interests of capital in the end? This was the issue that I took up in Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: In and Beyond the Post-War Art Museum. As I put it at the time: “no matter how imperfectly actually existing museums fulfill their social obligations, the symbolic position of the museum remains inseparable from notions of public space, democratic culture, and citizenship itself”.\(^{21}\) Alternative spaces, after all, did create new opportunities that allowed a different and somewhat more politicized voice to be heard in the public sphere, even as these voices were absorbed into the museum network. The essay also suggests a reason for this attraction to the art world, even by critical, politically-driven artists because:

if institutional power persists in attracting even its opponents, perhaps it is because we love it, or at least the unselfish image it projects, more than it could ever love itself. That is the scandal my essay seeks to comprehend.\(^{22}\)

The key issue, to reframe these concerns, is how the totality formed by the art world is understood. Crucially, it must be grasped as a dynamic system; one that adapts but also one that breaks down, if only momentarily. Founded on contradictions the question I asked in 2003 was: “are not museums, universities, corporations, and perhaps even the armed forces not rife with administrative malfunctions, redundancies, and even occasional destabilizing conflicts?”\(^{23}\) Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to say that the prevalence of bare art is itself evidence of this kind of destabilizing conflict, pulled this way and that by the different

\(^{21}\) See page 18.
\(^{22}\) See page 28.
\(^{23}\) See page 19.
forces that constitute the art world. Undeniably, just as everywhere else, this is not an equal struggle: the resources are almost all in the hands of the patrons, their hedge fund managers and the administrators who do as they are told. However, the point is still pertinent: the art world absorbs resistance and seeks to neutralize it, but its processes do not always succeed in achieving the right kind of inertia.

O.W.S. was a moment of resistance that stood in close relation to the New York art world (though the global Occupy camps were all quite different in character). Let’s Do It Again Comrades, Let’s Occupy The Museum! addresses the presence of an off-stage archive that ripples through the actions of Occupy Museums as a kind of repetition that is also strangely novel: the rediscovery of the art activist tactics of the 1970s and 1980s by a new generation of interventionists including staging protests and performances inside museum lobbies, but also the “human microphone,” or “people’s microphone,” which though it is not specifically an artistic invention actually dates to the anti-nuclear movement some thirty years previous to O.W.S., if not even earlier. The essay focuses on Occupy Museums, one of many post-Occupy groups that has gone on to develop, gradually, a new set of values with which to oppose capitalism including the aforementioned Debtfair project. These groups have emerged from the fundamental contradiction within the art world, and the wider neoliberal economy: there is not enough room or resources for everyone (or so we are constantly reminded). A few experience the exalted version of an artistic career, but most will find themselves barely existing as precarious cultural laborers. For along with revealing the obscene top-heaviness of neoliberal institutions, O.W.S. has also underscored the utter redundancy of most workers in the present economy, including artists.

O.W.S. and the contemporaneous rebellions in other parts of the world also represented for me and other social commentators a critical denouement about contemporary art. Examples include Theorist Stevphen Shukaitis, who interprets the 2011-2012 wave of public square risings as heralding the formation of a new Left constituency that drew upon such Situationist tactics as psychogeography, détournement, and dérive to create “the time and space for the emergence of new forms of collective subjects, rather than a politics formed around already

---

24 It is possible to see a precedent for the Peoples Mic in the figure of the Town Crier of News Shouter that dates back to medieval Europe.
given demands”. Curator Nato Thompson argues that the significant presence of contemporary artists in O.W.S., the Arab Spring, and other 21st Century uprisings is proof that culture’s role in oppositional movements must be taken seriously, linking this amalgam of art and politics to the late 20th Century anti-globalization movement. For Thompson, what these uprisings share in common is a preference for leaderless leadership, non-hierarchical organizing, and the “creative and productive unity of art and activism”. Thompson also defends Occupy’s frequently criticized lack of political demands by explaining that, “one cannot understand this radical refusal until one appreciates just how intensely O.W.S. sought to avoid its language being used against the movement in the court of public spectacle”. Here I am reminded of Michel De Certeau’s description of the everyday tactical resistance that keeps no territory or winnings, and “has no image of itself”. Likewise, the humble O.W.S. tactician neither wants nor owns anything and is instead engaged in what Stephen Wright terms “usership”, an activity comparable to a bee colony whose pollinating labor collectively generates a far larger economy than the colony requires to sustain and reproduce itself.

**Occupying the Totality.**

While Shukaitis and Thompson acknowledge the central role of artistic vanguards, or a certain interpretation of these practices, in 21st Century Left politics, historian Yates McKee goes one step further in his book *Strike Art!* by proposing that O.W.S. might be read as a work of contemporary art in itself. Acknowledging his own divided position as both critic and activist, McKee describes the surrealist atmosphere of the O.W.S. encampment as follows: “for those steeped in contemporary art theory, walking into Zuccotti Park was an uncanny experience”. But in order to firmly set up the role contemporary art and avant-

---


26 According to Thompson the union of art and activism defined the anti-globalization movement, but following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 this cultural politics was suppressed only to re-emerge during the period of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 28-30.


29 Stephen Wright is working with ideas generated by among others Yann Moulier Boutang and Henri Lefebvre who argues that “the user’s space is lived – not represented,” Stephen Wright, *Towards A Lexicon of Usership*, Van Abbemuseum, 2013, 26.

30 McKee, *Strike Art!* 79.
garde aesthetics played in Occupy he turns to the concept of prefigurative politics as this is defined by one of movement’s primary architects, the anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber. For Graeber, as for McKee and many other commentators on Occupy, the concept of prefigurative politics involves first visualizing a non-alienated society as a means of realizing its future actualization:

Surely there must be a link between the actual experience of first imagining things and then bringing them into being, individually or collectively, and the ability to envision social alternatives.\(^{31}\)

Graeber proposes a link here between political prefiguration and what we might describe as aesthetic imagination and. McKee threads the needle:

Graeber’s text is an essential point of reference in tracking the political and artistic ethos that would inform Occupy, an ethos that, as we have seen, developed in relative autonomy from the art world itself even while drawing nonacademically on the discourses of avant-garde art such as Dada, surrealism, and the Situationists.\(^{32}\)

*Strike Art!*’s emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of pre-figurative politics is reinforced throughout McKee’s book, including a reference to the late 1960s street theater of the San Francisco Diggers, and also when he cites the ingenious media-oriented creativity of ACT UP in which artists were essential “not merely as decorators or designers, but rather as organizers and tacticians in their own right”.\(^{33}\) Finally, with cards almost revealed, he writes:

Occupy as a totality—rather than just this or that phenomena within it—can itself arguably be considered an artistic project in its own right, assuming we reimagine our sense of what art is or can be.\(^{34}\)

This project, McKee asserts, also represented the end of socially engaged art, at least in so far as the latter seeks to be a vanguard practice “defined by its very flirtation with dissolving the category of art altogether into an expanded field of “social engagement”.\(^{35}\) Remarkably, McKee’s

---

\(^{31}\) ibid., 61.

\(^{32}\) ibid. 61-62.

\(^{33}\) ibid, 28, 41.

\(^{34}\) ibid, 27.

\(^{35}\) ibid, 81.
prediction has come to pass, and has also simultaneously been flipped about on its head. For on one hand the direct interventions of Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) and Liberate Tate among other activist art groups reflect the dissolution of art into social activism, while on the other hand, social practice art is now being taken-up, selectively, by mainstream art institutions including the Guggenheim Museum, which is the very target of G.U.L.F.’s direct art activism. Therefore, regardless if O.W.S. did or did not serve as the furnace fusing the categories of art and politics into a new amalgam, the resulting state of affairs might best be characterized as a delirious state of resistance and subsumption at one and the same time.

Perhaps this is another permutation in the trajectory that has been followed by bare art since the 1970s. Imagining such history for socially engaged and activist art inevitably raises the question of our art world, and the role it plays in normalizing such practices, which is why I insist on grasping the art world as “a world,” or if you prefer, as a unified, but internally conflicted, political economy grounded in its own endless reproduction and expansion. To reject this notion of the art world as a totality set within the larger totality of capitalism inevitably generates interpretative limitations that not only constrict cultural criticism, but also political analysis. McKee’s otherwise excellent Strike Art! runs afoul of this shortcoming when he writes that he will use “the phrase “art system” as a way to displace the deeply engrained figure of the “art world.” McKee continues:

The latter term connotes a unitary, self-enclosed cultural universe of likeminded cognoscenti making, viewing, judging, and sometimes buying and selling work of art. Even when used disparagingly, as in the phrase “art-world elites,” the phrase homogenizes and neutralizes what is in fact a highly complex and uneven landscape.

I certainly would not argue with the metaphor of the uneven cultural landscape, but would add that it is still very much a landscape with definable properties and topographies regardless

36 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has received a major grant from the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation to support Guggenheim Social Practice, a new initiative committed to exploring the ways in which artists can initiate projects that engage community participants,” including soliciting a project by Conflict Kitchen co-founder Jon Rubin, we are informed by a press release of May 12, 2016, posted precisely one day and one month after the Guggenheim trustees unilaterally rejected efforts by Gulf Labor Coalition to reform the museum’s internationally discredited labor policies in Abu Dhabi. See https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/85742 and http://gulflabor.org/.

37 Here I am indebted to Marc Fisher’s insightful observation that “to a degree unprecedented in any other social system, capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations. Without delirium and confidence, capital could not function,” Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?, Zero Books, 2009, p. 35.

38 McKee, 11.
of how it might appear from any particular angle at any given time. Because like capital, the art world, manifests itself as a fragmented and highly localized phenomenon, though in one significant way the situation is quite the reverse. For what the art world’s exhaustive power relations aim to reproduce is its own restricted economy: a system of structured immobility, competitive hierarchies and false scarcities. And rather than call it a system and leave it at that, the art world is better grasped as a system of reproduction, one that no matter how granular in appearance generates real world effects on the way artists live and work. In other words, the art world is both a real, material economy, and a comprehensive symbolic whole, not a monumental whole, but an oblique and roundabout narrative that we typically glimpse only in moments of crisis and breakdown, such as the current period following upon the 2008 financial collapse.

Rejecting the concept of an integrated art world has other consequences. For one thing, there can be no such thing as activist art, political art, interventionist art, or socially engaged art without the adversarial presence of our art world. This does not mean activists or social movements do not produce cultural artifacts or aesthetic concepts that could be described as art were we to, as McKee suggests, “reimagine our sense of what art is or can be”.39 On the contrary, just like hobbyists and amateur artists, L.A.R.P. enthusiasts, Crop Circle makers, zinesters, or the ultra-Left and largely self-taught Madame Binh Graphics Collective whose untrained, hand-drawn silkscreen posters of fugitive Black Panther activists will never be displayed as “art” without first passing through a mandatory filter of disinterested detachment. This is after all how artists such as Sharon Hayes or Jeremy Deller are allowed to display politically-charged artifacts within the art world context, as much as it is the logic behind the presence of the P.A.D./D. Archive of socially engaged art that is located within the Museum of Modern Art (M.o.M.A.) though in P.A.D./D.’s case the detachment is literal since its archive is offsite and out of view to regular museum-goers.

In order to move these practices out of a state of sheer “usership,” to cite Stephen Wright’s terminology, and into the ontological category known as art, their specific social provenance

must be bracketed out and replaced with a new frame of neutralized or ironic reference. The typically fraught outcome of this procedure is apparent whenever an earnest, socially conscious curator attempts to display the “authentic” life settings of activist artworks within the solitude of the white cube by using documentary photographs, newsreels, artifacts and so forth. Most often the exercise results in a visual menagerie with the ultimate example found in the 2012 Berlin Biennale where curators Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza invited Occupy Museums and other art activists from Zuccotti Park to establish an encampment on the ground floor of the Kunstwerk for the duration of the exhibition. This “administered occupation” as Olga Kopenkina describes it was also labeled a “human zoo” even by its participants.  

Nato Thompson’s exhibition The Interventionists and Martha Rosler’s If You Lived Here exhibitions, as well as installations by Group Material fared better by confronting the art world framing as part of the critique. The question remains: how are we to understand this new aesthetic frame if O.W.S. really is to attain the status of an artwork? How are the terms of the struggle over culture to be reconstituted?

At moments like this we see the art world firmly set within that larger whole that is capital. This is not an entirely new situation. Writers such as Chin-Tao Wu and Julian Stallibrass argued this reality for years, as did artists such as Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler. But there is one caveat today, and that involves scale, even if it is not always clearly visible as such. Because while Jameson reminds that U.S. capitalism is never visible as a totality and can only ever be perceived as a set of symptoms that manages crisis through “mutation onto larger and larger scales,” so too has the art world scaled up to the point that it has become a literal surrogate for capital.  

A new generation of cultural critics has arrived at a similar reading of the art world’s imbrication within capitalist production including John Roberts, Mealanie Gilligan, Kerstin Stakemeier, and Marina Vishmidt, Kim Charnley and Hito Steyerl. Some of their views are discussed in the fourth chapter of this section one: Bare Art, Debt, Oversupply, Panic!: (On the contradictions of a 21st Century Art Education). As Steyerl has recently observed “art’s organizing role in the value-process—long overlooked,  

---


41 Fredric Jameson, Representing Capital, 6-7.
downplayed, worshipped, or fucked—is at last becoming clear enough to approach, if not rationally, than perhaps realistically”. Which is perhaps why when I look at a monumental work produced by Jeff Koons’s studio, or a diamond dotted platinum skull by Damien Hirst, what I see is a very real ailment puffed up to the size of our too-big-to-fail 21st Century reality. And what strikes me, as does so many other people, is not the presence of a powerful idea or a remarkable manifestation of artistic expressivity, but the raw accumulated resources of money and wage labor necessary to bring this work into being. I also remember on other thing. On September 17, 2011, just before the actual occupation of Zuccotti Park began, the first thing I saw when visiting Occupy Wall Street was a lone protester carrying a placard with an image of Hirst’s skull on it that read, “Wall Street is Destroying America.” To many, the art world is the primary symptom of the 1% economy.

This is also why the delirium and crisis of capitalism is also the delirium and crisis of the art world. Two realities demonstrate this turmoil above all others. One is the art world’s need for an ever-increasing pool of unremunerated creative workers indebted to the art world system of reproduction, the focus of the final essay in this section, entitled Bare Art and the Contradictions of 21st Century Art Education. And this is also why art education plays an important role in the penultimate essay After O.W.S.: Abstraction and the limits of the Social and the new essay on debt that concludes this section. Art education is one of the key points of entry into this surplus labor pool and riven with its own contradictions as a result. Like the rest of university education, the price for being shown the City of God is a lifetime of debt that will force you to labor, paradoxically, to keep it out of reach. The super-profits from the loan system no doubt feed into the unremitting art world expansion visible today in the supercharged art market, certainly, but also in the wave of global museum construction, including in nations propped up by extremes of inequality and repressive political regimes such as the United Arab Emirates. What is remarkable however, is the way so many art world pundits, institutions and policy makers continue to use the language of social justice and democratic ideals while remaining faithful to capitalist principals of maximum growth, unremunerated cultural labor, and deregulated supply and demand, thus blatantly contradicting the ideal image of art as an exceptional mode of human activity.

---

The final essay of this section brings U.S. back to our starting point in 1999 with a focus on the art world’s production, circulation and accumulation of value, but this time from the perspective of artistic labor, rather than self-defined alternative institutions or experiments in redefining cultural management. *Debt, Panic, Oversupply* critiques the way that art world pundits, institutions and policy makers, despite using the language of social justice and reform, remain faithful to capitalist ideas of maximum growth and supply and demand.

**Bare Art.**

But if the latest iteration of system failure has left art naked, with no clear way of restarting the old narrative about art as an autonomous sphere of ideas and creativity no matter how entangled its system is with the marketplace, then this rupture also reveals a significant negation at work for all to see. What I term the art world’s dark matter, and what John Roberts more narrowly describes as art’s “second economy”, generates resources necessary for survival within, across, as well as beyond the art world, operating through networks of gift giving and the exchange of services and knowledge, rather than through a self-limiting market of buyers and sellers.⁴³ Much like Georges Bataille’s notion of a “general economy”, as opposed to a “restricted” economy, this other support system involves expenditure without precise limits and broadly distributed, rather than concentrated, forms of compensation and expectation.⁴⁴ And no doubt it was this beehive colony effect that occupiers in Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, and Zuccotti Park among other encampment sites were testing out, fine-tuning, and trying to make self-sustainable.

The undeniable aesthetic dimension of this experiment in horizontal generosity, its prefigurative vibrancy, is ultimately what I suspect many art world oriented observers of O.W.S. and other uprisings in the 2010-2012 time frame have interpreted as contemporary art’s gift to the movement as McKee suggests. “Occupy took the avant-garde dialectic of ‘art and life’ to a new level of intensity,” he writes, though one could also cite similar statements by Thompson, Shukaitis, Holmes, Gokey, Raunig Grindon among many others including even

---

⁴³ These concepts are discussed throughout John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time*, 2015, and Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 2011, respectively.

CNN in, predictably, a more conventional manner, “How art propels Occupy Wall Street.” Nonetheless, in truth, neither contemporary artists, nor creative class workers have any special monopoly on these informally networked, non-market methods of survival. These are the weapons of the weak. The most important lesson of bare art therefore is that it cannot help but point to new forms of potential solidarity within, but also beyond our art world.
Section 1: Chapter 1

*Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: Within and Beyond the Post Cold War Art Museum*

Figure 3. Dan Peterman Universal Lab, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2006 (Image courtesy of Dan Peterman).
Today, the socially committed artist, writer, curator, or administrator must face one very unpalatable fact — large, basically conservative institutions, including museums and universities, eventually charm even their most defiant critics and radical apostates. If the end of the Cold War (and of Modernism) has brought a new level of inclusiveness to these cultural institutions, what has become of the once defiant notion of a counterculture? Writing as a heretic, I believe that while institutional power is certainly no phantom, the “institutional function” (to rework a term borrowed from Michel Foucault’s essay What is an Author?) is seldom precisely directed. Rather, museums, universities, even corporations are rife with redundancy and internal conflict. Their greatest effectiveness is often more the result of a magnitude of scale than organizational efficiency. Naturally, administrators and curators will, in the last instance, always side with the institutional function, but at any point prior to that critical juncture, there arise intrigues, affairs, and infidelities of great potential to political activists. And if institutional power persists in attracting even its opponents, perhaps it is because we love the museum, or at least the unselfish image it projects, more than it could ever love itself. That is the scandal my essay seeks to comprehend. To address this conflict I will need to take a detour into my own experience with cultural institutions and the lessons learned therin.

I want to begin by describing my own troubled history. I have worked inside art institutions as well as outside and against them. I want to address this space of ambivalence, but I also want to confess a still deeper, long-standing disloyalty — toward the practice known as

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell

W. H. Auden (Lullaby, 1937)  

---

46 Michel. Foucault, “What is an Author?” Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Donald F.
contemporary art, and toward the increasingly global market that supports it. As a practicing artist and curator who teaches in an arts administration program, this confession is nearly seditious. Yet, like all complex relationships, it also betrays my codependency on institutional authority as a means of achieving what are in effect contrary, democratic goals.

I can trace my declining faith in the institutions of art back to 1979, the year I graduated from The Cooper Union School of Art. No longer a student, I began to attend meetings where other artists spoke not about their art but about their opposition to racism and apartheid, sexism and militarism. Rather than visiting studios or planning exhibitions, we focused on supporting third-world liberation movements, labor unions, the ecology movement, and public housing. Art was at best a vehicle for accomplishing these ends. Besides, there was serious work to be done that had nothing to do with career building. Among those active at these gatherings was the critic Lucy R. Lippard, the writers Clive Philpot, Irving Wexler, and Barbara Moor, and the artists Ed Eisenberg, Tim Rollins, Jerry Kearns, Richard Myer, r, Janet Koenig, Doug Ashford, Mike Glier, Mimi Smith, Herb Perr and Rudolph Baranik. Many were veterans of other organizations, including Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (A.M.C.C.) and the feminist group Heresies. Before long, an organizational mission was being formulated that would transform these informal meetings held in Lower Manhattan into a coherent association with its own offices and bank account. In principle, the new group was to focus its activities on archiving and circulating the many boxes of materials about political and activist art that Lippard had been collecting for several years. At the moment of institutionalization, Philpot, then the director of the Museum of Modern Art library, proposed the appellation Political Art Documentation, or P.A.D.. When several members raised concerns about the service-oriented connotation of this name, it was modified to become Political Art Documentation and Distribution, or P.A.D./D..

The P.A.D./D. archive was intended to be an instrument for expanding left-wing activism among artists. By accumulating and distributing models for politically engaged practices, the archive would serve as a sort of tactical toolbox. The greater expectation was that this


informal network would grow into an entirely autonomous system for distributing and exhibiting activist culture. This countercircuit would be woven out of a combination of new and existing sites not strongly tied to the dominant art world. It would include university art galleries, community centres, labor union halls, and various public venues. Work would also be made for demonstrations and picket lines. Note however, that most alternative art spaces were not part of this network because these artist-run institutions were perceived as outposts and stepping stones for the very cultural hegemony that P.A.D./D. opposed. To underscore this desire for critical autonomy, consider the group’s mission statement from 1981, in which P.A.D./D. proclaimed that it “… can not serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art...”.

Today, even the most formal art claims social relevancy. As Bruce Ferguson noted in his opening address for the 2000 Banff Curatorial Summit, it has become almost de rigueur to make explicit reference to issues of politics, cultural diversity, gender, and sexual identity (although, I must add, seldom to class or economic inequality). Indeed, such routines can be lamentable for political as well as artistic reasons. Yet, from the perspective of a politically engaged activist artist or organizer this kind of intra-institutional, liberal ambition can indeed be useful, if frustrating. Useful, because a certain amount of actual political work can be leveraged through it. At the same time, this tendency to display one’s politics on the sleeve (or via an interpretive wall text) is frustrating because curators, artists, museum administrators, and academics easily confuse the kind of symbolic transgression that takes place inside the museum with the political activism that occurs at the judicial, penal, even global levels of society.

The reflex to make art socially relevant is itself a recent phenomenon (as well as a return to a much older one). It appears to have accelerated following the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Perhaps this is because U.S. artists no longer needed to display to the world an uncompromising individuality exemplified by abstract expressionism. At the same time, however, new grounds for justifying culture were needed. Social purposefulness and community-based art fit that need. By contrast, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, art with overt social subject matter was dismissed as utilitarian or as protest art. As difficult as it is to imagine

today, in 1975 resistance to any sullying of high culture with politics actually helped topple the short-lived editorial team of John Coplans and Max Kozloff at *Artforum*. Coplans and Kozloff brought to the influential trade magazine a raft of radical art historians, artists and essayists, including Carol Duncan, Allan Sekula, Lawrence Alloway, Alan Wallach, Eva Cockcroft, Ian Burn and Patricia Hills. These writers dared to suggest that art was not an autonomous expression of transcendental truth, but an integral part of the social world. Hilton Kramer, then the principal art critic for the *New York Times* as well as an ardent cold warrior, openly called for art dealers to boycott the magazine. In what might be considered a virtual coup d’ état, both Coplans and Kozloff were soon dislodged from their positions.49

Meanwhile, by the late 1970s, politically engaged artists were becoming increasingly sophisticated in their mixing of the symbolic realm of art with the practical needs of political activism. Unlike an earlier generation, exemplified by Donald Judd or Carl Andre, who both strongly opposed the Vietnam War, yet remained devout minimalists, many post-formalist artists collaborated with one another as well as with environmentalists, anti-nuclear and housing activists, and community workers, producing a heterogeneous range of artistic forms and styles that directly addressed social causes. Even P.A.D./D. soon veered away from its stated archival and networking mission to make performances and agit-art for public rallies and demonstrations, including the 1981 action in Lower Manhattan titled *No More Witch Hunts*. The Reagan administration had recently passed anti-terrorist laws giving the government expanded powers of surveillance over U.S. citizens. Many understood these so-called anti-terrorist laws as a thinly disguised legal justification for spying on domestic supporters of the F.M.L.N. (the *Farabundo Marti National Liberation*), a Salvadorian-based insurrectionary organization opposed to the U.S.-backed regime of Jose Napoleon Duarte. *No More Witch Hunts* brought together religious activists, a local progressive union, legal activists, and artists. Meanwhile, Group Material, another New York City–based artists collective founded about the same time as P.A.D./D., performed a mocking, military-influenced disco dance outfitted in hybrid “uniforms” that grafted together standard GI camouflage with the bright red colors of the F.M.L.N.. Such reflexive and playful use of visual signifiers marked the increasing experimentation and confidence of a new “political art” that was consciously distancing itself from the banners and murals of the past.

49 A decade later, Lucy R. Lippard was herself ousted from her post at the *Village Voice*, ostensibly because her political enthusiasm prevented her from writing “objective” art criticism.
Along with P.A.D./D. and Group Material, a partial list of organizations that operated in the New York area between 1979 and 1982 included the anti-nuclear organizations Artists for Survival and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament; the community-based Asian American group Basement Workshop; media activists including Deep Dish and Paper Tiger Television; and the feminist art collectives No More Nice Girls, Heresies, and Carnival Knowledge. And this list could be sorted differently by highlighting specific projects, including The Women’s Pentagon Action and The Anti-WW III Show; The Real Estate Show, an anti-gentrification exhibition, organized by a splinter group from Colab, that was staged in a squat space on the Lower East Side; Bazaar Conceptions, a pro-choice “street fair” organized by Carnival Knowledge; and an art auction to help fund a women’s center in Zimbabwe organized by the ultra-left Madame Binh Graphics Collective, some of whose members later served time at Rikers Island in connection with the infamous Brinks robbery in upstate New York.⁵⁰

Therefore, when one speaks about political activism taking place inside the museum, as a prominent Chicago curator of contemporary art Mary Jane Jacobs once asserted, it is important to contrast the sort of critical and material engagement I’ve described above with attempts to “subvert the institutional frame” or to “transgress” conventions of representation or modes of display. Needless to say, and for reasons too detailed to go into here, by the later part of the 1980s, the category “political art” had become widely accepted, even as P.A.D./D. dissolved. Meanwhile, the P.A.D./D. archive is now housed in the mother of all establishment art institutions, the M.o.M.A. in New York City. And while activist cultural work continued to evolve within organizations such as Act Up, Gran Fury, and the Guerilla Girls, by the time the M.o.M.A. organized its 1988 “political art” survey, Committed to Print, the very possibility of an alternative or counter-network of affiliated activist artists and autonomous exhibition spaces such as P.A.D./D. proposed could no longer be sustained, either in practice or in theory. Perhaps even more disconcerting is that today, some twenty years later, much of the art documented in the P.A.D./D. archives remains invisible, in spite of the apparently required observance of political correctness within the contemporary art world.

The degree to which collectives such as P.A.D./D. or Group Material or the Women’s Building on the West Coast participated in this normalization of politically and socially engaged art

⁵⁰ List compiled from first and second issues of P.A.D./D. newsletter (both published 1981).
has yet to be studied. Nevertheless, when the terms “political art” or “multiculturalism” or more notably “activist art” are invoked today, they raise for me specific historical as well as theoretical questions regarding definitions and context. They also remind me that history is premised on such lost opportunities, just as activism is a process of recovering what the past has betrayed.

To briefly summarize then, from the perspective of a politically engaged art practice, whatever the motive is for the post–Cold War art world’s alliance with social content, it must be read as a potential site for rendezvous. To think otherwise, to remain opposed to all institutional intercourse, is to assume the most ideologically accommodating position possible. It leaves the institution in the hands of those administrators and intellectuals who dismiss the impulse for economic and political justice as impractical, turning instead to a melancholy exploration of personal meaning or an unreflective indulgence in popular culture. Therefore the current fashion for Political Correctness (to use a term I despise but one that makes perfect sense in this context) is useful if for no other reason than that it provides leverage for a certain measure of engaged, political work.51

Perhaps the clearest way to frame this dilemma then is in the form of a question. How can artists learn to siphon off a portion of institutional power while maintaining a safe distance and margin of autonomy from the institution? At the same time, we need to ask what ethical questions this raises — not only for artists but also for sympathetic curators and arts administrators working on the “inside.” In other words, what is the nature of the contradiction such potentially dangerous liaisons can produce? One answer can be found in the work of several contemporary artists, including Dan Peterman, his associates on the south side of Chicago, and the collective REPOhistory.

Peterman’s project, Excerpts from the Universal Lab: Plan B, was on display in the summer of 2000 at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago’s urban campus.  

51 An example of leveraging is the series of exhibitions entitled Mumia 911 that took place across the United States in the Fall of 1999 that not only called attention to, but provided material support for confronting police brutality and institutionalized racism. Mumia 911 called for an impartial retrial of the outspoken African-American activist Mumia Abu Jamal who has been on Pennsylvania’s death row since 1982, accused of murdering a Philadelphia police officer. International human rights groups have condemned his conviction as legally flawed, even politically motivated by a vindictive police department known for its widespread racism and corruption. Along with building support for a new trial the Mumia 911 coalition focused public attention on the disproportionate number of non-white people incarcerated and on death row across the United States.
The Smart Museum is located not far from Peterman’s multipurpose studio that prior to a suspicious fire in 2001 included a neighborhood organic garden and housed a bicycle recycling and woodworking business as well as the offices of The Baffler, an iconoclastic left-wing journal featuring articles about global media culture and the so-called “new economy.”

On one level, the artist’s project for the Smart Museum resembles an unassuming display of outdated scientific equipment painstakingly arranged on a cylindrical platform or dais. The initial effect is of a display meant for a science fair that was mistakenly delivered to the wrong institution. But the “excerpts” that Peterman has used in the installation were in fact drawn from the collection of a former University of Chicago research associate named John Erwood (the man’s actual name, but Peterman chose not to identify him in his project). By using the history of this collection, the artist is able to launch his subtle process of leveraging institutional power. For several decades, Erwood had been diverting scientific materials from the university into a warehouse north of the campus. Initially, Erwood’s accumulations formed the basis of an unregulated science laboratory under the utopian-sounding name Universal Lab or U.L. This “laboratory” was intended to be a free space in which science projects that were not sanctioned by the university could be explored by almost anyone wearing a lab coat (At least one viable scientific project involving solar-voltaic technology did result from the work done at U.L.).

The Universal Lab was therefore something of an institutional parasite. It recycled outmoded equipment and materials while remaining invisible to any oversight by its host, the university. However, Erwood’s free space eventually became so choked with discarded apparatus and hazardous chemicals that it was no longer anything but a storage depot. By 1999, the Universal Lab devolved into piles of Geiger counters, autoclaves, lab ovens, oscillators, computers, radio equipment, plastic buckets of mercury, and hundreds of chemicals in brown glass bottles, all of which were stacked from floor to ceiling inside a cavernous former factory on Chicago’s south side. If the University of Chicago was not concerned with this pilfering, it may have been because Erwood was “disappearing” obsolete, even dangerous holdings that would have been expensive to dispose of in the proper manner.

The building was finally renovated into the newly named Experimental Station opening in 2006 where, among other occupants over the years, it has housed The Baffler Magazine, Invisible Institute, Theaster Gates and the Blackstone Bicycle Works: http://experimentalstation.org/aboutus/ see also Section Two, Chapter Four: Art After Gentrification.

that later merged with 3Com with combined assets of $8.5 billion, meanwhile, Peterman’s Universal Lab project was assisted by a young, intrepid curator Stephanie Smith then working at the Smart Museum, as well as former publisher of The Baffler Greg Lane, and Chicago Resource Center’s Ken Dunn also discussed in
U.L. might have remained invisible indefinitely if not for the building’s ownership changing hands around 2000. In the meantime, Erwood had become destitute. With nowhere to turn, and no cost-effective way to dispose of the mountains of archaic technology, the new owner called on the assistance of the Resource Center, a Chicago-based non-profit recycling organization. Closely associated with Peterman’s own recycling projects, the Resource Center allowed the artist to selectively catalogue some of the anonymous equipment and display it at the Smart Museum as part of an exhibition titled *Ecologies: Mark Dion, Peter Fend, Dan Peterman*, which was organized by curator Stephanie Smith. By physically relocating some of the University of Chicago’s lost “assets” back to its campus, Peterman was able to provoke a series of political and aesthetic challenges that extend beyond the immediate art context. As Smith notes, through this collaborative project, these objects, many of which were scavenged from the university’s loading docks and trash bins, spiraled back in a new context. They did not complete a circle/cycle but instead accrued new layers of use, value, and meaning as they were temporarily incorporated into the systems and physical spaces of the University of Chicago’s art museum.

If the apparatus Peterman transported to the museum is viewed simply as art, it neatly falls into the now familiar and relatively safe category of found object. However, if *Excerpts from the Universal Lab: Plan B* is looked upon as materials momentarily freeze-framed, yet still in a process of circulation and recovery, Peterman’s project raises a far broader spectrum of issues. Perhaps the most provocative are legal questions about the University of Chicago’s responsibility toward environmental safety in the largely African American community surrounding its south side campus. The project also brings up questions of a more theoretical nature, including how U.L., an extremely unconventional model for scientific experimentation, could exist, even briefly, in the shadow of an enormous institution such as the University of Chicago. Again, in terms of practice, what would it take to ensure the stability of a “free space” like U.L.? Equally compelling is the way that the moment Universal Lab was made

---

54 Some of those who worked on the solar technology also developed the start-up company U.S. Robotics that later merged with 3Com with combined assets of $8.5 billion, meanwhile, Peterman’s Universal Lab project was assisted by a young, intrepid curator Stephanie Smith then working at the Smart Museum, as well as former publisher of The Baffler Greg Lane, and Chicago Resource Center’s Ken Dunn also discussed in *Art After Gentrification*, ibid.

55 ibid, 125.
visible within the legitimating authority of the museum, it was transformed into both a cultural asset (as “art”) and a danger to the institution. One year after the exhibition ended, *Excerpts From The Universal Lab: Plan B* continued to haunt the University. In 2002 the University of Chicago Department of Radiation Safety, under the supervision of the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety (I.D.N.S.) entered the U.L. site and identified and removed four potential dangerous radioactive items. Following this the University again absolved themselves of any responsibility to the cleanup Peterman has noted, and Erwood’s former laboratory was quarantined. Erwood was essentially evicted from Ulab and locked out while landlords puzzled over how to get rid of the Ulab inventory. Eventually the private owners of the space took on the cost of decontaminating the Ulab site.

U.L., an extremely unconventional model for scientific experimentation, could exist, even briefly, in the shadow of an enormous institution such as the University of Chicago. Again, in terms of practice, what would it take to ensure the stability of a “free space” like U.L.? Equally compelling is the way that the moment Universal Lab was made visible within the legitimating authority of the museum, it was transformed into both a cultural asset (as “art”) and a danger to the institution. One year after the exhibition ended, *Excerpts From The Universal Lab: Plan B* continued to haunt the University. In 2002 the University of Chicago Department of Radiation Safety, under the supervision of the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety (I.D.N.S.) entered the U.L. site and identified and removed four potential dangerous radioactive items. Following this the University again absolved themselves of any responsibility to the cleanup Peterman has noted, and Erwood’s former laboratory was quarantined. Erwood was essentially evicted from Ulab and locked out while landlords puzzled over how to get rid of the Ulab inventory. Eventually the private owners of the space took on the cost of decontaminating the Ulab site.

The threat Peterman’s artwork delivered to the Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) and other regulatory agencies prevented the landlords from recklessly disposing the hazardous contents of the lab. But the importance of these cross-overs between art and local politics depends on how Peterman’s work is contextualized. With little more than a shift in discourse, the work veers between an engaged artistic practice that uses the museum for its own extra-artistic purposes and the now familiar mode of institutional critique, a point I will return to.
Yet if artists can leverage the institution’s tendency to confuse symbolic and actual political action, this same ambivalence can also serve the interests of the institution. For instance, the semblance of self-criticism and a move toward cultural inclusivity can have direct economic benefits for the museum. This has become especially true in a funding climate where guidelines for (what is left of) public money in the United States explicitly call for “outreach” to “underserved” communities. Notably, within the hierarchy of the museum, this outreach usually falls to the education department even if the education department and its staff seldom recuperate the financial rewards for such virtuous work. Needless to say, power and status in the museum come down to how much of the budget you receive (regardless of what you earn) and how much programming space you are permitted to command. This is one reason why every possible move an artist or curator makes inside the museum is always already a political one.

Much of the practice of the artist’s collective REPOhistory also remains largely invisible within the institutional discourse of the art industry. One possible reason for this is that REPOhistory, an informal group of artists and activists established in 1989 by myself as well as several dozen other individuals, produced work that is unapologetically didactic and that appears to subjugate visual imagery to strategies of communication. By repossessing lost histories, the group simply, and in some ways naively, assumes that an intelligent, concerned citizen actually exists and will take the time to read the often bounteous information REPOhistory posts in public spaces. More than that, the group holds out a genuine belief that some portion of the political and social critique REPOhistory is raising about the representation of history and the use of public space will be communicated, even acted upon. The New York–based group operated from 1989 to 2000, and while no empirical proof has been collected regarding this model of what Jürgen Habermas would call communicative action, the substantial amount of mass-media (as opposed to art) press, as well as the negative response by city officials to several REPOhistory projects, suggests that the group’s operating assumptions are not entirely baseless. Perhaps the project that best illustrates this is the 1998 public installation Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City.  

*Civil Disturbances* developed out of a unique collaboration between the REPOhistory collective and a non-profit law office, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. The latter

---

provides legal assistance to poor and under-represented people and communities in the New York City area. Working with a team of socially concerned lawyers, REPOhistory established twenty topics and sites that designated pivotal battles in defense of the legal rights of the politically and economically disenfranchised. Using the same approach the group developed in past projects, in which artist-designed street signs were mounted on city lampposts (temporarily permitted through the Department of Transportation), Civil Disturbances aimed to mark publicly subjects such as the mistreatment of citizens by members of the N.Y.P.D., the legal fight to save various public hospitals, a class-action suit brought against the Giuliani administration in defense of abused children, and the passing of laws to protect women from domestic abuse and to provide low-income public housing. Yet, despite the group’s record of obtaining two temporary installation permits for its public work from the city in 1992 and 1994, REPOhistory was first stonewalled and then refused permission by the Giuliani administration to proceed with the installation of Civil Disturbances. It required the intervention of a major law firm, Debevoise & Plimpton, to force the city to relent. However, the victory over City Hall in August of 1998 did not end the battle over Civil Disturbances. Once the project was installed, following many months of delays taken up with legal tactics, several individual artists’ signs “disappeared” from city streets. Among these were Janet Koenig’s work documenting the Empire State Building’s prolonged non-compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Marina Gutierrez’s piece critiquing housing discrimination by the city against Puerto Rican families in her Brooklyn neighborhood, and a sign by William Menking that “landmarked” the site of an illegal “midnight” demolition of low-income housing on the lot where a luxury hotel now graces the “new” Times Square. As it turned out, in each case the art was being removed by building managers or local politicians. This underscores a principle about so-called public space: it is never “empty” and simply waiting to be filled. Instead, it is always already occupied by political and economic power that claims entitlement to that space regardless of its designation as “public.”

Nevertheless, these harsh lessons in realARTpolitik that REPOhistory, P.A.D./D., and Peterman endured have a counterpart within the hallowed heart of the museum. For many

cultural laborers of my generation (artists, critics, and scholars educated during the late 1970s and early 1980s), the inner workings of museums and other art-related institutions were rendered visible through the artistic practice known as institutional critique.

Exemplified by Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren in the 1970s and continuing today with Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson, among others, institutional critique is characterized by work that is less concerned with the formal aspects of art than with the unseen economic and social structures that buttress art’s institutional setting. These unseen forces include the boards of directors, corporate underwriters, wealthy benefactors and affiliated dealers and collectors for museums, foundations, and similar cultural entities. What has been revealed by the institutional critique is one persistent and disturbing fact: many cultural institutions are led by the private interests and personal tastes of an invisible elite, rather than by their stated philanthropic and educational mission. Yet while institutional critique has directly focused significant attention on this cultural contradiction for the past thirty years, it now appears to provide a degree of closure by reinforcing the notion that the museum offers and uncompromising democratic zone for engaging in civic dialogue. Even the preservationist obligations of the traditional museum are being redeemed in the work of Mark Dion, whose installations have increasingly become less an exposition of institutional limits than a rediscovery of the primary conservationist role of the museum. Once again, it is Dan Peterman’s work that proves the more nuanced. Indeed, if there is the possibility of leveraging the all too conspicuous benevolence of the art museum, and of proceeding where institutional critique has left off, it is through work that extends off-site politics into the museum, then propels it back out into the public arena. Yet this begs still another question. Just who and what is outside the museum and how do these off-site, institutionally resistant spaces and practices perceive their relationship to the authority of the institution?

Speaking from my own experience, those artists working out of abandoned warehouses and in basement workshops, cooperative centers, and urban squats believe that large institutional structures operate with a military-like precision to strategically defuse grassroots and resistant practices. In response, any viable counter-practice is compelled to constantly re-establish itself at an ever-greater perimeter from the institution’s expanding hegemonic zone. Within this scenario, globalization clearly poses an unprecedented challenge to any possible
counter-hegemonic cultural practice. Yet even within this outermost post, at a safe distance from the discourse and economy of the museum, there is a form of unspoken fidelity to the museum’s institutional marrow. There is even a vague recognition that the passion that drives and sustains opposition is motivated just as much by an affinity for the failed ideals of such institutions as by any overt hostility to institutional power.

What does it mean therefore to suggest that even a critical discourse that refuses to serve the institution can remain faithful to it? Simply this: that informal antagonistic formations such as Peterman’s *Excerpts from the Universal Lab*, REPOhistory, or P.A.D./D. actually share a pivotal semblance to what they, by their very constitution, must necessarily reject. However, in the case of these small, anomalous organizations, this similarity is based on an allegiance to what many museums and universities already abandoned in practice, if not also in theory: the passionate commitment to explore the social, political, and aesthetic dimension of art, coupled with the desire to transform the material world into an egalitarian and de-alienated living environment.

There is yet another level at which the institution and its antagonists converge. Even the most fleeting and decentralized collective, art group, or political collaboration requires some form of operating structure, some kind of institutional arrangement, however ad hoc or informal. To think otherwise is to naturalize and mystify what is a specific type of contractual relationship among individuals with common concerns (among them is often the actual or perceived threat of being crushed by institutional hegemony)! At some level, both the museum and its other — those resistant, residual, and informal cultural organizations recognize that the centralized institution proper doesn’t exist. Instead, it is constructed within a field of ideas as well as economic variables that are jointly, if unequally, shared by the center and the margins. This means that activists must develop the cunning to see the museum, as well as the university or corporation, as virtually predicated upon the collective productivity of those whom it regulates. In the case of the museum, this naturally includes artists, but also the museum staff and the public that patronizes it. To paraphrase the philosopher Giles Deleuze, the institution is an apparatus of capture. But what does it seize? The answer is the enthusiasm

58 On the structural nature of collectivity see “Counting on Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice,” Section III: Chapter 3.
59 “Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank,” Gilles
of artists such as Peterman or REPOhistory or P.A.D./D.. And, at least for a brief moment, it manages to entrap this dynamism. Yet, one must also ask, what dangerous, even treasonous ideas now spread within the institution as a result of this abduction that is also an infection?

Finally, in order to describe oneself as both artist and political being, or what Pier Paolo Pasolini termed a “citizen poet,” one must indeed remain ill at ease with the neo-liberalism of post-cold war institutions, especially those that seem all too willing to embrace a prudent form of political dissent, including the unstated demand that curators be culturally inclusive and socially progressive. Despite this uncertainty, and regardless of one’s divided loyalties, we might now seriously consider re-approaching the idea of critical autonomy that P.A.D./D. as well as the Universal Lab attempted to establish more than twenty years ago. I’m not referring here to the modernist notion of autonomy in which the art object is celebrated as something solely in and for itself, transcending everyday life. Rather, I want to propose reintroducing the concept of a self-validating mode of cultural production and distribution that is situated at least partially outside the confines of the contemporary art matrix as well as global markets. In other words, a self-conscious autonomous activism in which artists produce and distribute an independent political culture that uses institutional structures as resources rather than points of termination. As the theoreticians Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Empire*, capitalism may be evolving into a circulating phantom in the global arena but:

around it move radically autonomous processes of self-valorization that not only constitute an alternative basis of potential development but also actually represent a new constituent foundation.60

Naturally, such critical autonomy could not exist in close proximity to voracious institutions like art museums, kunsthalles, or international biennials for very long. That lesson was learned from the 1980s all too well, when a select group of artists were chosen to represent “political art” within the mainstream culture industry.61 No, what is required is a program of

---

60 Deleuze writes in his late essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” indicating that far from a moment of liberation, the institutional apparatus that captures and encloses human freedom including artistic labor is now penetrating into the circuits of the globally networked society. (*October*, Vol. 59. Winter, 1992, p 6.)


61 For more on this history, see Nina Möntmann “The Enterprise of the Art Instituteion in Late Capitalism,
theft and long-term sedition aimed at rupturing and re-appropriating institutional power for specifically political purposes. Once more, the work of autonomous collaborations, including Peterman and P.A.D./D., as well groups such as REPOhistory, RTmark, Les Sans Papiers, Temporary Services, UltraRed, or Ne Pas Plier, Colectivo Cambalache to mention a few now active in the United States and Europe, can serve as provisional models.

But what of us? Us faithless intellectuals, artists, curators, and administrators — myself included? We need to actively forget the convoluted nature of our predicament. We need to break with the guarded routines of fidelity and betrayal that circulate both inside and outside the museum and move toward recognition of the radical potential already present in collective action. As Pasolini mused:

Corporeal collective presence,
you feel the lack of any true religion,
not life but survival\textsuperscript{\textemdash}\textsuperscript{62}

Let’s Do It Again Comrades, Let’s Occupy The Museum!

Figure 4. Aaron Burr Society’s Jim Costanzo and Occupy Museums protesters outside the Museum of Modern Art, New York during the Diego Rivera Murals exhibition, January, 17, 2012 (Image courtesy of Sak Costanzo).
If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. There is, therefore, an economic difference between the two.

Gilles Deleuze.\(^{63}\)

There is an art world haunting the specter of the occupy movement. It’s January 14, 2012. Gathered on the second floor of a café near the M.o.M.A. is a cohort of conspirators known as Occupy Museums. They are stitching together a public art intervention plotted in a few simple directions: split up and enter M.o.M.A. individually...reconvene on the second floor within the Diego Rivera exhibition...point out to those present that the radical Mexican artist would have been opposed to his work being on display in such a bulwark of capitalism... initiate a General Assembly and discussion about who the museum serves... drop a banner into the atrium at 7:00 p.m. that reads:

M.o.M.A.: When Art is Just a Luxury/Art is a Lie
Sotheby’s: Hang Art Not Workers/End Your Lockout

Outside the museum Jim Costanzo of the Aaron Burr Society dons a top hat and bellows out a tune from the *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* on his baritone bugle. Passersby are handed informational flyers as museum guards watch on warily. But the artists entering the museum that night, myself among them, did not dress in paint-spattered blue-jeans as their 1969 counterparts had when they demanded that M.o.M.A. establish a wing for women, black, and Puerto Rican artists, and open its doors to the public for free evening and weekends for working New Yorkers (Technically M.o.M.A. is a privately owned museum, yet since it functions as both a tax haven and public relations mechanism for wealthy individuals and corporations one could argue that it is at least partially by default a publicly-owned institution.).

---

By contrast, the 2012 invasion was carried out by post-studio creatives, that surfeit of young men and women with Master's and Bachelor's degrees in fine art who are beginning to recognize a sobering fact: their seemingly privileged place in the economy is not substantially different from the millions of other professional workers who have lost employment since the economic meltdown. In short, they are just more surplus labor gathered like dross within the “jobless recovery.” It is their rapid politicization that has generated interest. In this they follow a pattern set by previous artists. And yet somehow, what is happening is also simultaneously new. By way of repetition something is undone, “repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same center, the origin has played.” And undoubtedly, the center is in play today, again.

American artist Tim Rollins once scornfully quipped that the term “political art” conjured up charcoal sketches of Lenin, and muscular workers with clenched fists. It was the 1980s, but his reference was to the radical proletarian art of 1920s and 1930s often associated with the John Reed Clubs, publications like the New Masses, and the Communist Party U.S.A.. Fifty years later Rollins, together with Julie Ault and a dozen other people, co-founded Group Material, a youthful collective of 1980s art school graduates hoping to resurrect the withered spirit of the avant-garde then languishing between the exhausted vocabulary of post-minimalism on one hand, and regressive neo-expressionist painting on the other. Group Material had no doubt about the connection between art and politics; both were cut from the same cloth of social dissent. Rather, it was Social Realism, and political propaganda that they dismissed with righteous contempt. The objective of Group Material was to forge links between art and politics and popular culture in a complex, aesthetically engaging way. Nor was Group Material alone in this pursuit. Paper Tiger television, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (A.M.C.C.), Political Art Documentation / Distribution (P.A.D./D.), Artists Against Nuclear Destruction (A.A.N.D.), and the feminist art collective Carnival Knowledge, were more or less contemporaries with Group Material in New York City during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the Guerilla Girls, and the anti-AIDS activists Gran Fury emerging mid-decade. Meanwhile, on the West Coast groups such as S.P.A.R.C. (Social and Public Art Resource Center), the San Francisco Poster Brigade, Urban Rats, and Border Arts Workshop represented a similar wave of collaborative, socially engaged cultural intervention.

Nevertheless, most of these short-lived collectives and their actions have largely vanished from the art historical narrative, just as much of the work they generated has little or no representation in museum collections (though admittedly, now and then, one or another example of this artistic dark matter is trotted out like an official dissident whose presence proves that the art world is not the homogenous monolith it appears to be). Group Material, probably the best known of these communal art experiments, is typically treated as the singular representative of 1980s art activism. Rollins’s contempt for the cliché-bound “political art” of past generations notwithstanding, the actual history of this engaged art activism has generally fared only somewhat better than social realism. Alternatively, one could view this missing artistic matter as part of a phantom archive filled with practices and practitioners either too political, or simply too anomalous for mainstream cultural institutions to acknowledge in any complex way. But then came the Occupy Movement, charging that “the 99%” were being systematically excluded from visibility, including within the art world. The phantom archive spills open (yet again). Its dark content threatens to contaminate the sterility of white cube ideology. And refusing to acknowledge this danger is not really an option. Therefore, just as in the past, the art world haunts these occupiers and dissidents. Haunts them and hunts them, as if waiting to obtain specimens of this energetic phenomenon for its treasured vaults and repositories. Not missing a beat, the Whitney Museum featured one or more artists associated with O.W.S. in its 2012 biennial, reinforcing the process of institutional capture referenced above. It was no different in the late 1980s as “political art” became briefly popular in the art world several New York museums staged “radical” exhibitions. This, after all, is the logical way to manage dissent. Still, one must also ask, what, if any, dangerous ideas might be spread as a result of this abduction. Was not the communist modernist Diego Rivera’s waltz with M.o.M.A. and the Rockefellers also a long-range plan of infection? (At the same time, aren’t museums experts at managing fever?)

Consider the lack of in-depth, critical writing about such dynamic post-War artists’ groups as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (1971-1984); the pro-sex feminist collective Carnival Knowledge, NYC (1981-1985); or The Basement Workshop (1970-1980), EPOXY (1982-1990), and Godzilla (1990-2003) three Asian-American Art groups in NYC; or SPARC/The Social and Public Art Resource Center centered in Los Angeles (1976-present), or Art Contre/Art Against Apartheid (1983-1885) international traveling art project and “museum in exile” to only touch on the vast content of the largely invisible surplus archive of socially engaged art. More examples are found in Lippard (1984), Lacy (1995), Walker (2002), Ault (2003), however even these few outstanding counter-examples typically only list examples of such alternative artists’ groups, rather than provide a chronological or critical analysis that places this production in relation to the more visible (and oft-repeated) examples found in within the standard art historical canon such as H. W. Janson’s History of Art (1977), or even the more inclusive work of Buchloh, Foster and Karuss, Art Since 1900 (Thames & Hudson, 1994).
Some forty years ago another wave of informal collectives – Art Workers’ Coalition (A.W.C.), Guerrilla Art Action Group (G.A.A.G.), Angry Arts – demanded the mainstream art world be held accountable not merely for the wellbeing of living artists, but that museums and other cultural institutions take part in a broader critique of capitalism and imperialism, including opposition to U.S. intervention into Southeast Asia. One of the few concrete gains made by A.W.C. was the establishment of free admission one night of the week at the M.o.M.A. in New York.

Today, M.o.M.A. calls this public gift Target Friday, prominently displaying the big-box store’s Kenneth Nolan like logo inside its lobby. Occupy Museums pointed to this irony that the group only became aware of recently during their January 14 intervention at the museum:

As it turns out, this free day was initiated not by the mega-retailer, but rather by pressure from a group of artists/activists called the Art Workers Coalition in the 1970’s. Their struggle then, and our shared struggle today is to put culture into the hands of the 99% – the artists, art lovers and workers who are largely invisible to the museum.66

Asserting an adversarial dualism such as ‘we are the 99%’ can be viewed as factual distortion, or simplistic sloganeering, or it might be viewed as a discursive weapon tactically wielded by the politically disempowered. Nonetheless, it is important that the movement begin to precisely define this occluded population since clearly it is not merely the negation of a ruling, one percent elite, any more than the sizable percentage of artists invisible to the mainstream would refuse success in the art world on sheer principle. However, there is another way to look at the recent “discovery” of asymmetrical power by the Occupy Movement, one that requires wheeling-out that rusted Marxian apparatus of base and superstructure even if only as a kind of demonstration device. Rather than view this gadgetry as offering a literal explanation of the current crisis, that is, the strict determination of cultural labor by the capitalist market system, we could visualize it in a state of spectacular malfunction as the sphere of economic activity below erupts into the realm of ideological production above. For along with revealing the obscene top-heaviness of neoliberal institutions, O.W.S. has also underscored the utter redundancy of most workers in the present economy. This includes artists, many of whom are forced to find work fabricating, framing, transporting, or installing the work of other, more successful colleagues just to keep on making

their own art. It is this sense of failure and superfluousness that may also help explain why O.W.S. has, as a movement, identified itself with the homeless by garrisoning its General Assembly in public spaces that resembled the shantytowns of unemployed workers in the 1930s. Exemplifying these perverse divisions of artistic labor and tacit class privilege is the current lockout of Sotheby’s unionized art handlers. 2011 was a banner year for the auction house, and its CEO’s salary jumped from three to six million dollars. The corporation offered its work force a seriously compromised contract. They went on strike. Sotheby’s then set about hiring replacement workers.\footnote{For more on the Sotheby’s strike and art market profits see: Carol Vogel, “As Stocks Fall, Art Surges at a $315.8 Million Sale,” The New York Times, November 9, 2011: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/arts/sothebys-contemporary-art-sale-totals-316-million.html and Marlon Bishop, “Teamsters Art Handlers Picket Sotheby’s Following Lockout,” WNYC Radio, 8/2/2011: http://www.wnyc.org/story/150049-art-handlers-picket-sothebys-following-worker-lockout/}

Notably, Occupy Museums’ January 14th public action linked this lockout to M.o.M.A. because it uses Sotheby’s for some of its transactions, but also because the Rivera exhibition seems to underscore the indifference of the museum to these contradictions. Nevertheless, much more difficult to convey is the way the art world depends upon the majority of its participants to remain both unseen and undeveloped, even as this same invisible multitude continues to dutifully reproduce the economic and symbolic structures that systematically exclude them.

Thus far, Occupy Museums, along with the Arts & Culture and Arts & Labor working groups, have openly embraced the surplus imagination of the phantom archive, transforming its dark matter into a bright carnival of protest. This is a significant start. But as Adorno cautioned in somewhat different words, it’s a privilege to critique privilege.\footnote{Theodor Adorno. “The critique of privilege becomes a privilege: so dialectical is the course of the world,” 

\emph{Negative Dialectics}, Trans, Dennis Redmond, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970. 50-53.} The real occupation of culture will not begin until a different set of values is developed, both between artists, and between artists and their audience. And this more ineffable challenge to invisibility will require more than slogans and banner drops. Yes, unquestionably, let’s occupy the art world, or better yet, let’s do it again comrades. And then? And then?
Figure 5. Deftfair Installation at the Art League Houston, 2015 Deftfair is an ongoing artistic campaign seeking to expose the relationship between economic inequality in the art market and artists’ growing debt burdens, exploring the idea that the most active layer of artistic practice is not what we see on the wall, but the “economic reality” which lies below the surface. Deftfair is a project of Occupy Museums (Image courtesy ALH).
“To play at life one must win over the economy.”

Randy Martin

Debt, Oversupply, Panic.

Much has been written regarding the seemingly irrepressible rise of student financial debt, especially in the United States where by June of 2016 a record 1.3 trillion dollars in higher-educational loans has accumulated. Alarm bells ring louder still when the students in question are studying fine art, and for good reasons. Two years of tuition at a top ten U.S. M.F.A. program leaves behind a debt burden of some $76,000. This sum does not factor in such essentials as the cost of living and art supplies, which in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago, the cities where most of these programs are located, is far from a minor expense. Critics point out, correctly, that the average art graduate is less likely to find regular, well-paid employment when compared to other, similarly educated professionals, thus diminishing the likelihood loans will be repaid or economic solvency attained. “Nearly one-third of borrowers in repayment were in default,” cites Andrew Ross writing about total student U.S. debt, with overleveraged artists undoubtedly making up an even higher percentage. This explains

---

70 Libby Kane, “Student loan debt in the U.S. has topped $1.3 trillion,” Business Insider, 1/12/2016: http://www.businessinsider.com/student-loan-debt-state-of-the-union-2016-1
71 According to the U.S. Department of Education data, the percentage of student loans owed to art-focused institutions of higher learning averages around $21,576, see: Ruth Simon and Rob Barry, “A Degree Drawn in Red Ink: Graduates of Arts-Focused Schools Are Shown to Rack Up the Most Student Debt,” The Wall Street Journal, February 18, 2013: http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324432004578306610055834952
73 Andrew Ross, Creditocracy And the Case for Debt Refusal, OR Books, 2014, 125.
why most artists operate in a constant state of financial deficit: the ability to borrow capital requires a steady income and maintaining a good credit score, a challenge not just in the U.S. or U.K., as a Warsaw-based study found artists “do not have borrowing capacity enabling them to purchase property or credit, which puts them in a worse situation than the average Polish employee”. And yet the number of individuals choosing art as a career path has been growing steadily, sometimes rapidly, starting in the late 1980s, and may only now be leveling off in the past couple of years. With artistic labor apparently at an all-time record high, a chorus of anxious voices contends that these numbers are simply unsustainable. That may be so, but my argument would step back farther to insist most artists have never been sustained by the actual art world economy. This chapter therefore examines the veracity of these claims about the oversupply of artists, proposing an alternative reading that argues there are exactly as many artists as the system requires for reproducing itself, just as there always are in a market-driven artistic economy. What has changed is the capacity to conceal this fact as the privileged status of art, its autonomy, and the exception it represents to capitalist markets is subsumed by post-Fordist enterprise culture. What remains might best be described as a bare art world.

Panic.

Figures from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics in 2012 indicate that Master’s degrees granted in the visual and performing arts have “been rising every year in the last decade,” and the Center for an Urban Future reported in 2015 that “while traditional economic drivers like finance and legal services have stagnated in recent years, several creative industries have been among the fastest growing segments of (New York City’s) economy,” with twenty-four percent of this growth attributed to visual artists. Similar statistics show a simultaneous expansion of the artistic labor force in other developed nations such as Australia where one-fifth of the nation’s entire

74 Michel Kozlowski, Jan Sowa, Kuba Szreder, The Art Factory, Free/Slow University of Warsaw, 2014, 43.
75 The overall number of artists in the U.S. doubled between 1970 and 1990, and then tripled from a mere 737,000 in 1970 to become 6.9 percent of the professional U.S. labor force by 2005. These figures of course represent all types of artists but also include some 288,000 painters, sculptors and craft artists, or 11.5% of the total. See the National Endowment for the Arts Executive Summary of Artists in the Workforce: 1990-2005: https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/ArtistsInWorkforce_ExecSum.pdf; see also Princeton University’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies: https://www.princeton.edu/culturalpolicy/quickfacts/artists/lbrfrcartist.html
population is engaged in the arts and the number of visual artists rose by a third between 1987 and 2011 before leveling off. A 2011 Canadian study indicates there has been “higher growth in artists than the overall labor force,” twice the farm worker population, two and a half times larger than real estate employment with visual artists, artisans and craftspeople making up some 22 per cent of the 136,600 artists surveyed. British artist Derek Harris flatly states that there are “more fine art courses per capita in U.K. than anywhere else in the world” (Perhaps this is an exaggeration but the statement also parallels American anxieties about an oversupply of artistic labor). Europe’s already large population of artists has grown as well, but less rapidly between 2011 and 2014. What to make of these facts? It would seem that one of the world’s most precarious professions, poet and philosopher aside, suddenly became alluring, even irresistible, to a generation growing up as their economic prospects and presumable class mobility rapidly declined.

This ever-expanding, always precarious glut of creative labor also destabilizes the urban environment as discussed in Part II of this book on gentrification, inadvertently leading to rising rents, small business closures and the expulsion of long-term, low-income residents. Sociologist Sharon Zukin explained in her classic study *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, “cities with the highest percentage of artists in the labor force also have the highest rates of downtown gentrification and condominium conversion”. Placing the blame on speculators first and cultural workers second, artist Martha Rosler insists that real estate speculators are eager to offer concessions to “artists and small nonprofits in the hopes of improving the attractiveness of ‘up-and-coming’ neighborhoods and bringing them back onto the high-end rent rolls”.

Whatever the exact mechanism and whoever is really to blame, the belief that artists cause

---

79 “Are there too many artists?,” Padwick and Jones, September 4, 2015: http://www.padwickjonesarts.co.U.K./are-there-too-many-artists/
80 See Table Two of Eurostat Statistics on Cultural Employment: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Culture_statistics_-_cultural_employment#Focus_on_artists_and_writers
or significantly accelerate the process of gentrification has become a truism. The greater the number of artists emerging out of M.F.A. and other certificate education programs, the more this axiom solidifies, and becomes part of a knot of panic that extends beyond issues of housing and displacement, to encompass changing perceptions about the stability of the cultural economy in general. One result has been for commentators to apply financial paradigms such as “supply to demand” to the problem, a terminology once anathema in proper fine art circles. Even the noted artist and commentator Coco Fusco exclaimed that the situation is simply “unsustainable” at a public discussion on the topic of gentrification:

... [its cause is the] expansion of M.F.A. programs that produces an impossibly large demographic of artists, there are many many more artists than there ever have been... the pool [of artists] has expanded to an absolutely untenable degree and without means of controlling access it would be impossible for the market to contend with the numbers.  

Among responses to this issue, we find an unexpected convergence as bewildered policy wonks, conservative and liberal art critics, including some on the Left, confront with alarm a deluge of newly-minted art professionals poised to inundate a field where there are already too many players and too few resources. One outcome of this state of approaching terror is a surprising degree of soul-searching and honesty regarding the political economy of art. It turns out that many now see the cultural economy as nothing special. Art is just another commodity, and the iron law of supply and demand rules over the art world just as it does over everything else. A small but influential group of commentators either raise or actually advocate curbing the apparent oversupply of artistic labor:

At a time of flattening demand there is increasing supply, as noted above, in terms of both the sheer number of organizations and the supply of product. Neither the audience nor the public or philanthropic sector can support this level of oversupply.  

The Australian arts sector is grossly “oversupplied.” In the first decade of the century, Australian participation in creative arts work increased dramatically – in some arts activities it more than doubled or tripled! At the same time, artists’ relative incomes

---

83 Coco Fusco speaking on a panel entitled Art-Estate, one of the Town Hall Discussions organized by Martha Rosler for her exhibition “If You Can’t Afford to Live Here, Mo-o-ove,” at Mitchel Innes & Nash gallery, June 14, 2016.
have declined...Australia’s cultural policies predominantly work on stimulating supply, and so are likely to have made matters worse.\textsuperscript{85}

Neither the audiences nor the public or philanthropic sector can support this level of oversupply [in cultural products].\textsuperscript{86}

Demand is not going to increase, so it is time to think about decreasing supply.\textsuperscript{87}

We have an overstocked arts pond.\textsuperscript{88}

Stripped of all romance or peculiarity, a demystified art world emerges into view, one in which pragmatic notions of supply and demand economics seem suddenly applicable. Today, art’s allegedly exceptional economy has been permeated by the grammar of finance, forcing its integration with the new normal of ultra-deregulated enterprise culture about which Randy Martin observed, “if money was, even in the recent past, what people were thought to be more defensive about than any other subject, the veil has, in many ways, been lifted”.\textsuperscript{89} It is as if everyone suddenly woke up to discover they had been speaking capitalist prose all along. In other words, we have arrived at the condition of bare art, whose peculiarities I will explore in this chapter.

The Contradictions of Enterprise Culture.

Not so long ago, the art world was largely the province of the wealthy upper classes. Their guardianship of art might be chalked up to nostalgia for aristocratic values, or simply a practical means of sheltering rentier incomes from taxes, not to ignore the cultural prestige that an association with art provides for elites. Regardless, the stewardship of art remained within the purview of high society and a small circle of trained connoisseurs drawn from


\textsuperscript{86} From a report by Grantmakers in the Arts, September 2010: https://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/capitalization-project_2010-summary.pdf

\textsuperscript{87} N.E.A. Director Rocco Landesman from a 2011 speech on supply and demand reported on in Creative Infrastructure: https://creativeinfrastructure.org/2011/01/29/supply-demand-and-rocco-landesman/


\textsuperscript{89} Martin, Financialization of Daily Life, 37.
elite universities. Though serving the public interest may have been officially stated as their mission, any real effort at democratizing art collections, opening museum doors to the masses, or funding academic scholarships probably had more to do with limited government support than any act of *noblesse oblige*. Art was not a populist project and certainly not a consumer-oriented affair; rather it needed to be protected from the multitude. Challenges came in response the great depression, and then with the G.I. Bill after W.W.II, which was itself a kind of concession to the socialist critique of capitalism. Even then, a tendency towards custodianship of high culture was prevalent in post-war art theory, most obviously in the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the two pillars of formalist art criticism. Nevertheless, things were already shifting thanks in part to the growth of artistic graduate degrees during the period of the Cold War.

Howard Singerman observes that some 320 candidates received diplomas from thirty-two institutions between 1950 and 1951, five times as many a decade earlier. From the perspective of the post-war state broadening access to high culture harmonized with the West’s ideological campaign against the Soviet Union, even if that meant funding dissident works of art and granting working class people limited access to high culture’s inner sanctum. The number of M.F.A.s has only grown since. But once the Cold War ended a new paradigm for cultural funding was required. Art was reborn as a creative instrument for sparking broader economic development, just as a generation raised on popular art unseated some of the established privileged associated with high culture, its form and its content. Art under neoliberal ideology was enterprising and creative. As a 2010 United Nations sponsored report summarizes, along with technology and business, culture helps to “circulate intellectual capital” thus providing part of a powerful engine “driving economic growth and promoting development in a globalizing world”.90

According to Chin-Tao Wu, key indicators of this paradigm shift can already be glimpsed in certain high-level museum appointments right before the onset of neoliberalism, such as that of Thomas Hoving who served as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1966 and 1977. With his big business background and training in medieval art, Hoving, Wu

---

observes, “deliberately ventured into costly undertakings –new wings, blockbuster exhibitions and expensive acquisitions –thus forcing the museum into a desperate search for new sources of income”.\textsuperscript{91} Decades later we see this tendency playing-out with massive real-estate ventures by such institutions as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and The Cooper Union, forcing the latter to impose tuition for the first time in its one hundred and fifty year history, and leading to protests by faculty and occupations by students. But if Hoving embodied the emerging spirit of enterprise culture, then former Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, who held the position from 1988 to 2008, represents its fully developed archetype, signaling once and for all that capital had unapologetically come to dominate the art world. Wu cites a \textit{New York Times} profile of the Guggenheim director written shortly after his appointment in which Michael Kimmelman notes that despite the discomfort brought about by the “Globe Straddler of the Art World” within certain elite art circles (including, despite Hoving, the less overtly entrepreneurial Metropolitan Museum), Krens is “pursuing the American cultural system to its inevitable conclusion”.\textsuperscript{92}

Substitute “capitalist” for “American” and a great deal falls into place. Because it is not just the art fairs and auction houses or the fact that the majority of museum trustees now come from the corporate sector, what we see is the hegemonic effect of capital across the board, even if we focus solely on the non-commercial, not-for-profit art sector. Consider the overtly entrepreneurial approach of both the N.E.A. and British Arts Council’s creative economy models that intentionally dovetail with the broader economic emphasis on flexible, knowledge-based work and the development of private-public culture industries. Take note of the unabashed application of finance management tools useful for meeting consumer demand as proposed by a prominent not-for-profit arts foundation, “if society demands and deserves more relevant, accessible, and dynamic art, we emphasize capitalization as the means to that end”.\textsuperscript{93} Often the language of these programs and policy forums borrows directly from the world of technology start-ups. We find promotion of incubator spaces, pop-up shows, experimental labs and clusters, and yet the underlying gambit aims to extend state-supported cultural endeavors globally by financing collaborative projects in developing countries such as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Wu, \textit{Privatising Culture}, 135
\item Grantmakers in the Arts: note 18.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Vietnam, Nigeria, Kenya, Brazil and Egypt. Parallels with corporate models of globalization are impossible to avoid. By now, all this creative economy and corporate-culture-speak may be rather obvious to many close observers of the art world; however, what is necessary to underscore here is that not-for-profit administrators and policy makers are obliged to join with their art market counterparts in asserting, often indirectly, a constant-growth economic model, identical with that of capital. This is so, even as commentators call for moderating the supply of artists to better match the “demand” that exists in the form of art careers.

**Regulation.**

However well-meaning it may be, the call to limit the supply of artists –even if this were somehow possible– is at the same time a coded call for a return to a position of superintendence with regard culture, one that raises uncomfortable questions about who is to decide which aspiring artists, or art schools, will make the cut. In other words, art’s alleged “oversupply crisis” looks very different depending on which end of the art economy you inhabit, or whether or not your art school degree is more vocational or liberal arts oriented. For artists positioned somewhere along the narrow central peak of visibility, the pressure in the system may seem like a threat; for others –most artists– extreme competition to gain some measure of visibility is already part and parcel of a place at or near the bottom of the art world pyramid. Here, among the artistic dark matter, what will additional artists really do to fundamentally alter that situation?

It may be, however, that it is not possible, or really desirable from a pro-market perspective, to stem the tide of artists. When it comes to the arts, “disequilibrium seems to be a sort of permanent critical situation,” affirms French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger. Art’s economic dementia reaches back at least to the 17th Century Dutch painting market, which allegedly produced “between five and ten million works of art” of which “perhaps less than 1%, have survived”. However, Menger’s disequilibrium condition really kicks-in with the formal

---

94 From the British Council Creative Economy website: http://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/about/
96 The Vermeer Newsletter online: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/dutchpainters/dutch_art/ecnmcstdchart.html#.V_fjm5MrJhE
subsumption of artistic production under 19th Century capitalism in France. It was then that the exhausted academic art system fell into disarray, opening up space the free market came to dominate. What came next was a wave of innovative artists and movements operating on a:

more flexible and also much riskier basis of open competition involving dealers, critics, painters, and buyers. Supply was no more to be regulated, so that oversupply was known to become a permanent feature of that market...periodic panics about the glut and the high rate of unemployment didn’t deter students from entering art schools in growing numbers.97

Art education is integral to this chaotic system, where established producers may begin to feel “trapped in a disintegrating market while new aspirants continue to flood in,” as Menger cautions, adding, “the training system may play an unintended role in the self-congesting spiral of oversupply”.98 Elaborating on the role higher education plays producing an art supply glut, Fusco also maintains that the “proliferation of degrees does not translate into more jobs for graduates; it is just another way to lure more people into assuming debt”.99 This is, of course, true, but it is not only art that experiences this problem. Across the Humanities and Social Sciences, there are more highly qualified post-graduates than can possibly find long-term academic employment. Without doubt, in the U.S., the marketing and monetization of higher education programs is a pernicious trend where falling government education spending forces schools and universities to scramble for every tuition dollar increasingly generated by private lenders. Still, the argument that the development of more art programs, sexier programs, more cleverly advertised programs, is the primary reason for the oversupply of artists is not entirely convincing, or at least it is only a part of the story. The sheer intensity and pace of change within the art system makes other diagnoses of the problem of an “oversupply” of artists implausible. Ideology is to blame insists Hans Abbing, a Dutch artist who is also a trained economist. In the minds of the majority, he claims, art remains a near-spiritual endeavor, not a commodity-oriented business as is in other types of work. In his view, it is state funding that encourages the glut of artists, feeding their delusions by allowing them to just about scrape a living, resulting in the ascetic mindset of artists whose unremunerated devotion to their field “looks a lot like a ritual sacrifice”.100

98 Menger, 773.
99 Coco Fusco, Critics Page, Brooklyn Rail, December 9, 2015: http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/12/criticspage/coco-fusco
Abbing lays out his solution to this problem in his book *Why Artists are Poor*:

If governments were to interfere less in the arts and offer fewer subsidies, the economy of the arts would become less exceptional and, as a result, artists would not be nearly as poor. Nevertheless, for the time being this remains an unlikely scenario because governments are just as locked into the present mythology of the arts as the other participants are.\(^{101}\)

Whether or not government subsidy really is to blame for the delusions of artists, it has become increasingly difficult to argue, outside of a few European countries, that art is clearly separated from the rest of the economy any longer. Record-breaking sales for individual artworks (including works by younger, living artists), the increasing capitalization of the art world by financial speculators, as well as the explosion of museum building seem to show an art system that is integrated into the expansionist tendencies of capitalism. Influential Professor of Creative Industries Ruth Towse tells U.S. that it is “risk taking behavior” in which “artists overestimate their (average) chances of success prior to entering the labor market”.\(^{102}\) For Towse, like Abbing, the solution to oversupply is more and more being viewed as a matter of regulating production. This takes such forms as allowing “market forces to bring the supply of artistic labor down,” as Dave Beech skeptically summarizes Towse’s advice to the British Arts Council, or in more socialized European economies, the answer proposed is to “reduce overall [cultural] subsidization”.\(^{103}\)

It is curious that for both Abbing and Towse the real culprit behind the hazardous behavior of artists is state intervention and support for culture, rather than the prevalence of neoliberal ideology, which openly advocates for a universal embrace of risk throughout the entire population (knowing of course, that some are more exposed to failure than others). For many wannabe artists there is an irrefutable attraction to a highly unregulated market whose overall value in 2013 was estimated at 35 billion dollars, which is about half the size of Microsoft Corporation’s sales revenues two years earlier.\(^{104}\) Most likely it is this same barely supervised

\(^{101}\) Abbing’s book summary pdf, last page: http://www.hansabbing.nl/DOCeconomist/SUMMARY.pdf

\(^{102}\) Professor Ruth Towse cited in “Are there too many artists?,” September 4, 2015: http://www.padwickjonesarts.co.U.K/are-there-too-many-artists/


economy that attracts hedge fund operators, though the stakes and consequences of failure hugely different. Still, in a capitalist society, where one’s very livelihood is contingent on taking risks, placing an $80,000 wager on a M.F.A. degree, or on a painting by a 20-something artist, may not be as irrational as it first seems. The student gains entry into what appears to be a growing economic sector that some claim outpaces the stock market, while the capitalist gambler might be the first to discover a “flippable” new art star at a discount price.

As Randy Martin put it, as if he was anticipating the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, today one must firmly believe that the system can effectively be gamed. In truth, neither the so-called economic exceptionalism of art, nor the neoliberal economy in general, operates consistently through rational decision-making (though watching such incoherent behavioral phenomena enter the very seat of presidential authority within a nuclear superpower such as the United States is an alarming and unforeseeable turn of circumstances even for an era rife with capitalist delirium).

**Art, Class Conflict & Capitalism 4.0.**

As with all things in our ultra-high-risk society, individual rates of financial solvency and professional success are skewed towards those with pre-existing access to capital, or towards those who have a good working knowledge of money management, two elements that often converge in one and the same privileged person. Recent studies have shown that the overall student loan default is actually less common amongst those attending expensive, Ivy League type schools when compared with low-income and low-earning students who are attending far less costly State Community Colleges. One likely reason for this is that elite institutions provide their students

---


107 Martin, 17.

108 Anatole Kaletsky, *Capitalism 4.0: The Birth of a New Economy in the Aftermath of Crisis*, Public Affairs Press, 2011

109 Sophie Quinton, “The Student Debt Crisis at State Community Colleges,” The PEW Charitable Trusts online, May 10, 2016: http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/05/10/the-
with significant stockpiles of accumulated social capital with which to successfully launch oneself into a well-paying job, including a successful art career, upon graduation. By contrast, even a modest tuition hike represents an onerous expense for those from less affluent backgrounds, as those of U.S. who teach in the public school system know so well. Add to this the fact that peer networks at less prestigious schools are likely to offer lower social capital value. Certainly the job market for artists is weak or non-existent regardless of your class background.

Inevitably, those with more resources remain a few steps ahead of others. Graduating students with prosperous upbringings also come pre-bundled with financial resources and social skills, as well as pre-existing family networks, all of which help them make up for the job deficit, while low-income students scramble to learn what others take for granted in a kind of D.I.Y. fashion. While the art world's class differentiation seems to start here, stratification was already in development during art school. Not only does higher education do little to prepare students for the economic realities of the art world, but as art historian Katy Siegal points out the "real class divide in the art world [is] between the art workers and the art thinkers," because "places like Ohio State versus, say, the Whitney program still teach manual labor skills...as opposed to...conceptual problem solving and networking". One need hardly guess which art school graduate will be fabricating the other one's projects in due time. At the same time, the lending of public capital for education in the Post-War, Post-Sputnik era helped to open-up the field of arts and humanities to a broader composition of participants in terms of class and race, ironically priming the pump, at least in theory, for potential resistance or rebellion, a point to which I will return shortly. With the shrinking of government support for academia and increased private, debt-lending together with rising tuition fees that diversity is in jeopardy.

Class, then, is not really so difficult to see at work in the art world. One need only follow the money, and for many that begins with the extreme indebtedness of so many art students. Which is why the absence of debt as a topic related to class in Ben Davis’s influential essay

---


Page 4 of 6
“9.5 Theses on Art and Class” seems like such a remarkable oversight. In some 90 concisely worded segments, Davis explains that being middle class means “having an individual, self-directed relationship to production,” as opposed to being working class and possessing but one thing with which to leverage the system, labor power that one sells as a commodity in the marketplace. All of which feels solid enough if we are speaking of economic conditions in the 19th or early 20th Century, or perhaps in underdeveloped nations today. However, in a fully developed neoliberal economy, Davis’s schema is upended by two seemingly obvious factors. First, except for the most precarious and homeless segment of the population (who would not classically be considered part of the proletariat) most modern workers have more resources at their disposal than only their commodified labor power. In fact, it is precisely the aggregate consumer capacity of the working classes that capitalism has transformed into a means of bolstering its flagging rate of profit in recent decades. And second, the composition of this consumer power is increasingly derived not from salaries or wages, but from financial lending institutions as leveraged credit.

And therein lies the rub.

Rather than only focus on student debt, consider home ownership. In the U.S. and U.K. this hovers around 65%, with a good portion of this segment undoubtedly consisting of “blue collar,” unionized workers. If we overlay onto these numbers the 80% average debt of G.D.P. (Gross Domestic Product) carried by U.S. and U.K. households (87.4% in the U.K., 78.4% for the U.S. in 2016 that is in excess of income, and we factor in the 4.4 million U.S. home foreclosures since 2008.

If we then overlay onto these numbers the 80% average debt carried by U.S. and U.K. households, and factor in the 4.4 million U.S. home foreclosures since 2008, then Davis’s very concept of the “middle class” begins to take on water. In reality, the so-called middle class

---

113 ibid.
consists of working people who aspire to be in control of their own means of production, who want to become property owners, even perhaps stockholders, and yet who frequently fail, or have been failed, by the system, never quite reaching escape velocity other than in name or in their own imagination (or apparently in the mind of some art critics). This is not to suggest those who self-identify as painters, sculptors, performers or other types of artist are workers in the way nurses, dishwashers, truckdrivers, or even programmers are when they are engaged in the type of labor that pays their wages (or that pays off their credit card debt). But many of these same artists, most of them, will be doing some other kind of labor, often several other types of work, in order to support themselves. So while Davis asserts that, “the sphere of the visual arts has weak relations with the working class,” it requires only the slightest nick at its surface to expose the class differentials manifest within it. Such disparities produce divergent effects, both before and after graduation, not unlike an unspoken caste system, where, for example, the state-school M.F.A. graduate builds the art star’s projects for the next biennale or art fair.

The real question therefore is not whether artists are or are not middle class—an inquiry made especially ambiguous given the extensive redrawing of social rank including the economic immiseration of the working class and lower middle classes within the population as a whole— but why do the majority of professionally trained artists continue to reproduce the system and its hierarchies when the actual distribution of aggregate benefits is skewed towards the top tier of the art world? This is a question Davis cannot address and not only because of his oversimplified concept of class composition. Ultimately, the critic’s outlook is underpinned by an unreflective conservative viewpoint that, as Kim Charnley notes, presumes that “it is the job of the artist to make art, of the audience to look at it, and of the critic to let the audience know whether it is good”. Even though Davis embraces a Marxist analysis of class, his attitude to culture recalls an attitude toward the custodianship of culture that was last seen at the height of Modernism. Since the beginning of the twentieth century avant-garde artists and other cultural workers have labored to blur or even upend this hierarchical and

117 Charnley on Davis, note 46.t
categorically segregated arrangement. That is not to say this destabilization of categories has been consistently successful or even always sincere, however, this internal critical process—as well as the contradictions it generates—should not be overlooked by art critics who are concerned with the politics of culture, as is Ben Davis, genuinely I believe.

Looking back over the period since the end of World War II, and especially since the 1960s, the transfer of power from an older patrician class to that of enterprise culture has undeniably improved entry into the art world for a more diverse population of participants and audiences. The neoliberal spirit of entrepreneurship has lowered barriers of entry into high art, perhaps just enough to allow museums and other elite cultural institutions to claim, not always incorrectly, that they are unique havens for an otherwise missing democratic public sphere. The most obvious illustration of this accessibility is the growing embrace of social practice art, a topic discussed in the final chapter. And yet, for many, including women and people of color, the art world, especially at its highest levels of institutional governance, remains still a privileged territory for wealthy, male, white gentry, even if the formerly aristocratic makeup of this or that board of directors, for instance, is now infiltrated by financiers, real-estate moguls and media barons. Recent struggles by marginalized artists over issues of cultural representation sometimes referred to as “decolonization,” also continue to erode these barriers. However, it is important to acknowledge that under enterprise culture the world of high art has come to be dominated by something else, something lacking either taste or social consciousness, and that is capital itself, capital as a thing-agency.

Alongside capital’s intensive domination of the art world via neoliberal entrepreneurialism, a different sort of patrician class arises, with arguably less attachment to bourgeois values of tradition and stability, but whose ethos is grounded instead in the “financialisation” of life. This makes for some rather obvious paradoxes. On one hand, a condition of bare art emerges in which art’s mystique and romance has boiled away, where laws of supply and demand can be invoked without irony. The conditions of bare art also blatantly transform culture into a new, secure investment category. A senior manager of the global financial consulting firm Deloitte goes so far as to insist the complete monetization of art will actually serve the public interest because its:
financial activities will have ripple effects on other sectors of the economy. This evolution should create a new era for the art markets and for the benefit of the society as a whole by fostering culture, knowledge and creativity.118

Welcome to the obligatory platitudes of the new art patron class; though unwilling to give up art’s mystique, they cynically work at minimizing the difference between art and capital. Once fully accomplished, today’s art flippers will be tomorrow’s oligarchs, managing talent like stocks and bonds. Perhaps as a result we find an attempt to wrap art’s nakedness with a new critical task, derived from notions of autonomy and economic exceptionalism. Theoretically, a demystified bare art may set the stage for a return of artistic autonomy as critique. Jeroen Boomgaard has suggested that “the artist’s symbolic act can consequently propagate the idea of freedom even more strongly than it could in the days when autonomy was still the hallmark of art – if only because that autonomy no longer has an ideological background”.119 Is art somehow still exceptional within the capitalist economy even as it is being colonized by it?

**Reorganizing the Exceptional Economy of Art?**

Artist and theorist Dave Beech rejects both Hans Abbing’s mythologizing explanation for the apparently exceptional economy of artistic production, as well as Ruth Towse’s rationalistic approach, each of which ultimately lead he argues to the normalizing of artistic production through mechanisms of market correction, including managing supply and demand. Beech instead reaches back to Marx’s *Capital* and to classical economics in general in order to assert that an artist’s practice is *essentially* anti-market regardless of what anyone thinks art is about, whether it is or is not mystified, or how a painting or sculpture is priced or circulated later on after it leave’s the artist’s studio. This makes artistic labor fundamentally alien to capital’s means of production as Marx proposed when he wrote that “Milton produced *Paradise Lost* in the way a silkworm produces silk, as the expression of his own nature”.120 Although Milton’s book ultimately became a commodity, distributed through a capitalist market, it did so only after the author completed his epic poem, doing so to his own standards.

---


120 Beech, 20.
Perhaps, had Milton been in desperate financial need, he might have been forced to sell his talent directly to capital as artistic labor, thus tethering his freedom to its system of production. As it is however, both silkworm and Milton produce things naturally, and would presumably continue to do so regardless if their creations were useful or interesting to anyone, including to capital, always in search of profit. In this sense both artist and silkworm are “unproductive workers,” to use Marx’s terms, because only living labor harnessed as labor power can add value to the capitalist’s initial monetary investment, producing more capital than was there to begin with. This type of labor, Beech argues, is not that of the artist. Once purchased from the labor market, (non-artistic) living human labor is fully enclosed within capital’s apparatus of production where it is put to work alongside objectified dead labor (machinery) in order to generate “a commodity greater in value than the sum of the values used to produce it”.\footnote{Marx cited in Beech, 106.} Thus, the mystery of capital is theft, the taking away of a worker’s time and labor in either mental and/or physical form without full compensation when compared with the return on the sale of a commodity. Extrapolating from this premise, Beech argues that “no capitalist makes a profit merely from the existence of potential wage laborers, but only, as Marx says, \textit{by putting them to work}”.\footnote{Beech, 324, my italics.} Unproductive work, like art, is not incorporated, or \textit{not} fully incorporated, into that system of exploitation, and cannot be because, first, unlike exploited wage workers, artists take the necessary time to generate a final product, and second, just as with the \textit{Bombyx mori} caterpillar’s automatic silk-spinning, the artist freely deploys his or her mental and physical energy autonomously, just as they please, regardless of pressure from capitalist regimentation. Personal time and labor are at the artist’s command, which is why Beech understands the politics of art to be located here at the very basic level of cultural production, and not necessarily in any specific content or activist engagement. Beech’s concept of artistic production also shares qualities with Walter Benjamin’s interest in childhood play. As Ester Leslie interprets, “in play, and in learning, children animate objects [bringing] to life past energies now slumbering in objects. The reification of commodities is to be dissipated in the process”.\footnote{Esther Leslie, \textit{Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde}, Verso, 2002, 95.} Thus art is doubly anti-capitalist, first because of how it is made, and second because of the way it appears to release
ossified social labor out of inanimate things and materials.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into all of the argumentation Beech brings to his engaging thesis, but a couple of tentative challenges to his proposition may shed light on issues related to the current oversupply panic, as well as artistic resistance, more broadly. The first question has to do with history, because it is necessary to ask, along with Sven Lütticken, at what “dialectical tipping point does an exception become the norm?”124 In other words, art’s exceptionality from the market may need to be rethought at a time of sustained capitalist crisis and falling profits, and not because Marx did not see it coming, but because he did.

Plausibly, capitalism has continuously evolved, reacting to its own economic contradictions as well as to those of labor’s resistance, by replacing more and more living workers with machinery in response to intra-capitalist competition, but also to working class opposition. This has generated an increasing surplus of workers who are not employed, or who are only barely employed. Just as Marx predicted these developments have also brought about rising productivity, along with falling rates of profit, and also a spreading immiseration or precariousness for much of the population. Such conditions now appear to be a chronic feature of modern capitalism. With no viable socialist or other alternative, this incongruity takes on an almost farcical quality, as capital scrambles to “normalize” its contradictions. Responding to its own shrinking surpluses capital tests out financialization schemes, negative interest rates, credit default swaps, technology bubbles, and other alleged fixes, that sooner or later always fail, sending catastrophic ripples across the global economy.

Inventing new ways of managing the tremendous surpluses of labor is another attribute of 21st Century capital. Low wage jobs in the service sector only soak up a portion of this excess, and even at that it does so inadequately. A recent study shows that $153 billion in annual government welfare payments is being spent to subsidize employees of corporations with multi-billion dollar assets such as Walmart and McDonalds.125 Demands for better pay gave

125 The High Public Cost of Low Wages, U.C. Berkeley Labor Center: http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/the-
rise to the Fight for $15 movement that eventually forced pay hikes by some fast-food chains. At the same time the increasing precarity of the workforce has led to previously unthinkable calls for socializing the economy as shown by the popularity of presidential candidate Bernie Sanders’ Left leaning anti-Wall Street message. In the U.K., former Prime Minister David Cameron was essentially forced to commit to a rise in the minimum wage (though many insist it is not a “living wage”), and arising across Europe is a growing call for a Basic Income Guarantee or Guaranteed Minimum Income, another response to the chronic nature of capitalist crisis. In other industries, flexibilizing the means of production into post-Fordist systems of fragmented just-in-time manufacturing helps capital decentralize labor, thus making unionization and other forms of organized resistance much more difficult to bring about. But by becoming dependent on distributed forms of outsourced labor capitalists risk exposure to politically repressive regimes and unstable “failed” states where resistance can break out in outright rebellion as we have seen in Syria.

The refugees fleeing conflict in Syria into Europe, as well as into, other parts of the Middle East is a highly visible symptom of the instability that has been caused by neoliberal capitalism, which in turn feeds xenophobic far right narratives in Europe and the U.S., despite the staggering 5,000 deaths amongst asylum seekers in 2015 with predictions that double that figure for 2016. While capital thrives on such instabilities at the margins, their “spillover” into the economic center is—Angela Merkel’s shortlived policy exception in Germany aside—entirely unwelcome. One reason so many refugees aim to live in London, to take the example of just one “global city,” is the same reason some polls show one in six people worldwide wish to move there: it harbors a creative economy with multi-cultural diversity, precisely as the city promotes itself via the global mediascape. The stability at the centre draws the effects of disorder toward it. The very same communication technology that allows cities to compete with one another and for capital to disseminate production over greater distances, compressing space and time as Harvey and Virilio contend, also generates an informal capacity for resistance. Spreading post-Fordist global networks aid or actually give birth to collective practices such as Tactical Media, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and other forms of activist culture. As John Roberts and I have claimed, this broadening of access to technologies, resources, and distributed labor effectively provides tools for building a parallel

high-public-cost-of-low-wages/
cultural sphere where, as Roberts writes, “energies and strategies pulled in from a range of skills, competences and interests, across the divisions of professional and non-professional, artist and non-artist, artistic practices and non-art practices” that operate without recourse to the hierarchies of the official art world allowing as I have put it a “formerly invisible sphere of imaginative productivity [to come] spilling out of the archive” brimming over with all manner of past and present resistance from below.¹²⁶

For Beech on the other hand, modern production technologies and collective networking assets remain outside art’s true sphere of activity, not necessarily always in practical terms perhaps, but at the deepest level of artistic production: “Insofar as the economics of artistic production have not changed significantly since the Renaissance in some respects and since the eighteenth century in others, post-Fordism appears to coincide with the pre-industrial”.¹²⁷ Beech rejects assumptions about the convergence of capital with artistic production, arguing that art’s potential anti-market resistance does not pivot on collective forms, conceptual strategies, and activist practices, but instead arise from the nature of its essentially unaltered production model. Activist art is of incidental political value in this regard.

That said, his claim for art’s inherent anti-capitalist attributes is based more on ontological than on tactical grounds: art as non-productive labor remains a kernel of opposition, regardless of how buried it becomes under capitalist offal. This is Beech’s aesthetic of resistance, one that inevitably raises the danger of romanticizing art’s revolutionary promise, but an assertion that is not without merit. Still, his understandable desire to repossess art’s singularity in this manner runs the risk of wistful futility. As Kerstin Stakemeier cautions:

The modernist figure of a somewhat prior autonomy of the arts fulfills a solemnly affirmative function within catastrophic financialized capitalism. It reiterates a nostalgic figure than can linger on only at the price of its social remoteness and conservative discursive function.¹²⁸

While Stakemeier doubtless underestimates the potential value something like tactical

¹²⁷ Beech, 344.
nostalgia might play in countering the psychological damages prevalent in our high-risk society, the gambit Beech proposes would nevertheless be available only to those privileged enough to be able to withdraw into autonomous productivity in the first place. Given the state of the art world, the window of opportunity for artists to construct for themselves a time and space for critical, autonomous, or non-commercialized cultural labor, while also accruing or paying-down enormous debts, is very brief. This is not in itself an invalidation of Beech’s thesis, but it is a reason to hit the pause button when it comes to art’s oppositional potential. Beech himself does not entirely avoid addressing this problem, though after first dismissing the potential critical effect of recognizing a counter-productive sphere of non-professional dark matter creativity on the established art world, he concludes by admitting that only when culture becomes common property and general “philistine” creativity (perhaps akin to general intellect?) is manifest in the fullest sense will art fulfill its capacity for universal liberation “both through the extension of collective decision-making about the consumption of art and collective participation in artistic production”.

It is difficult to see how art defined as a truly autonomous practice, and not merely a tactic of resistance, could accomplish this goal, or how it can even survive modern day circumstances. As neoliberalism in its desperation to salvage falling profits seeks out ever more intrusive means of monetizing the totality of life it seems to increasingly generate what Mario Tronti called a “social factory”: a world in which capitalist markets enclose social relations previously located outside the factory or workplace proper. Does this mean that art has become wholly subsumed within capital as well? And if so, does that spell the end of its oppositional power? With art education, cultural institutions, foundations and urban centers simultaneously more diverse than in the past, but also more like a financial marketplace than ever before, the wellspring of resistance originating from within artistic labor production per se seems less and less tenable, not without radical change.

However, reification and the blockage of desire have differing outcomes depending on the level of one’s political awareness. “Objectification is an unavoidable aspect of all signifying systems, all abstract thought, and all art forms” writes Andrew Hemingway with regard to György Lukács classic 1923 study History and Class Consciousness, adding, “the point is that reification comes in

129 Beech, 368.
130 Mario Tronti, Operai e capitale (Workers and capital), Einaudi, 1966: https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/TrontiWorkersCapital.html
beneficial and harmful forms”. Being subjected to the illusion that capitalism is an ahistorical inevitability is a negative deformation caused by reification, for example, but confronting head on the condition that I call bare art sans illusions would be a potentially positive utilization of objectification. Let me sketch out an alternative scenario to art’s adversarial ontology, one that is not entirely at variance with what Beech proposes.

The Growth/Oversupply Paradox.

What if the essential uniqueness of artistic labor is not its anti-market form, but its ability to mimic productive modes of work without being “productive”? As artists, Beech and I both know that making art is both pleasurable and a task, except that our taskmaster is internalized. More than that however, artists commonly describe what they do as work. And though people with nine to five jobs may find this description infuriating, such working at not-working is both real and dissimulating at once. It could even be described as art’s subsumption of capitalist modes of production: capturing, reflecting, and ultimately mocking the absurdity of being forced to generate surplus value for private appropriation, a sort of reverse theft in other words. As philosopher Jacques Rancière has written with regards to Plato’s ban on imitative artists, the shoemaker, carpenter, baker, blacksmith all must remain tied to their stations in life because these:

artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do not have the time to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be somewhere else because work will not wait.

However, the “office” of the artist, is ambiguous with regard to time, space, communal duties and so forth. Art is like a phantom profession, one that permits the artist to simultaneously work and not work, to have a “real” job, and to have a fictional job. And nothing is more subversive than showing other workers the pleasure of not engaging in productive labor. Furthermore, artists have always been able to slide between social barriers; sometimes even “passing” for members of another class. More to the point, the offices of contemporary art are now filled with imitative projects that are not replicas of objects, but of the administrative, affective,

---

and institutions of neoliberal enterprise culture. One need only think of the many institutes, centers, bureaus, offices, and schools whose reality has been forged by contemporary artists. Sometimes these mock-institutions even overtake and substitute the actual institution they imitate. Therefore, unlike the silkworm, which by the way has been genetically modified in recent years to increase its output, artistic work exists as a natural counterfeit, or conversely, a counterfeit nature. And once art’s mimetic non-productivity is subsumed within capital its real threat appears once a bare art world arrives: art becomes the single most conspicuous demonstration of capital’s delirious con game.

Still, it’s what the art world needs from this counterfeit, unproductive artistic labor that leads to the multiplication of M.F.A.s and the so-called oversupply of credentialed artists. Before addressing that let U.S. consider one other part of the system: how the growth maxim is communicated to art world participants. In truth, the signaling mechanisms are as ubiquitous as they are easily overlooked. They are aimed at cultural administrators, municipal policy makers, but also individual artists, adding up to a pervasive, though implicit law driving the art economy towards a constant state of expansion. To illustrate this, I have selected three of many excerpted statements drawn here from (1) Creative New York report, (2) the British Arts Council, and (3) a program director of the Andy Warhol Foundation respectively:

The economic impact of all this innovation and growth is enormous. As creative workers multiply and experiment and their companies grow, they spend more on support services and suppliers. This benefits thousands of ancillary businesses across the city, including lumber, equipment and catering companies, as well as manufacturers producing everything from clothing to furniture...They’re building institutions. They’re building an incubator for themselves, and they’re working across mediums.

If investment in the arts is to positively impact upon the growth and competitiveness of the creative economy, which in turn will re-invest in and exchange other types of value with the arts, then ‘innovation and growth’ are the investment imperatives for

---

133 For example, The Center for Tactical Magic (one artist), Carbon Defense League (a couple of artists, no defunct), Institute for Applied Autonomy (one artist), Los Angeles Urban Rangers (a small art group), The Church of Stop Shopping (not a church but an art performance project with a fake Reverend Billy), Broken City Lab (not a laboratory but a Canadian urban art project), Royal Bank of Scotland (snowball throwing art activists in Scotland), C.U.K.T. /Central Office of Technical Culture in Gdansk, Poland and so on and so forth.

134 Creative New York, report, 8 & 23.
the Arts Council and its co-investors.\textsuperscript{135}

Our general principle is that if a project moved an artist’s practice forward, allowed him or her or a group to experiment, try something more ambitious, less familiar, in collaboration or conversation with someone or something new, then it is a success.\textsuperscript{136}

Taking these expansionist directives at face value their aim is clear enough: generate more and bigger cultural projects, creative placemaking programs, ever-larger organizations, budgets, staff, and of course art careers. Compounded growth is, in other words, institutionalized within the art world. It is present through investment in the administrative apparatuses of art, including not only a continual proliferation of arts organizations, but also significantly through indirect systems of re-granting, educational programing, student lending and other capital services to the arts community, that appear to be taking place robotically, regardless of any corresponding rise or fall in the demand for artistic labor or its products. But now we are faced with an obvious inconsistency, if not a contradiction. How to square the imperative for growth with the kind of statements found at the start of this chapter whereby another group of panicked policy makers advocate tightening the alleged oversupply of artists, art institutions, staffing and so forth. What drives this blatant growth/oversupply paradox?

One answer is the exceptional nature of the art economy, its very strangeness generating inevitable contradictions. We might add to this the possibility that given its exceptional nature art generates an allure drawing individuals to it precisely because it is not completely subsumed within capitalist markets. This attraction operates regardless of the limited chance for success. For Abbing this allure leads to the growth/oversupply paradox, it stems from art’s historically venerated social position; we always want more culture, but until we bring culture into better alignment with capitalism most artists will remain poor. For Beech, following Marx, the inherent autonomy of artistic practice means there will likely always be more artists than there are available resources to support them in a market-based economy. Why? Because at bottom, there is no economic discipline regulating the making of an art work, the market only becomes important after production is complete. If art making were to be more rational, this


could only have one negative outcome: heteronomous art is no longer art, at least not in the form celebrated by the contemporary art world, its institutions or its markets. We can add to these problems Fusco’s criticism regarding the unethical overselling of art education to young people. All of these may indeed be involved in the growth/oversupply paradox, however there is another, arguably more dominant mechanism generating this paradox, bringing U.S. back to the reality of bare art in a post-Fordist economy.

In the book *Dark Matter*, I address the fascination the arts hold for neoliberal enterprise culture, arguing that this attraction is not entirely based on the “imaginative out-of-the-box thinking or restless flexibility” of cultural workers, but involves:

> the way the art world as an aggregate economy successfully manages its own excessively surplus labor force, extracting value from a redundant majority of “failed” artists who in turn apparently acquiesce to this disciplinary arrangement. There could be no better formula imaginable for capitalism 2.0 as it moves into the new century.

If we seem to have too many artists today, that is because what was once exceptional to artistic economies in relation to capitalist markets has, under conditions of post-Fordism and bare art, become increasingly less extraordinary. The extraction of value from a large surplus population is what drew neoliberalism towards artistic production in the first place, at least according to Boltanksi and Chiapello’s “artistic critique” argument, in which capital appears to assimilate aspects of its own Bohemian-inspired refutation. The integration of art and capitalism also explains the necessity for a constant expansion of creative labor, a process analogous to the unfettered compound growth inherent to all capitalist forms of economic organization. Capital, David Harvey writes, requires an ever-expanding output of social labor, “a zero-growth capitalist economy is a logical and exclusionary contradiction. It simply cannot exist. This is why zero growth defines a condition of crisis for capital”.

What we are witnessing under conditions of bare art, just as with capitalist crises more broadly, is this aggregating compulsion in overdrive. It has become an accelerating demand machine

---

137 Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 134.
138 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007. However, not all observers agree. For example, Art historian Karen Van Den Berg stresses post-Fordism misappropriates the concept of artistic labor production by denying any difference between autonomous art practices and capitalist labor, an argument she and Ursula Pasero explore in *Art Production Beyond the Art Market?* California: Ram Publications, 2014.
seeking to extricate ever more marginal and dispersed gains from an expanding pool of widely distributed participants of indebted art students, underpaid cultural workers, unpaid artists and interns, as well as the innumerable networked contributors, with or without credentials, who assist in reproducing an increasingly bare art world.

And it is here that we glimpse the danger that an imagined oversupply of artistic labor generates. It is twofold. If the aggregating process continues to speed up, thus contributing to the demystification of the art world economy, it may lead to the solution sought by panicked oversupply advocates: the decreasing numbers of artists entering the system. Some studies, as well as the highly publicized walkout of students from M.F.A. programs in the U.S., suggest this possibility. Assuming my thesis is correct and that art in an age of enterprise culture requires a prodigious excess of unremunerated participants, the contemporary art world as we know it will simply cease to be under these circumstances. But there is another set of reasons that may underlie this oversupply anxiety. What if this surfeit of invisible producers demanded economic justice? This appears to be the tact of W.A.G.E. and others seeking exhibition fees for artists. Or, contrarily, what if the majority of artists simply decided not to participate in the art world, perhaps following Stephen Wright’s sardonic suggestion that contemporary art is seeking to break away from itself, a process that even generates a new area of study he calls escapology.

Who would be left in that case to teach art, fabricate projects, subsidize museums and conferences and industry journals? Where would the art world’s hierarchies and value production be in that situation? Even more terrifying, what if the majority of those whose creative potential has never even tapped by the system as Carol Duncan inquired some three decades ago, were to suddenly be illuminated within it as a bare art world sweeps into view that vast surplus army of dark matter creativity? What was previously (and perhaps thankfully) hidden from sight now becomes painfully manifest in the bare art world.

**Bare Art World: Conclusions.**

---

140 On May 10, 2015 almost the entire Master of Fine Art class at the prestigious (and expensive) University of Southern California Roski School of Fine Arts staged a walkout of classes, Art&Eduction: http://www.artandeducation.net/school_watch/entire-usc-mfa-1st-year-class-is-dropping-out/

141 Wright’s playfully serious concept is outlined in his paper “Escapology & then you disappear,” December 2012: http://northeastwestsouth.net/escapology
Rather than approach the crisis of artistic “overproduction” as if we were dealing with an inelastic, Malthusian closed system of supply and demand, we can now see that there are today, just as there were in the past, exactly as many artists as the system requires to reproduce itself.\textsuperscript{142} Too many artists is a steady and central feature of the art world’s means of valorization and propagation and the mechanism of exclusion does not operate outside of, but rather from within the very center of the system.\textsuperscript{143} This makes gaining an M.F.A. more like a subscription to an online service that one signs up for, and only later realizes the charges never stop piling up, plus interest. Why is this current state of oversupply, or perhaps better described as plentiful \textit{pre-supply}, different and potentially calamitous for the status quo (including myself as a disloyal opposition figure)? The answer is again found in the emergence of a bare art world where freedom is just another word for nothing left to buy (leaving only subscription plans purchased on credit). Thus the one difference between oversupply panic today and in the past is that in a bare art world the situation is impossible to ignore.

If the extraordinary accumulated debt incurred by an ever-expanding population of individuals prepared to gamble away a great deal of their resources in order to join the art world is not an actual constraint on the growth of total artistic production, if it is instead a kind of delirious stimulus, then as argued here it is time to look elsewhere for the culprit behind this crisis of so-called oversupply. And that would almost certainly be the total aggregate demand for cultural consumables, a category that art now finds itself in along with such bizarre commodities as financial derivatives, risk management instruments and highly-leveraged mega-real-estate developments, thanks to the dubious celebration of “innovative” creative and cognitive labor power as a highly distributed, abstract economic force. It is a strange situation in so far as this reality has perhaps never been more apparent, while at the same time capital, as we will see in Section Two “Cities without Souls”, is developing new ways to attach artistic prestige to its endeavors. This means any attempt at developing non-capitalist models of sustainability must begin with an analysis of this new cultural algorithm and its “set of bureaucratic and linguistic instructions and their effects” as theorist Marco Baravalle points out with regard to “Creative Europe”.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{142} “Malthus finally discovers, with the help of Sismondi, the beautiful Trinity of capitalistic production: over-production, over-population, over-consumption – three very delicate monsters, indeed.” Karl Marx, \textit{Capital} Volume One, Penguin Classics reprint edition, 1992, 787.

\textsuperscript{143} Sholette citing Simon Sheikh, \textit{Dark Matter}, 70.

\textsuperscript{144} Marco Baravalle, “Art, Creativity and Cultural Labor Between Neoliberal Devices and the Drive Towards
What then actually makes this historical oversupply of artists different from those of the past? Two things stand out. First, the intense matter-of-factness of this precarious majority who now perceive one another through the eyes of a bare art world: so many inter-changeable elements making up an over-arching art system. This realARTpolitic is as conspicuous as it is delirious, merging what Fisher calls “Capitalist Realism” with the vertiginous feeling of having no viable alternative.\textsuperscript{145} It is also this state of nakedness that has given rise to self-organized instances of militancy as this no-longer dark matter pushes back hard against the norms and rules of the art establishment’s political economy.\textsuperscript{146} For as much as the condition of bare art yields predatory behavior and panic, so too does it give birth to “bad deeds” in the form of boycotts, strikes, occupations and demands for equality. And here, in a nutshell, sits point number two concerning the delirious irrationality of the typical oversupply crisis argument. Any attempt at “normalizing” the situation, especially through austerity-style economic constraints or neoliberal cultural policies, will also almost certainly destabilize everything that the status quo wishes to preserve about its art world.

\textsuperscript{145} Fisher, op cit.

\textsuperscript{146} See discussions about W.A.G.E., Debtfair, Occupy Museums, Gulf Labor Coalition, and similar groups in the Introduction to Part One: “Welcome To Our Art World.”
Section 2: CITIES WITHOUT SOULS

Introduction: Naturalizing The Revanchist City
The rebuilding of public spaces since the 1980s shows signs of the same homogenizing forces of redevelopment...smooth[ing] the uneven layers of grit and glamour, swept away traces of contentious history...This is another way the city loses its soul.
Sharon Zukin\textsuperscript{147}

\textit{Aggressive mimicry often involves the predator employing signals which draw its potential prey towards it, a strategy which allows predators to simply sit and wait for prey to come to them.}

Wikipedia\textsuperscript{148}

\par

\textit{Romulus broke down and wept at Remus’ funeral.}

Author Cotterell\textsuperscript{149}

The emergence of a distinct art activist scene in New York City in the 1980s was closely related to a gradual recognition of, or perhaps refusal to accept, artists’ involvement in processes of gentrification. The relationship between art and gentrification is now widely acknowledged, and it is a feature of all global cities. However, New York has become the most cited example of the volatile combination of utopianism and artistic careerism that fuels gentrification, and accompanied a wave of young, white and primarily middle-class newcomers as they took up residence in the economically impoverished and ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Manhattan island in the early 1980s. The artists’ communities in SoHo, and then the East village, seem to have made way for the “regeneration” of inner city neighborhoods, which, in the process, displaced existing communities. This pattern has since been reproduced in other boroughs of New York, and in major cities of the world, as artists are increasingly considered integral to urban regeneration. At the same time, artists and other creative laborers have proven a willingness to critique, protest, boycott and occupy neoliberal institutions and policies. This section of essays therefore situates my work in this particular place and time, as a member

\textsuperscript{148} “Aggressive Mimicry,” Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aggressive_mimicry
of the art “gentry” and one of its critics, while noting the shift in urban mythology from a feral, post-industrial city, to the present-day “creative city” where nature and the remnants of an industrial past are symbolically reconciled, as attractions for tourists, investors and an expanding urban gentry, sometimes giving rise to moments of upheaval and resistance.\textsuperscript{150}

**Unnatural City.**

For three eight-hour days in May of 1974 German artist Joseph Beuys confined himself with a living coyote to a secure enclosure inside the René Block Gallery in Southern Manhattan. Beuys was engaged in field work, writes Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, transforming art into “applied or active/activist anthropology”.\textsuperscript{151} In one photograph shot towards the end of the piece we see man and canid lying side-by-side and looking out the window like a couple of warm, mammalian siblings.\textsuperscript{152} This was the point in the project where the beast is said to have grown docile after hours spent in Beuys’s shaman-like presence. (Still, just as the artist is seen wearing his signature felt hat, so too is his heavy, wooden shepherd’s staff visible close at hand). But other than this one view out the window Beuys allegedly saw very little of New York. As per his instructions, the artist was hustled from the airport by ambulance wrapped entirely in felt, and taken directly to the gallery enclosure. He later returned for his flight back to Germany in exactly the same fashion. What he did not see therefore was a city on the brink of bankruptcy, its infrastructure in ruins and increasingly abandoned by race-panicked White European-Americans.

A little over one year after Beuys’s *I Like America and America Likes Me* performance piece,\textsuperscript{150} Considered today to be a global movement, the specific term “Creative City” appears to first date back to its use in an essay by University of Melbourne architectural professor David Yencken in the Australian cultural journal *Meanjin* (vol 47, no. 4, 1988, pp 597-608). Since then, the phrase has since taken on a life of its own to become a meme or mantra for re-thinking post-industrial urban infrastructure in the age of neoliberal enterprise culture, especially following the publication of Richard Florida’s *Rise of the Creative Class* in 2004 (op cite). According to Charles Landry who wrote *The Creative City A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* in 2000, not only is such a city a creative milieu that “contains the necessary requirements in terms of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure to generate a flow of ideas and inventions,” but “everyone is now in the creativity game,” see his manifesto “Lineages of the Creative City” from 2005 p 4&1 available here: http://charleslandry.com/panel/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/03/Lineages-of-the-Creative-City.pdf

\textsuperscript{151} Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes and Victoria Walters, eds., *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics*, Meunster, 2011, 14.

\textsuperscript{152} Canid is a member of the Canidae, the mammal family that includes dogs, foxes, hyenas, wolves and coyotes. Regarding Beuys’s Canid, there is no reliable account for either the source of the animal, or its fate after the encounter with the artist, though speculation is that it came from and was returned to a local zoo.
President Gerald Ford publicly rejected bailing out the largest municipality in the country, leading the tabloid *Daily News* to declare “Ford To City: Drop Dead.” Once a deal was struck however, it required austerity measures that included freezing the salaries of city employees, closing hospitals, libraries and fire stations, and raising public transportation fares to make way for the new masters of the city, the Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate industries, or simply F.I.R.E. These same policies would later be expanded and applied to the entire U.S. and U.K. economies under President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that is typically considered a watershed moment of neoliberal economic policy. In other words, the founding of the new New York City, came at the expense of trade unions, the working poor and public sector. But unlike the she-wolf’s foster child Remus, no public officials wept as they vanished from the city, cleansed to make way for high net worth individuals, as the F.I.R.E. economy fundamentally changed the class composition of the city.

The first chapter of this section on Gentrification entitled *Nature as an icon of urban resistance on NYC’s Lower East Side 1979–1984* was written in 1997 for the journal *Afterimage*. It addresses the hopes and paradoxes of activist art in the pre-gentrified and ethnically diverse 1980s Manhattan neighborhood where I lived when I first came to New York. Without lionizing the various but too-few efforts at resistance against gentrification and displacement by artists, the essay attempts to map out the way several specific projects engage with images of the natural world in order to make sense of the city, or to critique the failing world of urban capitalism. One of the projects discussed took place in the early hours of 1980 when a group of artists from the C.O.L.A.B. collective broke into a city-warehoused building on the Lower East Side and installed an impromptu exhibition called The Real Estate Show. Before the day was over, the N.Y.P.D. had shut down the illegal squat gallery. As it happens, Joseph Beuys was back in New York for his Guggenheim Museum retrospective. After the German celebrity took part in a press conference in support of the shuttered exhibition an embarrassed Mayor Ed Koch relented, eventually giving the C.O.L.A.B. artists another, nearby location to reinstall their project. *The Real Estate Show* reopened a few weeks later with Rebecca Howland’s street drawing of a monstrous white octopus crushing tenement buildings pasted on the façade, an image exemplifying the participating artists’ hostility to both municipal

---

153 Warehousing property amounts to holding useable buildings or spaces vacant in order to rent, lease or sell at a higher value once a neighbourhood is fully gentrified. See Picture the Homeless organization: http://picturethehomeless.org/announcing-the-housing-not-warehousing-act/
policies of urban abandonment and commercial strategies of property speculation.\textsuperscript{154}

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (P.A.D./D.) soon picked up where \textit{The Real Estate Show} left off, mounting the Not For Sale street art project in 1984 that not only protested gentrification, but explicitly linked the phenomenon to the rise of the entrepreneurial East Village art scene on New York’s Lower East Side (which was, we insisted, “not for sale”). \textit{Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance} tries to catch sight of a future city that is as different as can be from the present revanchist, neoliberal model. Resistance, it seems to propose, will come in the form of an inner-city zone of autonomy, informally organized by a scruffy cadre of long-term residents, housing activists, progressive artists and an intransigent detachment of persistent vegetation and animals that despite all odds continue to thrive at the margins. For some eight years P.A.D./D. generated art for political demonstrations, published a newsletter, hosted monthly public forums and did all of this with virtually no public funding relying instead primarily on the volunteer labor of its activist art membership. P.A.D./D.’s activities wound down in 1988, just as the Cold War was coming to an end and N.Y.C.’s gentrification stepped up apace with an event that even the New York Times described as a “police riot” as dozens of N.Y.P.D. assaulted squatters and homeless people living in Tompkins Square Park.\textsuperscript{155} One could easily describe the horror of that day as a wolfpack in blue uniforms turned loose upon their prey, precisely the words written on an anti-police brutality protest sign only one year after Richard Luke, a 25 year old black man, was killed by white officers in Queens, New York. The wolfpack “in blue” description was itself a cutting reference to the media’s portrayal of five young men of color falsely accused of beating and raping a white jogger one month earlier on April 19th, 1989. The media condemned the Central Park Five, describing their activity as “wilding.” It was not until D.N.A. tests proved their innocence thirteen years later that forced confessions by police were targeted as endemic facets of racial profiling by the N.Y.P.D..\textsuperscript{156} Thus, in more ways than one, a baleful beasiality seemed to lurk within the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[154] Local press covered \textit{The Real Estate} show but the major papers only reflected on it decades late including Ken Johnson “The Real Estate Show Wasn Then: 1990,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 27, 2014. Alan W. Moore, one of the key participants in the \textit{Real Estate Show} went on to earn his art history degree from City University of New York’s Graduate Center and compares the squat intervention to O.W.S. in his online 2014 essay “Excavating Real Estate,” availabe at: http://www.pcah.U.S./posts/161_excavating_real_estate_alan_w_moore_on_the_real_estate_show_1980
\item[156] The defendants spent between six and thirteen years in prison from their falsely alleged crime in 1989 and their collective exoneration in 2002. Regarding the “wolves in blue uniform “responsible for the death of
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
New York City of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

**Feral City.**

The image of a coyote gazing out at skyscrapers evoked the loss of connection to the natural environment: the wound that Beuys’s activist-ethnography was intended to locate, perhaps to heal. Ironically, as the city continues to gentrify, the rats, pigeons, roaches and other savaging species of the financially deteriorated 1970s and 1980s have been forced to make room for animals better known in rural settings including deer, raccoons, skunk, opossum, the occasional black bear and, of course, coyotes. On Staten Island, white-tailed deer populations have risen over 3000 percent in six years, and the Gotham Coyote Project now tracks a couple of dozen animals that first moved to The Bronx around 2006 and have now fanned out into other boroughs. In 2015 one coyote even wandered about the Chelsea art district in Manhattan, an unknowing tribute to the nameless creature who performed alongside of Beuys almost four decades earlier. Coyote populations have also been established in Chicago and Pittsburgh, two cities discussed in this section.

This resurgence of urban based wildlife – which may be due to increasing maintenance of city parks – has given rise to nature tourism in the form of guided walking tours and family kayaking trips. Vanished from the 2016 New York City is the image of a wild malevolent jungle with its obvious racialized undertones. Gone too are the Wild West “trail blazers” who “tamed, domesticated and polished” various rundown neighborhoods, as one full-page 1983 real-estate advertisement in the New York Times proclaimed (by now these “settlers” have probably fled escalating rents and the city’s colorless docility). What remains is itself like a sci-fi movie, a parallel urban universe completely removed from any image of the future that might have been extrapolated from the devastated 1970s or 1980s. Unreal nature in a real 1980s city has become today real nature in an unreal city.


157 Artist Dillon de Give was so inspired by the appearance of “Hal” the Central Park coyote he created a social practice project called The Coyote Walk Itinerancy: https://coyotewalks.wordpress.com/

158 See note 168 below.
One symbol of this urbanized nature stands out above all other contenders, New York City’s High Line Park. Covered in wildflowers, ailanthus trees and carpets of weeds, an abandoned mid-19th Century elevated railway in Lower Manhattan served – like so many forsaken parts of the city once did – as the illicit destination for graffiti artists, photographers, informal urban explorers, as well as homeless people, drug users, run-aways and prostitutes. In 2009, it was repurposed into a city park by a team of architects, designers and engineers using funds drawn from both public and private sources. Less than a decade later the High Line has become a prime global tourist attraction as well as the anchor for a burst of nearby real estate development including luxury condominiums, upscale hotels and restaurants, blue-chip art galleries and the new Renzo Piano designed Whitney Museum of art building. Not surprisingly, the High Line’s elevation of a cultivated wild space set above urban commotion, as well as its seemingly magical powers of spill-over regeneration, has spawned copies elsewhere. London’s proposed Garden Bridge follows the NYC prototype by pooling sizable sums of public money with privately raised capital in a project that will regularly shutdown for private events. Similar endeavors are planned in Philadelphia, Chicago, Sydney and Rotterdam.

The return of nature to the neoliberal city has an obvious ideological message: urban space has erased the past and achieved an uncanny urban pastoral, or neoliberal eudemonia. The violence of the city has been tamed, at least on an aesthetic level. Of course, the obverse of this tranquility is the experience of the working class, marginalised populations who were once subjected to racialised imagery of the urban “jungle” or the “frontier,” have been replaced by another “nature”, one that has been cleansed of all antagonism, as if performing a semiotic inversion of Rosalyn Deutsche’s critical observation from the early 1980s that the city was socially cleansing public spaces of unwanted humans, including of course the homeless.

Within a few decades of the urban devastation that I witnessed in the early 1980s grew a new metropolis that did not completely erase the past, but rather encapsulated its malevolent history as a souvenir for memory-wiped gentry. The second essay in this section, from 2004, acknowledges that the battle to realize a non-gentrified “city from below” had, for the moment, already failed. Mysteries of the Creative Class, or, I Have Seen the Enemy and They Is Us is almost unique amongst my writings in so far as its sardonic, first person voice addresses my

---

159 An excellent analysis of the project is found in Julia Rothenberg and Steve Lang, “Repurposing the High Line: Aesthetic Experience and Contradiction in West Chelsea” in City, Culture and Society, November, 2015.

own return to N.Y.C. after several years of teaching in Chicago. In it I am confronted with the reality of what Neil Smith called the revanchist city whose elite retaliate towards those they are displacing by seemingly crying out: “Who lost the city? And on whom is revenge to be exacted?”

*Mysteries of the Creative Class* was written in 2004 and addresses the predicament of being a socially engaged artist in a city metamorphosing into an enormous gated community for the ultra wealthy. But this chapter requires a special note of introduction. For while more than half of my thesis was written in decades past, unlike the other chapters the narrative of *Mysteries* is not only consistently first person as mentioned above, but it is more informal in style. Its inclusion in the project is based on the belief that this essay uniquely represents a snapshot of a particular time and place and the reaction to these conditions by someone committed to a long-standing critique of gentrification. For this reason, I have left the essay basically intact adding footnotes as needed to situate its argument in a 2016 context. Nonetheless, the writing is polemical and committed, expressing a partisan tendency that Walter Benjamin called for in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer”. In this text I write with alarm about encountering the visage of a city that I once knew which was “being transmuted from lead to gold,” a process of alchemical conversion affecting both its physical and mnemonic traces of the past. Such profound disenchantment is not mine alone. Richard D. Lloyd’s neo-bohemia is a soulless theme park, Martha Rosler’s reclaimed city is saturated with “naturalized creativity and hipster-friendly memes,” while Sharon Zukin’s *Naked City* has simply lost its soul. Nonetheless, *Mysteries of the Creative Class* does manage to wind up with a positive thought experiment at least, one that seems to anticipate events in Zuccotti Park some eight years later. At the conclusion of the essay I imagine the recently built Millennium Hotel suddenly occupied by its own service workers acting in cahoots with luxury establishment’s creative class clientele:

>The bartenders and the brass polishers and cooks, the laundresses and bell hops throw down their aprons and spatulas to join in mutinous celebration with artists,

163 “Mysteries of the Creative Class.” (Thesis, section 2.2).
web designers and musicians. Raiding the wine cellar, they open up all 33 executive style conference rooms, set up a free health clinic in the lobby, transform the hotel into an autonomous broadcasting tower and party in a universe of creative dark matter.\footnote{“Mysteries of the Creative Class.” (Thesis, section 2.2).}

The insurrection finally came in the Fall of 2011; a rebel festival swiftly spreading across the U.S. and into other countries (but also preceded by uprisings in public squares from Cairo and Madrid to Athens and Tunisia) as the contradictions within different sectors of unemployed people following the 2008 turned into a wave of protests targeting economic austerity and neoliberal policies more generally. Particularly visible in O.W.S. was the so-called Creative Class. The penultimate essay of this section, *Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology*, returns to the theme of the surplus archive explored in *Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere* (see Chapter 3.2) by proposing that a type of *archival agency* was at work within O.W.S.. This archival activation generated speculative expectations simply by constituting a massive assemblage of once-shadowy productivity and resistance now brought into light in the present. Ultimately I suggest that Zuccotti Park’s cardboard encampment with its inventory of no political demands and its free O.W.S. library existed in a state of creative lawlessness temporarily at odds with neoliberal capital and its revanchist urban policies, but with a definite desire, if unknown trajectory, towards the future. Those on Wall Street took singular advantage of the massive Charging Bull sculpture located close to the New York Stock Exchange; intended to be an icon of capitalist perseverance following the 1987 Black Friday market collapse, it is primarily a favorite with selfie-snapping tourists (though it is assigned a 24/7 NYPD guard detachment). Some credit the occupation of Zuccotti Park as inspired by a poster of a woman striking a ballet pose atop the masculinist beast’s back. The poster was created by the Canadian culture-jamming group Adbusters and, as Yates McKee writes, it graphically flipped the bronze bovine’s power “against itself in what would become the foundational meme of Occupy Wall Street”.\footnote{McKee, *Strike Art!*’87.} In any case, the pro-capitalist metallic creature remains standing as if it were also an uncanny, burnished totemic counterpart to the actual return of abundant animal life in the new New York City.\footnote{The Wall Street mascot was first installed illegally by a wealthy Italian artist as symbolic push-back against the 1987 stock market crash, and later officially adopted by the city, but one can’t help wish that the Charging Bull sculpture was present a few years earlier when Wadleigh shot his film, the sight of a Wolfen howling on its back would have been detectable.}
Repurposing the *Wolfen*.

Creatively reusing the past is a paradigm well suited to an era where no vision of the future sits on the collective horizon: this is the secret of our own time, of course. In order to understand banal utopias of the neoliberal city, I will return to 1980, the year that filmmaker Michael Wadleigh began shooting a film adaptation of horror novelist Whitley Streiber’s story *The Wolfen* on East 172nd Street in the South Bronx, an area of the borough so damaged from neglect that a few years prior to this a German film crew used it as the set for a movie about the firebombing of Dresden in 1945. In retrospect one can see how this odd urban thriller (retitled simply *Wolfen*) captured the vertiginous transition of a crumbling working class city that would later be reborn as an ultra-gentrified metropolis, a neo-bohemian enclave celebrating creative workers and delirious development schemes benefiting the global elites. As a historical document the film shows the sheer scale of destruction that had been wreaked on the city by de-industrialisation and calculated neglect.

*Wolfen*’s plot parallels such post-war cinematic terror films as Jacques Tourneur’s neo-gothic *Night of the Demon*, Don Siegel’s paranoic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and Nigel Kneal’s sci-fi *Quatermass* series in so far as a scientifically-minded skeptic protagonists gradually acknowledge the presence of a menacing, unnatural force capable of disturbing the normal course of everyday things. But while 1950s popular culture often addressed anxieties over communist infiltration or homosexual contamination, *Wolfen* appeared at a time when the Left, both old and new, was in decline and as identity politics rather than international class struggle was on the rise. By the early 1980s not only had Keynesian policies of social spending failed to stabilize the economy, but much of the Left-organizational energy stemming from 1968 was either being consumed by factionalism or disintegrating in the face of a well-funded Right wing backlash. To many, this political and cultural entropy found expression in crumbling post-industrial cities whose metonym was the South Bronx. Whatever *Wolfen*’s menace was, it did not come from without, but from within a space of a decomposing unreality, one that is nevertheless fully enclosed within the logic of capitalist crisis.

---

168 Despite its cult status and relative obscurity, this low-budget early 1980s film is gradually being regarded as a significant reflection upon its time and place of production.

169 If anything, the undecidable signification of the Wolfen has only been amplified in 2016 as financial and political crisis eat away at our “domestic” peace of mind post-Brexit and post-Trump, while the Islamic State and “war on terror” chip away at our sense of stability from without.
The movie's narrative is set in motion by the execution-like slayings of a wealthy, Donald Trump-like developer, his trophy wife, and bodyguard. Gruesomely beheaded with near-surgical precision, police begin to suspect a terrorist conspiracy. My memory is this scene symbolically played out the racial and class resentment many New Yorkers felt at the time towards the white establishment elite. And while the organized New Left was in disarray and decline, 1981 was far from lacking militant Left politics, though of a highly factional nature. For example, that year saw the bombing of a bathroom at J.F.K. airport by the Puerto Rican Resistance Army, the kidnapping of a U.S. Army General in Italy by Red Brigades, and the armed robbery of an armored van just north of New York by a black splinter group of the Weather Underground known as the May 19th Communist Party that included three fatalities amongst bank guards and police. Wolfen's terror however, turns on a different threat. In a pivotal scene the lead police investigator (Albert Finney), enters a smoke-filled bar frequented by Native Americans. Physically enervated by false leads, more killings, and a close encounter with the killer whose identity has left him stunned, he is warned by an older man (Apache actor Dehl Berti) that what he is after is in fact an ancient race of wolf-like predators. These “Wolfen” once lived alongside indigenous humans, hunting with them, and only later, after Europeans arrived, did the smartest go underground to feed on the homeless or the addicted amongst urban decay “the new wilderness: your cities; into the great slum areas, the graveyards of your fucking species...in their eyes, you are the savage”.\(^\text{170}\)

In their canny collaborative essay, “Werewolf Hunger (New York, 1970s),” cultural theorists Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle persuasively argue that Wolfen represents a “critical moment in the collapse of radical politics and the emergence of a feral neoliberalism against a backdrop of urban dereliction and real estate speculation”.\(^\text{171}\) I am going to spend a bit of time building on their interpretation not only because the film’s anti-capitalist imagery stuck with me for decades after first seeing it during the year of its release, but also because, like Toscano and Kinkle, when looking at issues of gentrification some thirty-five years on – a timeframe that runs almost parallel with the introduction of economic austerity measures, deregulation and privatization in N.Y.C. and elsewhere – Wolfen appears as an ever more

\(^{170}\) Albert Finney plays a NYC detective, Diane Venora the criminologist, late tap-dancer and actor Gregory Hines is the coroner, and a young Edward James Olmos appears as a Native American militant, though no tribal affiliation is revealed.

prophetic statement.\textsuperscript{172}

The film certainly captures themes present in the four essays that make up this section of the book, including the place of naturalized (and unnatural) white anxiety about what is lurking in the failed, post-industrial city, as well as the figure of the artist who appears sometimes as gentrifier or capitalist regenerator, and at other times as an activist and an angry spirit of marginalized resistance just biding time for the day of revenge. In Toscano and Kinkle’s reading, the Wolfen are an ambivalent resistant subject that rises up against capital. \textit{Wolfen’s} political unconscious – to apply Jameson’s hermeneutic– portrays a world teetering on implosion from every possible angle. Pointing to the physically fatigued white police detective (Finney), Toscano and Kinkle observe that every character in the movie appears worn out, including the city which is surrounded by an “exhausted working-class and radical left”.\textsuperscript{173} In fact, almost all of the characters in \textit{Wolfen} will be dead or might as well be. As another Native American played by Edward James Olmos says ominously to protagonist Finny, “you don’t have the eyes of the hunter, you have the eyes of the dead.” He could also be talking about capitalism in 1981. Toscano and Kinkle, however interpret the Wolfen as akin to gentrifying artists who move into the run-down inner cities in search of low-cost housing, only to become “unwitting collaborators with capital.” Artists exploit the weak and clear away debris, thus preparing neighborhoods for development, before they themselves are displaced later on. Therefore, what Finny saw, Toscano and Kinkle suggest, was “not the shock troops of gentrification, but its janitorial squadron”.\textsuperscript{174}

And yet as an artist living in N.Y.C. during \textit{Wolfen’s} summertime premiere, my reading is somewhat different. It’s not so much that Toscano and Kinkle get it all “wrong,” they just don’t allow the movie’s political unconscious to fully play itself out. I recall not a sense of shock while viewing \textit{Wolfen’s} docu-depiction of the South Bronx, but of familiarity. That devastated neighborhood closely resembled my own on the Lower East Side, a partially ruined zone where the carcasses of overturned, tireless cars accompanied collapsed buildings filled with refuse that nonetheless served as impromptu homeless shelters and shooting galleries for

\textsuperscript{172} Curiously, there were two other hit “wolfish” films of that era: The Howling and American Werewolf in London but only Wolfen, despite an initial weak box-office showing, transcends the horror genre to address socio-political issues of the day that still appear relevant now.

\textsuperscript{173} Toscano and Kinkle, \textit{Cartographies},135.

\textsuperscript{174} ibid., 133.
heroin addicts, only to become crack-smoking dens in a year or two. While artists undoubtedly played their part in regenerating these spaces, helping sweep in the no-collar creative class and F.I.R.E. economy, they almost always found themselves in turn the victims of its machine-like processes of displacement and expulsion. In addition, some artists, though certainly too few, attempted to fight back against these circumstances.

On several occasions Toscano and Kinkle seek to answer a central question, “The South Bronx and Wall Street, what’s the connection?” In Wadleigh’s film, the speculator breaking ground for the construction of a luxury high-rise located inside the Wolfen’s South Bronx hunting grounds instigates their ruthless retaliation. This is the ostensible reason he is hunted down and exterminated. However, intentionally or not, the filmmaker also establishes a conspicuous symmetry linking two unproductive surplus populations: the class of wealthy speculators, financiers, rentier-capitalists, and pseudo-aristocratic social freeloaders who skim value off the top of society while adding little or nothing back to it, and the sick and dispossessed whose failed lives bear the brunt of capitalism’s failure. Thus the ruined South Bronx of 1981 and Wall Street connect at the level of cultural signification.

Toscano and Kinkle are right therefore when they identify the movie as an oblique treatise on the arrival of what we now call neoliberalism with its privatization schemes, gated communities and aggressive enclosing of the commons, but, rather than the beasts signifying merely the feral counterparts of self-serving artists and creatives, Wadleigh’s depiction of the Wolfen is far more ambivalent. It is important to note that the Wolfen kill without prejudice or remorse, much as Nietzsche’s amoral beasts in Beyond Good and Evil devour weaker prey. They appear to be a force of nature that transcends humanity, like the Big Other of Jacques Lacan’s symbolic order, a sort of impersonal superego “that relieves U.S. of responsibility for what we desire” theorist Marc James Léger remarks with reference to certain forms of community art practice. In this repurposed scheme, as Toscano and Kinkle propose, the Wolfen are artists foraging at the edges of a ruined capitalist city, but these monsters also mark the otherness of capital as nature, red in tooth and claw; its thing-like drive that is inherently alien to life. In this sense the artist-Wolfen play Renfield to Dracula, promised eternal life in a delirious space where Wall Street

175 ibid., 111.
and the South Bronx, the center and periphery, impossibly conjoined on East 172nd Street, an uncanny spatial collision where capital’s normally hidden contradictions become visible in vertiginous free-fall.

Wadleigh goes to lengths to show U.S. the beasts at home within this breach. Thanks to infrared heat sensitive film we “see” with the predator’s preternatural vision as they stalk U.S. from a hallucinatory *near-beyond* just adjacent to our own world. Before the movie ends we witness a zoologist, the chief of police, and the city coroner meet the same end as the fated tycoon Van der Veer. Tellingly, Finney’s character survives the massacre, first by casting rationality aside, and then, with head almost bowed, by accepting not only the fact that the *Wolfen* exist, but that they, and not the police, or intelligentsia or financial elites, are the city’s truly uncontested top predators. Toscano and Kinkle conclude their allegorical reading by stating that:

what lies in tatters beneath the rubble is the precarious social-democratic compact of postwar New York City. What rises in its wake is a city where the memories have largely been wiped and the ruins elided, the unrestrained voraciousness of capital now but an everyday appetite.¹⁷⁷

The placid wanderers of the High Line need to be read through, or understood as, the ciphers of the Wolfen’s predatory subjectivity. Werewolf hunger has become an “everyday appetite” in the sense that it is equally banal and aestheticized, though it continues to tear capitalist sociality apart from the inside, and brings U.S. to another moment of disintegration. It is not only artists, but a pervasive class consciousness that is marked by this contradiction: a simultaneous avid competition with and contemplation of nature.

**Regenerating Cities Without Souls.**

A principle concern of the section’s final text is to look at how the displacement from art into life, or perhaps more accurately art into capitalism, has led to disputes and encounters with labor unions, financial administrators, the law, police, and other social agencies typically located outside the literal and historical boundaries of a work of art. *Art After Gentrification* concludes this section by focusing on three recent socially engaged art projects in which a contemporary art aesthetic

breathes new life into existing, frequently failed urban structures mixed with creative industry business enterprises. But it also reflects on the prominence and challenges faced by social practice artists who are now selectively being recognized by the art world mainstream, even as states and municipalities appear increasingly incapable of either governing or reasonably managing the social sphere, as accelerating urban gentrification makes apparent.

The first case study examines Assemble, a London-based designer-collective and their collaborative regeneration project in a devastated neighborhood in Liverpool, England. Following Assemble’s analysis I present an evaluation of Theaster Gates and his work including the Dorchester Projects, the Southside Chicago art enterprise that is poised for replication in economically challenged cities around the globe. The chapter concludes with an appraisal of Conflict Kitchen in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, an art project that has morphed into a successful fast-food business in a city rated by the Movoto real-estate brokerage firm as one of America’s top ten most creative cities. The link between creative industries, gentrification and upper class indignation is not a simple one, and it has taken years to come into focus. Still, as early as 1984, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan formulated an answer to a question not yet asked. The primary target of the affluent urban gentry is “directed against those who will never serve the interests of “postindustrial” society, as either workers or consumers.” It is a retribution that carries with it “the full vengeance of two hundred years of capitalism” in which as Deutsche and Ryan pointed out decades ago:

people, dwelling in the lower strata of what Marx identified as capital’s surplus population, are [viewed as] victims ‘chiefly’ of their own ‘incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labor.179

Or as then N.Y.C. Mayor Ed Koch is alleged to have put it, “If you can’t afford to live here, mo-o-ove!” 180 Meanwhile, the fetishization of the wild and untamed within the ultra-gentrified metropolis is, like a saccharine reworking of the city’s Wolfen past, served-up in a pastoral, family-friendly Disney movie manner for the tourists, city-boosters, F.I.R.E. denizens, and the elite glitterati. Its version of urban nature is grafted seamlessly onto the fossilized remnants of a now-distant, troubled past to emerge as a resplendent, made-to-order enclave for the 21st Century ruling classes and their administrators. The dark side is, as Saskia Sassen and Neil Smith have noted, the neoliberal

178 Movoto real estate site: http://www.movoto.com/blog/top-ten/most-creative-cities/
city’s gentrifying policies are vengeful, predatory expulsions, not merely “displacements,” to cite the less brutal sounding and preferred terminology of the creative economy. Because once victims are “displaced,” the truth is they can no longer return. And so perhaps Beuys was right (or was it Romulus?), to think beyond present contradictions – of capitalist cities and failed nations, of class divisions and socially engaged collective art – is to lead U.S. back into a world of feral signifiers and rough beasts, slouching and scavenging about the margins of the “new normal” crisis economy, a repurposed predatory art species ideally suited to this time and this place.

Soulless City Limits.

On October 29th of 2012, the largest hurricane of its type on record struck the New York region, killing 233 people and causing some 75 billion dollars in property damage. “Superstorm Sandy” shifted the discourse around sustainability and the city’s collective future. That we now face amplified natural forces made catastrophic through anthropocenic human intervention is without doubt. And yet, if Sandy was this decade’s “big Other,” made all the more monstrous by surplus carbon emissions and negligent governmental politics, its uncontrollable terror was prophesied by other, man-made creations run-amok, including the legendary Golem, and Shelly’s tragically reanimated experiment in Frankenstein. While the storm, like the Wolfen, dealt its fury evenly to both wealthy and poor neighborhoods of the city, those with fewer resources suffered longer, more severe periods of post-disaster rehabilitation. In response, post-Occupy Wall Street activists, including many artists, mobilized to voluntarily fulfill civic obligations in low-income storm-damaged neighborhoods that the city, state and federal governments were, unlike Rome’s mythic she-wolf, simply unwilling of caring to care for.

Section 2: Chapter 1


182 Anthropocene is a recently coined term for the epoch in geological time in which earth’s ecology began to be dominated by human as opposed to natural activities, thus the Anthropocene follows upon the Pleistocene.
Figure 7. Anton Van Falen, “Abandoned Car With Dog And TV,” 1977 (Image courtesy of A. Van Dalen).
The state of this Lower East Side of New York City provides pictures for painters, operas for actors and poets from urban shambles of a slum where monstrous inequity is met with savagery, a nearly perfect specimen of malignant city life....yet this neighborhood.

Figure 8. Becky Howland, flyer for The Real Estate Show, 1980 (Image courtesy B. Howland).
has also functioned as a cultural insulator. Within it bosom minority cultures have remained intact, and new ideas have incubated.

Alan Moore

Urban cycles of decline, decay, and abandonment followed by rebirth through rehabilitation, renovation, and reconstruction may appear to be natural processes. In fact however, the fall and rise of cities are consequences not only of financial and productive cycles and state fiscal crises but also of deliberate social policy.

Martha Rosler

Loisaida’s wounds are bandaged with posters, stencils, and graffiti that bear witness to the internal struggles and triumphs of its diverse populace.

Lucy R. Lippard

Metaphors of urban decay and trauma, but also of rebirth and incubation suggest natural processes above all. Likewise in pulp fiction, detective novels, and film-noir cinema the city often appears as a malevolent creature whose affect on humans is typically corrupting. And yet as Martha Rosler points out urban cycles of expansion and contraction, construction and demolition, are anything but natural phenomena. Why then is the naturalization of culture, and in particular the representation of the inner city, presented as natural forms or natural processes that so often appear in the work of artists? In this essay I look at the figurative use of “nature” in the work of several visual artists and artists’ groups active on the Lower East Side of Manhattan from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. What makes these artists’ works cohere is that each uses natural

iconography – nature as image or as idea – to critically respond to the entwined processes of real estate speculation and class displacement known as gentrification, while effectively treating the neighborhood itself as a thing brimming with “malignant city life”.

By and large the work examined below was initially seen in outdoor locations, often on abandoned buildings. These street settings presented their own artificial ecology where competing species of images inhabited an environment of licit and illicit visual noise that included: wheatpasted hand bills, commercial advertising, signage from retail businesses, fluorescent graffiti, as well as stencils and posters, some of which also presented anti-gentrification messages to the public. One response to urban speculation involves satirizing the naturalizing language of the real estate industry itself. Through advertisements and press releases, land developers, speculators, and even the city administrators described low income neighborhoods like Hell’s Kitchen or the Lower East Side as “untamed territories” where upwardly mobile white renters were called on to serve as “trail blazers” or “urban pioneers”. The other way artists “naturalized” or challenged the myths surrounding gentrification on the Lower East Side is less straightforward. It involves what Craig Owens described as a search “for lost difference [that] has become the primary activity of the contemporary avant-garde.” Owens’s critical remarks were aimed at the shallowness of the East Village art scene in the early 1980s which: “seeks out and develops more and more resistant areas of social life for mass-cultural consumption”.

Owens’s acerbic analysis frames in historical terms what he called the “shifting alliances” between artists and other social groups. He manages this by comparing a certain 1980s avant-garde (his term) fascination with the “racial and ethnic, deviant and delinquent subcultures” of the Lower East Side, to the infatuation of a previous avant-garde with the “ragpickers, streetwalkers and street entertainers” of mid-19th Century Paris. Yet despite Owens’s important

---


187 Consider the language used in this advertisement from a full page ad in the New York Times as quoted by urban geographer Neil Smith: “The Armory [a new condo facility] celebrates the teaming of the Wild Wild West with ten percent down payment and twelve month’s free maintenance. The trail blazers have done their work. West 42nd street has been tamed, domesticated, and polished into the most exciting freshest most energetic neighborhoods in New York.” Wallis, Rosler, If You Lived Here,108.

188 Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism.”
insights he misses some of the irony generated by the artist’s role in gentrification. For example Owens applies arguments made by Thomas Crow in his essay *Modernism and Mass Culture* to the phenomena of the East Village art scene. Crow understands what he terms “resistant subcultures” to be the source material for high-art avant-garde re-cycling. But like Crow, Owens also bestows upon these marginalized groups an “original force and integrity” that is later appropriated by high art and turned into a commodity, thus tacitly investing subcultures and marginalized communities with an exploitable, organic richness manifested as “difference.”

Against the “puerilism” of the East Village art scene, Owens champions the anti-gentrification imagery produced by members of Political Art Documentation / Distribution, a project that I helped organize in 1983–84, and which I detail below. Yet in describing P.A.D./D.’s work as “mobilize[ing] resistance against, the political and economic interests which East Village art serves” Owens fails to notice, however, the way the same search for “lost difference” also operated within progressive cultural formations, including the work of P.A.D./D., even if this longing occasioned more reflexive practices, as I hope to reveal. In various and often unexpected ways therefore the work under consideration naturalizes urban culture, extending this process to all parts of the Lower East Side including: the streets, the political economy, the history, and even the heterogeneous population of the neighborhood. Within the work of these artists, “Loisaida” (as the local Latino population called the region based on a 1974 poem by Nuyorican writer “Bimbo” Rivas) is represented variously as: an endangered species or as one that is biologically out of control; a tableau in which predators and prey are locked in a primeval struggle; a cyclical organic process revealed to be man-made; or a corrupted ecological utopia in need of liberation. It is this last instance that I will turn to in my conclusion when examining some of the art from the late 1990s that reworks the ecological themes of the last decade but so far remains primarily wedded to art world display.

**Malignant City.**

Like myself, many of the artists immigrating to the lower east side in the mid to late 1970s were voluntary refugees from the managed communities of New Jersey, Long Island or in

---


190 Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism.”
towns in the mid-West or California, places where life’s rough-edges and natural disorder had been evacuated displaced in favor of the regularity of landscaped yards, shopping malls, and parking lots. To these children whose parents had themselves fled the cities, the mix of Afro-Caribbean, European, and Asian cultures proved enduringly vital despite the crumbling tenement buildings and empty lots. In many places the Lower East Side circa 1979 indeed looked like a B-movie version of life amidst the ruins of a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Overturned cars, resembling animal carcasses, with their chassis stripped of parts, were strewn along the sides of streets especially on the alphabet Avenues B, C, and most of all D. Burnt out or demolished properties cut spaces between tenement buildings. These openings became filled with rubble, trashed appliances, syringes, condoms, as well as pigeons, and rats. Often they appeared to be returning to a state of wilderness as weeds and fast growing locust trees began to sprout from the piles of fallen bricks and mortar. Along some stretches of Avenues B, C, and D there were more square feet of this antediluvian looking scenery, than there was extant architecture.

Still, residents in this predominantly Hispanic community could be seen organizing gardens amid the rubble and hurrying in and out of tenements to work (always elsewhere), fetch food or to go to a social clubs. In the summer, older Ukrainian men played checkers in Tompkins Square, while the women would sit together on the opposite side of the park conversing near kids dressed in black leather with Mohawk haircuts, the remnants of an already fading punk scene. Both groups shared their space with street vendors, graffito writers, and children chilling in opened fire hydrants. Always a conga drum sounded, meting out a near 24-hour pulse. Even the neighborhood’s ethnic and cultural vitality could be read as a dense forest of signs where typographical tracings, some in Spanish or English but others in Hebrew, Chinese or Slavic characters, overlapped on brick or stucco walls and in shop windows. Along with this melange of texts was the visual chaos of newsstands, billboards, wheat-pasted handbills, graffiti, political slogans and murals that depicted angry looking brown or yellow workers raising their fists. The total effect was that of a mongrel thing: part living, part mineralized ruin, part text but always more authentically “natural” than the genteel communities of either SoHo or Nassau County. Before discussing the art in detail, let me present a highly

---

191 Compare this to Walter Benjamin’s description of wall posters in the Arcades of 19th Century Paris: “the first drops of a rain of letters that today pours down without let-up day and night on the city and is greeted
abbreviated history of the neighborhood and the arrival of a new wave of artists beginning in the late 1970s.

The anti suburb.

Celebrated by many who were raised on the Lower East Side, this working class neighborhood formed the first home to generations of Americans entering the United States beginning in the 1850s. Along with consecutive waves of Irish, Germans, Italians and later, eastern European Jews, Chinese, Puerto Ricans it was also a place where the artistic avant-garde, from the publishers of the radical paper *The Masses* to the first cooperative galleries to the Beat poets flourished alongside one another. Like an American Left Bank, aspiring actors and artists drank coffee, ate ethnic foods and encountered the urban poor, the chemically dependent, and the slumlord. By the late 1960s and Lower East Side was still a place for political activists, small businesses, hippies, Yippies, and junkies, and a vibrant Hispanic culture (mostly Puerto Rican but also Dominican) of social clubs, sidewalk domino games, botanicas and bodegas. At this point the falling property values sped on by bank red-lining and municipal neglect, made much of the intact rental property a target for arson as some landlords who preferred insurance money over some unlikely rise in property values contracted for the destruction of their own miserable investments.

Then in the latter half of the 1970s came a new wave of young immigrants. Many of these young people who moved to the streets west of the Bowery, south of 14th street, and north of Delancey were artists – a class of individuals traditionally willing to forego bourgeois comforts, even risk their safety, in the pursuit of two goals. One of these was to be discovered in the traditional manner by a patron, a ticket out of the East Village for the lucky few. The other hope was to come into contact with something authentic such as the imagined organic quality of other peoples (ethnic) communities. However the national and regional economy of the 1970s was in a virtual depression and the low-income areas of the city were the worst hit. This malaise was reflected in the fin de siècle spirit of the art and club scene in the Lower East Side. Downward mobility caused by high unemployment and a tight money

like the Egyptian plague” or shop signs “recording not so much the habitat as the origin and species of captured animals.” From Walter Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk, quoted by Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1989, 66.
supply literally cut off any route leading out of low rent neighborhoods and back into the middle class (at least until the boom years of the mid-1980s, and then at the price of 70 hour work-weeks).

Yet in spite of this sense of “zero” option combined with such ominous signs as the energy “crisis,” where people shot each other at gas stations or the unprecedented global nuclear build-up of the 1970s, the punk years were filled with a sense of macabre festivity. As one observer put it:

The first generation to grow up under the specter of nuclear annihilation angrily came of age in an era of diminishing expectations. It was in this atmosphere that a rock club CBGB [in 1975] opened in New York’s East Village... CBGB launched the punk movement, and it’s no coincidence that many of the early punks looked like survivors from a nuclear holocaust.

Ronald Reagan became the Republican presidential contender in 1979, offering steep tax cuts for the wealthy, and promising a demolition of the liberal welfare state established after the great depression of the 1930s. Dubbed “Supply Side Economics,” Reagan’s policies were interpreted by the working classes and poor as little more than trickle down leftovers, and unending attacks on the social safety net. Today we refer to this ultra-free market outlook as neo-liberalism in which the deregulation of markets, and the privatization of public assets go hand in hand to move capital up the class ladder. But in 1980 the former Hollywood actor was elected president and immediately began implementing his “Voodoo Economics” (as his

192 Most researchers believe that increasingly longer hours worked by professionals and creative class “cognitariat” do not take place entirely in the office, but instead involve a situation where the job spills out into the individual’s daily life thanks to networked communications technology. These trends are discussed by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce in “Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek,” Harvard Business Review, December 2006: https://hbr.org/2006/12/extreme-jobs-the-dangerous-allure-of-the-70-hour-workweek, as well as books such as Juliet Schor’s The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, Basic Books, 1993, pp 22-24; Robert E. Kraut, Technology and the Transformation of White-Collar Work, Psychology Press, 1987, see p 121.


194 While Reagan’s own administration deployed the term “Safety Net” in February of 1981 to describe policies that would assure support for the “truly needy,” the primary thrust of his presidency was eliminating subsidies to workers and food stamps to the poor, while the act of even as the cutting of Federal taxes was presented as a form of savings for these same working class and impoverished Americans. However, the cost-benefit analysis of this approach by Reagan’s own Agriculture Department showed that this policy would actually amount to more than a 50% reduction in support for food stamp recipients alone. See: David E. Rosenbaum, “Regan’s ‘Safety Net’ Proposal: Who Will Land, Who Will Fall; News Analysis,” New York Times, March 16, 1981: http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/17/U.S./reagan-s-safety-net-proposal-who-will-land-who-will-fall-news-analysis.html?pagewanted=all
own staff referred to these policies in private), as well as making occasional bizarre remarks in public about a coming biblical showdown. All of this left some thinking that President Reagan was proof enough that the world had all but ended, and that the only option that remained was to party (or to imitate a party at any rate). The tone was set for the 1980s as one of extremes: excessive consumption on one hand; homelessness and poverty on the other.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s some Lower East Side artists inevitably folded into this anarcho-apocalyptic moment did pull back somewhat. They attempted to develop a specifically political and resistant agenda to the forces of gentrification and displacement. Still, these art-activists understood that they were themselves central to these processes as typically white, well-educated young people whose very presence enhanced the desirability of a given neighborhood for more mainstream middle and upper income residents. Some also began to grasp that later on they were themselves going to be displaced by the same processes artists helped set in motion. Finally, when a second wave of artists began arriving in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these political possibilities became exceptionally sharpened, if only temporarily, before the juggernaut of gentrification overwhelmed all resistance. These contradictions begin in the final few hours of the 1970s decade with an illegal act of culturally dissident intervention known as The Real Estate Show.

**Copping an Octopus.**

The smoke of burning buildings fills the street... Rats and dogs are coming out to eat...the rich have been buried in the basements of their buildings... throw away your clothes you no longer need them.\(^{195}\)

In the last weeks of 1979 a splinter from the four-year old artists group Collaborative Projects (C.O.L.A.B.) entered a city-owned building on Delancey Street that had been sitting empty in Loisaida for years. Aiming to liberate and occupy the site as a means of exposing “the system of waste and disuse that characterizes the profit system in real estate,” the Committee for the Real Estate Show opened their “squat-gallery” to friends and the public on January 1st 1980.\(^{196}\) The show was filled with coarsely made artworks that decried rent gouging landlords,

---

\(^{195}\) Excerpted from the poem, “Thermidor,” in Moore, *ABC No Río Dinero*, 185.

\(^{196}\) “Manifesto or Statement of Intent’ Committee for the Real Estate Show, 1980,” (excerpt), Moore, *ABC No Río*, 56.
city run development agencies, and what would become a favorite target of the new scene: the “suburbs,” as a series of suburban real estate photographs with sardonic captions like “3 BR, no rats, no unemployment” demonstrated. 197

Outside the building, in a move that pre-figured the pop-piracy of east village art, Rebecca Howland copped the image of a monstrous octopus – the consummate left-caricature of big business – and painted it onto the bland facade of The Real Estate Show. In the creature’s tightly coiled arms were two tenement buildings, a bundle of cash, a gem (signifying the speculator’s perception of the building,) and a dagger. But one of the beast’s arms had been violently severed. The artist positioned this liberated limb just above the entrance to the building forming an arrow that directed the eyes of the neighborhood toward both the exhibition and to the example set by the artist’s collective action. Within the context of the Lower East Side with its graffiti covered brickwork, handmade store signage, street graphics, and didactic murals the Real Estate Show’s polymorphic sea creature appeared inevitable, natural, like a denizen attracted to the region’s visible ecological fatigue. Howland also put her octopus icon on the Real Estate Show’s fliers and posters some of which were printed over actual page-spreads from the New York Times Real Estate section thus turning the creature into a veritable logo for the squat-action.

Howland would in fact continue to use the mollusk-image in her work for years, her most ambitious version a large three-dimensional sculpt-metal piece from 1983 titled the Real Estate Octopus with Dead Horse, that she made for the walkway of the Williamsburg Bridge. Real Estate Octopus... presented Howland’s now emblematic invertebrate writhing beneath the towers of the world trade center as if it were the radioactive spawn of a secret Port Authority experiment. One likely source for Howland’s initial octopus effigy may have been the mural “Chi Lai – Arriba – Rise Up!” by Alan Okada on a building just five blocks to the south of the Real Estate Show. Within Okada’s four-story high painting a squirming cephalopod, draped in a U.S. flag, clings like a parasite to the figure of a money-grubbing landlord. Another source for Howland’s image is undoubtedly the 1901 novel “Octopus” by radical socialist author Frank Norris where the railroad is represented as a many-armed monster. This connection is all the more interesting in that Norris’s beastie symbolizes the

197 ibid., 61.
expansion of capital into the western frontier. In the following passage Norris’s protagonist Presely, first encounters the rail-road made monster:

Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and stream, with its single eye, Cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon...with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.\footnote{198}{Frank Norris, \textit{The Octopus: A Story of California}, Doubleday, 1901, p. 48.}

It is difficult to miss Howland’s version of Real Estate speculators with their “tentacles... clutching the soil” of the Lower East Side. But the Real Estate “insurrection” was itself a mixture of anarchistic bravado and analytical naivété. The artists mimicked the direct action strategies of 1968 and in doing so they imagined that the community would be inspired to take similar action and stop the irrational warehousing of useful property. There was however nothing irrational about the city’s plan for the neighborhood. It was part of a long standing grand design to weaken investment and living conditions in certain low income areas so that re-development could later be carried out that would attract real estate developers and upper income residents.\footnote{199}{A useful account of Manhattan’s planned urban restructuring from an industrial working class city to a professional service economy can be found in Robert Fitch, \textit{The Assassination of New York}, London Verso Books, 1993.} Neither did neighborhood people necessarily get the point of the exhibit. According to artist Joe Lewis, a fellow C.O.L.A.B. member, “a lot of people saw the show, the community people, they thought it was just a group of artists protesting that they could not show their work anywhere”.\footnote{200}{Moore, \textit{ABC No Rio Dinero}, p. 57.}

The day after the opening of the Real Estate Show the city padlocked the building. Then, after receiving some bad press helped along by the appearance of artist Joseph Beuys, the city reversed itself and offered the artists a smaller space a few doors away to resume the exhibition. Soon after the Real Estate Show debacle, the city offered artists still another storefront a few blocks north on Rivington Street to use as an ongoing gallery. The new space was named ABC No Rio after a garbled nearby sign reading ABOGADO NOTORIO. Since 1980 the space has occasioned changing exhibitions, musical events, happenings, and an occasional educational art project with neighborhood kids (most recently the No Rio building was discovered to be structurally unsound: it will be replaced by a state of the art green
building designed by Paul Castrucci\textsuperscript{200}). The Real Estate Octopus was just one specimen in an ersatz natural history of the Lower East Side targeting landlord abuse and neighborhood degradation. While Howland’s tentacled speculator cast the real estate wars in terms of natural predation and defense, artists such as Christy Rupp and Michael Anderson presented images of animals as signs and victims of an urban environment gone wrong.

**Rats, King Fishers, and Voodoo Economics.**

In works like Rubble Rats and Rat Patrol, artist Christy Rupp approaches the Lower East Side as if it were the locus of an ecological disaster. In 1979 Rupp pasted some four thousand offset images of running rats throughout the city. The action titled Rat Patrol was intended to make “visible during the day what went on at night”.\textsuperscript{202} Rupp also played on traditional images of plagues or miasma where corruption spreads like an infection throughout the urban body. What was the source of this contagion? In an interview with the New York Post in 1980 the artist stated “Rats are not terrorists... I see them as part of the history of ecology, in the whole chain of things. It’s simply that they’re out of control in the cities”.\textsuperscript{203} Elsewhere the artist has commented that “Rats are a symptom,” insisting that garbage and “the environment and economics” are the cause, presumably of natural imbalance in cities.\textsuperscript{204}

The success of Rat Patrol was followed by a series of rodent-sized sculptures such as Rubble Rat. In 1980 Rupp made the work by casting a rat with cement directly onto a pile of bricks she found in the debris and weed covered backyard at ABC No Rio. In keeping with the camouflaging common to the animal kingdom Rupp’s small concrete sculpture is at first indistinguishable from other chunks of broken building that littered the area. Partly embedded in the debris it is only when the rat figure is at last discerned that are we tipped-off to the artifice of the work. A somewhat different reading of the work places it in the category of the post-traumatic souvenir, along with other petrified curiosities such as the melted watches in Hiroshima or the mummified inhabitants of ancient Pompeii. The piece first appeared in No Rio’s inaugural

\textsuperscript{201} See: http://www.abcnorio.org/newbuilding.php
\textsuperscript{203} Rupp quoted in Moore, *ABC No Rio Dinero*, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{204} Rupp quoted in Wye, *Committed to Print*, p. 86.
exhibition put on by the anti-nuclear coalition Artists for Survival in May of 1980. In contrast to Rupp’s more recent, skillfully crafted and assertively beautiful animal sculptures, these scabrous rodents retain a strong ambivalence about art as commodity production. The abject look of Rupp’s sculptural vermin hints at another ambivalence by reflecting at once the rawness of “malignant city life” on The Lower East Side as well as an uneasiness over the absence of bourgeois standards. Once again my speculation is that for Rupp as well as other east village artists, the inner city landscape appeared as pathological, as “malignant city life.” And whether her representations of rodents were intended to make visible a nocturnal urban ecology or to amplify the already abundant evidence of New York’s social and environmental crisis, these works are symptomatic of art that used the poor ecological hygiene of the city to agitate for social improvement. In 1984 the activist art group P.A.D./D. launched the second of two anti-gentrification projects on New York’s Lower East Side, and artist Michael Anderson added another specimen to Loisaida’s expanding zoological garden.

Anderson’s silk-screened poster In Memorium featured the unusual pairing of an endangered animal, a bird known as a Kingfisher, together with an altogether different endangered species, the neighborhood mom and pop store, in this case the Orchidia which was a popular Lower East Side restaurant serving the unique combination of Ukrainian and Italian cuisine. The Orchidia had recently been forced to close down because of unregulated commercial rent increases brought about by the upturn in the neighborhoods property values. But it was also one of the focal points for neighborhood anti-gentrification activists such as the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council who used the Orchidia situation to expand community participation and garner media attention. Anderson was an exhibition preparator for the American Museum of Natural History at the time, and was also actively involved in anti-gentrification work in Brooklyn and on the Lower East Side. The poster, which was made for a neighborhood-wide art project called Out of Place: Art For the Evicted, has a bold headline that is dedicated: “To those felled by environmental/economic pollution.” On the left side of the 24 X 30 inch piece is the image of a dead bird. Beneath it in small type is a label-like caption reading: “Belted Kingfisher (C(Megacerle Alcyon) Found in New York City alive but with legs paralyzed. Died August 25th 1983 of suspected poisoning by environmental pollutants.” To the right of the Kingfisher memorial Anderson has printed an image of the neighborhood eatery along with another testimonial that reads: “Orchidia Restaurant: almost 37 years at
2nd Avenue at 9th street, landlord Sydney Wiener in defiance of community opposition raised rent from $950/month to $5,000/month. The Orchidia, despite protest, closed April 11, 1984”. Surrounding both images is an irregular color smudge – one blue one red, like the color of the dyes used to stain microscopic specimens – and within these blots are images of roses and hovering cherubs.205

Along with Anderson’s memorial to economic and environmental pollution was another lament for a lost neighborhood business that was part of the Out of Place project. The Garden Cafeteria had been a Jewish cafeteria style restaurant located on East Broadway which had recently been bought out by a Chinese Restaurant (more likely a symptom of the changing demographics of the Lower East Side than real estate gouging). The artist Marianne Nowak paid tribute to the establishment’s passing in the form of color Xeroxed images of actual gardens interspersed with Cafeteria diners. Arranged in the form a single horizontal panorama on the deteriorated building that would temporarily be known as the Guggenheim Downtown, the work linked urban life and personal memory with natural cycles of growth and dissolution. But where Anderson’s graphic dirge-likely lament In Memorium worked as a visual and conceptual pun, mixing document with lamentation and patently confusing the categories of nature and culture, Garden Cafeteria resolves this opposition by using nature to invoke the rapture of dwelling on what has recently been lost.

In general, the re-configuring of the economic sphere – labor and capital – into a metaphor of natural processes is not unlike the ideological sleight of hand that Marx and Engles charged the young Hegalian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach with perpetrating when they insisted Feurebach:

> does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same but the product of industry and of the state of society.206

The authors further demystify Feurebach’s idealization of the German landscape using the history of a species of tree arguing:

205 Details related to these projects derive from materials in the author’s own archives, as well as from the P.A.D./D. Archive at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. For more about Political Art Documentation/Distribution see Chapter 7: “P.A.D./D.: A Collectography,” as well as in Sholette, Dark Matter.
the cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become “sensuous certainty” for Feuerbach.\textsuperscript{207}

In a more theoretical hybrid of ecology and activist ideals artist and architect Peter Fend who was active with the Real Estate Show, presented his plan for a project he called O.E.C.D. or Ocean Earth Construction Development. Fend’s idea was to set up a “community corporation” that would design environmental engineering projects and then channel the profits from these into neighborhood improvements. This green-stock would be held exclusively by residents of the Lower East Side, who would in turn democratically vote on how profits would be used. Under the slogan of “Delancey Street Goes to the Sea” Fend aimed to secure autonomy for the neighborhood by establishing “an independent energy and wastes-conversion cycle, possibly in Jamaica Bay or the shoals off Staten Island, and to build structures which – being elevated above existing structures or lots – are virtually exempt from taxes or rents.” Exactly where the profit would come in Fend’s project is unclear. Together with fantastic re-workings of topographical maps so that nations might be organized around shared resources and drainage basins, Fend was a sort of east village version of the conceptual art team of Helen and Newton Harrison, but Fend’s Libertarian-like schemes fit the entrepreneurial style of the eighties more than the anti-commercialism of early 70s conceptual art.\textsuperscript{208}

Proposing to fix the environmental and social-economic problems of the inner city through conceptual projects has recently re-appeared in the work of 90s artists like Mark Dion and Nils Norman. Dion’s project for the exhibition, \textit{Culture In Action in Chicago} in 1992/93, combined a high school science project with a field trip to a South American rain forest, and resulted in temporarily recycling an abandoned building in Chicago into what Dion described as an “eco-drop in center and clubhouse.” According to the curator of the project Mary Jane Jacob, the participating young Chicagoans learned “to frame nature in art context and to frame art in relation to the natural world. It initiated in the students

\textsuperscript{207} ibid.

\textsuperscript{208} One of the key distinctions between 1960s conceptual artists and 1980s East Village and Neo-Expressionist artists was the way the not for profit proclivities of the former actually benefitted from available sources of public funding, while the latter’s turn towards self-marketing reflected the rise of neoliberal deregulation and the defunding of tax-supported cultural policies and institutions.
a way of thinking about nature”.

Closer to issues related directly to the Lower East Side as a site of social and political contestation are the conceptual schemes and prototypes made by British born artist Nils Norman. In an exhibition at American Fine Arts in 1997, Norman presented detailed scale models and blue-prints for a number of utopian architectural and/or garden projects including The Sky Village for Thompkins Square Park (designed for both habitation and defense against city marshals and police), a communally owned solar powered news kiosk for senior citizens, and a proposed agricultural workers collective to be known as the Underground Agrarians. Underground Agrarians would be constructed at Norfolk and Delancey Streets on the Lower East Side. (Recall that the Real Estate Show was held on Delancey in 1979.) With each of the precise plexiglas covered miniatures in the exhibition is a Site Analysis. The model-site is broken down in the document into various life-sustaining functions including: “Food Coop, Specialized info/book shop (gardening, tenant rights, autonomous energy use), Prosthetic Gardening Limbs Shop, Self-composting toilet, and Sustainable model permaculture roof garden.” The Organizational Structure is composed of work detachments and democratically voted commanders who supervise “composting, watering, weeding, sowing.” Norman even proposed re-naming Delancey Street: Wobblies Street after the radical turn of the century workers organization known as the Industrial Workers of the World or Wobblies. Norman’s models even more than Dion’s largely symbolic investigations, borrow from the little known history of left politics and ecological utopianism, including the kind of iconographic and polemical uses of nature that I have touched on in this essay. Nevertheless in light of the present anti-progressive and the self-satisfied insularity of the 90s art industry, it is this, often less than ideal, history of actual political work by artists in places like the Lower East Side that is in danger of being forgotten, or romanticized like an exotic, organic thing.

There is a seductive pleasure in the new ecological art, not least of all derived from the conceptual linkage, especially strong in Norman’s projects, to the history of collective practices.

---

209 Mary Jane Jacob in “Outside the Loop” from the catalog to the exhibition Culture in Action, Bay Press, p. 114.

210 With the continued erosion of public support and concurrent dependency on market success, the 1990s art world became ever more hierarchical while justifying this stratification as normal, a tendency that likely reflected the broader neoliberalization of society. For instance, star artists now captured much of the attention in a winner-takes-all approach, while the majority of artists faded from view into a surplus archive of shadowed practices and careers that nevertheless served to support the architecture of high culture. This too, however, was defended as only “natural.”
and militant political resistance. And while New York City’s Lower East Side continues to serve as the “natural” site for locating these alternate histories, what cannot be stressed enough is the need to move beyond idealized exhibition settings into long range commitments where conceptually refined concepts are put to use in the malignant urban landscape that gives birth to such urban art activism.
Figure 9. Millenium hotel advertisement from the *Sunday New York Times*, circa 1999 (artist unknown).
The full-page advertisement in the Sunday edition of the New York Times depicts a trio of smartly clad, sophisticated young white people conversing over a glass of wine. Intentionally rendered in a retro-1930s Art Deco style, the illustration is captioned “An Oasis In Times Square.” The ad goes on to explain that the illustrated place is where the traveller who is weary from business can discover tranquility and a “new level of self-indulgence,” right in the midst of busy Manhattan. This was the year 1999 when, with bank-rolled panache, the Hong Leong Group launched the Millennium Premier. It was the global real-estate group’s first New York project, and immediately I sensed the arrival of something different at work, some shift in tactics within the decade-old project of “upclassing” the city. I also knew something troubling about the hotel’s recent past that made my hunch even more compelling, and deliriously logical.

A veteran of anti-gentrification activism on the city’s Lower East Side some twenty years earlier, I still recall the clumsy call for pioneers to brave the city’s harsh urban frontiers. But by the late 1990s this type of gambit had largely played itself out, at least in Manhattan. Already most of the island was well on its way to full blown gentrification and what was left of the poor and working class largely scattered by force or rising rents in the wake of reverse white flight that began in the 1980s.

However, this late 1990s wave of gentry wanted nothing to do with leaking pipes or chasing away crack-heads from street corners, and under no circumstances would they wear overalls. Yet the hotel’s curiously retro illustration also avoided references to the fevered, techno giddiness of those blissful, pre-crash 1990s. Instead, the unknown artist lovingly invoked the modernist conceit of the machine age some sixty years prior. Nor was it camp, for the irony was too far adrift from any rhetorical moorings to signal spoof. Instead, like an arcane plot out of a Philip K. Dick novel, the very visage of the city I knew was being transmuted from lead to gold. The more I looked, the more I saw. Quaint cafés replaced actual coffee shops. Futuristic bars and art galleries took over food processing and light industrial shops. An ersatz cosmopolitanism was everywhere and the Millennium was a part of this larger whole that involved wiping clean not merely the physical traces of the past, but its memories. What
filled up the ensuing breach were artful surrogates and clever replicas of a city that no one had ever lived in but that nevertheless looked strangely familiar. Certainly it is easier to see this in retrospect, but the Millennium campaign signaled the start of an entirely new era in the administration of free market urban renewal. More abstract, more inspired, more creative. The question I wanted to answer most, then and now, is whose minds the hotel chain’s marketers hoped to, well, gentrify, and what ghosts they sought to keep at bay?

It was the artists' collective known as REPOhistory that provided the key to unlocking this mystery, but its startling solution, like Poe’s purloined letter, turns out to have been right in front of me all along. Located on West 44th Street, the Millennium Premier Hotel stands in a once largely Irish and working class neighborhood formerly known as Hell's Kitchen but re-christened with the sanitary-sounding moniker “Clinton” by real estate speculators in the 1980s. This new Times Square is no longer the porn playground of the fiscal crisis 1970s. It has been rehabilitated: safe for families, safe for business, efficiently emptied of homeless people and sundry other uninvited. In May of 1998, however, a metal street sign appears outside the Millennium. The sign is flagged off of a lamppost, meters away from the hotel’s tastefully subdued, black marble façade. Mounted low enough for passersby to read, its text begins portentously:

What is now the Millennium Broadway Hotel used to be the site of 4 buildings including an SRO hotel that provided badly needed housing for poor New Yorkers....

Artist and architect William Menking designed the plaque to look like a busy montage of newspaper clippings. The story of the hotel’s less than tranquil past continues in bold type:

In 1984, New York City passed a moratorium on the alteration of hotels for the poor. Hours before the moratorium was to go into effect, developer Harry Macklowe had the 4 buildings demolished without obtaining demolition permits, and without turning off water and gas lines into the buildings. N.Y.C. officials declared, “It is only a matter of sheer luck that there was no gas explosion.” Attempts to bring criminal charges against Macklowe for these actions were not successful. Macklowe built a luxury hotel on the site, then lost it to the current owners. The demolition of hotels for the poor during the 1970’s and 1980's added to the city’s growing homeless population. While streets of the “new” Times Square seem paved with gold – for many they have literally become a home.

Like the materialization of an army of Dickensian apparitions, the Millennium/Macklowe sign
was one of 20 temporary historical markers specifically sited around New York that made up the public art project Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City. Sponsored by New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (N.Y.L.P.I.) and produced by the art and activist group REPOhistory, its aim was to publicly landmark legal cases in which civil rights were extended to disenfranchised peoples. The content of the signs ranged from the famous Brown Vs. the Board of Education desegregation case to the first woman firefighter sworn into service in N.Y.C.. Others, however, pointed to occasions when the law had failed to protect as promised and Menking’s sign was in this category. Initially, for a time the city tried to stop REPOhistory from installing Civil Disturbances. After weeks of legal maneuvers however, the signs went up from spring of 1998 to late winter of 1999. Nevertheless, right from the start several signs vanished after installation. Menking’s was among them.211

Responding to an inquiry the Millennium freely admitted having its staff confiscate the legally permitted artwork. They even returned it to the group. However, along with the returned sign came a letter threatening legal action if any attempt was made to reinstall it. The grounds? REPOhistory was damaging hotel business. It seems the return of an inopportune past can prove a powerful trigger revealing hidden ideological tendencies in what appears otherwise to be a purely market driven process of privatization and gentrification. After considerable debate that internally split REPOhistory roughly along lines of activists versus artists, Menking’s sign was reinstalled, but now at a greater distance from the hotel. And despite further threats the sign stayed in place, the project’s permit ran its course, and neither side took legal action. It is five years on. Aside from this text and other scattered citations, Macklow’s “midnight demolition” is forgotten along with those he cruelly displaced. At the tranquil oasis in old Hell’s Kitchen stylish guests still sip wine, discuss art, and continue to manufacture content for the information economy.

All of this is familiar now. The 1990s affection for the 1920s and pre-crash 1930s, its weird merger of avant-garde aesthetics, high fashion, and post-Fordist management theory all dolled-up in a neo-modernist longing for limitless progress. So what if the occasional act of terror was, and remained indispensable to make it all seem real? Why dwell on conflict? If the creative class has supplanted the traditional laboring class in many places it has done so by greeting capital as potential equal,

not as adversary. Winners are admired. Losers on the other hand are truly abject, lacking the aptitude to become exploiters themselves. Asserting a collective disarray, an enduring a-historicity, and a belief they have transcended labor/management antagonisms, creative workers think they can even avoid being exploited in the long run because their big, table-turning breakthrough is always just around the corner, always about to make that longed-for reservation at the swanky Millennium tower a reality.

Anyway, it is 2004 and billionaires abound.\textsuperscript{212} According to Forbes’ recent survey they number a record 587.\textsuperscript{213} Still, it is difficult not to notice a connection between this fact and the new economy with its deregulated markets, rampant privatization, decaying worker protection and widening gap between rich and poor. Nor are the super-rich all petroleum refiners and armament producers. Many belong to the so-called creative class. Among those joining the ten figure income bracket include the rags to riches writer of Harry Potter stories, J.K. Rowling; Google creators Sergey Brin and Larry Page; and Gap clothing designer Michael Ying. So why am I still surprised when I walk down formerly forbidding streets to see such upscale consumption? Designer outlets, smart eateries, bars radiant with youthful crowds, and taxis shuttling celebrants to and fro. Block after block the scene resembles a single, unending cocktail party strung like carnival lights up and down nearby 7th and 8th Avenues. Between these cheerful stations other men and women, mostly in their forties and fifties, haunt the shadows gathering glass and metal recyclables from public waste bins. Certainly losers can not harm you. But what about ghosts?

I enter bar X: its ambiance probably not much different from bars in the Millennium New York, or Millennium Shanghai, or Millennium London. I shout for a dry, gin Martini over the mechanically generated industrial music (a cartoon thought-bubble appears, “Am I the only person in here with a beard?”\textsuperscript{214}). My mind returns to REPOhistory and its altruistic necromancy some six years earlier. “If the enemy wins, not even the dead will be safe,” Walter Benjamin once declared.\textsuperscript{215} Not safe from whom? Perhaps it was the noise and the alcohol, but a surprising correlation asserts itself.

\textsuperscript{212} Please see comments about this essay in my introduction to this section.

\textsuperscript{213} In 2015 the total number of billionaires had risen to 1.826 according to statistics found on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billionaire ; but the 587 number comes from Luisa Kroll, “The Rich Get Richer,” February 26, 2004, Forbes online: http://www.forbes.com/2004/02/26/cz_lk_0226mainintrobill04.html

\textsuperscript{214} Ironically the bearded “hipster” fashion was only getting underway in 2004, and was mostly confined to the “creative class” neighborhood of Williamsburg Brooklyn at the time.

REPOhistory was part of the creative class. While its objectives were different, REPOhistory, like RTmark, The Yes Men, and similar artistic agitators made use of available technologies and rhetorical forms to reach the same erudite consumer-citizens this swanky bar hoped to attract. The Millennium had been correct all along: we were the competition. With a little toning down of its righteous antagonism REPOhistory could have even taken its place amongst the web designers, dressmakers, M.T.V. producers and other content providers of the new, immaterial economy. And come to think of it, right before the group folded it was increasingly being asked to travel outside to this or that city or town and install public markers about the quaint olden times; the local barber shop, the saloon, the red-light district and parade grounds. I had indeed found the enemy: it was me.

Like forgotten letters in some dimly lit archive, those not immediately part of the radical shift in the means of production remain out of sight, out of mind, fleeing from demolitions, down sizings and sometimes rummaging for cans. Not that this zone of dark matter was not always present and surrounding the upwardly mobile types such as the Millennium crowd. What is new, however, is the way this far larger realm of unrealized potential can gain access to most of the means of expression deployed by the burgeoning consciousness industry – that ubiquitous spectacle essential to the maintenance of global capitalism. By the same token, the so-called insiders might, if circumstances permit, decide to cast their collective lot in with the losers and the ghosts. REPOhistory et al proves it can happen. Because even the new creative class with its eighty hour work week and multiple jobs has a fantasy, one half-remembered perhaps and a bit mad, yet still evident in times of stress and economic uncertainty. It goes like this: the bar tenders and the brass polishers and cooks, the laundresses and bell hops throw down their aprons and spatulas to join in mutinous celebration with artists, web designers and musicians. Raiding the wine cellar, they open up all thirty-three executive style conference rooms, set up a free health clinic in the lobby, transform the hotel into an autonomous broadcasting tower and party in a universe of creative dark matter.

I finish my drink and return home to wrap-up the essay I promised the fine, creative folks at Mute magazine.
Section 2: Chapter 3

**Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology:**

*The city of (dis)order versus the people’s archive*

Figure 10. The People’s Library, Occupy Wall Street (O.W.S.), Zuccotti Park, NYC, October 1, 2011. (Image courtesy, G. Sholette).
The archive, with its icy temperature and motionless repose, may seem like an unlikely place to begin thinking about Occupy Wall Street (O.W.S.), a then dynamic and still-unfolding phenomenon by November 2011, whose precise nature appears impossible to determine, let alone file away like a stack of dog-eared documents. Unlikely, if we approach the idea of the archive as a physical collection located in a specific time and place, or as a set of historical documents that uphold this or that interpretive school. But what if we invoke something like an archival agency, something that now and then animates the *longue durée* of resistance from below. After all, things have changed since we witnessed the power-scrubbing of Zuccotti Park’s People’s Library and the mulching of the encampment’s hundred-page opus of dissent written on corrugated scraps of cardboard and inverted pizza boxes, some torn, trimmed, or simply folded down into manageable dimensions for extended protest. We witnessed the demolition as an echo of the Baghdad library’s destruction eight years ago earlier in 2003, when U.S. and U.K. troops stood by as that archive was reduced to ashy pulp.\footnote{Well, not all of this proto-archive was destroyed, because some museums were already collecting O.W.S. protest signs and other material culture from Zuccotti Park before the police raid, see for example: Cristian Salazar and Randy Herschaft, “Occupy Wall Street: Major Museums And Organizations Collect Materials Produced By Occupy Movement,” *AP/Huffington Post*, December 11, 2011: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/24/occupy-wall-street-museums-organizations_n_1168893.html?ref=new-york&ir=New%20York} It is this we must grapple with and theorize, this residue that authorities determined to be expendable, or even threatening, even if such engagement takes U.S. places we would, under other circumstances, prefer to avoid (for, after all, doesn’t the act of conquest demand the erasure, in whole or part, of an enemy’s communal identity, just as resistance centers on defending or recreating the archive?).

O.W.S. has an odor. Its lustful, repetitious, and messy imagination is articulated not only through fat felt markers on tent flaps and recycled materials, but also on naked bodies, and on moving and dancing bodies, as well as the multicellular superorganism known as the General Assembly. Still, to describe this as an archive – or *swarmhive* – is to suggest that O.W.S. is more than an accumulation of conceptual, biological, and material textures. It is also something being written, call it a promissory note, an obligation to a future reader from a place already dislocated in time (though admittedly aided by time-bending cybertechnologies like YouTube and Twitter). Not what does, but what will, the archive mean, Derrida once asked, to which he then replied: “We will only know...
tomorrow. Perhaps”. Tomorrow began at 1:00 a.m. on November 15th, 2011 for O.W.S., the hour of Zuccotti Park’s brutal erasure on orders given police by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The N.Y.P.D. raid seemed to express something else. Call it a repulsion toward damp, cardboardy smells, and commingled sweat, or a fear of the breathy exhalations emanating from the People’s Microphone, with its mandatory intervals of listening and hearing, and its uncanny pantomime of mechanical apparatus as if some inert thing were being jolted back to life. But perhaps most unsettling of all was the way O.W.S. established a link with the dispossessed and discarded homeless at the very center of private real estate and finance capital, a tactic Mike Davis perceptively contrasted recently to the university sit-ins of his generation in the 1960s that while certainly confrontational, nevertheless remained bound up within less contested academic spaces. It seems that when today’s creatives rebel, they take no hostages; they make no demands.

So there it was, occupied Zuccotti Park, filling up, hour after hour, with multiple signs of urban dispossession and homelessness, from sleeping bags to makeshift shelters, virtually everything that the “quality-of-life” city detested about the vanquished liberal welfare city, and everything it wanted to forget, including the drifters and hustlers, addicts, and graffiti taggers who are nevertheless continually generated by its deregulatory policies. There was no bold objective, such as forcing R.O.T.C. (Reserve Officer Training Corps) off campus, or establishing a Black studies program. Instead, facing inward, the O.W.S. General Assembly painstakingly constructed systems of communication, grew antennae, spawned internal laws and methods of governance, all the while appearing from the outside to be so much dead capital, a homeless hive of unemployed kids with too much time on their (jazz) hands, growing, festering, like a blot or a bruise, directly on the belly of the global finance leviathan. Is it any wonder city patriarchs sent police to punish Richard Florida’s children turned warrior class?

---

218 “One of the most important facts about the current uprising is simply that it has occupied the street and created an existential identification with the homeless. (Though, frankly, my generation, trained in the civil rights movement, would have thought first of sitting inside the buildings and waiting for the police to drag and club U.S. out the door; today, the cops prefer pepper spray and “pain compliance techniques.”)...The genius of Occupy Wall Street, for now, is that it has temporarily liberated some of the most expensive real estate in the world and turned a privatized square into a magnetic public space and catalyst for protest.” Mike Davis, “No More Bubble Gum,” Los Angeles Review of Books, October 21, 2011. Available at: http://tumblr.lareviewofbooks.org/post/11725867619/no-more-bubble-gum
219 According to the latest report by Coalition for the Homeless, the number of homeless families is now 45 per cent higher than when Mayor Bloomberg first took office: http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/forty-one-thousand
II.

“Leave us alone!” asserts the towheaded cadre of mind-melded children in the 1960 British science-fiction film Village of the Damned. Mysteriously born all at once to the unimpregnated women of a rural English hamlet, the children possess collective powers of telepathy and worse. They also have an enormous appetite for knowledge. A professor played by George Sanders, the one human they tolerate and who serves as their teacher, eventually destroys them in a suicide attack. But even as the final credits roll, we never fully understand who, or what, they were. We never learn what they were after.

III.

Police, not protestors, were visible on day one of Occupy Wall Street, September 17, 2011. They massed in all directions, ringing Wall Street, shielding storefronts, securing Citibank, Chase, Wells Fargo, and Morgan. And then there were those two, slightly chagrined officers standing watch over Charging Bull, the bellicose bronze sculpture that dominates the northern edge of Bowling Green Park. An irony likely lost on most who passed by is that artist Arturo DiModica’s giant bovine was an unannounced gift that he dropped in December 1989 to lift Wall Street’s downcast spirits after the crash of 1987. Initially seized by police as illegal street art, the statue was soon born-again as a seven-thousand-pound photo-op relished by tourists, filmmakers, city boosters, and anticapitalist protestors.

One intrepid demonstrator stood out on the first day. She carried, sandwich-board style, a photographic reproduction of Damien Hirst’s For the Love of God, the diamond-spattered platinum skull allegedly valued at over 50 million pounds. No other statement or slogan was present, as if the no-longer Y British artist’s profligate memento mori was the indisputable portrait of our epoch. But only a few days into the occupation at nearby Zuccotti Park – the privately owned public space that demonstrators ultimately settled into after failing to take possession of Wall Street proper – a functioning commonwealth had germinated. It was complete with daily meetings aimed at self-governance; food and trash services; recycled gray-water treatment systems; a generator-powered

---

220 Village of the Damned was based on the novel The Midwich Cuckoos by John Wyndham, and was first made into a film in 1960, directed by Wolf Rilla, followed by a 1963 sequel entitled Children of the Damned by Anton Leader, and a 1995 remake of the original by John Carpenter.
digital media station; and an expanding collection of books and publications dubbed the People’s Library, nestled in rows of boxes with handwritten labels like International Relations, Music, Religion, Fiction, Non-Fiction, Feminism, and Racial Justice. According to movement librarians, an estimated five thousand volumes were located at Zuccotti Park prior to the N.Y.P.D. raid of November 15.\(^{221}\) The encampment also gave life to dozens of smaller subdivisions, including Jail Support, Medics, Direct Action Painters, and one of the largest: Arts and Culture, with its own subdivisions, including Arts and Labor, Alternative Economies, and Occupy Museums. Among other immediate necessities is restoring knowledge of past attempts at organizing cultural workers such as Art Workers’ Coalition, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, Political Art Documentation/Distribution (P.A.D./D.), and Group Material. Much of this history had been shorn from the record to form a missing mass or cultural dark matter.\(^{222}\) The articulation of this shadow history is now taking place through teach-ins, e-mail exchanges, and archival websites, all of which are, so far, beyond the reach of police.\(^{223}\)

IV.

“What do they want?”, demands the mainstream media. O.W.S. has no response. No policies, no demands, and only a stated desire to be left alone. “The 1% is just beginning to understand that the reason Occupy Wall Street makes no demands is because we aren’t talking to them. The 99% are speaking and listening to each other”.\(^{224}\) Zuccotti Park: Das Unheimliche.

V.

Scrawled dollar signs, credit cards, monstrous octopi, mutated American flags: like pages torn from a faded copy of The New Masses (rather than Adbusters), Zuccotti Park’s artistic iconography was replete with anticapitalist slogans, clenched fists, and top-hatted

---


\(^{222}\) For more on my concept of cultural dark matter see Sholette, Dark Matter, 2011, as well as Chapter 3.2.

\(^{223}\) Starting in 2011, O.W.S. generated hundreds of websites, twitter feeds, and blogs; some of which are still accessible online including: http://occupywallst.org/ ; http://occupywallstreet.net/ ; http://www.nycga.net/ ; http://www.adbusters.org/occupywallstreet/ ; https://twitter.com/occupywallst?lang=en ; and one specifically dedicated to the “peoples library” that was destroyed by NYPD at Zuccotti Park: https://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/

millionaires. But this time the slogans were a great deal cheekier than those printed in the radical *Leftist* magazine of the 1920s and 1930s, and the fists were attached to people wearing Guy Fawkes’s *V for Vendetta* masks rather than muscular workers. Meanwhile, the millionaire – pulled down from his pedestal, bearded and broke – did not refer to the sketchbooks of Communist artists William Gropper or Hugo Gellert, but was appropriated straight from Parker Brother’s Monopoly board game. One sign simply implored “Occupy through Art.” Yet, despite the twenty-first-century self-consciousness, O.W.S. released a repertoire of protest tropes that, like a grammar of dissent waiting in the wings, came to the fore as the encampment participants discovered they were legally bound by New York City ordinances to pre-electronic forms of protest to pre-electronic forms of protest. Thus there were citations, statements, manifestos, and entire letters directed to the public. “Did you lose your home? Wall Street stole from you.” One text with blue-on-red writing exclaimed tragic loss as a leftover handhold from what was once a cardboard box floated off to the side like an errant exclamation mark. Along with the ubiquitous beige of cardboard signage there were silk-screened T-shirts, a few oil paintings, and professionally designed typographic posters by *Adbusters*, the Vancouver-based culture-jamming magazine that first called for a Wall Street occupation which officially began on September 17. Shepard Fairey, of *Andre the Giant* stencil-art fame, morphed his own controversial Barack Obama election poster “Hope” into an explicit reference to *Anonymous*, the online hacktivist entity strongly associated with new forms of digital civil disobedience. But the President wearing a Guy Fawkes mask with the tagline “We Are the Hope” simply did not go over well with some O.W.S. organizers. Fearing that Fairey’s graphic promoted links to the Democratic Party, the former street artist was taken to task and asked to revise his design in what amounted to a series of online studio critique-sessions: long-distance learning, O.W.S.-style. “While it definitely looks cool, whether intended or not, this sends a clear message that Obama is co-opting O.W.S.”. The movement may not have demands, but it is exceedingly conscious of its image, as befits a twenty-first-century rebellion.

VI.

"I’m not a smooth writer and am barely managing to focus now on something I need to finish," writes the Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun in an e-mail. "But in general, positions, attitudes and temperaments are changing here with every headline. It’s a constant tug and pull. A constant recalibration of expectations. Many players rising that were not known before, and many known ones falling. It’s interesting to see this “organic” process play out. It’s not easy. Every detail is a battle. . . . It’s definitely taking a huge amount of time away from work. Most of our time is spent following the news in every form. Resulting eventually in loss of concentration and burnout. Personally, I feel that previous drives in my work have been halted or changed. There is some kind of rupture but it’s not clear where exactly and what it will lead to. Result is a need to be quiet and research and find one’s (new) center of gravity . . . I think activists and artists, and those who are both, are all putting in time and effort when and how they can. And since this is a prolonged situation, it is understandable that participants come in and out of action depending on their ability and time. Burnout is experienced by all, and thus the need to take time out in order to be able to come back in. That is to say, divisions of roles are not so clear."

If a real-world crisis politicizes artists and cultural workers, sometimes to the point that they abandon their studios and galleries to engage in agitation, organizing, the production of ephemeral street art, or direct action, then is this to be understood as an aesthetic lacuna similar to a mason throwing cobblestones at soldiers, or a seamstress smuggling food to demonstrators in the hem of her skirt? Or is art’s occasional venture into radicalism something else altogether, perhaps an inescapable phase of aesthetic investigation that ironically must jettison aesthetic investigation itself (or temporarily seem to discard it)? Must it be the case that when artists take their turn along the barricades, along with the partisans and oppressed, the dispossessed and the evicted, they are there because, aside from playing for the enemy, they simply have nowhere else to go? Or are they, along with the practice of aesthetics itself, a kind of blockage or lesion found within society’s disciplinary structures, only functioning fully as a grammar of dissent in times of crisis?

226 From two e-mails to the author dated August 6 and August 7, 2011 (original spelling retained).
VII.

I visited the encampment again on October 1. Immediately following the evening’s General Assembly, O.W.S. protestors streamed out of Zuccotti Park and swarmed up Broadway. Within the torrent of handmade protest placards – “Workers Rights are Human Rights,” “Jail Bankers, Not Protesters,” “Occupy Everything” – I spotted a trio of art students (they must have been art students), who lofted what looked like an abstract painting over their heads. Watery, colored shapes have soaked into a rectangle of beige cardboard. In truth, it was an elegantly odd picket sign that looked a bit like a D.I.Y. Arshile Gorky, and was oddly fragile, bobbing up and down in the crowd. A short time later O.W.S. flocked onto the Brooklyn Bridge, where seven hundred demonstrators were arrested. God only knows what became of the corrugated Gorky.

VIII.

Take another look at the infamous University of California, Davis, pepper-spraying video on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AdDLhPwpp4 Watch it to the end to see the power reversal that follows the abusive violence. Students surround police. After the crowd uses the People’s Microphone, one student begins to chant, “You can go.” Others gradually follow in unison, “You can go.” “You can go.” “You can go.” Like a colony of insects guided by pheromones, the police turn and march away. Applause.

IX.

Capitalism, like nature, has no history, hisses the ghost of Milton Friedman from the great beyond.²²⁷ Perhaps this explains why the city of disorder – Alex S. Vitale’s sarcastic moniker for post-Giuliani New York – loathes the archive. It’s too ungainly for a town that is always investing in its present, a city that worships the erotics of gentrification

and delights in the joyful liquidation of memory. In truth, this state of affairs may have been perfectly acceptable for a generation of precarious workers, artists among them. Until recently, the creative cognitariat demanded neither a past, nor a future, but only an opportunity to be productive all the time, 24/7, as a mode of life. That was tolerable, until capital placed its boot on the big hand of time. Suddenly both history and hope lurched into view, and memory, an archaic vestige, was foisted onto them like a millstone. Liberating the future becomes the logic of the archive, and perhaps this is why the political scientist Jason Adams argued that O.W.S. is “increasingly complicating static images of space: it is, in short, occupying time”. If encampments at Zuccotti Park and other squares and public spaces around the globe marked nothing else, they marked the lawlessness of the law, or what passes for law. The real crisis is less about finance than about the social ruins that are no longer allegorical memories archaically dotting a forward-looking, modernist landscape, as Walter Benjamin held dear. Nor are they merely ungovernable disaster zones or self-contained spaces of decay within stateless states and collapsed cities. In short, ruins have become our destiny. Do you remember Occupied Berkeley and its revolt of anointed intellectual heirs decrying their education as a necrosocial graveyard “of liberal good intentions, of meritocracy, opportunity, equality, democracy?” Despite batons, pepper spray, rubber bullets, buckshot, tear gas, polycarbonate shields, orange dragnets, and military sound amplifiers, what has been occupied is the long duration of resistance: Trenton’s Army of Unoccupation, the Flint Michigan sit-down strike, the Woolworth cafeteria sit-in strike, Berkeley’s plant-in at People’s Park, an attempted occupation at New Hampshire’s Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant, the Seneca Women’s Peace Encampment, Tompkins Square Guilianiville in New York, as well as Seattle, Genoa, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Spain, Wisconsin, Wall Street – all impure, repetitive, and often self-mythologizing, occasionally sentimental.


230 “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” Walter Benjamin observed in his 1925 post-doctoral thesis Origin of the German Mourning Play (The Origin of the German Tragic Drama, Verso, 2009 p. 179). Theorist Esther Leslie comments that Benjamin’s approach dialectically entwines hope and dispar by perceiving the decimated, post-World War I European landscape as simultaneously a fascist crime, and as a “symbolic landscape within which technology and its effects have become metaphors for idealist categories.” Estehr Leslie, Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 31.

sometimes resentful, even reactionary. It is the murmur of the other archive, with its excesses, and magic gift-economies, its aesthetics of attraction, and its reanimation of dead time. Now there is only after O.W.S., no longer is there a prior to.

X.

Immediately after the police raided Occupy Oakland, a protester spoke to a radio reporter and assured her that O.W.S. had been dispersed for now, but would soon collect again in other locations, “like water.” Spores, buds, mushrooms, swarms, rhizomes, air, water; the swarmchive has emerged as a thing that seems to ask: What Am I? The answer is very simple: You Are the Swarmchive. You Are the Social.
Section 2: Chapter 4

Art After Gentrification

Figure 11. Assemble collective: yardhouse under construction, London (Image courtesy of Assemble).
Young creative professionals who operate in these collective spaces are blurring the lines between commercial and non-commercial work, shifting from one to the other, depending upon the project.

Creative New York report (2015)\textsuperscript{232}

The ability of art to ‘accumulate’ all social phenomena as instances of itself comes to resemble what capital does, in its self-expanding movement as the automatic subject.

Stakemeier & Vishmidt\textsuperscript{233}

Assemble.

Sixteen cosmopolitan hipsters lean against, squat atop or straddle across the skeletal wood frame of a three-story building in early construction stage. Wearing subdued street garb rather than sensible work clothing, one passes a square point shovel to another who dangles overhead, three engage in conversation, still another is steadying a ladder though no one seems to be on it, and high above on a roof joist sits a lone figure gazing into her mobile. None engage in actual work (why is a tool used for shoveling gravel and soil handed up?), instead they mimic acts of physical labor. The measured spacing between each of the sixteen also implies a mode of loose collectivism particular to our time, as if those present were a flash mob responding to a text message: “meet at such and such location, pick up a tool and/or find a place to sit, pose and wait for the photographer to arrive”.\textsuperscript{234} Note the remnants of a damaged brick wall visible in the distance? This is definitely not a community barn-raising even in some wind-swept prairie, but a redevelopment project located in a neglected

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{232} Creative New York report, 23. Op Cit, 1.4. note 134
\textsuperscript{233} Stakemeier and Vishmidt, \textit{Reproducing Autonomy}, 42. Op Cit, 1.4, note 128.
\textsuperscript{234} A “flash mob” is an assembly of individuals gathered via networking technology to carry out what appears to be a spontaneous short-lived, though typically absurd activity such as dancing or singing in a predetermined public space and just as quickly dispersing again.
\end{flushleft}
inner-city. Though it could be set in numerous inner-city regions or forgotten neighborhoods abandoned to ultra-free market neglect the photo it was taken in London’s former industrial area known as Sugar Hill Lane, now undergoing regeneration. And the image is popular. As of this writing some five thousand websites host digital copies of the image, which makes it viral by art world standards. Its popularity is simple. We are looking at the London-based collective Assemble, a self-described cadre of designers, builders, artists and organizers who in December of 2015 were awarded Tate’s prestigious Turner Prize for contemporary art. For some, including members of Assemble, this art world recognition came as a surprise. For others, including those who wish to fortify a link between urban regeneration and social practice art, it was all but inevitable.

Assemble’s Turner award primarily honored another inner-city regeneration project involving residents of Granby 4 Streets, an ethnically mixed area of Toxteth, Liverpool. For decades, inhabitants organized themselves into D.I.Y. work committees and guerrilla gardening teams to repair damage left over from a racially charged, anti-police rebellion some thirty years earlier. “After the riots an invisible red line was drawn around the area,” explained a resident of Granby of forty-years, before describing an “unspoken policy of no maintenance and no investment”. Successive neoliberal governments, nominally right and left-wing, continued the policy and refused to address Granby’s plight, actively disinvesting in the neighborhood for decades. As the recently released papers of a former Thatcherite minister admitted with regard to the government’s official practice of inner-city abandonment, Toxteth represented a “tactical retreat, a combination of economic erosion and encouraged evacuation”. Locals fought back with the “weapons of the weak,” blocking bulldozers and planting vegetables in the rubble, though not always entirely successful. Some residents gave up and left, but a resistant core remained to establish a Community Land Trust (C.L.T.) in 2011, giving Granby greater control over municipal funds and guidelines. Two years later, social investment

236 Assemble website: http://assemblestudio.co.U.K./?page_id=1030
237 The 1981 riots are often considered the result of a surge in unemployment amongst Toxteth’s largely black community that was already suffering as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s monetarist economic policies. Alan Travis, “Thatcher government toyed with evacuating Liverpool after 1981 riots,” The Guardian, December 29, 2011: https://www.theguardian.com/U.K./2011/dec/30/thatcher-government-liverpool-riots-1981
239 On the British government’s abandonment of the region see Travis, op. cit., note 237.
company Steinbeck Studio Limited commissioned Assemble to develop a social regeneration project with the Granby 4 Streets C.L.T., restoring to date a ten-unit section of building stock with plans for a winter garden and local artisanal cooperatives in the development stage.

Comparable stories can be identified across Europe and North America, where disinvestment in former working class areas has been a key consequence of neoliberal reforms. Deserted by policy makers, the residents of marginalized zones develop their own micro-political agency pivoting on a D.I.Y. skillset of salvaging, recycling, grass-roots entrepreneurship and forms of direct resistance that sometimes target both conservative and liberal policies (especially given that for many years neoliberal agendas now have dominated both the U.K. Labor Party and the U.S. Democratic Party, although battles within involving Sanders and Corbyn represent challenges to this alleged fait accompli). Granby 4 Streets is one of many examples that include neighborhood improvement projects, homespun cultural programs, and cooperative food/urban gardening projects, as well as tactics for evading eviction. Though each of them is defined by its particular context, comparable examples can be identified across the world, including the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, the Focus E15 Mums in Newham, East London, Radical Housing Network in Tower Hamlets, Experimental Station and Reuse Center on Chicago’s South Side, The Brooklyn Anti-gentrification Network, Baltimore Development Cooperative, or the Kaptaruny Art Village where sculptor Artur Klinau is transforming an abandoned town in rural Belarus into a literal Straw Village for himself and his artist friends.

While some of this activity involves artists or finds support with internationally-based N.G.O.s and even occasionally by enlightened municipal governments, in large part these grassroots rejuvenation and resistance projects are carried out through the pooled labor of local residents. It comes as no surprise therefore that one obvious solution to governmental neglect is found at the heart of the very same regions that capitalism withdrew from as it sought to stabilize itself following the economic collapse and racial and class-based rebellions of the 1970s and early 1980s. This socioeconomic self-repair prototype appears to be voluntary, but it is in fact virtually obligatory, forming the core rationale for twenty-first-century, top-down forms of “creative” urban redevelopment such as “placemaking,” This socioeconomic self-repair prototype appears to be voluntary, but it is in fact virtually obligatory,
forming the core rationale for 21st Century, top-down forms of urban redevelopment such as “Creative Placemaking,” a quasi-privatized initiative popular with cultural foundations and municipal agencies, as well as real estate developers. The social practice art template fits here perfectly, and seems to be a win-win for all concerned. City managers leverage low-cost cultural and community assets to solve seemingly intractable infrastructure problems; blighted neighborhoods are made livable again; and artists get an opportunity to apply their talents to real world problems outside the solitude of their studios. Typical of the enthusiasm for “arts-initiated revitalization” a 2010 National Endowment for the Arts (N.E.A.) White Paper described job creation and the re-use of “vacant and underutilized land, buildings, and infrastructure”.

And while it raises the issue of gentrification and displacement of long-term residents, the solution offered aimed to retain affordable spaces for members of the creative class, without a single proposal for shielding minority and low-income residents from permanent expulsion.

Like the U.S., the U.K. Arts Council has promoted the Creative Industries approach since the end of the cold war in the 1990s, but as Josephine B. Slater and Anthony Iles also point out in their critique of regeneration art projects, “state-led regeneration proper developed in the wake of the inner city riots which erupted across Britain’s cities in 1981, in London (Brixton), Liverpool (Toxteth), Birmingham (Handsworth) and Leeds (Chapeltown)”.

The regeneration efforts that were made, of course, need to be understood in the context of a widespread post-industrial decline, especially in the north of England, which is widely credited as a key factor in the outcome of the Brexit vote to leave the European Union. Whether state-led regeneration, or creative placemaking, has ever been anything more than a token gesture is a moot point. Similar observations could be made about the South Bronx, Detroit, Baltimore and parts of Los Angeles where creative placemaking is being tested out or already underway in communities dominated by people of color. Irrespective of the effectiveness of

240 According to www.arscapediy.org “Creative Placemaking is an evolving field of practice that intentionally leverages the power of the arts, culture and creativity to serve a community’s interest while driving a broader agenda for change, growth and transformation in a way that also builds character and quality of place.”: http://www.artscape diy.org/Creative-Placemaking/Approaches-to-Creative-Placemaking.aspx


these interventions when set against the structural tendencies that exist within capitalism, however, the 2015 Turner Prize Jury should be understood as a tribute to the Granby citizens themselves, including their bottom-up form of self-governance, which managed to salvage a story of hope from the maelstrom of neglect and disinvestment. This story is easily lost in the arguments about the extent to which Assemble’s work is art: the decision to award the prize to Assemble certainly highlighted differences of opinion among artists, and shows that the contemporary art world’s so-called social turn—as Claire Bishop pronounced it a decade ago—has arrived on the doorstep of the mainstream art establishment.

Social practice art confronts U.S. with a disarming sincerity, one that is refreshingly at odds with the typically contrived affect of the contemporary art world. As Turner Prize jury member Alistair Hudson explains his decisions to award Assemble, the collective is “not in the hierarchical structure of the art world [and] not about making art forms but about changing the way the world works, making the world a better place, making life more artful”. The power of this William Morris-like aesthetic affirmation radiates back into the collective. In a profound moment of de-alienation, one member of Assemble states about her experience in Toxteth that, “the sense of community is much stronger than anywhere I’ve ever experienced in my whole life”. This same unassuming euphoria can also be seen in Assemble’s group portrait in which their neatly choreographed bodies feign blue-collar toil while playfully making allusion to 19th Century forms of communal work. This curious, even jocular, detachment from labor underscores the group’s blithe relationship to the complex political stakes involved in what they do. After all, theirs is not an image mocking work itself, but, neither is it a classic depiction of 19th or early 20th Century emancipated socialist labor either. The group’s ironic workerism is more likely a form of collectivism after modernism, as Blake Stimson and I termed this phenomenon, which is to say, it is communalism grounded in plasticity, unity founded on difference.

246 Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Collectivism After Modernism: Art and Social Imagination*
far as social solidarity is staged via a networked aesthetic, more than it is through physical togetherness or the immediate relationship to work.  

Still, there is no satisfactory escape from the contradictions bound up with contemporary high culture, especially under present conditions of bare art, as discussed in the previous section of this volume. This is a post-avant-garde situation robbed of deep historical resources, and devoid of future utopias, with only the cunning technology of reuse available. Not surprisingly one of its primary competencies is superimposing a certain spontaneous naïveté onto clever cosmopolitanism, precisely what we see manifest in Assemble’s mass-selfie. Whatever real gains it may achieve, social regeneration art is tailor-made for a non-revolutionary now-time, covering up the effects of crisis with the infinite return of the same.

**Theaster Gates.**

Perhaps no artist embodies this curious blend of urban sophistication and uninhibited enthusiasm better than the virtuosic Theaster Gates. Like Assemble, Gates ducks the label artist (or at least he does some of the time), and yet like Assemble he is the recipient of a distinguished art world prize, the Artes Mundi. Known for leveraging sizable sums of public and private capital, Gates purchases and renovates vacant real estate on Chicago’s fiscally depressed and primarily Black South Side. Like Assemble, Gates casually and somewhat credulously sets aside the label artist in order to describe his work as “practising things – practising life, practising creation.” His reputation is embellished with a delirious combination of real and fictional monikers such as designer, architect, social worker, archivist, and urban planner, with the last of these listed on his actual curriculum vitae along with ceramicist. An African American originally from the Near West Side of Chicago, Gates has rehabilitated some thirty-two abandoned South Side homes in what he calls the

---

247 The notion of an informal or “whatever” collectivism relates to tribe-like, non-politically ideological a-political artists’ group formations that have emerged sprung up in great numbers duringin the post-modern era. This is as discussed in G. Sholette, “From radical solidarity to “whatever” collectivism...” for In The Name of Art, (sous la dir de), ed.s K. Schneller & V. Theodoropoulou V. Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2013. pp. 225–236.


249 White Cube gallery: http://whitecube.com/artists/theaster_gates/information/theaster_gates_cv/
Dorchester Project. Most of this work is carried out under the auspices of his Non-Profit umbrella organization The Rebuild Foundation. With assets in 2014 of about half a million dollars, Rebuild is the quintessential embodiment of a sustainable, artist-driven regeneration enterprise. Its mission statement promises to reactivate “underutilized properties,” invest in “creative entrepreneurs,” and empower “neighborhood transformation” through artist-driven “Intentional Aesthetics,” the latter term a possible tweak on the expression “intentional community.” Yet, while this represents Gates’s community advocacy, it is a different side of his practice that most distinguishes him from Assemble.

Gates departs from his British counterparts in two fundamental ways. First his connection to the University of Chicago where he was appointed Director of the Arts + Public Life initiative in 2011 and, second, via his skillful capitalization of art world prestige and his own ethnic identification, resources mobilized not only for the South Side rejuvenation projects, but also for his individual art practice. By actively repurposing building and industrial materials such as lumber, wooden doors, tar, tires, roofing tiles, furniture, and even decommissioned fire hoses into works of art, Gates is able to sell these mixed-media assemblages for considerable sums of money at the top tier of the global art market while concurrently making reference to African American culture. While Assemble also retails what they call “upcycled” furniture made from urban detritus, so far these pieces have not rocketed to blue chip status; perhaps because not even the Turner Prize can overpower an art collector’s preference to possess an individually-authored art object. Notwithstanding the recent embrace of socially engaged art, when it comes to commercial investments by wealthy patrons the art world remains a fundamentally conservative economic system, one that can, however, be repurposed. To whatever degree gambling with art as a financial investment strategy has always been present, playing itself out behind the closed doors of the art world, today there is no concealment needed: intervening within the system is an unabashed hallmark of bare art, just as financial scheming is of capitalism in general.

In 2012 Gates purchased the abandoned Stony Island Savings & Loan bank building from the city of Chicago for one dollar, repurposing a portion of its marble interior, including material from the water closet, into a limited edition of one hundred Bank Bonds, or more accurately, Art Bonds. Acid-etched into each sardonic collectable is the motto “In Art We Trust.” (Some

---

250 The Rebuild Foundation website is at: https://rebuild-foundation.org/
of the marble allegedly came from the bank’s urinals, thus re-inscribing the Duchampian Readymade not only with acid, but also a dose of Nietzschean ressentiment? The following year at the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland Gates’ White Cube gallery offered the satirical securities for $5,000 a piece: “I found myself with a failed bank, and here I was being invited to Basel, the land where banking never failed. So what did I do? I asked bankers to help me save my bank. That felt poetic”.

Gates exhibits a witty, even facetious disposition towards money, including the question of how it is acquired and what it can do. The capacity to toggle back and forth between a market-based art practice and Not-For-Profit social entrepreneurship provides Gates with several advantages, including managing multiple taxable income streams and expenses such as his studio of assistants. This same financial realartpolitik carries over into virtually all of the artist’s practices, sometimes appearing in a mischievous form as in the Duchampian Art Bond gambit, but at other times taking on a more indignant expression, almost as though one finally catches a glimpse behind the Gates phenomenon of a vexed class and racial frustration at work:

It’s unreasonable to think that only collectors should have the luxury to be conscious of that [investment value of the art object], and that if an artist ever became conscious of the economics associated with the art world then they would no longer be pure. That’s bullshit.

Much of the power and moral authority of Gates’s work derives from its engagement with race: “For as long as I can remember the everyday things of black people have had deep resonance for me... It’s from this place of thankfulness and reverence that I start a more critical examination of how the world sees blackness and, by extension, how the world sees me”. The relationship between appearance and identity, especially in the visual art world, is too complex to tackle

---

251 Without expressly saying so, Gates’s “Art Bonds” appear to reference Duchamp’s 1919 “Tzank Check”, a hand drawn 115 Dollar check drawn on the artist’s fictitious institution “The Teeth Loan & Trust Company Consolidated of New York.”


253 ibid.

meaningfully in this chapter except to say that perhaps more than any other frequently-cited socially engaged artist Gates’s “unapologetically black” (his phrase) practice has singularly rebooted the color spectrum emitted by art as social intervention, permanently altering what African Canadian artist Deanna Bowen calls “optical politics”.255

What is curious here is that Gates is not the first artist of color to work in the medium of direct social engagement; that distinction typically goes to African American artist Rick Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* (1993) that transform abandoned real-estate into art installation, and which is clearly a strong influence on Gates, but also Asian American Mel Chin’s *Operation Paydirt* (2006-ongoing) if we stick with the social practice genealogies developed by Tom Finkelpearl, Shannon Jackson, Nato Thompson, and Grant Kester among others, and if we hold to Claire Bishop’s 2006 historical bracket for the start of the “social turn”.256 Other precedents also exist in this regard, including Tania Bruguera’s Behavior Art School (*Cátedra Arte De Conducta*, Havana, Cuba: 2002-2009); Coco Fusco’s anti-Guantanamo Prison performance *Bare Life Study* (2005); William Pope.L’s interactive cross-state vehicle *Black Factory* (2004); Daniel J. Martinez and VinZula Kara’s West Side Chicago protest parade *Consequences of a Gesture* (1993); and also perhaps David Hammons infamous snow-ball vending action *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), or Adrian Piper’s *Funk Lessons* (1983-1985, though Kester considers the latter more pedagogical than socially participatory). However, none of these works by artists of color have made blackness a topic of discussion for social practice artists to the same degree, and in just a few short years, even before the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag went viral in 2013. Perhaps this is because, in a social practice field primarily populated by non-commercial careers, Gates has not shied away from an individual studio practice or from the market, thus bringing him into more eyeball-to-eyeball contact with the dominantly white art world pecking order. Or maybe it is because he has consistently asserted his otherness within this supposedly neutral, color-blind framework, as he did in a statement from a 2013 live-blog interview, “I don’t have to perform blacker, but that I become blacker in the presence of all you white people”.257 And with regard to the art works he produces for a largely white artworld “Black art is art that can triple code”.258

255 A comment made to me by the African-Canadian artist in a conversation about race May 9, 2016,
256 These specific authors’ works are referenced in the bibliography.
258 Cited from email to me from Theaster Gages on November 3, 2016: 6:13 AM.
Further complicating the riddle of Gates’ meteoric career is that he was almost certainly introduced to the possibilities of material salvaging and creative reuse by fellow South Side (white) artist Dan Peterman. A long-time proponent of recycling who is better known in Europe than in the U.S., Peterman is also the co-founder of Experimental Station (E.S.), a mixed-use cultural center or “border institution” as Peterman describes it, and where Gates has shared a small studio for the past decade along with a bicycle refurbishing shop, a local farmer’s market, a vegan delicatessen, and a documentary production studio known as Invisible Institute that was instrumental in forcing the city to release the sequestered dash-cam video of the 2014 police murder of black teenager Laquan McDonald. Peterman owes his own association with the art of recycling to Chicagoan Ken Dunn, a waste reuse maestro who founded the Chicago Resource Center in 1973. Dunn began experimenting with urban sustainability by employing jobless South Side residents picking up discarded cans and bottles. First of its kind in the city, the Center now has over two-dozen employees and hosts the Creative Reuse Warehouse where artists, among other re-users, pay modest fees to locate and release the possibilities latent within what Chicago had simply forsake. Peterman likens the idea of reuse to “a medieval economy or someplace where everything is still in the loop, where everything is being reworked, everything has the potential to be viewed with a new perspective”. However, the notion of keeping it small and keeping it local is simply not part of the bare art equation, or of an art world intent on unbounded expansion. By contrast, Peterman’s recycling loop almost resembles an autonomous gray zone economy:

We can actually seriously build an economy for the city of Chicago based on what are conventionally conceived of as liabilities: all the vacant lots and vacant land, the food waste and yard waste can be turned into valuable compost and turned into farms that can provide materials”.

259 Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times by a white officer on Chicago’s South Side who was subsequently charged with First Degree Murder. See Invisible Institute’s Citizens Police Data Project: https://cpdb.co/data/L5Kg6A/citizens-police-data-project ; on Peterman and Gates see: Rachel Cromidas, “In Grand Crossing, a House Becomes a Home for Art”, The New York Times, April 7, 2011: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/08/U.S./08cncculture.html?_r=0
260 The Chicago Creative Reuse Center website is at: http://resourcecenterchicago.org/
262 Ibid, 186.
While Peterman and Dunn emphasize sustainable community-oriented economies that attempt to gain some degree of political autonomy, their approach to material reuse differs from Gates in so far as the latter extends his recycling strategies not only into the mainstream art market, using a more or less Duchampian strategy to attract the surplus value of art collectors, but also expands the paradigm into such highly ambitious regeneration undertakings as Dorchester Projects or the Stony Island Savings & Loan library. Peterman’s recoverable liabilities include for Gates not only housing stock, but also undervalued and underutilized human capital, thus his direct artistic intervention into the social as a material in its own right. In addition, with some sixty people now in his employ, and the prominent rejuvenation projects as proof, the artist has delivered a significant, though still largely symbolic retort to capital’s problem of waste and surplus, material and labor. And by gaming the autonomous art (real or not, artistic autonomy still has cachet in the market) Gates gradually expands his practice beyond its initial locality. While he cut his teeth on Chicago’s South Side, the artist now insists his real challenge is “the same as it is in Liverpool, or wherever, it is: what do working people do now the industry has gone?” As a lecturer and policy adviser in the ravaged Mid-West cities of Detroit and Gary, but also the austerity choked nation of Greece and the racially and class divided city of Bristol, U.K., Gates will likely be disseminating his Dorchester Project model far beyond Chicago.

In this broader context, the significance of the 2008 real-estate bubble implosion for Gates’s practice is impossible to overlook. The artist’s first property was purchased with a sub-prime mortgage loan, and when the housing collapse hit Chicago he leveraged additional properties. Simultaneously, post-crash Quantitative Easing by the U.S. Federal Reserve helped to boost the upper tier of the art market, as historically low interest rates pushed capital towards stocks, but also art, whose notoriously opaque and unregulated market was flooded with cash. This was certainly a key reason why the art market did not collapse along with other high-income investment instruments, and one of the reasons why Gates’s

---


individual art practice could operate so effectively: there was stimulus money, guaranteed by
the state, surging into the art market. And if all of this peels back a layer or two to Gates’s
renown it is also important to note that hidden genealogies and economic stimuli are common
to the under-theorized, and under-historicized, field of socially engaged art. Neither should
this diminish the artist’s effort to establish through his own creative reuse activities a Black
art consciousness, though it does situate this ambition within a long history of such practices
on Chicago’s troubled South Side. Because along with alternative economic experimentation
and regeneration projects this regeneration paradigm also collides with a decades old,
complex history of racial tension between the University of Chicago and the surrounding
African-American community: the former consisting of a traditionally white and privileged
enclave that for years virtually blockaded its campus from residents of the surrounding low-
income African American South Side Community. However, as sociologist Julia Rothenberg
writes, with the hiring of Gates the University now suddenly appears as “a magnificently
generous benefactor and font of support for Black cultural life in the community”. Such is
realARTpolitics in the creative city. And it is also possible that Gates, as well as other social
practice artists such as Conflict Kitchen that I now turn to, actually did begin their projects
by slyly mocking the creative city model itself, only to discover over time that they had become
essentially indistinguishable from it.

Conflict Kitchen.

An art project that poses as a successful fast-food restaurant in a post-industrial American
city may seem like an odd inclusion in this chapter on regenerative social practices, but the
creative city must be fed, figuratively, as well as literally, and the consumption of food is,
after all, our primary embodied relationship to the abstract forces of social production (Gates
has also recently opened up a coffee shop on Chicago’s South Side he calls The Currency
Exchange Café.) Contemporary artists have approached commodification in their work for
decades, primarily focusing on issues of fetishization in relation to the work of art itself.

266 Ivan Lindsay, “An unintended consequence of QE: an art market boom”, September 10 2013, Spear’s
website:http://stremmelgallery.com/art-word-an-unintended-consequence-of-quantitative-easing-an-art-
market-boom/
267 Julia Rothenberg, cited from an unpublished presentation “Theaster Gates: Chicago’s
Entrepreneurial Artist.” Presented at International Sociological Association meetings in Vienna, Austria. July,
12, 2017.
Approaching group consumption itself as a site of potential intervention is less typical, though precedents reach back to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s gallery-framed curry dinners, or back further to the artist-run FOOD restaurant in New York SoHo art districted between 1971 and 1974, but neither Tiravanija nor FOOD was organized as an entrepreneurial social art project, especially one that could effectively be franchised to other regenerative city settings. By contrast, in 2010 artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski opened Conflict Kitchen (C.K.) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, “a take-out eatery that only serves food from countries with which the United States is in conflict.” Sometimes described as a “Trojan Horse” by founder Rubin, C.K. specializes in a rotating menu of cuisine from Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Afghanistan, North Korea, Palestine, and as of this writing, the indigenous nation’s alliance of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy: all countries that are in political and/or military conflict with the United States.

According to the project’s website, C.K. operates seven days a week using “the social relations of food and economic exchange to engage the general public in discussions about countries, cultures, and people that they might know little about outside of the polarizing rhetoric of governmental politics and the narrow lens of media headlines”. Fulfilling such a solemn mission involves cooking authentically prepared ethnic dishes and serving them in graphically designed informational wrappers that focus on the culture, people and politics of a given adversarial nation. Though C.K. offers diners a flavorful and inexpensive meal, it also compels patrons into an intimate encounter with their alleged enemies. In other words, there is a mischievous, even ironic dimension to the project’s stated ambitions that reminds us C.K. is also a work of contemporary art. Location also matters. Twice selected for an All American City Award (by contrast, New York City has never won), Pittsburgh is a small Northeastern service-oriented city that nevertheless represents itself as a beer drinking, blue collar sports town. Moderate in size and politically liberal in outlook, C.K. has naturally attracted a great

268 Rirkrit Tiravanija’s first pad thai art work/dinner took place in the Paula Allen Gallery in NYC in 1990 and was celebrated soon after as a form of “relational aesthetics” by critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. The cooperative restaurant known as FOOD was founded by Gordon Matta-Clark, Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard in 1971 and closed three years later. It was located on the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets in Downtown Manhattan at a time when the New York artists’ community was both local and relatively small. FOOD literally helped lay an affective foundation to the city’s art world apart from commercial interests. The cooperative was celebrated in 2013, not by a scholarly museum exhibition, or even with a relational aesthetic art project, but by a curated restaurant by Cecilia Alemani installed at the Frieze Art Fair.

269 Trojan Horse comments made by Rubin and Weleski during a presentation to ASJWG (Art & Social Justice Working Group) at the Brooklyn home of Paul Ramirez Jonas, February 19, 2015.

270 Once the anchor of U.S. steel production, today the majority of job occupations in Pittsburgh are not
deal of local media attention. When C.K. began serving Iranian food in 2010, not only did they
discover Pittsburgh’s previously cloistered Persian community, which began to flock to their
restaurant, but their project’s regional media focus went national and then international.

With bright blue and gold colors alluding to ancient Persia, the Kubideh Kitchen wrapper
included short paragraphs about such topics as the 1979 revolution, conflict with Israel, the
U.S. Perception of Iran, and Nuclear Power, as well as such less charged subjects as tea,
bread, film and fashion. But when in the Fall of 2014 the kitchen staff began turning out
traditional Palestinian meals including Shawarma roasted chicken, falafel and baba ganoush,
things got ugly. The new menu was wrapped up in a packaging design citing a range of topics
raised by Palestinians living in Pittsburgh, but also from interviews conducted during on a
ten-day visit to Palestine in May of 2014 by C.K. director Rubin, and co-directors Weleski
and chef Robert Sayer. For example, one wrapper about Israeli Settlements reads: “it’s about
fragmenting and isolating Palestinian communities;” and on the Palestinian Authority: “We
have two problems. The first is the occupation and the second is the Palestinian Authority”.
Another about “Resistance” states: “Palestinians are not going to just let you in and drop
their arms.” And a more detailed illustration is offered by one yet another wrapper that reads
in part, “Israeli soldiers shot our friend Bassim [with a tear gas canister] it made a big hole
in his chest and killed him. The canister was made in Western Pennsylvania.” Still other
short texts focus on marriage, dating and olive trees, and all of this was printed on C.K. food
wrappers.

But almost immediately after C.K. began to serve Palestinian food, the project received a death
threat, forcing Rubin and Weleski to shut down operations for several days as authorities
investigated. Previous to the threat, pressure from conservative Jewish organizations forced
one of the project’s sponsors, the University of Pittsburgh’s Honors College, to withdraw their

working class, but service and administrative related including office support (16.8 per cent), Sales (10.5 per
cent), Food preparation (8.9 per cent), Healthcare (7.2 per cent), Education (5.7 per cent), business and finance
(5.1 per cent), management (4 per cent). By contrast, construction, maintenance, transportation, production,
farming and fishing are only 20.5 per cent of total regional employment according to U.S. Bureau of Labor


271 The texts consisted of interviews between CK and residents of Palestinian lands including “The West
Bank, Gaza and the diaspora,” see: “New Palestinian Interview Wrappers” online at: http://conflictkitchen.
org/2015/04/16/new-palestinian-interview-wrappers/
funding. C.K. later reopened under police protection but with heightened media attention from global news agencies including The Washington Post, Al Jazeera, BBC, El Mundo and even Tonight Show humorist Jay Leno, who referred to the besieged art project in one of his stand-up routines. The comedic connection is less baffling when one learns the importance of humor to Rubin’s aesthetic concerns:

Humor is the thing the visual arts have that gets you in the gut... I’m doing a project with my friend who lives in Iran to have a sitcom in Los Angeles and Tehran. The family will be stuck in two realities at the same time. The kid knows what’s happening and the others don’t. Conflict and miscommunication is the core of comedy.²⁷³

Rubin concludes by rhetorically asking if it is possible to “create an innocuous environment to bring up political issues without censorship?” The Trojan horse recipe he and Weleski operate from is clear. Smuggle politics in through the back door of a familiar setting, in this case a fast-food restaurant. This artistic subterfuge built upon C.K.’s previous iteration as The Waffle Shop, a late night Pittsburgh eatery where customers could order vegan waffles and take part in a live television broadcast involving “the storytelling vernacular of a talk show”.²⁷⁴

The Waffle Shop developed out of an undergraduate art seminar Rubin taught at Carnegie Mellon University (C.M.U.) between 2009 and 2012. Before long it evolved from a social art experiment into a full-fledged enterprise in which a series of rotating hosts conversed with patrons in the type of empty patter typical of televised talk show programming. Supported in part by the Center for the Arts in Society at C.M.U., though mostly funded through its own sales, the Waffle Shop was located in the East Liberty section of the city. According to a 2009 article in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the once economically blighted neighborhood was “on a rocket’s trajectory”, with upscale food stores, hotels, a Home Depot and more than a dozen developers actively transforming its bankrupt infrastructure into an attractive target for capital investment.²⁷⁵ As in so many similar rejuvenation scenarios, East Liberty’s mostly black, low-income residents were systematically edged out of the neighbourhood in order to

²⁷⁴ Jon Rubin’s website: http://www.jonrubin.net/#/the-waffle-shop-talk-show/
make way for middle and upper income residents, who are also predominantly white. In this regard, the Waffle Shop was both similar and different. Rubin managed to get a reduced rent from the landlord and that cost was picked up by C.M.U.. At the same time the Waffle Shop soon managed to generate its own revenue from sales, reportedly employing some 450 students over the course of its business life. Rubin’s student-run art project operated between the hours of 10 p.m. and 3 a.m.; giving it the air of a nightclub for insomniacs. The Waffle Shop’s curious mix of food enterprise plus a side of reality TV was made-to-measure for the so-called creative class: knowledge-based professionals whose flexible, adrenaline charged work schedules favored a place with cheap coffee and sugary confections for knocking out that website design, concert deal, or press release on a tight, redeye deadline.

In practice however, most regular waffle eaters came from the Shadow Lounge, a late-night hip-hop music club located next door. That did not prevent Pittsburgh policy shapers from seeing The Waffle Shop as a creative cities type venture useful for anchoring broader urban changes. Assistant city planning director for development and design cited the project when she stated “art can stimulate development. For example, the Waffle Shop became an East Liberty destination that contributed to the neighborhood’s development buzz, officials said”.

Whether or not grabbing a midnight snack plus a side of realitytainment led to the neighborhood’s upclassing is unclear. But as cuisine, The Waffle Shop ranked fair to good. As television, it was no less trite than most broadcast fare. But as art, The Waffle Shop, just like Conflict Kitchen, put forth an imposing organizational model that Rubin insists, “hybridized many social identities as it simultaneously functioned as a restaurant, talk show, business

---

276 ’The city’s housing policies over the past four decades led to “the forced migration of black people from Pittsburgh to the suburbs,” with the black population declining to 79,789 in 2010 from about 102,000 in 1980, a 22 percent drop,” Tom Fontaine, Hill District group: as quoted in “Civic Arena plan unfair to black residents,” Trib Live, January 7, 2016: http://triblive.com/news/allegheny/9737974-74/housing-affordable-black


280 Customer reviews from Yelp.com include: “I wouldn’t go here for the food alone, but it is a neat little venue with a live talk show, which is something you don’t see every day.” “Pretty good, actually, but not worth a detour.” “The format is irrefutably weird.” “Quirky spot. Great for a late night bite.” http://www.yelp.com/biz/waffle-shop-pittsburgh
venture, public artwork, and classroom". What presumably keeps it ontologically grounded as contemporary art is C.K.’s dialogically aesthetic ambition. For art historian Grant Kester, dialogical art draws indirectly on the ideas of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky and German playwright Bertolt Brecht. At the start of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Shklovsky’s technique of ostranenie (остранение) or defamiliarization sought to make what is familiar strange, thus freeing it from cultural ossification. Notably his estrangement process contrasts with the aesthetic approach of artists Tatlin, Popova, and Rodchenko whose concept of Constructivism sought to replace existing cultural forms with a completely new society merging art and life. It was Brecht who blended aspects of both avant-garde tendencies in his own estrangement effect by instructing actors to alienate their performance from traditional bourgeois theater’s illusionary mise-en-scène. Ideally, once the Fourth Wall separating audience from stage was lifted, a real-time space remained behind in which candid and improvised reflections on art and politics and revolutionary change could unfold.

Sensing that the late 20th Century neo-avant-garde had stripped these practices of their social and political context, Kester takes issue with the resulting tendency to serve up cultural alienation for its own sake, without the secondary process of critique, reflection and reassessment provided for in earlier avant-garde theories. Pointing to the paradox of “liberating” a subjugated population by cruelly negating the comfort of representational conventions and clichés, Kester proposes that the next step after shocking the viewer is engaging in participatory conversation about the shortcomings of existing social conditions. The resulting dialogical aesthetic aims to reimagine art and society as a more democratic collaborative project. Curiously, C.K. splices Kester’s dialogical aesthetic directly into the context of a carefully staged world of deception in which patrons’ expectations are reprocessed through an intimate encounter with their alleged geopolitical enemies. That there is humor in this confrontational platform there is no doubt. Whether or not diners leave the kitchen more enlightened is difficult to assess, though perhaps Rubin and Weleski will make outcome evaluation part of their project going forwards. Still, it is probably more accurate to suggest that both The Waffle Shop and C.K.’s version of audience estrangement is not an attempt

281 Artist Jon Rubin’s website: http://www.jonrubin.net/the-waffle-shop-talk-show-1/
283 Grant Kester, ibid.
at resurrecting pre-war avant-garde techniques, but instead derives from secondary or even tertiary pop-cultural sources including The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live whose reality television parodies and mock-news broadcasts borrow indirectly from early 20th Century art innovators.\(^{284}\)

Notably, Conflict Kitchen’s name and mission closely resemble another food related art project entitled Enemy Kitchen (E.K.) developed six years earlier by Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz. While neither Rubin nor Weleski have officially commented on the similarities of the two projects, Rakowitz amiably grants that “there is room in the world for both projects to exist”.\(^{285}\) E.K.’s origins are also in the classroom where, beginning in 2003, concurrent with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the artist taught middle school students how to make his Iraqi-Jewish mother’s chewy Kubba dumpling dish. The classroom became a space for “dispersing cooking technique and a space for conversation making as an act of resistance”.\(^{286}\) E.K. later evolved into a Chicago food truck that employed U.S. veterans of the Iraq War as sous-chefs/servers taking orders from Iraqi refugee chefs. The ensuing conversation between truck operators and residents is the heart of Rakowitz’s project that he believes inverts power relations between military personnel and refugees so that “friction and discomfort is made visible”.\(^{287}\) Rakowitz, trained as a sculptor, explains that “instead of the kind of didactic approach Conflict Kitchen take with their wrappers, I am interested in having people in relation to the object”.\(^{288}\) The paper plates on which E.K.’s food is served are replicas made from Saddam Hussein’s hospitality dinnerware and E.K.’s kitchen knife was forged for Rakowitz by Hussein’s personal sword maker. And while Rubin and Weleski have not sought to expand the range of what constitutes actual conflict to include their own city, one could easily imagine a curated African American cuisine phase complete with wrappers exploring issues of displacement in a gentrifying creative city like Pittsburgh.\(^{289}\)

\(^{284}\) Both programs emerged from Chicago’s satirical comedy troupe The Second City whose founder, Paul Sills, in turn employed both the improvisational techniques made famous by Viola Spolin, but also the radical cabaret theater of Bertolt Brecht as reported in Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p 122.

\(^{285}\) All quotes are from a telephone interview with Mike Rakowitz conducted March 1, 2015.

\(^{286}\) ibid.

\(^{287}\) ibid.

\(^{288}\) ibid.

\(^{289}\) C.K. has featured a two-day menu created by local African American and Caribbean chefs celebrating “Juneteenth” (June 19-20th), which marks the date in 1865 that Texas finally abolished slavery, thus bringing all states into accordance with President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.
Bare Art/ Real Estate.

Up to a point, Assemble, Gates’s Dorchester Projects, the Waffle Shop, and C.K. all pivot on a similarly anomalous logic in which participant’s reality frame is undermined and sustained at one and the same time. On one hand this brings the laws of capital, as well as state and municipal regulators, directly into art’s ontological frame. Whether post-Fordist capitalism now resembles art, or vice versa, virtually everything we thought we knew about serious culture has been peeled away with astonishing force, leaving behind a raw, and in some ways vulnerable thing: a bare art world, fully congruent with the political and economic emergency that marks our contemporaneous present. On the other hand, in a society dominated by entrepreneurship and risk, such real world practices as regenerative social art inevitably serve to map the tactics of a certain artistic vanguard directly onto the raw and unmediated capitalist reality of the 21st Century. Without contesting the dialogical value of these practices at a local level, as Marina Vishmidt warns, the transfer of art from the sphere of culture into the realm of real-estate, contract law and business, permits:

art to stop being art, or to stop being only art, and allows it to start playing a much more direct role as a channel of empowerment, governance, and even accumulation—if only of “social capital”—for specific communities and in specific contexts...we thus seem to be living through a moment of semantically frictionless yet socially devastating fusion between the social and capital”.

I would go a step further, but also one step back, by suggesting this slippery transition from art to life is more real than a mere semantic integration, one that is therefore free of neither class conflict nor racial and gender discord. I would go a step further, but also one step back, by suggesting this slippery transition from art to life is more real than a mere semantic integration, and yet neither is it free of class conflict or racial and gender discord. Since contemporary art no longer has any meaningful contextual or formal limits, it is also no longer possible for any art practice to radically exceed or subvert the field’s existing boundaries.

---


or discursive framing. This *bare art* condition is a state of cultural over-exposure in which the horizon of art’s future possibilities is also its infinite conventionality made visible as an exhausted canonical finitude, and it is not always clear that empowerment can be the result. Bare art has merged with life, while life is permeated by capital. What was once capital’s crisis is now also that of art, institutionally as well as epistemologically and ontologically. What is overlooked by Vishmidt’s understandable pessimism therefore is that this change of status forces art into an encounter with social frictions operating within capitalist forces of production. This is especially evident when socio-economic art practitioners mobilize the undervalued labor power of other artists for their own projects. Probably, almost certainly, it always was this way, though now, under the stark conditions of bare art, there is no reliable means of concealing this fact. The truth will out, leading to conflicts of a decidedly real-world nature once perceived as largely external to art.

In a 2009 University of Chicago public forum, Theaster Gates confessed to listeners that his temporary staff wanted “healthcare benefits...they want their family members to fly free to Documenta...they made me rich...what do I do?” Musing on this situation, but also on divisions of labor within the contemporary artworld in general, John Preus, a former Gate’s fabricator, rhetorically asks

> how is it that the image of labor is still so compelling? From the early yearnings to turn lead into gold, to the fountain of youth, we have returned to the blue collar transformations of hands and material as a sort of spiritual placeholder, reifying the Laborer as the inarticulate alchemist, the one whose knowledge of the material world is true and pure...Is this simply another instance of the poet falling in love with the shipbuilder, ostensibly amplifying the plight of the common man against the supposed frivolity of the upper classes and academics? Could we call this phenomenon Bluewashing? And how far can such populism stretch, as the celebrity of the artist increases?

These days Gates produces his studio based art by himself, while assistants are deployed to fabricate projects related to the Rebuild Foundation side of the artist’s career. Nevertheless, whenever intentional aesthetic practices tap into actual legal, economic and social production

---


293 Excerpted from an unpublished memoir by John Preus shared with the author on August 23, 2016: 12:12PM.
frameworks labor related conflict inevitably arises. More recently the fifteen person staff of Conflict Kitchen decided to form a union “Inspired by food service workers across the country fighting for fifteen dollars an hour, we the workers of Conflict Kitchen have decided to come together to organize for living wages, fair benefits, and recognition of the key role we play in the [art] project”. The project’s business success has required a staff including a full-time chef, a couple of management personnel and project researchers, as well as over a dozen kitchen employees who voted to join Local 23 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union in an effort to improve working conditions at C.K.. As one employee explains “I’ve had eight jobs in Pittsburgh since I moved here ten months ago. Like Conflict Kitchen, not getting paid enough is the baseline for all of these jobs”. Another staff member, however, focuses on the aesthetic dimension of the job, reporting that along with better wages about half the staff wanted to be more involved in researching and programming. All of us are interested in harnessing our skills and interest and apply them to a project in a small way and making more money and having the benefits we deserve will give us the power and confidence to make small changes and programing ideas that might change the direction of Conflict Kitchen.

C.K.’s employees have come to realize that they are in fact not artistic representations of food preparation workers who perform their tasks as if on display in some historical village reenactment, but are instead actual food service employees on the payroll of a socially engaged art project known as Conflict Kitchen. No doubt Brecht would approve of this double estrangement procedure in which an allegedly non-alienated artistic labor force undertakes its own self-alienation in order to generate a more real mode of collective solidarity that demands recognition for the value it adds to a work of contemporary art, which also happens to be a profitable commodity. It is important to add that the C.K. labor conflict is directed less at Rubin and Weleski, or at the art project, than it is towards Carnegie Mellon University (C.M.U.) who contracts the kitchen’s workers. Nevertheless, it is clear that a socially engaged artwork such as C.K. that is virtually interchangeable with reality also inevitably thrusts all of its participants into a day-to-day struggle with the legal, inter-social, and economic minutia of contemporary life operating beyond the sphere of autonomous art’s safety zone. That same

296 From a phone interview with Conflict Kitchen employee Clara Gamalski, October 29, 2015.
up-scaling of an art work to fully synchronize with life, in fact to become interchangeable with the everyday world, this evolution would once upon a time been celebrated as a triumph for the avant-garde, but under current circumstances, this shift reflects conditions particular to the crisis of capitalism, as well as art's own response to the impoverished status of the bare artworld. It is important to add that the C.K. conflict is directed less at Rubin and Weleski or the art project than it is towards Carnegie Mellon University (C.M.U.) who contracts the kitchen’s workers, nevertheless a socially engaged art work that is interchangeable with reality inevitably permeates all participants in the day-to-day legal and economic realities of contemporary life.

**Social Practice/Social Labor.**

The ethos of socially engaged art makes managing worker-oriented concerns an especially knotty affair. Which is to say, in a bare art world, contemporary artists, especially social practice regenerative artists, find many of the conflicts and dilemmas inherent to autonomous bourgeois art do not only remain in effect, but they have now been raised-up to a higher level of concreteness. While Rubin and Weleski allowed the C.K. unionization take place, and Gates has publicly struggled with such issues, there is a broader transformation underway as contemporary art and labor disputes spread.

Since the 2008 economic crisis we find art fabricators, cultural interns, studio managers and so forth collectively growing more assertive about their right to better working conditions and higher pay. In early summer of 2016 art world megastar Jeff Koons is alleged to have abruptly “laid off” fourteen of his painting staff in response to an attempt at unionization, whether or not this proves accurate is perhaps less important that the fact it seems perfectly plausible because enterprise culture has made such day-to-day conflicts just another facet of the bare art world phenomenon as agured in this thesis. To these labor-related tensions we can add the activism of W.A.G.E., Arts & Labor, Gulf Labor, G.U.L.F. (Global Ultra Luxury Faction), Debt Fair, and bfamfaphd.org discussed in the Introduction to Section One: *Welcome to Our Artworld*, but also the recently formed U.K. Artists’ Union England, the art as social factory research of the Slow/Free University of Warsaw, the investigation of divisions of artistic labor by the European think-tank Former West, and even as I write this, the Guerilla Girls are organizing a joint action with the Precarious
Workers Brigade in London focusing on unpaid art world internships, and W.A.G.E. is preparing to roll out a new coalition program called WAGENCY that seeks to go beyond issues of fair pay to tap into the developing political potential of artistic labor in general, while in the Basque region of Spain the educational staff of the Guggenheim Bilbao are protesting in the streets to denounce the “McDonaldization” of major museums by arguing, “We live a moment without precedents in museum history, which has lost respect for the cultural worker, turned into staff throwaway”.

This is not a comprehensive list, however, what it evinces is the fact that we are experiencing a phase of long-overdue reflection, advocacy, and action focused on the working conditions of artists and cultural workers. This reaction is spurred on by the chronically unmanageable repercussions of the financial collapse. But if cultural labor’s response is to rise above the important, though limited, need to improve the distribution of art world benefits by addressing deeper structural and political concerns, it may depend on our ability to link present conditions of bare art to the crisis and delirium of capital. As capitalism’s long-term contradictions deepen, in the form of an ever-weirder symptomology of bizarre negative interest rates, persistent underemployment and excess populations, an oversupply of artists and an ever-accelerating series of ponzi-like schemes involving bubble and burst debt and investment cycles, fundamental questions arise about the role of high culture. Art now speaks the grammar of finance, doing so with such aptitude that no accent is evident (though one is frequently affected), but labor disputes and signs of class struggle arise within it. At the same time, the sincere and sprightly good will of socially committed artists and urban rejuvenators stretches out far beyond the province of high culture in search of a desperate solution to the failures of neoliberal capitalism, and mainstream art prizes are awarded to them. Even though the art world is insulated from the economic effects of crisis, it becomes disorganized by it. One newly advertised project in N.Y.C. pretty much sums the situation up with uncanny precision (and note the reference to Intentional Community):

Art Condo is a professional real estate project and an Intentional Community based in the social sculpture ideas of Joseph Beuys [and] a community-drive real estate enterprise that helps creative individuals purchase and develop buildings, collectively, in partnership with neighborhood residents.

---

297 W.A.G.E. WAGENCY: Artist Certification & Coalition “is intended to build economic and political solidarity among artists by uniting them around shared principles of equity”; and on the Guggenheim Bilbao: http://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Educadores-del-Museo-Guggenheim-de-Bilbao-despedidos-por-hacer-huelga
298 N.Y.C. Art Condo website is at, http://artcondo.com/sign-up/
Expect more, not less, of these hybridized art and business enterprises as the crisis drags on. More Beuys-inspired condos, pop-up cultural ventures, university funded art eateries, and public-private creative placemaking initiatives. However, if cultural entrepreneurship and creative reuse represent art’s gift to capital, the gift is not free of contaminating animus, or even a degree of venom. On one hand, we find low-income residents and communities of color raising charges of art-washing and heightened gentrification when such projects are brought into discussion. On the other hand, social regeneration art illustrates a means of temporarily reappropriating and distorting mainstream market enclosures, adding local value to people and spaces abandoned by capital. In the crisis management portfolio, social regenerative practices are one tool among others, and probably the preferred mechanism for taming, or at least seeming to, a system spinning out of control: small in scale but high in visibility, such projects keep at arms’ length difficult ideological questions about the role that state and municipal agencies might play in moderating the deleterious effects of capitalism.

In order to save itself, capital goes to extraordinary lengths, even absorbing alien modes of production into its repertoire of perseverance, including experimental modalities of avant-garde art, if only assimilated superficially, at a formal level. And yet the more capital subsumes what was once “other” to it, including labor as Negri and others pointed out decades ago, or the reproductive systems of biopower as Federici and other feminists have insisted, or dark matter creativity for that matter, the more capital returns to itself the destructured society it has created, sometimes with a vengeance.299

---

299 Antonio Negri’s early writings on working class destructuring and resistance is taken up below in the introduction to Section Three: Resistance. Negri offers one explanation for the potentially destructive results of capital’s subsumption and fragmentation of working class culture. Sylvia Federici’s research on capitalist reproduction in her book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004) proposes that the feminist re-appropriation of female labor and the public commons as long-term resistance to capitalist enclosures. Nonetheless, neoliberal privatization, flexibilized post-Fordist production, and robotization are blurring the realm of work and domestic space, leading to the destabilization of traditional forms of feminist resistance, such as calls for wages for housework, while opening up other avenues of affective resistance within the networked economy, see for example Jessalynn Keller argument in *Girls’ Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, Routledge, 2015. And my own concept of cultural dark matter inevitably reflects both aspirations as well as resentments, a danger that is discussed in the next chapter on the Maidan uprising.
Section 3: RESISTANCE

Introduction: Critical Praxis/Partisan Art

Figure 12. Page 74 from an anti-catalog by Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, 1976 (Image courtesy of the author’s archives: http://darkmatterarchives.net).
What do we do now? Since the Revolution Egyptian artists have been running about like headless chickens. Their concerns have taken an almost existential dimension. What do we do now? Do we keep doing what we used to do? Where do “we” end and our art begin?

Coa Aly

Then, in the 1990s, a fresh wave of activist art and cultural collectivism emerged to immediately challenge many key assumptions held by an earlier generation of politically engaged artists still linked to the rebellions of May 1968. Dovetailing with the rise of the counter, or “alt” globalization movement, this new cultural activism was less concerned with demystifying ideology than “creatively disrupting it.” Unlike most of the critical art practices of the 1970s and 1980s in which dominant representational forms were systematically analyzed through a variety of methods ranging from Semiotics to Marxism, Feminism and Psychoanalysis, the new approach plowed directly, some would say gleefully, into what Guy Debord described as the Society of the Spectacle. Groups such as RTmark, The Yes Men, Yomango, Electronic Disturbance Theater, Nettime, and Critical Art Ensemble among other artists’ collectives took full advantage of increasingly widespread and affordable digital communication networks in order to practice what was often referred to as Tactical Media, a concept inspired as much by the Zapatista rebellion as it was by the Situationist International. According to key theorists of tactical media David Garcia and Geert Lovink, the practice involved appropriation of cheap, available technologies for the purpose of engendering political resistance amongst socially disenfranchised populations.  

---

Artists.

The opening essay for this section, *Counting on Your Collective Silence*, examines the process of artistic collectivization that often flows from moments when capitalism is in crisis or when it is delirious with imagined possibilities of endless profitability and prosperity. It was written in 1999, the same year online shopping emerged into the mainstream, sending technology-related stock investing into an “irrational exuberance” as the market appeared incapable of backsliding. Major investors such as George Soros dumped conventional industry stocks to plow their capital into Internet start-ups. At one point in 2000 the money manager of his Quantum Fund declared “This is insane. I’ve never owned a stock that goes from $40 to $250 in a few months”. Indeed, the Internet itself was viewed not only as capitalism’s savior, but as a libertarian machine for spreading Western democratic ideals. In his highly influential *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* from that same year, Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig stated that oppressive nations were about to:

wake up to find that their telephone lines are tools of free expression, that e-mail carries news of their repression far beyond their borders, that images are no longer the monopoly of state-run television stations but can be transmitted from a simple modem. We have exported to the world, through the architecture of the Internet, a First Amendment *in code* more extreme than our First Amendment in *law*.304

And then of course the so-called dot.com bubble imploded, shattering the hallucination of capitalism 2.0 as trillions of (fictitious) dollars disappeared from the global economy. But if *Collective Silence* reflects any aspect of the pre-crash delirium, it does so darkly by questioning the Internet’s acceleration of a market-based pseudo-collectivism and proposing in response a self-organized activist alternative. The essay draws on the plot of the 1999 blockbuster movie *The Matrix*, as well as from my own experience co-founding and co-developing such groups as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (P.A.D./D., 1980 -1988), and REPOhistory (1989-2000). In fact, this essay was completed about a year

302 Federal Reserve Board chairman Alan Greenspan described the early 1990s technology bubble as “irrational exuberance” at a meeting of the American Enterprise Institute in 1996, immediately pushing the stock market lower. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irrational_exuberance
before REPOhistory also expired, not because of over-capitalization like the stock market, but due in large part to the steeply rising cost of living in N.Y.C., and also the heightened social challenges presented by collective practice about which the Collective Silence has much to say. The essay therefore sets the tone for the concluding section on Resistance, not by celebrating oppositional practices uncritically, but by seeking to dig deeply into the complex relationship between self-organized group work and the historical, political and economic realities that play out within the very heart of organized social labor. In short, Counting on your Collective Silence reflects upon the possibilities and limits of collectivism after modernism, that is to say, after the end of actually existing socialism as much as Surrealism and other grand Modernist notions of collectivity that had, by the end of the twentieth century, already lost much of their allure to younger artists.305

“Collective Silence” also attempts to read communal labor figuratively, as Fredric Jameson might do, by asking what does collectivism represent in the social imaginary of the West following the collapse of actually existing socialism a decade earlier.306 One answer seemed to be found in popular culture where an image of social cooperation was especially visible in certain science fiction and horror movie narratives. That same year the movie The Matrix appeared.307 With its story pivoting on a ragtag team of multi-cultural cyber-space guerrillas who are forced into collective action by a mutual desire to awaken from an otherwise veiled state of exploitation and objectification, the movie seemed made to order for my evolving thesis by perfectly illustrating the state of collectivism at the end of the 20th Century.308 Two other concerns also became paramount as the essay came together. First, was a need to tackle the conspicuous absence of informal groups and collectives from the art historical record. Many of my subsequent writings focus on this gap in the official cultural narrative of high art, ultimately leading to the development of the “dark matter” thesis in the late 1990s. However, it was a second and equally pressing concern involving the unstable nature

306 Fundamental to Fredric Jameson’s hermeneutical approach in books such as “The Political Unconscious” is the interpretation of cultural phenomenon –both the high arts as well as popular culture including cinema– as part of a longer-term historical narrative that reflect such themes as class struggle and collective identity. Jameson, 1981, op cit.
308 Slavoj Zizek’s Lacanian-inspired exposition of the film, “The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion,” appeared online after my essay was completed: Lacan Dot Com: http://www.lacan.com/zizek-matrix.htm
of collective practice itself that *Collective Silence* primarily focuses on, and the explanatory model for this instability has had an equally long-term effect on my thinking. The question that bedeviled me was how to interpret the often intense, interpersonal messiness of group practice, including the challenge of collective decision-making, as well as the appearance of unspoken hierarchies in what is supposed to be a horizontal mode of social organizing? These obstacles to unity included unacknowledged pecking orders reflecting differences in gender, ethnicity, age, education, and class, problems that plagued modern social conditions in general and that collective practice was supposed to resolve. The most satisfactory responses led me entirely outside the field of art, or so it seemed.

Drawing on the early writings of Antonio Negri, *Collective Silence* makes use of the Italian philosopher’s concept of destructuration, in which working class self-organization and refusal to work in Italy in the late 1970s simultaneously broke down the disciplinary structures of the factory and made evident the discontinuous and disintegrated nature of working class experience itself. In such texts as *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse and Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of State-Form* (with Michael Hardt), Negri considered this state of fragmentation and discontinuity to be the direct result of capitalist processes of value extraction through work speed-ups, union busting, and automation of production.\(^{309}\) At the same time he recognized that this act of destabilization was in turn undermining capital itself, at least in so far as it pushed workers into acts of resistance and even sabotage. But Negri was also criticizing the role of the traditional Communist party that had long served as a disciplining mechanism in itself, as well as a regulator of working class resistance and thus complicit with capital. “The problem of the party today is the present reality of a real contradiction,” he writes, adding that it contains “the same contradiction that you find between the personal and the political, between self-valorization and destructuring, between destructuring and destabilization.” \(^{310}\)

Negri’s focus on spontaneous acts of direct working class resistance seemed to resonate with much of my experience working in various self-organized artists’ collectives. To underscore


this conceivable homology I conducted short interviews about collective experience with other artists. The response involved a mixture of elation and discord perceived to be right at the very core of the collective experience. I scattered excerpts of these observations throughout the essay (later, for the 2011 book *Dark Matter*, I generated a modest survey of collective practices in an attempt to map their size, longevity, organizational framework and other aspects of this collectivist topography). *Collective Silence* proposes that the contradictions and destructive forces of society at large are not excluded, expelled or resolved within self-organized group formations, but are instead actually amplified whenever individuals consciously seek to work together in a subgroup that is nevertheless surrounded by existing conditions of capitalist exploitation. And yet it is this same heightened tension and concentration of contradictions that forms the source of those exhilarating, short-lived moments of collective enthusiasm when things go well, as well as the extreme distress when they do not. It is in fact this instability that marks the point of departure for the study of collectivism after modernism, as Blake Stimson and I – but also John Roberts, Marc Léger, Brian Holmes, Kim Charnley and others – have endeavored to explore.\(^{311}\)

Negri’s pre-*Empire* theoretical writings were a significant influence on my own ideas and writing. I first read his work sometime in the mid-1980s as a member of the P.A.D./D. Reading Group where we worked collectively on his unconventional interpretation of Marx’s *Grundrisse* (the first English collection of these translated writings was published by Bergin and Garvey in 1984 as *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons from the Grundrisse*). Perhaps it was Negri’s direct experience with working class struggles in 1970s Italy and his attempt to theorize his involvement that spoke to me in the late 1990s in a way that the then popular writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe did not.\(^{312}\) Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of “agonism” seemed at the time, and still seems today, a means of side-stepping the exploitative inner workings of capital by shifting issues of political resistance away from a struggle over control of one’s own time and labor, towards a notion of political conflict manifest at the level of language. While recognizing that Laclau and Mouffe’s critique offered a partial corrective to what was an over-emphasis on the determining role of the economic base within all superstructural social formations, their version of agonism did away completely with

---

\(^{311}\) See bibliographic references for the major publications of each author.

the primary critique of political economy: that it always reproduces and exacerbates class inequalities. Furthermore, the exact nature of the mechanisms producing their model of antagonistic tension relies rests, if that is the word, on anti-foundational post-structuralist concepts of difference and discourse theory that at best leave Laclau and Mouffe's concept of agonism theoretically fuzzy, and at worst politically disarming.

Still, my own background no doubt helped tilt me towards a Marxist critique of capital. As the only college graduate in a family of four siblings I paid for classes at the local community college by working as a late night janitor in a computer hardware factory. Though all employees were gone by the time I arrived at the facility, sometimes after midnight following a long day of studio art classes and could visualize the supervisors stationed behind oversized interior windows as they watched over rows of wooden workbenches where men and women spent their days soldering electronic circuit boards. A few workstations also contained small craft projects workers produced on breaks, an observation that directly influenced my Dark Matter thesis many years later. Class stratification, in other words, was deducible from the very layout of the plant I maintained. At the same time, Collective Silence also recognizes the evolving nature of class composition, putting to work a comment by the late Gilles Deleuze in which the philosopher mused, “man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt”. As much as the late 1990s is characterized by the irrational exuberance of the dot.com stock market, it was also a moment when personal indebtedness rose conspicuously.

Following the late 1970s deregulation of financial industries, “a wave of unscrupulous and excessive practices” was ushered in as credit card companies engaged in aggressive marketing, lowering minimum payment requirements while raising late fees and other financial penalties. Between 1980 and 1999 credit card debt in the U.S. went from 111 billion dollars to nearly 600 billion. The very notion of an American middle class always so central to global capitalist ideology was beginning to come undone in a process that would only be fully revealed about a decade later during the financial meltdown of 2007-2009. Arriving at the same time as this widespread class decomposition, or as Negri would called it “class destructuration,” was the

technologically enhanced marketing apparatus of the Internet. Consumer behavior could now be tracked in real-time, almost like mice in a laboratory maze: their buying habits, lifestyle and interpersonal interactivity gathered into data sets for mining and mapping both the aggregate and individual desire of the population. Primitive by today’s standards, late 1990s human marketization technology took advantage of widening Internet usage to accelerate the integration of the population into capitalist modes of valorization and consumption. And this was happening not only in places of work, but also at home and even in public spaces, all locations where workers once withdrew away from the disciplinary regimes of capitalist production. Simultaneously, this same technology opened up possibilities of connecting forms of communal resistance to the market that had always existed in isolation from one another.

Dark Matter Unconcealed.

In reality, fantasy is a specific means of production engaged in a process that is not visible to capital’s interest in exploitation: the transformation of the relations between human beings and nature, along with the re-appropriation of the dead labor of generations that is sedimented into history.

Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere revisits key concerns of my thesis on dark matter first outlined several years earlier, and later developed into book form. Initially presented as a paper written for the conference Marxism and Visual Art Now (M.A.V.A.N.) held at the University College London in 2002. The text takes to task “radical” art historians for their indifference to oppositional culture and activist art even as they frequently apply their Marxist analysis to the familiar roster of luminaries already valorized by the art world establishment. The essay also proposes that art has at last merged with life, but that the life it has merged with is appalling. It also touches on the “pre-failed” status of M.F.A. students, the theoretical impact of a withdrawal by this ubiquitous dark matter labor force on the

318 The MAVAN conference, where an earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper, was held at University College London, April 8-10, 2002. This essay appeared in the a book emerging from that conference As Radical As Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century, edited by Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts for Peter Lang Publishers (Oxford, U.K.: 2007).
mainstream art world, and the latent reactionary aspects of dark matter as it becomes brighter while acknowledging the importance of pleasurable gift economies that operate within this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{319} It seeks to reminds U.S. of the historical, archival narrative from below, while recognizing that it is a fragmented lacuna. But my essay also insists that it is within the archives of this shadowed counter-public sphere of resistant culture where the radical art historian should be at work, and not in the celebrated temples of what O.K. Werckmeister calls Citadel Culture.\textsuperscript{320}

The concept of dark matter creativity focuses on three type of cultural producers with differing relationships to the disciplinary regulation of high art, including:\textsuperscript{321}

1.) Professionally trained “pre-failed” art students whose academic education most likely emphasized subversive “avant-garde practices” while in reality preparing them to be part of an apparatus of reproduction in which the majority of artists serve the multi-billion dollar industry as museum-goers, magazine subscribers, art supply consumers, part-time art instructors or as poorly paid gallery assistants, art handlers, fabricators and so forth.

2.) Informal, amateur, “non-professional” zinesters, live action fantasy role-play gamers (LARP), “craftavists” knitters, devotees of Goth, Punk, and Do It Yourself (DIY) sub-cultures, fan filmmakers and cyber-geeks who are engaged with creative practices focused on pleasure, fantasy and networked communalism, and therefore seemingly in conflict with both the career artist as well as the work ethic of capitalism and its markets.

3. A smaller number of artists and artist groups, both professional and also informal, who explicitly link their artistic practices to radical social or political transformation and therefore have traditionally been positioned at the outermost margins of the mainstream art world, its history and discourse, and most of all its political economy.

\textsuperscript{319} The term “pre-failed” art students refers to the structural hierarchies of the art world in which the majority of artists are statistically determined to remain in the shadows of those with more success. See Sholette, \textit{Dark Matter}, op. cit., see especially “We Are the Surplus”, p. 134.


\textsuperscript{321} See Chapter 3.2 “Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-public Sphere,” as well as the book \textit{Dark Matter}, 2010, op. cit.
These three marginal forces resemble what astrophysicists describe as dark matter (and also dark energy): an gravitational force of unknown makeup that makes up as much as ninety-five percent of the known universe. Without the weight of this “missing mass” the visible cosmos would have dispersed into space long ago. Like its astronomical namesake, creative dark matter can be said to makes up the bulk of the artistic activity that is produced in contemporary societies. However, this type of dark matter is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture – the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators and arts administrators. It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices – all work made and circulated in the shadows of the formal art world. Yet, just as the astrophysical universe is dependent on its dark matter, so too is the art world dependent on its dark energy. This is a phenomenon sometimes called the “missing mass problem”. The question my thesis asks therefore is this: if celestial dark matter is the principal anchor that slows down cosmic expansion, what role then do redundant artistic producers play in stabilizing the art world?

Two other questions follow from this. First, how does a redundant surplus productivity or even non-productivity benefit, or actually reproduce, the political economy of high culture given that by definition what is excess or non-productive is also unnecessary to the normal functioning of a given system? And second, how do these three types or “species” of dark matter agency – “failed” artists, activists and amateurs– that initially appear partially or wholly disconnected from one another form a cohesive conceptual category? The indebted art student who graduates with an M.F.A. and against all probabilities continues to play her part in the art system, or the fast-food service employee who spends his weekends engaged in Live Action Role Play, or the disgruntled temporary clerk who produces anonymous comic books lampooning his job: how do any of these examples relate to a self-defined radical artist painting banners for a May Day Parade or Black Lives Matter march? Provisional answers to this question require that we grasp the art world as a total system, one that is nonetheless always in a state of semi-destabilization thanks to internalized class divisions and the asymmetrical distribution of benefits that also serve to unify and reproduce it. (See the introduction to Section 1 ‘Welcome to our Art World)

---

322 The term used by some scientists to describe the solution dark matter and dark energy brings to the standard model of cosmic formation. See “The Mystery Of The Missing Mass,” National Aeronautics and Space Administration website, USA: http://history.nasa.gov/SP-466/ch22.htm
Here my argument parallels Fredric Jameson’s update of the fundamental Marxist law involving the reserve army of unemployed labor. The original concept proposed that capitalism requires a constant population of redundant, job-seeking laborers who outnumber employed workers and thus, serving as a regulatory threat, keep overall wages low. But this control mechanism is not located within the capitalist mode of production proper, and is instead external to it. Jameson argues that at this stage of capitalist subsumption, “the extra-economic or social no longer lies outside capital and economics but has been absorbed into it: so that being unemployed or without economic function is no longer to be expelled from capital but to remain within it”. One could conclude that this means non-productive labor, including art, has been brought within the disciplinary operations of capital *tout court*, suppressing or eliminating what artistic practice represents above all: free self-directed and non-market productivity. Except conversely, by incorporating the destructured and fragmented actuality of the working class culture and the anti-disciplinary and mimetic free play of art directly into its processes, capitalism can no longer externalize its own negation: that long, attenuated rebellion *from below* with its dangerous, non-utilitarian, and resistant surplus archive of uprisings and failures, repetitions and resentment.

Certainly some of this residue is made use of within the pseudo-counter culture and ersatz gift economies found within 21st Century hipster anarcho-capitalist marketing. Yet this non-productive productivity simultaneously establishes a negative space directly within the logic of de-regulated, modern capitalism. Is it therefore also possible that neoliberalism’s current financial crisis is as much a result of automation depleting the organic composition of capital as it is the incorporation of useless, redundant labor straight into the aggregate totality of the system, including art? Or does this more or less amount to the same thing, two sides of a single process? In any case, my approach to activist art as well as so-called dark matter resistance more broadly is that both are integrated directly to the architecture of the art world as internally excluded agencies, both literally and conceptually. On one level this exile constitutes the chronically under-remunerated productive forces of most professional art workers, and on another level it marks the permanent and necessary demarcation of the art world’s perimeter where non-professional amateurs, as well as self-exiled producers of movement culture and activist art, ply uncharted cultural waters, carry out resistance, and occasionally spout into view like Medieval sea monsters, only to submerge from sight again.

Delirium and Resistance

Two years following great crash when the “new normal” of austerity and a jobless economic future was being rolled-out by neoliberal apologists, these monstrous contradictions rose up again to manifest as spectacular protests and occupations across the public squares of the U.S., Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. One common element to this global rising was the perceived absence of a better future horizon. It seemed the failed economic policies of the present, or some moderately adjusted version of the same, was all one might expect from now on. This was particularly and understandably dismaying for younger people, including artists and those who made up the so-called creative class, issues that are discussed in Sections One and Two of the study. Meanwhile, far from Zuccotti Park and just two years after O.W.S., thousands took the central Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) of Kiev, Ukraine during the winter of 2014 to protest corrupt leadership and demand autonomy from Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin. The essay On The Maidan documents the process of installing my collaborative art project entitled Imaginary Archive in Kiev in April, just two months after the confrontation now known as the “2014 Ukrainian revolution”, but it also seeks to address the complex and conflicted materialization of excluded sensibilities. Imaginary Archive is a traveling project containing small pieces by over 90 contributors from numerous countries. It has been exhibited intermittently since 2008. On The Maidan compares O.W.S. with the automobile tire barricades of Ukraine’s revolution, provoking a further conviction that the surplus archive of dark matter creativity is becoming fully visible, but doing so as a force of both progressive as well as reactionary sentiments.

How does the contemporary art world respond to a situation where protests erupt in response to economic upheaval in a world in which everyone is told that they need to adjust and accept austerity, apart from a small group who continue to amass incalculable wealth? Despite claims of radicalism, or ostentatious prohibitions against overt expressions of racism, sexism, or anti-L.G.B.T.Q. sentiments (though seldom classism), the art world system seldom attempts to develop any substantive alternative to its own restricted economy. We might describe this schizoid stance as prog-servatism whereby a roster of socially progressive convictions is tethered to a foundation of managed economic conservatism. In the upheaval of centrist social democracy by the the last yeartumultuous Brexit and Donald Trump campaigns, it might be said that to illustrate this combination amalgam of the neoliberal status quo and with socially progressive positions posturing,
a has been revealed hybrid ideology and as the key legacy of the Blair-Clinton era now thrust: one that has been pushed aside by the resurgence of the far right. Meanwhile institutional critique, the most highly recognized agonistic offspring of this system, has since devolved from an attempt at critical negation into a project that even one of its best-known proponents, Andrea Fraser, describes as a “victim of its [own] success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against”.324

This does not alter the fact that the art world has sheltered, sometimes heroically, remnants of a once-vibrant bourgeois public sphere that includes the aesthetic-political inheritance of Kantian detached reason and even Marxist theorizing. Except that its primary means of preserving these liberal enlightenment ideals is compulsory subservience to capitalism, with all of the complications that brings with it (as discussed in the discussion of bare art throughout much of this investigation).

Written in 2015, when the events of 2010, 2011 and 2012 were behind me, Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn is the final chapter of this section and the text from which the investigation takes its title. It seeks to confront the dawning acceptance by the established art world of socially engaged art. The text focuses on events in 2004, the year Nato Thompson curated the watershed exhibition The Interventionists for MASS M.o.C.A., but also the year when Critical Art Ensemble founder Steve Kurtz was investigated as a potential bio-terrorist by the U.S. Department of Justice. Delirium and Resistance views 2004 as a crucial turning point for socially engaged art, not only because The Interventionists turned a spotlight on these previously submerged practices, but because the energy of the counter-globalization movement was lagging and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan expanding as images of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison circulated in the mass media.

If another world, or even another art world, were possible, then by the end of that year it had seriously failed to catch fire.

In November of 2004 George Bush Jr. was re-elected to a second Presidential term in spite of his administration having waged two illegal and devastating wars in the Middle East, and capitalism was also on a tear as predatory lending exploded and sub-prime mortgage “assets” spiked in supposed value (even though many seeds of the coming downfall were also being

sown in 2004). Meanwhile, the commercial art world’s markets mushroomed even as state sponsorship for culture dwindled. Against this gloom, tactical media and socially engaged art appeared to offer an antidote. But it is also possible to see the origins of a process of de-radicalization within the ranks of oppositional art that by 2015 was morphing into tools for “creative cities” planning and urban “placemaking” programs. Delirium and Resistance darts sideways rather than strictly forwards, favoring a tactic of conjecture over strict analytical reasoning. It asks how we might re-narrate, or perhaps de-narrate, the history of socially engaged art in order to at the very least problematize socially engaged art’s cooptation by, and complicity with, the mainstream art world. In a gesture that Jean-Pierre Gorin and Manny Farber would describe as an oblique, crablike movement, Delirium and Resistance hacks into the past in order to “prefigure” a different outcome for the present day. The essay bases its speculative premise on my own hypothetical art project Imaginary Archive in which an expanding collection of documents describes a series of pasts whose futures never arrived.

Breaking-out.

The indiscriminate archive of surplus creativity is rich, actually in truth it is overly rich with content, it is poor in actual resources such as institutional power or capital. Which is why when artist Andrea Fraser quips “L’1%, c’est moi,” her (undoubtedly ironic) declaration of identification with privileged elites does not accurately reflect the asymmetrical power relations of the actually existing art world. One need only place this same witticism into the mouth of Guggenheim Museum Director Richard Armstrong to understand my point. Today, the global art beau monde stands unashamedly together, off to one side of the undeniably bare art world where they primp and huddle with their partners and patrons, the mega-developers, oligarchs and petro-thugs of the neo-liberal new world disorder. This re-distribution of the insensible (to tweak Jacques Rancière’s term) opens up new avenues of appropriation, as high culture is strip-mined for its affective assets. That the Guggenheim and other major

---

325 While the N.E.A. budget in 2004 was a mere 1.5 Million in today’s dollars, the commercial markets in the U.S. and U.K. experienced a record jump in prices with a billion dollars in art sales overall (with Jeff Koons the most in-demand contemporary artist) and every following year has only been more financially spectacular: see Art market trends Tendances du marché de l’art: http://press.artprice.com/pdf/trends2004.pdf

326 Gorin, who was my M.F.A. advisor at U.C. San Diego in the 1990s, frequently incorporated the painter Manny Farber’s theories into his lectures on European cinema. See: Manny Farber, Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies, De Capo Press, 2009.

327 Imaginary Archive http://www.gregorysholette.com/?page_id=587
museums exploit the vast surplus precarious armies of both migrant, precarious laborers and artists – the former build their art empire but are not welcome inside it, the latter invisibly (though less so all the time) reproduce their art world while never actually being destined as its content providers, not in any lasting or meaningful way-- this is the truly strange weather, as Andrew Ross once put it, for an era of disintegrating habitats, governance and social security.\footnote{Andrew Ross, \textit{Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits}, Verso, 1991.}

The speed of finance capital, the rush of data, the demanding agency of living as work and art as life, just how does one describe a world that resembles itself down to the smallest detail with little or no space for metaphor, error or dark matter? Like a simulation that has always already passed the Turing Test, there are no more messages from beyond: only more of the same, everything is now directly in front of U.S.. It’s not that we cannot tell the difference, it’s that there is no difference. Lacking shadow or depth, the forces of production are repeatedly unconcealed, just as our inability to be shocked by this recurring fact is replayed over and over. With only slight variation this claustrophobic \textit{now} is like Freud’s symptom of repetition but without the underlying trauma. Or perhaps more accurately, it is a weird \textit{traumaless trauma}, a flat automated affect that, whatever passes for social collectivity today manufactures as an internalized, subjective accompaniment to Jodi Dean’s notion of “politics without politics.”\footnote{Jodi Dean, “Politics without Politics,” in Paul Bowman, ed., \textit{Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus}, Bloomsbury, 2011, 79-94.}

We are anxious, because we are always at risk, though from what exactly we are not certain, much as the protagonists in Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel \textit{White Noise}.\footnote{Don DeLillo, \textit{White Noise}, Penguin Books, 1984.} It’s not that things are hidden from U.S., instead they are always available in the form of viral factoids, arriving one microsecond, and gone just as fast.

As artists and cultural workers today we confront a bare art world, conspicuously entwined within an equally unconcealed and ongoing capitalist economic and political crisis. Still, now and then, a certain artistic resistance, even \textit{ressentiment}, is also visible, forcing itself onto this Dark Matter may be no longer dark, but contradictions within the sphere of cultural practice have only ratcheted up. As artists and cultural workers today we confront a bare art world, conspicuously entwined within an equally unconcealed and ongoing capitalist economic and
political crisis. Still, now and then, a certain artistic resistance, even *ressentiment*, is also visible, forcing itself onto this overly-lit stage set. Meanwhile, social practice art is only one new mechanism for managing both the “oversupply” of artists and their growing discontent, because it mobilizes social production in general, as an abstract thing or medium or agency, the management has good reason to be nervous. And though its predecessor “relational aesthetics” was a prototypical form of this mobilization, not yet ready for prime time and almost entirely confined to a formal level of artistic practice, the boycotts, demonstrations, wage demands, and other breaches of conduct committed by a new wave of art activism understand that art’s foundation is in social labor. Resentment and resistance fuel one another, the first making the work of the second possible.

Ever seeking to expand and compound itself, Capital, despite claims to the opposite, is stuck in a cycle of unimaginative destruction and mandatory reuse of existing resources. The real crisis, as Hito Steyel compellingly argues, is that “history seems to have morphed into a loop [and] the future only happens if history doesn’t occupy and invade the present”. But what if the solution is exactly the opposite? What if the future only happens when history returns to the present, not as copy of the past or a monument to its wars and delirium, but as a thing that disturbs the status quo whose very strangeness, as opposed to familiarity, liberates U.S. from the eternal return of commodified time, work, culture, life? Perhaps the final question is this: does a prison break have a foreseeable narrative? Or is it always a singular event? These concerns are revisited in the conclusion of this thesis.

Figure 13. “Yomango Tango,” members of the group Yomango flamboyantly “liberate” luxury items from a chain store in Barcelona, Spain using the “Five-Finger Discount” choreographed to live Tango Music to protest austerity after bank failures in Argentina, 2002. (Image courtesy of Yomango).
Hi Greg,

As I’m thinking about your questions on collective practice etc., I’m disturbed but not surprised to sense that it would be far easier for me to speak about the difficulties of collaborative work than to outline the things, which draw me to it. Here are a few of the positive aspects, however idealized and double-edged, that are important to me: Working as a collective or collaborative means that we can do projects on a scale that one person could only do with great difficulty. Resources, skills, interests, knowledge, and ideas are pooled. This contributes to the overall political and aesthetic complexity, diversity, and effectiveness of the projects. Working on these projects involves developing collaborative practices, which, however problematic, visibly reject a culture of hyper-individualism in favor of other models of “work” and of social (and even “personal”) responsibility.

David Thorne, artist and member of the Resistant Strains art collective, NYC: 1999

Automated Communities?

The *Commune* -[is]-the re-absorption of the State power by society as its own living forces, instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression.

Karl Marx

The family, the school, the army, the factory, are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner – state or private power – but coded figures – deformable and transformable – of a single corporation that now has only stockholders. Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank.

Gilles Deleuze

---

332 Artist David Thorne’s response is an excerpt from answers submitted to members of several artists’ collectives as research for this essay in the Fall of 1999. The questions and answers were exchanged via email and consisted of the following inquiries: a) Describe one particular incident – from a crisis to a hilarious situation – that represents some key feature of the process of working with others “beneath” a collective name/project; b) Other than joint authorship what other aspects of collaborative work – aesthetic, political, communal – set it apart from individual cultural production? (again you can use a specific example from your experience); c) Are there any specific historical or theoretical models – pop cultural references, personal incentives – of collaborative/collective work you feel relate to your own experiences?; d) Any other thoughts or anecdotes you wish to add?


From the swipe of a plastic debit card at the grocery store to regimes of summer recreation, from the surveillance of so-called public spaces to the labels in your undergarments, an administered collectivity hides everywhere in plain sight. Every “I” conceals an involuntary “belongingness”, every gesture a statistic about purchasing power, education, and market potential of your desire. A new IBM computer program named “Clever” even detects what its designers call “communities in their nascent stages”: these web-based fraternities “spring up spontaneously, even before members are aware of their community’s existence”.

But if collective formation is so unrelenting it can literally be automated, one might question why non-individualized cultural work – art made cooperatively through collaboration and collective action – requires special attention such as a special issue of Afterimage? This begs the question whether it can be seriously argued today that the artist is an autonomous producer who is detachable from politics, history, and the market. If we gauge our answer by the unimpeded flow of artists’ monographs, by the writing in most art journals, even including that by self-avowed “radical” art historians, the unqualified answer is yes. As the artist’s collective Critical Art Ensemble succinctly puts it:

> The individual’s signature is still the prime collectible, and access to the body associated with the signature is a commodity that is desired more than ever – so much so, that the obsession with the artist’s body has made its way into “progressive” and alternative art networks. Even community art has its stars, its signatures, and its bodies.  

While the auteur may no longer be thought of as “deep” in the way a Picasso or Pollock were once held up as an artistic gold standard, the art industry and its discourse remain dependent on a litany of individual name-brand art producers that circulates like a global aesthetic currency. By contrast, when a group of artists “self-institutionalize” to produce a collaborative or collective the responding art critical narrative, if any, typically falls into one of three story lines: 1. artistic duos like Gilbert and George, Komar and Melamid, or Sophie and Hans Arp, are indiscriminately analyzed using a methodology based on individual art practice to this collaboration; 2. collective authorship becomes a backdrop

---

for discussing the evolution of a stellar solo career, for example Kiki Smith as a former member of Collaborative Projects, or Joseph Kosuth as a co-founder of Art & Language; 3. the art collective is used to signify an entire historical *mis-en-escène*, thus the 1930 are the years of organized artistic activism loosely under the umbrella of the Communist Party USA, and the 1980s envisioned as the decade of activist art groups, and so forth (no doubt the beginning of the 21st Century will one day be described as the rise of networked resistance and collective occupations).

This essay will not rectify these critical shortcomings, but it will attempt to open up a set of questions about group art practice, as well as provide specific details regarding collaborative, activist art, much of it drawn from my own experiences, in New York City during the 1980s and 1990s. My text is focused on collective organizations that are both politically engaged and non-hierarchical in structure (at least non-hierarchical in spirit if not always in practice). It is the organizational model I know best, but also it is where the questioning of individuated artistic practice seems to be most contentious. Punctuating my writing the reader will find a series of comments about collective work that I solicited from colleagues. This “symbolic dialogue” is meant to remind both the reader and myself of that larger collective – the intellectual, discursive, practical, material, and artistic sphere of present, past, and future cultural workers – of which I am at best a ward. My motivation in writing this essay is based in large part on the renewed interest in collective art activism among younger artists and scholars, as well as a conviction that it is not enough to historicize these practices, an endless, even Sisyphean task in itself, but collective work requires its own analytical approach that does not fall back on modified versions of hagiography, nor slip numbingly into the comforting mystifications of much “community-based-art”.

---

337 See for example Tiziana Terranova who writes in *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (Pluto Press, 2004) network culture is a “common milieu, interconnected by the flow of images and affects” it is “the site for the emergence of new political modes of engagement (such as Internet-organized global movements against neoliberal economic policies and the Iraq war),” p. 5.

338 Grant Kester’s formative essay “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art,” argues for a more complex and critical reading of “new genre” public art. Written before the term social practice art became commonplace terminology for such work Kester writes that artists who chose to “navigate through the highly contested and complex symbolic fields that surround ‘dangerous populations; such as the homeless, the incarcerated, the urban poor, will need to prepare themselves with something more than good intentions and ‘intuitive wisdom.’” *Afterimage* 22, January 1995, upagedinated PDF: http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu/documents/30948821/Aesthetic_Evangelists.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJ56TQJRTWSM TNPE&AExpires=1480385338&Signature=ZihnQ%2FxCq%2BpCX6OrbddVEMpo2S8%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DAesthetic_Evangelists_Conversion_and_Emp.pdf
In her essay “Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism” critic Suzi Gablik argues for a new kind of artist who understands that “the boundary between self and Other is fluid rather than fixed: the Other is included within the boundary of selfhood”. However, boundaries, both real and imaginary, are historically determined and often harshly material. They are not subject to dissipation by idealized discourse. By contrast I understand conflict and difference, rather than “merging,” to be necessary for the formation of the collective. Furthermore such incipient abrasiveness cannot but carry over to the routine functioning of the group, thus sparking repercussions, sometimes violent, inside the collective, as well as between the collective and existing institutions and practices. As anyone who has worked in this way will attest, the effort required to sustain collective work rises in direct proportion to the professional and emotional toll extracted on its constituency. Yet it is exactly this state of practical overdetermination – the heterogeneity of membership, the meetings where too much is attempted or rejected, too much brought to the table and left off the table, the fleeting ecstasy of collaborative expenditure, and a space suddenly opened-up to the unpredictable effects of class, race, gender, sexual preference, age, divergences in ability, knowledge, and career status – all of this which can never be encompassed within the group identity per se; but instead which forms an excess that is precisely the force making the collective viable.

Perhaps the central concern of this text is therefore to rethink, but also to re-configure the way collective practice is narrated. Instead of the individual opposed set in opposition to the collective (or the lone artist bestowing his or her talent to a community), my contention is that “collectivity,” in one form or another, is virtually an ontological condition of contemporary life. It precedes divisions of society into the one and the many; the property owner, and the commons. Two consequences follow from this supposition. First, it guarantees that no location exists, no safe zone can be located, out of which an individual (an artist for example) can truly operate alone, in opposition to society. While this does not invalidate the irrepressible desire to escape or radically re-write what Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Thomas Hobbes considered the social contract or agreement, it does allow U.S., and this is the second point, to re-configure the often stated opposition between collective and individual in terms of a topological displacement between two kinds of collective formations: one passive, and the other active. Consider

---

340 Egoism is the basis of human nature for Rousseau as well as for Thomas Hobbes, but each in their own
Gilles Deleuze in his text “Postscript on the Societies of Control” in which the philosopher describes the new world order as one in which “we no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.” Man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt”.

The Blue Pill.

The collective nature of the work can be both exhilarating and exhausting. Working with different peoples strengths; balancing individual needs and interests with collective desires and demands; recognizing limits, while opening possibilities, these are challenges perhaps not so different from other administrative positions in mainstream organizations. What is unique, however, to artists is the overriding mythology of genius, and the realities of asymmetrical access to power. This can translate into problems in maintaining a public profile as a collective: making sure the same individuals don’t get highlighted again and again in media coverage, allowing different people to speak for the group while maintaining continuity.

There is still the cult of the individual auteur and we as a collective sometimes become kind of invisible.

Lisa Maya Knauer, discussing REPOhistory at the ten-year mark, NYC, 1999

What I recall most happily are particular periods of working, entering a sort of “flow” state in current jargon together with others, all of U.S. working towards a common goal. This would have to be the “painting parties” held [at ABC No Rio] for various purposes, mostly for Potato Wolf cable TV productions... There was a general idea of what the set should look like (I don't even recall that there were many if any sketches, just a verbal idea), and then everyone began to make stuff for it. Working was pleasurable, since the mode of working was relatively unusual for me, a writer, and seeing what others had come up with was really exhilarating, especially if the production we were working on was mine. I felt like my ideas were begin hyped up and enhanced by others in the group...All my political actions in the 1970s were based


Deleuze, “Post-Script,” 7.

Response by Lisa Maya Knaur, former member REPOhistory, to the author’s questions.
upon my vague and glorified notion of anarchist struggle in Mittel Europa during the last century, of which I knew only some theoretical writings.

Alan W. Moore, NYC, 1999

Re-working the classical Marxian concept of base and superstructure, Fredric Jameson maintains that “the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are ‘managed’ and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects”. Instead of simply masking the true relations of power as argued by many similar theories these “spurious objects” satiate a concrete need. That need is abundantly historical, as well as buried from everyday visibility. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin’s famed *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, Jameson dubs this need the “Political Unconscious.” This historical Other can no more be wholly repressed than can a passage towards liberation be charted without addressing what “it,” this Other, wants. In Jameson’s terms this means recognizing “such incentives, as well as the impulses to be managed by the mass cultural text, are necessarily Utopian in nature” forming allegorical figures for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society.

If Benjamin argues that the radical historian must “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger,” Jameson would agree and insist that the Utopian impulse is so ubiquitous it is invisibly at work even in the “most degraded of all mass cultural texts, advertising slogans – visions of external life, of the transfigured body, of preternatural sexual gratification – [these] may serve as the model of manipulation on the oldest Utopian longings of humankind”.

If Utopian desire, like the background radiation from some radically communal big-bang moment decades, or perhaps centuries past, actually does form a residual political unconscious within mass culture, then so too must some concrete figure of collectivism be present either as image and/or as hidden narrative. And perhaps the most transparent manifestation of collective practice for my purposes is that found in certain science fiction narratives that depicts a fantasy in which diverse cells of organized humans actively resist being taken-over

343 Response by Alan W. Moore, former member COLAB, to the author’s questions (see note 1).
345 ibid.
346 ibid. 291.
by hostile invaders (aliens, vampires, zombies, and thinking machines in some cases). It is an apocalyptic as well as survivalist narrative that appears in numerous films including John Carpenter’s *They Live* (1988), but also such television programs as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), or more recently *The Walking Dead* (2010). This heterotopic figure of underground resistance is perhaps most explicit in the 1980s television series *V*, (1983–1985) a mini-series in which human resistance fighters sabotage predacious, reptilian aliens disguised as benevolent “visitors.” Reportedly V even inspired real-world opposition to White-Rule in South Africa. Still more useful is the 1999 film *The Matrix*, (1999) and the way it explicitly narrated both desires and anxieties about collectivized human resistance to an alien and alienating enemy.

Set in an apocalyptic near future that looks very much like present day Chicago, we discover that in fact *The Matrix* is the secret name for a virtual simulation program that almost precisely replicates reality. This simulacrum is fed directly into the cerebellum of the human population who are now grown in liquid-filled vats stacked on top of each other like mile high versions of Cabrini Green. *The Matrix* has been digitally fabricated by an artificial intelligence run amock. This inorganic artisan still needs humans, however, since we are the only source of bioelectrical energy in what appears to be a post-nuclear landscape. Thus the *real world* is in fact little more than an enormous “farm” and the ersatz Chicago is “jacked” into each “human battery” effectively concealing the traumatic “real” that is too awful to confront directly. Happily for U.S., a small band of humans manage to “unplug” themselves from this electronic hegemony, confront the catastrophic landscape of the real world, and in so doing also set about liberating mankind from the machinations of the matrix.

What interests me about this story most is the way it represents two versions of human collectivization. One is involuntary, and consists of massified bodies digitally dreaming in a cavernous computerized nursery. This is like the bodily awe I sometimes experience attempting to cross Broadway at rush hour or when I try to grasp the magnitude of other

---

347  Former South African resident and New York City Legal Aid Attorney David Stern in a conversation with the author in the 1990s.

people all competing with me for a coffee or subway car or most disconcertedly perhaps because it is so ephemeral when using the backed-up telephone system of an airline, bank, or other service provider. Opposed to this reflexive collectively are the militarized cells of men and women, white, brown and black who struggle to release their fellow humans from an invisible bondage. No, this is not the experience I have had as an activist art collaborator, but the way resistance itself is portrayed here is useful.

The Matrix, like V and other examples of this sci-fi sub-genre typically represents resistance to mass control as heterogeneous, self-sufficient, and culturally diverse. At times the violence of the enemy holding these micro-collectives together barely outweighs their own internal antagonisms, as when for example the Judas-like character in The Matrix betrays the group in exchange for returning to the comfort of a simulated reality. But the most important moment for these occupation fantasies is when the horrible nature of the real world is de-concealed. In The Matrix the hero “Neo” is played by a nearly inanimate Keanu Reeves, who is even offered a choice about this pivotal discovery procedure. When several unplugged humans offer him two pills – one blue, and one red – he is asked to choose. If he swallows the blue pill he remains anesthetized within The Matrix. If however, he ingests the red pill then what lies behind the screen is revealed and there is no turning back to the false recompense comfort of the simulated world. As we know Neo picks the red pill. The now familiar plot of The Matrix was developed into two box office busting sequels, but most interesting to me is grafting this figure of revelation, resistance, and two competing forms of collectivity directly onto the world of cultural producers. In other words, is it possible to think that when artists choose collective action this is something like taking the red pill? Once one begins to work in a group context the “blue pill” collectivism that provides an illusion of individuality is displaced by a different collectivity made up of jagged heaps of partial meanings and chunks of resistant histories leftover from communal aspirations and failures. It also means that the much vaunted artist-genius narrative is revealed as a fiction. Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that taking the red pill means the mystique of individual artistic practice can never return, at least not with its original luster intact. At some level I believe artists are always already aware of this choice.
Figuring Collectively.

The issue of rupture within community based artistic collaborations is an important topic because rupture is an inherent part of the process of working with the community...Communities are not made up of people who are all the same, even if they are the same race. Communities imply a very loose connection of people where cultural, racial and class issues are never a homogeneous mix, and where questions of difference always surface.

From “Some notes on rupture” unpublished text by artist Tomie Arai, NYC: 1995

The founding or “minting” of any group identity, either corporate or cultural, is always dependent on the material that exceeds this imprint or group signature. However the capitalist, corporate identity aims at purifying this excess, transforming it into a sharply defined brand. This new brand allows the corporation to indefinitely replicate its manufactured identity to consumers with little fear of distraction [which is why image-correcting interventions such as The Yes Men are so difficult to pull off well]. For the politicized cultural collective however, the minting of identity signifies something else: namely a recognition of the inherently collective texture of the social fabric that surrounds, as well as intersects the group identity at all times. This overdetermination of group identity even affects the day to day working procedure of the collective in which too much is attempted, rejected, brought to the table and left off the table and where sudden accelerations of enthusiasm are followed by equally unexpected plunges in spirit. Antonio Negri once described such radical, concentrated excess as a “destructuration,” by which I take him to have meant both a demolition of capitalist totality, and the recognition that the nature of today’s working class is inherently discontinuous and fragmented. Negri’s formulation also implies that such collective arrangements are always therefore at risk of destabilization.

Marx too understood the importance of figuration when discussing political resistance. Writing about the 1871 Paris Commune he emphasizes the way this historic insurrection was an active re-absorption by the masses of their own alienated powers previously turned against them in

349 Tomie Arai, artist and former member of New York Chinatown’s Basement Workshop in the 1970s sent an unpublished text about collective work as her response to the author’s questions (see note 1).
the form of the state. Although the Commune lasted only three months Parisians still managed during this time to declare universal suffrage, to install a communal government, and to decree that all governmental officials be paid only workmen’s wages. It is worth contrasting Marx’s re-appropriation of state control with the “Society of Control” described by Gilles Deleuze. Gone in Deleuze is any single instrument of oppression; this includes the state, the factory, or the prison. Today a diffused “universal modulation” forces the individual into a perpetual state of mutation as continuously shifting systems of surveillance, education, and work replace any fixed locus of power. Without collapsing these different conceptions of the social body – one analogical the other digital if you like – it is possible to see that each presents U.S. with an economy of forces in which acts of displacement alternate with routines of administration. In both cases resistance depends upon recognizing its very possibility within the familiar. Marx describes the predicament this way:

It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain likeness. Thus the new Commune, which breaks the modern State power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the mediaeval Communes, which first preceded, and afterwards became the substratum of, that very State power.  

For Marx the Commune is a displacement in which a unique historical event outwardly replicates an archaic but well-known form: in this case the medieval commune (recall the deceptive role familiarity plays in our pop-culture example “The Matrix”). Deleuze also muses about the possibility of recognizing resistance from within the “society of control.” He still manages to ask “can we already grasp the rough outlines of these coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing?” His question, which explicitly adds the problem of pleasure to the one of mere recognition that Marx raises, might be provisionally answered in the form of the politically engaged artists collective if this is understood, as proposed here, not as a unity of differences, but as the overdetermined arrangement akin to what Toni Negri describes as the “radical, irreducible differentness of the revolutionary movement”.

351 Marx and Engels *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 75.
352 Deleuze, “Post-Script,” 7.
Repetition and Difference.

All my angst about collaborative work is hard to separate from the many good times and success that I shared as a member of Blue Funk; Chiefly Brit. A State of Great Terror – a six person 3 male 3 female art group from 1990 to 1995. Authorship was an interesting issue and a given piece was undercut by this transindividual author Blue Funk. The overall result was a strange and liberating experience. We were like some multitracked techno recording that is indistinguishable in a given space. We also rarely used text and all writing was kept to a minimum. For our piece in Sonsbeek 93 in the Netherlands we didn’t even have a title. If we followed any model I doubt if we could agree on it, maybe a band that is kept together by the tensions pulling it apart. .. But the pieces that we made have an interesting ontological shelf life...the archive of Blue Funk is dispersed and the ghost of Blue Funk still lingers on... I think humour was an important element in Blue Funk stemming from the name itself and from our collective friendship, politics and angst.

Brian Hand, Dublin, 1999

Finally, above all else the activist art collective is a de facto critique of the bourgeois public sphere. Not only does the overdetermined nature of such groups upset the alleged separation of public and private space, but the process of self-institutionalization itself inevitably assimilates political functions normally allocated to the bourgeois public sphere. The politicized artists’ group not only seizes space in other words, but it squats organizational structures transforming these into something both new, and perhaps also quite old. Sometimes the act of self-governing is consciously invoked, at other times simply manifest, but always the politics of the collective are sooner or later thrust into view. For the members of the collective this means deciding amongst themselves what kind of democratic process they will operate with, as well as establishing rules about membership (should it be open to all who attend meetings, or just active participants?) and voting (do motions pass using a simple majority or through consensus by every member?). Ironically it is the process of internal politicization that often reveals the lack of historical memory that dominates cultural resistance. Consider the following texts I have excerpted from the minutes of three New York City politically engaged artists collectives: AMCC (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change:1975 to 1977), P.A.D./D. (Political Art Documentation and Distribution 1980–1986, actively), and REPOhistory (1989–2000):

354 Brian Hand, former member of Blue Funk; a chiefly British state of great terror (email from the artist).
Our most urgent task right now is to find a more representative method of arriving at true agreement within the group. Not to do this is to doom U.S. to continual tactical maneuvering using these rules – tactics that, as was amply demonstrated last week, lead to destructive polarization and quite palpable disunity...In this group we are not looking for “victory” of one strand of opinion over another. In fact, this machismo, warlike attitude within the group is entirely contrary to everything that we should be struggling towards.

AMCC document January 30th , 1977

I noticed there were certain men or people who could say just about anything and everyone was “attentive.” Those who do the most work, those with the most responsibility, those with the most political sophistication and those who have a degree of establishment in the art field have the most “power.” We live in a hierarchical world. The fact that some of it translates into PADD is obvious.

Excerpt from an open letter to P.A.D./D. from a former member, October, 1983

KL felt that there was a consensus from the last meeting that membership take active tasks... LK felt that analyzing tasks would help redistribute work. She said that some people have resentment because they do not know where the task openings are.

KL said that tasks will shift given the projects we are working on. PL thought we should take a look at who’s doing what and why.

HB wanted to understand how this list would related to project tasks.

TT thought that the person within a project ..could become the delegate to work in a general REPO working group.

LK felt that certain people end up doing too much of the work and this person would be doing twice the work...It is important that more people get involved in this decision.

REPOhistory minutes: January 4th , 1993

---

355 Artists Meeting for Cultural Change Document provided by former AMCC member Ann-Marie Rousseau.
LB: what does closed meeting mean anyway? we don’t publicize it? what if we just say what it is online, put it out in GG, describe it as retreat, those involved will come.

BR: Closed meeting is having a space to acknowledge some of these things, tensions in the group. Actually, not sure why it needs to be closed.

J: are you creating a safer space, need it to be more trusting? BR: yes.

AB: I wd rather risk a little lack of safety in order to have proposals. Wonder if describe meeting other people wd really want to come anyway.

LB: friendly amendment 20–30 min for proposals.

PW: does closed meeting meaning you can say whatever you want, no minutes, not reported back. or the idea it would be reported back?

LB: yes, no minutes, if talking about what didn’t work, don’t want that reported out.

BR: can I restate the proposal as use this draft, but describe it not as closed meeting. will dedicate next week to this structure. I guess we could do proposals at end, as long as we keep time.

LB: and friendly amendment re: no recorded minutes. AB: too shady not to advertise it?

LB: too weird for O.W.S.. AB: I get that.

Arts & Labor working group of Occupy Wall Street, minutes from December 6, 2011

The repetition demonstrated by these documents is all the more remarkable when you consider that the selections span almost thirty-five years, and that these four groups share various degrees of overlapping membership. Obvious lessons might be drawn from this about the deficiency of not having a history or theory about collective practice, or how the burdens of decision making, divisions of labor, and power sharing are not mitigated simply because people

---

358 O.W.S. A&L minutes: http://www.nycga.net/groups/arts-and-culture/docs/arts-labor-meeting-minutes-12611
choose to work cooperatively. And because activist art collectives are naturally suspicious of establishment politics each new group tends to reinvent organizational processes already attempted, sometimes even abandoned by other similar institutions. Therefore what appears to be a blank screen on which to project some new, radical form of self-government might better be understood as a surface so overly etched with traces – of language, history, knowledge, and material conditions – that it merely appears empty. These traces cannot be navigated without first recognizing the way in which spatial metaphors are used, consciously or not, by the collective. The problem is similar to that characterized by Jacques Derrida in his essay “The Ends of Man: Reading U.S.,” first published in France in 1969 during the political aftershock of May ’68. When the question was: what paths lead to radical change the philosopher suggests there remain only the choice between two strategies:

a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is equally, in language. Here...[in which] one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one deconstructs...”. The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward and opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.

b. “To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference. Without mentioning all the other forms of” [risking a form of] “trompe-l’oeil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted, the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground.”

Derrida’s solution to this dilemma insists that “A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once”. But how can “we” remember and forget, repeat and interrupt, have a history as well as start over again? One possible answer is to map Derrida’s musings about ontology onto the very corporeal plurality of the activist art collective.

---

360 ibid.
The Red Pill

One main factor of this period [early 1980s] was its generosity in trying to include everyone – artist and non artist, good or bad art etc. in exhibitions. This may be why [Lucy R.] Lippard’s writing at that time in my eyes was more documentation (in the sense of listing artists and artworks in a matter of fact way) of this growing subculture away from the artmaket, and not criticism directed to judge the quality of a work of art.

Todd Ayoung, NYC, 1999

Certainly the contingencies Derrida enumerates above play themselves out within and around the art collective including the unwitting consolidation of prevailing power relations – masculinist authority, over-centralization, bureaucracy – and perhaps even more insidiously what he calls a “tromp-l’oeil” effect in which an imagined escape route is but a projection of present limitations. Yet it is the very absence of the collective, in particular the activist art collective, from within the larger cultural discourse (including what goes by the names “left” or Progressive) that seems to indicate a potential for something uncomfortably other and plural. If Derrida’s question of “who, we?” were posed to such a group entity the response would come as a shimmer of voices, historical narratives, and political positions. Within the “overflowingness” of collective identity then are both figures of resistance and something Derrida later termed in Specters of Marx (1994) as a

certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism. And a promise must be kept, that is, not to remain ‘spiritual’ or ‘abstract,’ but to produce effects, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth.362

While Deleuze has asserted that “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons,” Derrida still pursues the concept of hope, but in some as yet unrecognized anti-teleological form of the promise, not unlike Jameson’s Political Unconscious or Benjamin’s

361 Todd Ayoung, artist and former member of P.A.D./D. and REPOhistory.
moment of historical danger.\textsuperscript{363} This “promise” however \textit{must} be made concrete. And above all else what the activist art collective makes tangible, and no doubt what is so anathema to the art market and its discourse, is the capacity for self-regulation over one’s production and distribution. No doubt this ability is available and suppressed within all artistic practice and within all productive activity just as regulators, including Societies of Control, always recognize the danger of this promise. Ironically, the activist art collective often displays its own self-control through over-production and aesthetic incontinence: two operations forbidden by an industry that depends upon the illusion of scarcity and the predictability of goods (the consistency of an artist’s style and nowadays even persona.) Perhaps this more than any imagined threat to some lingering ideology of artistic autonomy is the danger the collective presents. Let’s look a bit closer at the mechanics of self-control or what Negri calls “self-valorization” before deciding on this question.\textsuperscript{364}

First such artistic self-valorization can be read as a reappropriation directed against the market’s own need to reign in an artist’s production and stylistic trademark. That restraint is virtually built into an artist’s education and reiterated, in one form or another, within the marketplace through dealers, critics, and even by other artists. However within the relative sanctuary of the group identity this pressure is meliorated. So much so that being part of a collective often means experimenting with styles and technologies that would otherwise be disruptive to one’s career. Second, and even more troubling from the point of view of the culture industry, is the way in which such collectives defiantly establish their own rules about who is and who is not an artist. Such aesthetic self-validation is typically extended, like stolen goods, from the collective to others, including many who feel locked-out of traditional venues for reasons of political or cultural content or simply because of the “stinginess” of the art market. In the 1980s the artist’s collective Group Material went so far as to use the frame of the museum itself to legitimate such munificence. This pilfered aesthetic aura is even transferable from the collective to non-artists who become ordained as bona fide aesthetic producers. In spite of the “inclusiveness” now dominating the contemporary art world such cross-disciplinary work remains taboo, except on those occasions when a non-artist is incorporated, ready-made fashion, within the work (or even through the body) of a “legitimate artist.”

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{363}] Deleuze “Postscript,” and Jamesons’s “Political Unconscious,” op. cit., Benjamin, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” 287. (Cited Chapter 2.2, Mysteries, Note 1).
\item[\textsuperscript{364}] Negri, \textit{Marx Beyond Marx}, op cit.
\end{itemize}
Finally, because all practical issues related to aesthetics today are ultimately settled in the marketplace, we should ask if it is possible to *collect the collective*? Which is to say, under what circumstances would the group signature – its minting or coinage if you like – be capable of being possessed? Certainly specific objects produced by Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury and other collectives have, in a limited way, found their way into museums, archives, and private collections. But this only raises the question differently: how can one comprehend group authorship as an artist? The answer seems to depend upon the possibility of even conceiving such a thing as a group signature *proper* (as opposed to say a collection of signatures or gathering of styles). Such a thing, if it did exist, would openly dispute the fiction of the individual mark: that unique sign which guarantees my absence only by virtue of being infinitely repeatable. It leads U.S. to question the economy of this seemingly unique mark, not only within the art industry and its discourse, but its function within that administered form of collectivity the Society of Control. If we were to answer that artistic value is determined today by a sphincter-like regulation of the individual mark with all that it represents, then, considering what has been said about the excess and instability of group identity – such a thing as a collective signature would by definition be incomprehensible. Not unlike the grotesque truth of “The Matrix,” recognition of this condition demands its price, both personally, and professionally.

Regarding the practice of collective, activist art this text is neither comprehensive nor conclusive. It is an open question whether the observations here can apply more broadly to other forms of cooperative work. The self-valorizing art collective, with all of its volatility, and repetition may be resistant to what Deleuze calls the Society of Control if for no other reason than its sheer generosity of material, aesthetic and political production. Overdetermined and discontinuous, the collective assembles the needs, affiliations, differences sometimes even afflictions of others in a space suddenly open to the possibility of social equality and self-management. Even under the best circumstances the collective is fueled by these differences.

---

365 Even today in 2016, when the concept of artistic collectivism is more widely accepted than it was when this essay was completed in 1999, most collective works of art remain desirably to collectors and museumsthann individually-authored work, and thus tend to be present mostly in archives, rather than in institutional or private collections. While researching the book *Dark Matter* I contacted One New York City art dealer who had devised his own solution to making a three-person artists’ group that he represented appear more marketable. His idea was to organize solo exhibitions for each member of Paper Rad, reassuring anxious collectors that behind the group’s communal persona lie three distinct talents, and then reexhibiting them after as a collective. *Dark Matter* pp 27-28, the art dealer Foxy Production (located in Chelsea, NYC) related this information to me in a September 30, 2005 telephone conversation.

as well as destabilized by them. Still if it was not for the intellectual and sensual pleasure made available, uniquely I believe, through sustained and voluntary collective activity, and undoubtedly linked to this same economy of displacement and re-appropriation, no one would ever “ingest the red pill.” After all, the art world is counting on your collective silence.
Figure 14. Nordic Live Action Role Play (LARP) Harald Misje, Martin Nielsen & Anita Myhre Andersen involving fantasy games with Palestinian children in a refugee camp in Beirut, 2012 (Screen-grab made by the author).
The emphasis on the passive element in experience certainly does not claim to be a theory of knowledge... But it is certainly the preliminary condition of any theory of knowledge which is not content with verbalistic and illusory solutions.

Timpanaro\textsuperscript{367}

There is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to astrophysics and cosmology than that of “dark matter.

Lawrence Berkely National Labs\textsuperscript{368}

The MAVAN Conference, and the Battles Lost

What does one make of a conference entitled Marxism and Visual Arts Now (M.A.V.A.N.) in which examples of contemporary, visual art were all but absent and the few speakers who did address recent artistic practices hardly strayed from citing works and practices not already ensconced within the institutional art world?\textsuperscript{369} One possible explanation for this conspicuous absence is the understandable resignation that the progressive scholar or artist experiences when confronting a world dominated, almost without exception, by images of a triumphant, global capitalism. This gloom is unintentionally compounded by the M.A.V.A.N. conference itself in so far as it concentrates knowledge about the numerous, failed efforts at oppositional artistic practice during the last one hundred years. To quote historian O.K. Werckmeister, himself a participant at M.A.V.A.N.: “After over a half of century of progressive abstraction from politics to ideology, from history to utopia,

\textsuperscript{367} Sebastiano Timpanaro in On Materialism Verso, 1975.

\textsuperscript{368} The Lawrence Berkely National Lab website: http://aether.lbl.gov/www/science/DarkMatter.html

\textsuperscript{369} The M.A.V.A.N. conference, where an earlier version of this essay was presented as a papwer, was held at University College London, April 8-10, 2002. This essay appeared in the a book emerging from that conference As Radical As Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century, edited by Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Leslie Esther and John Roberts for Peter Lang Publishers (Oxford, U.K.: 2007).
these images are dimming into irrelevancy before our own historical predicament”. Such resistant strains of art, if not openly suppressed by state power, either implode from the force of internal contradictions, or do so through a process of institutionalization as they come to resemble the very thing they once opposed. Meanwhile, within the United States today an unfolding spectacle of patriotism and militarism rises amidst the subservient and seamless mixture of high fashion and post-modernist irony that assumes the title avant-garde art. This aesthetic of delirium infiltrates galleries and museums but also public spaces, retail stores, advertising campaigns and even the language of management theory. It is a state of affairs that places a new spin on the classical avant-garde call to transform art into life. Yet if art and life have finally fused, then the life that art has merged with is as corrupt as it is appalling.

At this moment therefore, the battle waged over the symbolic power of artistic practice appears to be finished. Like a scene out of a Russian novel the battlefield is heaped with the remnants of an astonishing array of artistic models, many once aligned with the Left and other progressive forces. The defeated in fact fill the museums of Twentieth Century art. Among the fallen are those who sought to represent working class life with compassion and candor as well as more cerebrally oriented practitioners who endeavoured to reveal and subvert the ideological tropes of mass culture. Here and there are card-carrying modernist nobility and inscrutable formalists whose challenge to the decaying structures of bourgeois society were championed as an immanent critique by T.W. Adorno. Self-segregated in practice, mutual defeat conjoins this mélange of artistic modes and helps explain the missing “Now” witnessed at the M.A.V.A.N. conference. And while the loss of a strong, pervasive counter-hegemonic visual culture is as deep as the success of the consciousness industry is mountainous, this trope of failure should never become the sole determination of historical and theoretical reflection. Therefore, should you seek still another opportunity to grieve over the prosperity of bourgeois culture, please read no further.


371 Theodor W. Adorno’s concept of immanent critique sought to reveal the way even seemingly autonomous artistic and cultural forms actually embody social contradictions derived from historical, economic and class-based conflicts that apparently exist beyond the sphere of art itself. For example, Adorno found within the early atonal and highly abstract compositions of Arnold Schoenberg a negation of the light, cheerful popular music of his time that Adorno considered nothing more than a consumable product of the culture industry. Simultaneously, and dialectically, Adorno believed Schoenberg’s difficult music concretized the extreme social conditions of our era that Adorno described as impoverished and black. Thus, by assuming a negative condition Schoenberg is forced to adopt his art to this darkness if it is to survive, while also negating its negativity via a grammar of complex, formal dissonance. Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, op cit. (See in particular his discussion of black as an idea, pp 53-54.)
All of the lamentations and descriptions of defeat this paper contains are in the preceding paragraphs. Nor is any satisfaction offered to those who seek another redemptive tract about the critical potential of avant-garde art. Instead, what this paper attempts is the production of, or perhaps the recovery of space. A space gathered from in-between other structures and methods and in which a counter-narrative about the mostly unseen, and sometimes oppositional creative practices already present in the shadows of the culture industry can be articulated. Some will call this activity art and others will refuse that classification, but for my purposes such proper labeling is less the issue than the process of articulating and mapping present coordinates. To that end, this paper has three, more or less explicit aims. The first of these is to provide a map of a dimly lit, creative realm largely excluded from the economic and discursive structures of the institutionalized art world. Speculating on exactly why this shadow zone has not attracted serious, critical attention, and not even from many radical scholars, is the second goal of the paper. Thirdly, by linking specific aspects of informal creative practice with forms of emerging and residual politicized art, my text calls on progressive scholars and artists to initiate their own critique of what I somewhat mischievously call the artistic “dark matter” of the art world.

**Dark Matter**

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will read the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished,
Who raised it up so many times?
Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every 10 years a great man. Who paid the bill?
So many reports. So many questions

Bertolt Brecht, *Question From A Worker Who Reads*

---

372 By the term “art world” I mean the integrated, trans-national economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennials and trade publications that, together with curators, artists and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks.

I begin with a riddle: What is invisible but has such great mass that its effects are everywhere visible? Consider Brecht’s frequently cited poem about a worker who questions the dominant portrayal of history as a string of accomplishments by a few remarkable men. The poet’s fictive narrator reveals what Brecht knew from experience: any large-scale project, be it artistic, political or military is decidedly collaborative in nature. At the same time, collective experience as well as the intimation of worker autonomy poses a potential threat to capitalist management. Collectivism’s imprint therefore on Commodities and services, along with its trace of political and symbolic power, are attributes that must be managed through the imposition of clearly discerned, administrative hierarchies first during production and then through the pseudo-collective imprint of a corporate identity or brand following production. Any additional residue of collectivism is shuttled towards the seemingly autonomous realm of the bourgeois public sphere where it is re-configured within concepts such as community and nation or most notably today as an often dubious form of patriotism. Yet it is precisely the contour of labor’s un-represented collective experience that Brecht’s literate worker begins to trace for himself. At the same time the poem is itself a didactic lesson in so far as Brecht uses it to forge a necessary link between a materialist analysis of ideology and that which is not visible. He as much as insists that before any dialectical or materialist analysis of ideology is initiated one must first perform a radical reversal of normative, authorial categories. Carrying this methodological inversion over to the realm of the arts, it would seem that any practice claiming to be radical must also take seriously the materiality and structural complexity of unseen creative labor. This includes collective and informal work largely relegated to the shadows of art history but also non-professional, cultural practices. To do anything less means reducing materialist art history to a mere social history of art that, as Andrew Hemingway asserts, “takes the bourgeois category of art too much for granted, and turns itself into an appendage of that it supposedly seeks to critique”. Imagine we were to re-cast the protagonist of Brecht’s poem as a class-conscious, radical art historian? What sort of questions might she ask of the art historical cannon and its succession of male geniuses? Was the painting of the Demoiselles d’Avignon truly the result of one man’s virile talents? Did Picasso, Matisse or even Bertolt Brecht not draw ideas and material support from

---

374 Brecht’s practice of collaborating with his wife Helene Weigel and others and sometimes claiming these for his own, merely serves here to underscore my point.
375 For more on the problem of representing positive forms of collectivism in the art world as well as in popular culture see “Counting On Your Collective Silence,” Chapter 3.1
an invisible entourage of mistresses, amateur actors and non-western artists? What percentage of their historic importance owes itself to the skills as well as the creativity of artisans who prepared pigments, brushes, engravings or props, sets and stage lighting? Did these other men and women not have talent and ambition of their own? So few great artists: who paid the bills?

Nonetheless, we must go even further than this initial line of questioning because it is not sufficient for a radical scholarship to simply provide conventional art history with a more complete “background” to creative labor and then leave it at that. Instead, a class-conscious and materialist approach to art scholarship and theory must by necessity seek to revise radically the very notion of artistic value as it is defined by bourgeois ideology. Besides finding new ways to account for collective artistic authorship it must also theorize the many occasions in which no object is produced or where the artistic practice is a form of creative engagement focused on the process of organization itself. And it needs to theorize concepts of expenditure including the notion of artistic gift-giving as well as the shadowy forms of production and distribution, while simultaneously challenging the emerging rhetoric of artistic administration as evinced by the de-politicized use of the term cultural capital.377

This amounts to a radical re-zoning of art world real estate. This re-mapping also requires the placing of brackets around concepts such as taste or connoisseurship and that means art world property values can be expected to fall hard and fast. Nevertheless, it is the centralized art world itself, with its continuous striving to incorporate prudent examples of the very things that most oppose it, that ironically now opens a door onto a far more radical redistribution of creative value. It is an opening away from high culture and towards the dark matter beyond.

Cosmologists describe dark matter, and more recently dark energy, as large, invisible entities predicted by the Big Bang theory. So far, dark matter has been perceived only indirectly, by observing the motions of visible, astronomical objects such as stars and galaxies. Despite its invisibility and unknown constitution however, most of the universe, perhaps as much as ninety six percent of it, consists of dark matter. This is a phenomenon sometimes called the “missing

377 Coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the term Cultural Capital can now be widely found in the literature of cultural policy think tanks and even economists albeit stripped of its original, class conscious social critique: Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, Columbia U. Press, 1993.
mass problem.” Like its astronomical cousin, creative dark matter also makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society. However, this type of dark matter is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture – the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, curators and arts administrators. It includes informal practices such as home-crafts, makeshift memorials, Internet art galleries, amateur photography and pornography, Sunday-painters, self-published newsletters and fan-zines. Yet, just as the physical universe is dependent on its dark matter and energy, so too is the art world dependent on its shadow creativity. It needs this shadow activity in much the same way certain developing countries secretly depend on their dark or informal economies.  

Contemplate for a moment the destabilizing effect on professional artists if hobbyists and amateurs were to stop purchasing art supplies. Consider also the structural “darkness” within which most professionally trained artists actually exist. In the United States alone, several million M.F.A. graduates have been produced since the initiation of the M.F.A. degree in 1944. Assuming even a graduation rate of only sixty per cent at the time of this writing (2007) the total number of academically trained professional artists holding Master of Fine Arts degrees must hover around twenty four thousand individuals.

These informal, politicized micro-institutions are proliferating today. They create work that infiltrates high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate Web Sites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines in ways that do not set out to recover a specific meaning or use-value for art world discourse or private interests. This is due to the fact that many of these activities operate through economies based on pleasure, generosity and the free dispersal of goods and services, rather than the construction of a false scarcity required by the value structure of art world institutions. What can be said of dark matter in general is that, either by choice or circumstance, it displays a degree of autonomy from the critical and

378 According to the International Labor Organization (I.L.O.), eighty per cent of new jobs created between 1990–1994 in Latin America were in the informal sector, and as many as half of all jobs in Italy were also part of an informal economy defined as ‘economic activity taking place outside of government accounting and also goes by the name shadow, informal, hidden, black, underground, gray, clandestine, illegal and parallel economy,’ paraphrased from the I.L.O. website: http://www.ilo.org/

379 An estimated ten thousand students entered graduate level art programs within the United States in 1998 alone, see Andrew Hultkrans and Jef Burton’s report, “Surf and Turf”, Artforum (Summer, 1998), 106–9

380 Since then it has grown considerably in scale, see: Section One, Chapter Three above: Art, Debt, Oversupply, Panic! (On the contradictions of a 21st Century Art Education)
economic structures of the art world and moves instead within, or in-between, the meshes of the consciousness industry. But this independence is not risk free. Increasingly inexpensive technologies of communication, replication, display and transmission that allow informal and activist artists to network with each other have also made the denizens of this shadowy world ever more conspicuous to the very institutions that once sought to exclude them. In short, dark matter is no longer as dark as it once was. Yet, the art world, and global capital, can do little more than immobilize specific, often superficial aspects of this shadow activity by converting it into a fixed consumable or brand. However, even this cultural taxidermy comes at a cost to the elite, contemporary art world because it forces into view the latter’s arbitrary value structure. In terms of combat therefore, the double-edged hazards brought on by increasing and decreasing visibility are essential to comprehend.

Among the alleged art world outsiders included in the Whitney’s high profile art roundup was Forcefield: a Rhode Island based art group whose installation of hyper-colorful, hand knit costumes and wigs came with its own reverberating, industrial soundtrack. Yet this ubiquitous, outsider aesthetic Smith alludes to is perhaps more aptly labeled “slack art”, by historian Brandon Taylor. Self-consciously amateurish and informal and at the same time the product of a bona-fide M.F.A. degree, this slacker aesthetic was perfectly expressed in a second, very slackly entitled exhibition called “K48-3: Teenage Rebel-The Bedroom Show.” Organized by Scott Hug for a commercial gallery in the Chelsea district of Manhattan, it boasted work by fifty artists, fashion designers, musicians and graphic designers all haphazardly displayed on and around an automobile-shaped bed parked on a lime-green shag rug. Snapshots of gun-toting teens, hand-painted sneakers, scrappy pages of doodles, black-light posters, Ken dolls and distressed T-shirts were crammed into every corner of this fictional domestic space. And no less than three of the art writers for the city’s major weekly publications deemed “Rebel Teen Bedroom” essential viewing during the first few weeks of 2003.

The digital thievery of mash-ups and the fan cuts are perfect examples of this tendency. Mash-ups are made by pop music fans who illegally copy the vocal track of one pop song and graft it onto the instrumental track of another. The fan cut is similar to the mash-up, but involves a digitally re-edited version of a Hollywood film that is re-cut to please a specific group of fans. An example of the latter is the Phantom Edit, a reconstructed, fan-friendly version of The Empire Strikes Back, a George Lucas Star Wars episode. Ignoring issues of copyright infringement, the anonymous editor of this fan cut initially made the Phantom Edit available as a free Internet download.


My final example of institutionally secure high art influenced by the informality of what I call describe as non-professional, artistic dark matter is the work of Sarah Lucas; a British artist featured in the controversial Sensation show at London’s Royal Academy of Art in 1997. Lucas’s art consists of objects and installations made from such off-hand materials as stockings and soiled mattresses, a ripe melon, a toilet bowl cast in yellow resin and a cluster of snapshots arranged with that careful indifference to formal, aesthetic schema now typical of slack, or amateurized high art. However it is the Lucas piece entitled Nobby that most clearly testifies to the sway of dark matter over younger artists. Nobby consists of a meter high, plastic “gnome”, pushing a wheelbarrow. In all but one respect it is identical to the figures of dwarfs that suburban homeowners place on their lawns. The one difference is that both Nobby and his wheelbarrow are entirely covered in a “skin” of cigarettes. Because contemporary artistic products are not required to be the work of the presenting artist we must consider the possibility that Lucas purchased this butt-covered dwarf at a flea market or perhaps on an Internet auction site such as ebay. In fact, Nobby might just as easily be the work of an anonymous and obsessive smoker or it might be the tedious output of the artist’s assistant, or it may be her own handiwork. The answer is irrelevant. However, while this apathy regarding authorship sweeps away several previously valued artistic qualities, including personal expression and the uniqueness of a particular object, it also eliminates from the process of artistic valorization any measurement of the artist’s technical capabilities. This raises an obvious question regarding dark matter and in particular the practice of amateur artists and “Sunday” painters. Just what is it that prevents this sort of non-professional creative activity from directly entering the value structure of the elite art world? Or, to ask this question in reverse, how is it that the products of art remain “high” or “elite,” when cigarette covered lawn gnomes are scrupulously placed on display by leading, metropolitan art museums? The same question might be posed of artistic authorship. However, in order to answer these questions we first need a working model of the way artistic value is normally produced within the contemporary art world, one that can explain why not just any tobacco encrusted dwarf gets to enter such an elite domain.

_Times_, 31 January 2003, 36.

384 In the Tate Modern’s Still Life/Object room devoted to Lucas work in April 2002.
385 “Nobby” is a cast plastic garden gnome covered in cigarettes 70 x 34 x 68.5 cm, Sarah Lucas, 2000.
One way to explain why it is that a few artistic producers are rewarded, often quite handsomely, by the art world, while others lose absolutely, is to compare the way value is produced in that arena with value production in competitive sports. The economic anthropologist Stuart Plattner does this by employing a Tournament Model in which the winning athlete may be a mere fraction of a second faster than one or more of her rivals, yet she is designated the sole winner regardless of the outstanding athletic ability of her competition. According to Plattner, “this model is relevant to the art market because it describes a situation of workers receiving payments that don’t seem related to their input of effort.”386 In a close, art world competition however, it is not physical prowess that differentiates the winners from losers, but the quality of consumption capital available to the judges. This includes knowing which artist is highly sought after by a prestigious museum or private collector or what influential critic or curator will soon feature her work in a review or exhibition.387 Therefore, what stabilizes the borders of the elite art market is the routine production of relatively minor differences. These differences may have to do with the context surrounding a particular artwork or the authorship of a given piece, but what is important, and Nobby offers concrete evidence of this fact, is that art world valuation has little to do with the formal characteristics of the artwork in itself. Instead, it has everything to do with the way consumption capital – accumulated knowledge about art – is produced, circulated and accumulated. This also helps to explain how seemingly identical art products generate artistic value in radically unequal ways.388 Our re-mapping and ultimate deconstruction of artistic value hinges on this insight.

Look again at the art world and the dark matter it occludes. The lines separating dark and “light” creativity appear almost arbitrary even from the standpoint of qualities such as talent, vision and other, similar, mystifying attributes typically assigned to “high art.” If indeed the struggle over representational power is reduced to skirmishes and fleeting advancements

---

386 Plattner, whose work builds upon the groundbreaking scholarship of sociologist of art Pierre Bourdieu, adds that, “this model is relevant to the art market because it describes a situation of workers receiving payments that don’t seem related to their input of effort.” Stuart Plattner, High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1996, 12-13.

387 The significance of such consumption capital is made clear when one considers the odds of an artist without dealer representation ever being chosen for a major art biennial or even getting reviewed in a contemporary art publication.

388 Not surprisingly, the non-art world observer views this phenomenon as entirely arbitrary. Take for example a gestural painting by Yves Klein displayed in a major art museum compared with a well painted, but generic version of abstract expressionism hanging above a sofa in the window of a department store. The viewer with enough accumulated, cultural capital to know which painting is the more valuable will succeed in stabilizing a potentially confusing state of affairs, even if the actual, visual differences between the two paintings are negligible.
and retreats, then the reality of this new combat requires a turning away from the realm of the exclusively visual and towards creative practices focused on organizational structures, communicative networks and economies of giving and dissemination. It is an activity that necessarily points to the articulation of what theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call the proletarian or counter-public sphere.\footnote{Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, \textit{Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere}, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.}

**The Counter-Public Sphere.**

*Federal elections, Olympic ceremonies, the actions of a commando unit, a theatre premiere – all are considered public events. Other events of overwhelming public significance, such as childbearing, factory work, and watching television within one’s own four walls, are considered private. The real experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work, cut across such divisions [...] the weakness characteristic of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely, that [...] excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole.*

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge\footnote{Negt and Kluge, xliii and xlvi.}

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the full complexity of Negt and Kluge’s theories regarding the inherently conflicted constitution of contemporary public spheres, except to say that their polemical displacement of Jürgen Habermas’s concept pivots on the actual life experience of workers and others wholly or partially excluded from that idealized realm of citizenship and public opinion. It also seeks to account for the influence that relatively new modes of communication and deception, famously termed the “culture industry” by Adorno and Horkheimer, continue to have on both worker acquiescence and resistance to capitalist totality.\footnote{Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, Continuum, 1994.} What I will attempt however, is to introduce two key aspects of their work that are especially relevant to my arguments about dark matter. These include: 1) The subversive potential of working-class fantasy as a counter-productive activity hidden within the capitalist labor process, and 2) Negt and Kluge’s insistence that it is politically and theoretically necessary to weave together the fragmented history of resistance to capital into a larger whole or a counter-public sphere. Much like dark matter that is itself often composed
of fantastic and libidinous forms of expression, working class fantasy is never fully absorbed by the antagonistic structures of capitalism. As Negt and Kluge assert: “Throughout history, living labor has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production – within fantasy”.\textsuperscript{392} The authors further define fantasy as a multilayered defense mechanism providing, “necessary compensation for the experience of alienated labor process”.\textsuperscript{393} This does not mean that fantasy, any more than dark matter, represents an inherently progressive force. Instead:

In its unsublated form, as a mere libidinal counterweight to unbearable, alienated relations, fantasy is itself merely an expression of this alienation. Its contents are therefore inverted consciousness. Yet by virtue of its mode of production, fantasy constitutes an unconscious practical critique of alienation.\textsuperscript{394}

Working-class fantasy therefore appears to offer a twofold, critical function. At its most basic level it is a counter-productive surplus that constitutes a de-facto mode of resistance to alienation. This is not merely a metaphysical limit, but a material force generated by the “residue of unfulfilled wishes, ideas, of the brain’s own laws of movement”.\textsuperscript{395} However, at the same time, the content of fantasy does occasionally represent specific instances of anti-capitalist or at least anti-authoritarian sentiment. Negt and Kluge approach this repressed content as “promises of meaning and totality – promises that reproduce, in a highly sensitive manner, actual wishes, some of which remain uncensored by the ruling interest”.\textsuperscript{396}

Examples of workplace fantasies that were turned into action include the convenience store clerk who adjusted his pricing gun to create spontaneous discounts for customers; the model maker who added fantastic machinery to elaborately fabricated coal and nuclear power plant models; the assembly line date pitter who inserted her own messages into the fruit proclaiming such things as, “Hi, I’m your pitter” or simply “stuff it” and “Aagghhh!!”; the Heritage Foundation mailroom attendant who shredded fundraising letters meant to raise

\textsuperscript{392} Negt and Kluge, 32.
\textsuperscript{393} ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{394} ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{396} Negt and Kluge, \textit{Public Sphere and Experience}, 174.
cash for her employer’s conservative agenda; the low paid, white collar stock broker who used his access to a Wall Street phone system to create actual fluctuations in market shares; and the professional muralist who rendered Nazi storm troopers in the background of a painting made for a Walt Disney hotel and worked images of severed heads into another mural for a restaurant in Las Vegas.\(^{397}\)

However, in so far as these fragmented acts suggest the need for some greater “meaning and totality” yet nevertheless remain unarticulated as such, they are little more than isolated and ultimately impotent moments of a distorted wish fulfilment. Nevertheless both dark matter and working class fantasy do occasionally resist bourgeois ideology. Firstly, they interrupt its normative structures of production and appropriation. And secondly, they present a partial opposition at the level of content even if in an undeveloped form. What must take place before this fragmented experience can be transformed into something more political? According to Negt and Kluge this requires that the “political left must first of all reorganize fantasies in order to make them capable of self-organization”.\(^{398}\)

This brings me to the second aspect of Negt and Kluge’s work that directly concerns my argument: the importance of connecting these “unblocked” moments of working class fantasy with the history, or histories of actual resistance to capital, patriarchy, racism and nationalism. Rather than a smooth, linear narrative however, this process is one of assembling a montage of “historical fissures – crises, war, capitulation, revolution, counterrevolution”.\(^{399}\) This is because the proletarian public sphere “has no existence as a ruling public sphere, it has to be reconstructed from such rifts, marginal cases, isolated initiatives”.\(^{400}\) Not unlike the historical re-mapping suggested in Brecht’s poem, this reconstruction is built upon acts of interruption, stoppage and skepticism.\(^{401}\) At the same time this


\(^{398}\) Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 176, and also 296 in which the authors describe the leisure and cultural interests of workers including hobbies, ideals as “linked with one another only in a naturally rooted, random way, at a lower level of production.” The introduction of apparent hierarchies between types of resistant actions suggests either a standard of efficacy on one hand, or taste on the other. Yet it is also possible to apply the idea of practice to this problem, that is, practice as the work one does to improve an idea, activity or craft. Curiously, while this drive for self-betterment is found among both professionals and amateurs, the emergence of slack art leaves the amateur artist defending older notions of artistic craft.

\(^{399}\) Negt ibid., xliii.

\(^{400}\) Negt and Kluge, ibid., xliii.

\(^{401}\) Brecht, *Question Fom A Worker Who Reads*, op cit.
process also seeks to block capital from appropriating these other histories and desires for its own interests. This is an essential point for Negt and Kluge who believe that with the emergence of the consciousness industry, capital gains the means to reach ever deeper into the shadows of working class fantasy and with greater sophistication. The same danger of appropriation holds true for dark matter. At the moment these shadows become capable of collectively focused activity, as the margins link up and become visible to themselves, in and for themselves, they simultaneously become discernible to the voracious gaze of capital with its siren call of “lifestyle” and the joy of consuming.\textsuperscript{402} Significantly, activist artists have devised strategies that recognize this dilemma borrowing dark matter forms such as zines and a do-it-yourself approach to creativity. The final section begins with a description of zine aesthetics before sketching the varied activities of the activist art group known as Las Agencias.

**Las Agencias.**

*We need to make ourselves visible without using the mainstream media.*

Riot Grrrl Press\textsuperscript{403}

Least available for appropriation by the culture industry is not the slack look of dark matter, but its semi-autonomous and do-it-yourself mode of production and exchange. Zines for example are frequently belligerent, self-published newsletters that, as cultural historian Stephen Duncombe argues, do not offer:

just a message to be received, but a model of participatory cultural production and organization to be acted upon. The message you get from zines is that you should not just be getting messages, you should be producing them as well. This is not to say that the content of zines – whether anti-capitalist polemics or individual expression – is not important. But what is unique, and uniquely valuable, about the politics of zines and underground culture is their emphasis on the practice of doing it yourself.\textsuperscript{404}

\textsuperscript{402} This new “visibility” also risks attracting the attention of the newly constitute state surveillance institutions in the U.S.. At the same time the fashion industry already understands the cash potential of dark matter. Worn out blue jeans and threadbare hooded sweaters with faded screenprinted designs hint at the swap-shop aesthetic of anti-global demonstrators. Ironically, this ersatz “street” aesthetic is produced in volume by sweatshop labor. Indeed, even Nike advertisements for high-end running shoes have mimicked the hand-made style of the fanzine and the street stencil graffiti.


\textsuperscript{404} Duncombe, Notes from Underground, 129.
Duncombe draws an explicit connection between this reflexivity of the zinester and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the author as a producer. Applying Benjamin’s analysis to the case of zines, it is exactly their position within the conditions of production of culture that constitutes an essential component of their politics. In an increasingly professionalized culture world, zine producers are decidedly amateur. In producing cheap, multiple-copy objects, they operate against the fetishistic archiving and exhibiting of the high art world and the for-profit spirit of the commercial world. And by their practice of eroding the lines between producer and consumer they challenge the dichotomy between active creator and passive spectator that characterizes our culture and society.405

Indeed, with satiric titles such as *Temp Slave; Dishwasher; Welcome to the World of Insurance*; and simply *Work*, zines produced by service workers offer an instance of what Negt and Kluge term the “contradictory nature of the public horizon”, at least in so far as they represent a sporadic moment of resistance, rather than a means of sustained opposition.406 The zine aesthetic and its tactics of recycling and satire bear a certain resemblance to far more self consciously politicized art-related collectives including: *Temporary Services, Las Agencias, Wochen- Klausur, Collectivo Cambalache, The Center for Land Use Interpretation, The Stockyard Institute, Ne Pas Plier, Take Back the Streets, Mejor Vida, RTMark*, the Critical Art Ensemble, Ultra Red, The Surveillance Camera Players, The Center for Tactical Magic, Radical Software Group and the Institute for Applied Autonomy. All work within some aspect of public space, and many ascribe their approach as that of tactical media, an activist deployment of new media technology. Yet, the groups mentioned here are difficult to categorize within most definitions of art because their engagement extends well into the public sphere and involves issues of fair housing; the treatment of unemployed people, “guest” workers and prisoners as well as global politics; biotechnology and even access to public space itself.407 Groups such as *Temporary Services, Las Agencias, WochenKlausur, Take Back the Street, Ne Pas Plier, The Surveillance Camera Players, The Stockyard Institute* and *Mejor Vida* design participatory projects in which objects and services are made to be given away or used up in public settings or street actions. Other groups, including most notably *RTMark* use technology to encourage

405  ibid., 127.
407  “Tactical media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself media’ made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and the expanded forms of distribution (cable, satellite and internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved or excluded by the wider culture”, Geert Lovink, David Garcia, 2002. http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html
“the intelligent sabotage of mass-produced items”.\textsuperscript{408} \textit{RTMark} exists entirely on-line and its web site invites workers, students and other disenfranchized individuals to collaborate with them by purchasing “shares” of \textit{RTMark} stock. Because the group is a legally registered corporation it has successfully used limited liability rules to shield its members from personal lawsuits. The list of those who have sought to censor the group because of its “intelligent sabotage” includes major record companies, toy manufacturers and even the World Trade Organization.\textsuperscript{409} And unlike the lone, disaffected rebel worker \textit{RTMark}’s collective approach raises sabotage to the level of ideological critique, much in the manner proposed by Negt and Kluge.\textsuperscript{410}

This same typically humorous re-appropriation and do-it-yourself, zine aesthetic is also evident in the work of \textit{Las Agencias}, an informally structured collective of artists and activists now primarily based in Barcelona but who have collaborated on projects in Madrid, Tarifa, Boston and Milan.\textsuperscript{411} Similarly to \textit{RTMark}, \textit{Las Agencias} appropriates both the technology and appearance of the consciousness industry, but it also works directly in the streets and barrios to unsettle normative ideological structures and reveal the contradictions and false tranquility of the bourgeois public sphere. Carefully planned group actions have supported local squatters and migratory “guest” workers as well as designed campaigns against gentrification and militarism. But perhaps the work most crucial to my argument is \textit{Las Agencias} creative subversion of the riot police during street demonstrations and the group’s tactical assault upon lifestyle marketing by global corporations. Take for example the group’s \textit{Las Agencias} line of apparel designed for use in demonstrations and street actions. These colorful, “ready to revolt” designs contain hidden pockets that allow the wearer to conceal materials for buffering the blows of police batons or to conceal cameras for documenting abuse by the constabulary. Expanding upon the group’s intervention into the couture industry is a more recent project entitled \textit{Yomango}: a word that is slang for shoplifting. Mockingly playing off of the retailing strategy of the \textit{Mango} clothing label that markets itself to young, European professionals,

\textsuperscript{408} \textit{RTMark} website, March 1997, no longer extant. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RTMark
\textsuperscript{409} The W.T.O. even attempted to prosecute the group over a website the group created parodying the global juridical agency that not only sowed confusion, but spread detailed information about the WTO’s neo-liberal brand of global profiteering. http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=2671
\textsuperscript{410} For a keen analysis of activist public art using the theories of Negt and Kluge see: Philip Glahn’s essay, “Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice & the Possibilities of Critical Articulation”, \textit{Afterimage}: December 2000.
\textsuperscript{411} More about \textit{Las Agencias} can be found at: http://www.sindominio.net/
Las Agencias has developed its own “lifestyle” campaign that integrates a range of “anti-consumer” products and services with everyday acts of customer sabotage. Specially adapted clothing and shopping bags are available on the Las Agencias label designed for “disappearing” products out of the retail outlets of global emporiums. Las Agencias also provides workshops on how to defeat security systems through orchestrated teamwork that on one occasion, to mark the Argentinean riots of December 2001, took the form of a choreographed dance. For Las Agencias shoplifting is a type of civil disobedience in which reflexive kleptomania is directed against the homogenizing and instrumentalization effect of global capital.\footnote{Information on Yomango can be found at: http://www.yomango.net}

For a time, all of Las Agencias tactics including counter-couture, anti-war graphics, strategy lessons, street actions and communication systems came together in the Show Bus: a brightly painted, motor coach equipped with display and networking technologies and topped off by a rooftop platform for public speaking and live performances. With its windows refitted for rear-view projecting of live Internet feed, the Show Bus was a combination of mobile organizing space and self-contained agitation apparatus. It also made a conspicuous target for reactionary forces. Show Bus was demolished and set alight one night by unknown forces, thus compelling the group to reconsider the conspicuousness of this approach. Nevertheless, Show Bus was a concrete manifestation of counter-public space in so far it brought together numerous, otherwise fragmented forms of resistance while remaining networked to street culture and yet relatively autonomous with regard to the high art world. And it is important to add a final note about the cunning of Las Agencias in relationship to the art industry. By 2002 the group had gained enough notoriety for a liberal minded curator to solicit their participation in the Torino Art Biennial. The members met and agreed to bring their Yomango campaign into the “white box” of the institutional art museum. But they elected to do so in the form of an “installation” that replicated an actual retail franchise. Within this simulated storefront the audience would be invited to practice shoplifting as well as attend workshops on civil disobedience and activism. Furthermore, all of the shopliftable practice products were themselves to be procured from nearby retail chains prior to the exhibition’s opening. The organizers of the Biennial, upon hearing about Las Agencias plans to essentially “squat” their exhibition, acted to evict the group.
However, on other occasions, the group has managed to “leverage” art world funds provided by a museum and use this money to carry out political actions in non-art related public spaces. Nevertheless, this “catty” interplay between art activists and art institutions underscores the opportunities as well as potential risks of moving this type of dark matter into greater visibility within the public sphere. And to the extent that *Las Agencias* focuses on the process and organization of creative work itself, rather than the production of objects, its “art” is difficult for the art world to appropriate. With group activity divided between theorizing, creating posters, designing clothes, organizing and carrying out actions and giving workshops as well as networking with other activists and artists, it is simply not possible for the formal institutions of the art world to represent the full extent of *Las Agencias* “work.”

No art objects exist that could summarize group identity and unlike individuals artists such as Joseph Beuys, the group has so far avoided making fossils and souvenirs of their work for museums and collectors. In addition, because its audience participates in the making of the work and its meaning, it is difficult to imagine what aspect of the group’s work would appeal to conventional art collectors. To date, the legitimization of collective authorship has been avoided by the culture industry most likely because it undermines artistic values as defined by collectors who expect art works to be the product of one individual with one clearly articulated artistic vision. Finally, and most important to my argument, groups such as *Las Agencias, Temporary Services,* and *RTMark* have adopted forms of creative expenditure and gift giving more typically found within the informal arts that are fundamentally hostile to the functioning of the formal art industry economy. It is my contention that such acts of expenditure without the expectation of a specific return on investment is aimed at building egalitarian social relations rather than optimizing one’s position within a market.\(^{413}\) And it is this adaptation, rather than any formal resemblance to dark matter, that draw these oppositional practices into dark matter’s gravitational field and away from the hegemony of the elite art world.

**Dark Matter: Conclusions**

Despite the ideologies of resignation, despite the dense reality of governmental structures in our “control societies”, nothing prevents the sophisticated forms of critical knowledge, elaborated in the peculiar temporality of the university, from connecting directly with the new and also complex, highly sophisticated forms of dissent appearing on the streets. This type of crossover is exactly what we have seen in the wide range of movements opposing the agenda of neoliberal globalization.\textsuperscript{414}

To paraphrase the cosmologists: there is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to cultural radicals than that of “dark matter.” Collectives that operate within the contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere, openly and playfully expose its imaginary fault-lines dividing private from public, individual from collective, and the light from the dark matter. But while such groups offer important models for cultural resistance, it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that the art collectives and dark activities touched upon in this paper provide a totally satisfactory solution to the radicalization of creativity now or in the future. Instead, these groups and practices are characterized by their overdetermined and discontinuous nature, by repetitions and instability. Their politics privilege spontaneity. Some favor anarchic forms of direct action over sustained organizational models. What is effective in the short term remains untested on a larger scale. And that is the point we appear to be approaching rapidly. Again, Duncombe neatly summarizes this problem in relation to zine production:

Tales of sabotage and theft are not just represented in zines, but often by them. Stealing the materials and “borrowing” the technology necessary to produce zines is considered part and parcel of making zines [...] roommates copy zines on midnight shifts at Kinkos and others use postage meters on their jobs. [...] [Yet ] with no memories of pre-industrial labor patterns to sustain them, and little in the way of alternative models of labor organization to guide them, these individuals have little hope of taking control of the production process in their workplace, never mind society at large.\textsuperscript{415}


\textsuperscript{415} Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 81
Where then are the historians of darkness? What tools will they require to move beyond a mere description of these shadows and dark practices and towards the construction of a counter-public sphere? Clearly, more research is needed on how alternative or counter economic forms link up with collective patterns of engaged art making as well as how one measures the relative autonomy of critical art practices in relation to the culture industry. One thing is clear however; the construction of a counter-public sphere will necessitate that we move away from the longstanding preoccupation with representation and towards an articulation of the invisible. To be seen, seeable, embodied, to block something from another’s view, to take as well as give away the very means of seeing, these are the new terms of battle. With this change it comes a new horizon filled with possibilities as well as risks. If the domain of representation has up until now belonged to those who have held power over deciding what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, then the politics of invisibility will require an investment in the representation of the excluded and that which is structurally invisible.

Still, what steps forth into the light by tactically cutting across zones of representational exclusion may not always be to our liking, as has been seen in recent (2016) votes in the U.K. and U.S.. The 2014 uprising in Ukraine is an illustration of this paradox to which I now turn.

---

416 The act of covering over the copy of Picasso’s Guernica during Secretary of State Colin Powell’s televised call for war against the nation of Iraq at the United Nations on 5 February 2003 suggests that the forces of Empire fully comprehend the nature of this next Theatre of cultural battle.

Figure 15. Imaginary Archive Kyiv still under construction in the basement of Les Kurbas Center, Greg Sholette with curators Olga Kopenkina and Larissa Babij, Ukraine, April 23, 2014. (Image courtesy L. Babij.)
With a sharp tug the soot-covered tire slides free from a pile stacked over my head. Then another. And another. Soon I have fifteen tires loosened. It’s April 22, 2014, and along with local curator Larissa Babij I am standing on the battle-charred northeast corner of Kyiv’s Independence Square known locally as Maidan (square). Only a few months earlier the state’s special military units and riot police confronted an assortment of extra-paramilitary forces and ordinary citizens here as they attempted, and ultimately succeeded, to oust their corrupt President Viktor Yanukovych from office. Throughout the battle D.I.Y. barricades appeared across all the streets leading to Maidan. Stacked three and four meters high these improvised barriers combined wood shipping pallets with packed ice and assorted objects from benches to pieces of the dismantled city-sponsored Christmas tree to automobile tires. The barricades were built to impede the advance of pro-Yanukovych forces, while simultaneously protecting the square’s motley crew of demonstrators. Now, after the events of February, these barricades are less functional and more like monuments. Perhaps that is why we were able to cut a deal with the local Maidan “self-defense” to relocate scores of tires to Les Kurbas National Theatre Arts Center, a nearby cultural space where the Ukrainian edition of Imaginary Archive (I.A.) is being hosted.

I.A. is a traveling installation that I have organized together with curator Olga Kopenkina and with technical assistance from Matt Greco. For this occasion Larissa Babij makes up the fourth member of our team. I.A. consists of dozens of artist-generated “documents” each of which represents a past whose future never arrived. As it moves from country to country local artists contribute new fictitious histories, which despite their fantastical dimension manage to address concrete political, historical and social struggles. So far I.A. has appeared in New Zealand (2010), Ireland (2011), Austria (2013) and now Ukraine (2014) thanks to support from CEC Artslink and a crowdfunded IndiGoGo campaign.

A principle aim of the project is to release the utopian dimension of history, or as a reporter from Ukrainian Pravda described I.A.:
At a time when living impressions and personal memory are no longer a reliable instrument for “digesting” the endless stream of events, the need for an alternative approach to understanding the history, which is unfolding before our eyes, becomes more than relevant.\textsuperscript{418}

And so we gather up these readymade materials, rolling them one by one into a waiting cargo van that is quickly filled to capacity. Yet even as we do so small units of camouflaged men huddle about Maidan on this chilly spring morning. Some chop firewood. Others peel potatoes and tend stoves. They remain stationed here 24-7, presumably dug-in “just in case.” (Or is it because the entire square is now charged with historical significance, or more accurately, with multiple auras of signification?)

Meanwhile, Kyiv’s residents swarm between these grimy, makeshift obstacles heading to and from work. At certain points their flow is reduced to a single-file. In other words, the barricades still function. Before we pull away I tuck some folded Hryvnias into a plastic donation box adorned with a small Ukrainian flag. It amounts to only a few U.S. dollars, but in an extraordinarily imploded economy valuable nonetheless. The blue and gold flag is sealed beneath several layers of yellowing packing tape and it dawns on me then that both the tape and the box and the tires are all made from the same petrochemical ingredients that sparked the Maidan uprising. It was Yanukovych’s Kremlin deal, which had aimed to slash Russian gas import prices in exchange for securing Moscow’s vital oil pipelines across Ukraine into Europe, that brought masses of anti-Russian, pro-EU demonstrators into public squares and spaces starting November 21. Dubbed Euromaidan (ЄВРОМАЙДАН) via Twitter and then by the press, the crisis peaked on February 22 when Yanukovych fled into exile in Russia, though not before government-loyal forces killed over one hundred protestors, many were shot by unmarked snipers along Institutskaya Street, not far from the National Art Museum. (Notably those who lost their lives during Maidan protests were of many nationalities and religions and also from all regions of Ukraine – the first person killed was an Armenian, the second from Belarus.) To \textit{détourner} a Situationist slogan: Beneath the streets, petropolitics: above the streets, blood, tires, asphalt and chaos.

\textsuperscript{418} “A very timely and out-of-the-ordinary project,” Ukrainian Pravda, April 5 2014, online at: \url{http://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2014/05/4/166771/view_print/}
Easy to acquire in large numbers pneumatic automobile tires have become the “cobblestones” of 21st-century uprisings. Made primarily of Styrene-butadiene copolymer they roll naturally into position and yet are light enough to be stacked into tall, unyielding barriers. But it is thanks to their mostly synthetic carbon composition that their superiority to paving stones becomes evident. At about 140 degrees Celsius (284 Fahrenheit) tires combust, thus amplifying their usefulness as barricades separating protesters from police, protesters from other protesters as things turned out in Ukraine. For while, at first, Maidan was a swarm of intermingled Ukrainian bodies –far right ultranationalists, middle right and middle *middle patriots*, and even a small liberal-left made up of feminists, anarchists, and anti-Stalinist neo-Marxists. These latter forces never coalesced into a block yet still continue to meet and exert force. In general, precise lines of political stability were difficult to draw. Certainly, from the outset in December there was conflict – often violent – between protesters with varied or opposing political leanings, especially a number of incidents where leftist (sometimes specifically feminist or anarchist) activists were attacked for their political inclination by right activists claiming that there is no place for leftists on Maidan. Still, there was a unified objective to all this opposition: oust the Yanukovych government. After the government fell this comingling of positions grew less unified. Insignia and slogans, many of them reflecting strident Christian beliefs and others archaic historical imagery, all began to crystallize into an array of distinct positions. As if a series of micro-nations had sprung up overnight on Maidan with each minute-grouping generated its own rules, identifiable mottos and imagery, as well as bureaucratic structures.

Imaginary Archive’s participants belonged by and large to the small, liberal-Left intellectual sector. By one artist’s estimate it consists of between seventy and a hundred people. Passionate though disorganized, seriously outnumbered, their brief presence on Maidan was easily foiled by men wielding clubs. Not surprisingly many artists turned to the cultural sphere to express their resistance. In the summer and fall of 2012, about a year before the massive Maidan Square protests, many of these artists worked in coordination with staff at the National Art Museum of Ukraine to pressure the Ministry of Culture into hiring a competent director who would prioritize the interests of the museum as a public institution over personal ambitions and political ties. Not unlike Art Workers’ Coalition from N.Y.C. in the late 1960s/early 70s or Occupy Museums today these artists engage in direct action, the wellspring of “institutional critique.” The Art Workers’ Self-defense Initiative manifesto reads in part:
In a country that declares democracy the preferred mode of interaction, we, as art workers, must impact the formation of new cultural policy principle and how they are put into practice.\footnote{Manifesto from ICTM Art Workers' Self-defense Initiative at: http://istmkyiv.wordpress.com/manifest/}

But mass political-cultural uprisings today are seldom the sole province of political progressives. Maidan was no exception. What is striking about the Ukrainian revolution is the degree to which a previously shadowy sphere of ideological interests rapidly cohered if only momentarily through acts of self-representation, thanks to a combination of populist activism, networking technology, and a significantly weakened central state. And perhaps there is a link between Ukrainian “zhlob-art” with its overtly folksy kitsch paintings of unemployed citizens and Maidan’s improvised plywood shields behind which men bore sticks, rods and makeshift wooden maces. At one point protestors constructed a Molotov cocktail launching contraption that resembled a medieval catapult. On another day babushka flashmobs sang quaint Ukrainian folksongs. Illuminated by pyres of flaming tires this brightening slew of unrestrained fantasies, some at least partially real, though all decidedly heroic, flared rapidly into visibility. As Babij notes:

Maidan became a platform for certain zhlob-artists to demonstrate their own righteous patriotism and also for accusing other artists (especially those same leftists who were already unwelcome in the square) of not being active enough, especially in day-to-day presence on the square. I bring them up not because I find their work, political positions, or modes of operating in the public sphere sympathetic or thought-provoking; what astounds and disturbs me is their extreme popularity, a kind of channeling of aggressive, populist, patriotic and anti-Other sentiment and their support in the glamour – and scandal-craving wider Ukrainian contemporary art scene. You may recall the photo of some art exhibition that opened just after IA with a photo of “Russians” in a cage.\footnote{Email from Larissa Babij to the author 6/3/14. Other examples of “zhlob-art” with commentary can be found at: http://www.unitedcreativity.org/central_and_easetrn_europe/ukraine/zhlob-ar.html and similar analysis of EuroMaidan’s seemingly “regressive” imagery was made by artist Nikita Kadan whose work appears in Imaginary Archive during a skype session at New Museum on February first, 2014 at the height of the struggle: http://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/spaceship-skype-session-europe-at-its-best}

The unleashing of Maidan’s Imaginary Archive is just one of many recent examples in which a previously unrepresented cultural mass or “dark matter” has generated its own public presence.\footnote{Gregory Sholette, \textit{Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture}, Pluto Press, 2010.} Yet even as this process of brightening opens-up progressive possibilities, it also allows space for reactionary tendencies to gain visibility and coherence. Still, if we sympathize
with the “counter-publics” thesis expressed by Kluge and Negt that “throughout history, living labor has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production – within fantasy,” then the anachronistic and mythopoetic imagery often of Euromaidan comes as no surprise.\footnote{Negt and Kluge, 32.} Of course, the political economy of this imaginary production is never neat and orderly. It is instead permeated with hopes as well as resentments. It is also a resource or archive ready to be mined by an ever-expanding culture industry that has moved far beyond the administered Fordist model once proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer. Creativity, collaboration, horizontality; neoliberal capitalism’s new business vocabulary applies equally well to the globalized sphere of art as it does to finance. The rapid illumination of this missing cultural mass has become a primary intake-valve for deregulated enterprise culture. Resistance is not futile however, though it can be costly. Not only in terms of one’s life or career of course, but also politically, as we now see in Egypt in particular.

I.A. opened as planned on April 23, 2014, however hours beforehand electrical power was cut to Les Kurbas Center. Using small flashlights and a dose of adrenaline Olga Kopenkina, Larissa Babij, and I completed the installation. Later on, thanks to a portable generator and some gasoline that participating artist Volodymr Kuznetsov biked in from protestors on Maidan we installed temporary lighting for our guests. Notably artist Volodymr Kuznetsov was himself the victim of state censorship when his painted mural “Koliivschina: Judgment Day” depicting government corruption was defaced on July 25, 2013 by Natalia Zabolotnaya, director of the Mystetskyi Arsenal art museum the night before President Viktor Yanukovych was to visit the exhibition.\footnote{For more about this incident see ArtLeaks: https://art-leaks.org/2015/05/19/artist-volodymyr-kuznetsov-has-taken-legal-action-against-the-mystetskii-arsenal-kyiv-ukraine/} After the opening and the loss of the gas-powered temporary lighting, the exhibition had to be viewed with a flashlight in hand. It now seems that electricity rationing as well as the privatization of previously public utilities led to the sudden cutoff, this despite the fact that Kurbas is a state-funded institution. Babij describes the installation itself as resembling or resonating with “the barricades on Maidan” while remaining “consciously artificial”.\footnote{Babij email, op. cit.} She also pointed out that this congruity of real and synthetic structure echoed the more “formal” barricades constructed in eastern Ukrainian cities as they were being taken
over by separatists. Soon after the newly elected mayor of Kyiv, Vitaliy Klitschko, called for cleaning crews to dismantle the Maidan barricades. His efforts were met with angry protestors not ready for a return to business as usual. Instead these barricades were tidied up and transformed into genuine monuments to the uprising, and in some places even urban gardens have appeared in Maidan.425

Where then does this leave U.S. barricade builders and barricade busters who construct mock-institutional identities to slip between the interstitial spaces of capital? Or what about those who envision the possibilities of progressive dark matter and its imaginary archive? Perhaps by refusing to construct our own absolutist mythologies and by keeping all notions of identity in play we produce a kind of alternative usership to deploy a smart, handy term devised by theorist Stephen Wright.426 In this scenario, art literally attempts to escape its own ontological conditions by seeping out of its autonomous shell to become activity in the everyday world, though while it continues, it is unrecognized as “art.” Not that every artist in IA would agree with Wright’s objectives, and some in fact are already established figures within the Ukrainian art scene and beyond. In any case, we seem to have arrived at a moment of great possibility and equally great risk. Meanwhile, the socially conscious intellectual never surrenders questioning the substrate of his or her discipline, no matter how squalid its conditions, and never loses hope. “Dark matter” and “imaginary archive” are just two names for this paradox.

425 By 2016 all that remains of the Maidan uprising is a series of engraved plaques in the square.
Figure 16. G.U.L.F intervention, the Guggenheim Museum, May 1st, 2015, NYC. (Image courtesy GLC.)
To a degree unprecedented in any other social system, capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations. Without delirium and confidence, capital could not function.

Mark Fisher

Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship are characterized more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale... They don’t look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don’t look like art.

Stephen Wright

In just a few short years the emerging field of social practice has gained a considerable following thanks to the way it successfully links an ever-expanding definition of visual art to a broad array of disciplines and procedures, including sustainable design, urban studies, environmental research, performance art, and community advocacy, but also such commonplace activities as walking, talking and even cooking. Not just another cultural field or artistic genre, social practice is evolving into a comprehensive sphere of life encompassing over a half dozen academic programs, concentrations, or minors at the graduate and undergraduate levels already dedicated to turning out engaged artists, and still more programs in the pipeline (and full disclosure I am part of this pedagogical trend evolving at the City University of New York). Philanthropic foundations, meanwhile, are hurriedly adding community arts related

429 Throughout most of this essay I will use the term “social practice art” to describe the type of cultural production under discussion because this label seems to have gained the widest usage at this point in time. For an interesting hypothesis about the evolution of this terminology see: Larne Abse Gogarty, “Aesthetics and Social Practice,” in *Keywords: A (Polemical) Vocabulary of Contemporary Art*, October 3, 2014, available online at: http://keywordscontemporary.com/aesthetics-social-practice/
grants to their programming, and major museums are setting aside part of their budgets (primarily from education departments although that seems about to change) in order to produce ephemeral, participatory projects that have the added benefit in a crash-strapped financial environment of being relatively low in cost, of not requiring storage or maintenance, and of generating audience interest in ways that static exhibitions no longer seem to provide. “Art,” writes Peter Weibel, “is emerging as a public space in which the individual can claim the promises of constitutional and state democracy. Activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century”.

And yet all of this ferment is also taking place at a moment when basic human rights are considered a state security risk, when sweeping economic restructuring converts the global majority into a precarious surplus, and when a widespread hostility to the very notion of society has become commonplace rhetoric within mainstream politics. In truth, the public sphere, as both concept and reality, lies in tatters. It is as much a casualty of unchecked economic privatization, as it is of anti-government sentiments and failed states. Counter-intuitively, the rise in the number of Non-Governmental Agencies (NGO) does not reveal a healthy social sphere, but more of a desperate attempt at triage aimed at resolving such complex issues as global labor exploitation, environmental pollution, and political misconduct, all of which no longer seems manageable within the framework of democratically elected state governance. The contrast and similarity between socially engaged art collectives and NGOs has been noted by Grant Kester, who cites criticisms by the Dutch architectural collective BAVO regarding “accomodationist” practices that only aim to fix local social problems without questioning the system that gave rise to these problems in the first place. My concerns fall along similar

430 In the past three or four years alone several East Coast institutions of higher education have added some level of social practice or community oriented arts curricula to their offerings. Along with Queens College CUNY this includes NYU, SVA, Pratt, Parsons and Moore College of Art in Philadelphia. Regarding the philanthropic turn towards social practices, in 2014 the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation announced what they describe as a “game changing” $100,000 grant category called Artist as Activist which is aimed at supporting individuals who address “important global challenges through their creative practice”: http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/grants/art-grants/artist-as-activist. There is also The Keith Haring Foundation which in the same year provided Bard College with $400,000 to support a teaching fellowship in Art and Activism at the school: http://www.bard.edu/news/releases/prfstory.php?id=2516, and just a few years ago in 2012 an entirely new foundation calling itself A Blade of Grass tells U.S. that it “nurtures socially engaged art”: http://www.abladeofgrass.org/. Meanwhile, the Education Departments at the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museum sponsor socially engaged art projects with the latter also hosting the think tank/community center known as BMW Guggenheim Lab both inside and outside its museums between 2011 and 2014.


432 Grant H. Kester, The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context, Duke
lines, except that here in the United States the situation is less easy to parse. A lack of public funding for art, as well as the absence of an actual Left discourse or parties makes it difficult to avoid some level of dependency on the institutional art world.

That a relationship exists therefore between the rise of social practice art and the fall of social infrastructures there can be no doubt. And it begs the question, why art has taken a so-called “social turn,” as Claire Bishop proposes, just at this particular historical juncture?\footnote{Claire Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells: Participation Art and the Politics of Spectatorship}, Verso, 2012} I raise this paradox now, as engaged art practices appear poised to exit the periphery of the mainstream art world where it has resided for decades, often in the nascent form of “community arts,” in order to be embraced today by a degree of institutional legitimacy. The stakes are becoming significantly elevated, and not only for artists, but also for political activists. This is not a simple matter of good intentions being coopted by evil institutions. We are well beyond that point. The co-dependence of periphery and center, along with the widespread reliance on social networks, and the near-global hegemony of capitalist markets makes fantasies of compartmentalizing social practice from the mainstream as dubious as any blanket vilification of the art world. As Mark Fischer puts it, a delirious confidence permeates our reality under Capitalism 2.0, and I would add that contemporary art is simultaneously its avant-garde and its Social Realism.\footnote{See the opening citation by Mark Fischer at the head of the chapter.} To this I would like to propose a tactical détournement of this state of affairs by rerouting capital’s deranged affectivity in order to counter its very interests. I would like to say that this is the goal of my re-examination here, which aims to make trouble for the increasingly normalized theory, history and practice of socially engaged art and its political horizon, or lack thereof. I would like to insist that this is an attempt to bring about a system-wide reboot. Realistically though, I hope to at least present an outline for future research, discussion and debate regarding the paradoxical ascent of social practice art in a socially bankrupt world.

Capital and art, two seemingly discrete, even antithetical categories, appear to be converging everywhere we look, from the barren sands of Abu Dhabi where western museum’s help brand patriarchal monarchies propped up by a surplus of petrodollars and impoverished University Press, 2011, 223. BAVO’s webpage is: http://www.spatialagency.net/database/why/political/bavo

\footnotetext[433]{Claire Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells: Participation Art and the Politics of Spectatorship}, Verso, 2012}
\footnotetext[434]{See the opening citation by Mark Fischer at the head of the chapter.}
migrant workers, to online subscriber-driven services like the Mei Moses Fine Art Index, which promotes itself as the “Beautiful Assets Advisor” faithfully keeping track of financial returns on art for the .01% super-rich, much as the Stock Exchange does for other types of investors.435

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that both the Mei Moses Index and the future Louvre Abu Dhabi were rolled out in 2007, just as key economic indicators were falling like dominos across the world banking system. It was also the year Apple announced the iPhone, so that by the end of 2007 some 700 Billion SMS text messages had been sent, setting the stage some would argue for a series of “twitter revolutions,” starting in Iran and Moldavia in 2009, and then later across the Arab world.436 Books such as Naomi Klein’s The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism (2007) launched a salvo against Milton Friedman style laissez-faire capitalism, while Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s re-theorization of imperialism in their best-selling volume Empire (2001), followed by Multitude (2005), continued to inspire anti-globalization activists in the Global Justice Movement.437 Still, at this very same moment a combination of dark derivatives, toxic assets, and subprime mortgage tainted hedge-funds were beginning to tank as virtually the entire planet was about to learn to learn to speak the “grammar of finance”.438 “The financialization of capitalism – the shift in gravity of economic activity from production (and even from much of the growing service sector) to finance – is thus one of the key issues of our time,” wrote John Bellamy Foster in a 2007 Monthly Review article, adding prophetically “rather than advancing in a fundamental way, capital is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of stagnation and financial explosion”.439 As the journal containing his essay went to print the entire global economy began plunging into a massive, prolonged contraction that is still crippling indebted nations and individual workers today.

438 Sholette and Ressler, “Unspeaking the Grammar of Finance,” It’s The Political Economy, Stupid, 2013, 8-13 (Op Cite, 1.0, Our Art World, Note 40).
Astonishingly, one of the few markets to not only weather the crisis, but which also subsequently exploded in aggregate value, even as the rest of the economy remained in deep recession, was that of fine art. On May 9th, 2008 Sotheby’s sold 362 million dollars’ worth of modern and contemporary painting including a record breaking Francis Bacon painting triptych. And the sales have not weakened since. It was the same day Fitch Ratings announced they were awarding a subsidiary of Lehman Brothers Holding Inc. an ‘A,’ for a positive financial outlook. Four months later Lehman initiated the largest bankruptcy filing in U.S. history, sending the stock market into a sustained sequence of unprecedented capital losses. Expectations were high that the art market would follow this downward trend, just as it did after the 1987 “Black Monday” crash. And initially, the art market did indeed take a hit, with prices for such seemingly stable assets as Impressionist and post- Impressionist painting dropping as much as much as 30% in value by the end of 2008. Then something unexpected took place. Sales of art stabilized and began to rise again, so that by 2013 the global art market grossed €47.42 billion in sales, the second most prosperous year on record since 2007.

Since then art sales have continued their dramatic and unprecedented boom even as the economic crisis continues to plague most of the world’s nations. One result of art’s cultural potency has been the mutation of works of art themselves, a process in which a relatively fixed capital asset such as a Jackson Pollock painting owned by a well-heeled society elite a few decades ago has today morphed into an investment instrument capable of being bundled together with other assets by clever hedge fund managers. This goes well beyond the merely entrepreneurial marriage between art and commerce exemplified by, say, Jeff Koons who has licensed his metallic, balloon dog brand for use on H&M handbags. This financialization

zeitgeist is shifting art all the way down to what might be thought of as its ontological level. Artist and theorist Melanie Gilligan goes so far as to suggest that even the production of artistic work is beginning to resemble a type of finance derivative, which rather than seeking to generate new forms or new values instead depends “on the reorganization of something already existing”.

Pervasive financialization has also led to the un-concealing of art’s political economy. Eyes wide open, the legions of largely invisible artists and cultural workers so fundamental to reproducing what Julian Stallabrass sardonically dubbed *Art Incorporated* as far back as 2004 are starting to doubt their professional allegiances. We now see in high relief what has always been right in front of U.S. all along: the thousands of invisible, yet professionally trained artist service workers – fabricators, assistants, registrars, shippers, handlers, installers, subscribers, adjunct instructors – who are necessary for reproducing the established hierarchies of the art world. This socialized dark matter is now impossible to unsee, as criticism of the top-heavy distribution of compensation endemic to the field of artistic production intensifies. As we shall see, some artists are even beginning to organize.

The business-as-usual art world is now facing not one, but two mutinous tendencies. The first involves demands that the art industry be regulated in order to assure a more equitable allocation of resources for all concerned. The other involves escape. Examples of the first tendency include recently formed artists’ organizations such as Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), BFAMFAPHD, ArtLeaks, Gulf Labor Coalition, Deftfair, Arts & Labor (both offshoots of Occupy Wall Street), and a new Artist’s Union being organized in Newcastle, England. These micro-institutions collectively assert moral and sometimes also legal pressure on the art industry demanding that it become an all around better citizen. Redressing economic injustice in the art world, including the 52,035 average dollars of debt owed by art school graduates has also been the topic of recent conferences including “Artist as Debtor,” the 2015 College Art Association panel entitled “Public Art Dialogue,” Student

---


Debt, Real Estate, and the Arts and “Art Field As Social Factory” sponsored by the Free/Slow University in Warsaw Poland in order to address the “division of labor, forms of capital and systems of exploitation in the contemporary cultural production”.\textsuperscript{446}

The second reaction by artists to the current crisis involves exiting the art world altogether, or at least attempting to put its hierarchical pecking order and cynical winner-takes-all tournament culture at a safe distance For many artists the primary means of achieving this is withdrawal, or partial withdrawal, which sometimes involves turning to social and political engagement outside of art.\textsuperscript{447} In theory, not only is it difficult to monetize acts of, say, artistic gift giving or dialogical conversation, two commonly practiced operations that typify socially engaged art, but also by forming links to non-art professionals in the “real” world one establishes a sense of embodied community quite apart from and affectively far richer than anything possible within the hopelessly compromised relations of the mainstream art world.

In truth, collectively produced art and community-based art have been around for decades. Beginning in the 1970s the British Arts Council began to funnel support to muralists, photographers, theatre troupes and other cultural and media workers operating outside the studio in urban and rural public settings. A similar dissemination of government resources took place in the U.S. under the U.S. Department of Labor’s Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (C.E.T.A.) as well as through National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding. Some of this public support gave rise to artist run alternative spaces. It also helped establish artists working within labor unions, impoverished inner city neighborhoods, prisons, geriatric facilities and other non-art settings. Exactly what makes current, more celebrated forms of social practice art distinct from these previous incarnations of community art is hard to pinpoint, although four things do stand out as follows:

One difference is the move away from producing an artistic “work,” such as a mural, exhibition, book, video, or some tangible outcome or object, and towards the choreographing of social


\textsuperscript{447} For a strong argument to this effect see Tom Finkelpearl, \textit{What We Made: Conversations on Art as Social Cooperation}, Duke University Press, 2013.
experiences itself as a form of socially engaged art practice. In other words, activities such as collaborative programming, performance, documentation, protest, publishing, shopping, mutual learning, discussion, as well as walking, eating, or some other typically ephemeral pursuit is all that social practice sometimes results in. It’s not that traditional community-based art generated no social relations, but rather that social practice treats the social itself as a medium and material of expression. Blake Stimson and I began to intuit this shift in 2004. Writing about what we then perceived to be an emerging form of post-war collectivism after modernism:

This [new collectivism] means neither picturing social form, nor doing battle in the realm of representation but instead engaging with social life as production, engaging with social life itself as the medium of expression. This new collectivism carries with it the spectral power of collectivisms past just as it is realized fully within the hegemonic power of global capitalism.448

Second, as Theorist Stephen Wright similarly insists in his recent book Toward a Lexicon of Usership that contemporary art is moving beyond the realm of representation altogether and into a 1:1 correspondence with the world that both we, and it, occupy.449 But before returning to these provocative claims, let me offer one add a third other, less sensational contrast between social practice art and community-based arts. The mainstream critical establishment of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s treated community-based art either with indifference or derision. It was a level of scorn that community artists returned in spades. Driven by populist ideals as much as contempt for art world glitterati, community artists frequently turned their backs to the established art world, and still do. On those rare occasions when a “serious” critic did “stoop” to address this “unsophisticated” art four three issues typically arose.

First, while community artists who were, as often as not, white, middle-class and college educated, might collaborate with inmates to make “prison art,” or choreograph dances with geriatric patients, or train inner-city kids to make paintings and sculpture, thereby bringing pleasure and culture to the underserved, they were also, it was argued, undermining art’s historically established autonomy from the everyday world.450 As far as “highbrow” art historians go, this is akin to wearing a large

---

449 Wright, Toward a Lexicon of Usership.
450 Perhaps the most high-profile illustration of this line of argument is found in Miwon Kwon’s One
target on your back at a shooting range. Art’s allegedly unique state of independence from life has, at least since the time of Schiller and Kant, permitted artists a singular type of freedom from useful labor. It is this purposeless purpose that allows artists to operate in opposition to the banality of the everyday as well as what Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse later designated as monopoly capitalism’s “totally administered society.” That is to say, artistic work retains an ability to withdraw from the everyday world’s profaned, degraded routines only by keeping a measured, critical distance from it. By attempting to narrow the gap between art and society, community artists do exactly the opposite. Sin number one.

Second, community arts appear to substitute artist-generated services for genuine public services, thus reforming rather than fundamentally transforming offensive political inequalities that have only grown more extreme over the past thirty years, thanks to the anti-government policies of neoliberal, deregulated capitalism. Following the collapse of the world financial market this “replacement strategy” of artist service providers for actual social services seems to have accelerated in the U.S. and U.K. (in particular) as these governments look for ways to cut public spending (see Art After Gentrification, Chapter 2.4). As we well know, artists work cheaply. Unionized social workers, educators, therapists do not. In addition, point three, community-based art practices run the risk of ensconcing the contemporary artist as some sort of profound, revelatory change agent, or as Grant Kester perceptively wrote, an aesthetic evangelical.451

The third point asks, who says community is always such a good thing? Of course this depends on your definition of community, but the world is full of tyrannical “communities,” where difference, mental, physical, sexual, leads to expulsion or worse.452 This is the final sacrilege. Profano Numerus Tribus. Nevertheless, all of these charges can just as easily be applied to social practice art today. And yet this art activity seems to be the unconfirmed major contender for an avant-garde redux. What has changed?

Place After Another, see in particular her argument with Grant Kester starting page 139 “The (Un)Sitings of Community,” MIT Press, 2004.


452 Here one should refer to the tactical media group Critical Art Ensemble’s acerbically titled pamphlet “Join The Community” that critically states the very idea of community is “the conservative notion of “family values”– neither exists in contemporary culture, and both are grounded in political fantasy....a single shared social characteristic [such as being black or gay or white] can in no way constitute a community in any sociological sense”: http://www.critical-art.net/books/digital/tact4.pdf
Maybe it was Nicolas Bourriaud’s promotion of *Relational Aesthetics* in the 1990s that began the rehabilitation of community art? Recall that the celebrity curator insisted artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s gallery-centered meal sharing established a new, socially participatory paradigm for post-studio artistic practices. It was a claim the art world uncritically devoured.\(^{453}\) Or perhaps it was the expanding network of artists developing ephemeral actions, research-based public projects, and impermanent installations as a response to an ever-shrinking stock of large urban studio spaces? There is still a fourth possibility: the loss of no-strings-attached public funding for art institutions after the 1980s may have ironically brought about a popularization of museum programming by forcing institutions to seek out more interactive, spectacular public events. None of these scenarios disregards the sincerity of artists who seek communal experiences or socially useful applications for their work. Understandably, contemporary artists are seeking a way of remaining relevant in the contemporary art context, while also eyeing an exit from the ironic ineffectuality of the post-modernist paradigm that is still dominant, though fading fast. The question here is what accounts for the positive reception of social practice art today, as opposed to the negative reception of its close kin, community art, only a decade or so ago? One way or the other, it seems that by the early 2000s we find previously widespread art world resistance to socially engaged art practices eroding, though always selectively, so that now in 2015 the social turn is spinning full-throttle.

It is an inversion of artistic taste so abrupt that it reminds me of the late 1970s when painters still earnestly grappling with Greenbergian “flatness” discovered a decade later that it was an artistic “problem” that had simply vanished as a jubilant, and often juvenile 1980s art scene embraced figurative painting, decorative crafts, and even low-brow kitsch, all of which were the bane of most modernist aestheticians. Likewise, drawbacks once dismissively associated with community-based art are just as fugitive today, vanishing in a puff of smoke like the undead at sunrise. Aside from an occasional critic like Ben Davis who insists that “the genre of “social practice” art raises questions that it cannot by itself answer,” most graduating M.F.A. students today feel obliged to join an art collective and attempt to connect themselves to communities which are not traditionally part of the fine art world.\(^{454}\) If anything, the

---

\(^{453}\) The first widely circulated and still most cited critique of *Relational Aesthetics* did not appear until six years after Bourriaud’s book was published, see Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* No. 110, MIT, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79.

\(^{454}\) See Ben Davis, “A critique of social practice art: What does it mean to be a political artist?,” *International*
focus on socially engaged art by the mainstream art world has actually eclipsed, rather than illuminated the many individuals still active in community arts, turning long simmering resentments once directed at the art world establishment into charges of appropriation and colonization.\footnote{Davis may be right about the blindness of social practice art to its own preconceptions. Still, the fact that so many young people today are desperately seeking to redefine the way they live from the point of view of both environmental and social justice adds an impressive robustness to this cultural phenomenon. Art seems to be the one field of recognized, professional activity where a multitude of interests ranging from the aesthetic to the pragmatically everyday co-exist, a state of exception that led to artist Chris Kraus’s musings on what she calls the ambiguous virtues of art school:}

\begin{quote}
Why would young people enter a studio art program to become teachers and translators, novelists, archivists, and small business owners? Clearly, it’s because these activities have become so degraded and negligible within the culture that the only chance for them to appear is within contemporary art’s coded yet infinitely malleable discourse.\footnote{Socially engaged art practice is becoming such an attractive and paradigmatic model for younger artists that it seems to fulfil Fredric Jameson’s proposition that particular historical art forms express a social narrative that paradoxically, “brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction”.\footnote{At first glance, this seems like the answer to my initial question: why is socially engaged art advancing at a moment when society is bankrupted? Because, with due respect to Jameson, it resolves intolerable contradictions in the actual world. But while this explanation may have been applicable to Relational Aesthetics, it seems inadequate just a decade or so later with regard to social practice. For Jameson, the work of art remains a categorically discrete entity, a novel, building, performance or film framed within a specific historic, cultural and institutional context. It is, in other words, the privileged site where the work of hermeneutic textual interpretation takes place. What if Jameson, \textit{The Political Unconscious}, 80–81.}}
\end{quote}

\footnote{“Is Social Practice Gentrifying Community Arts?,” a conversation between Rick Lowe and Nato Thompson at the Creative Time Summit, October 2013, a transcript is available from \textit{Bad At Sports} at: http://badatsports.com/2013/is-social-practice-gentrifying-community-arts/}

social practice art has already successfully inverted normative representational framing as art, flipping inside out our spectator-based distance from the world so that now everything is outside the frame and nothing remains inside? In Wright’s 1:1 thesis, the practice of socially engaged art would then simply constitute the social itself, emerging into the everyday world as a set of actual social relations or commonplace activities, and not as a deep critical reflection or aesthetic representation of society or its flaws. This is different from a Kaprow/Beuys/Fluxus tactic of inserting anti-art into the everyday world. 1:1 art just becomes redundant by providing “a function already fulfilled by something else”.458 Neither does Wright’s model conform to Shannon Jackson’s notion that such heteronomous social activities might be folded into a neat, academic framework via performance studies.459

If these emerging practices interact with social life by producing the social itself, then they are neither an experimental trial, nor a performance, nor even a rehearsal for some ideal society. In fact the term practice would be a misnomer.460 Leading to several complicated consequences. First, redundant, 1:1 social practices are subject to all of the legal, economic, and practical consequences of any other real-world activity. Take Pittsburgh-based Conflict Kitchen that specializes in serving food from countries that the United States is in conflict with including North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. When But as discussed above, when they presented a Palestinian menu in 2014 last year someone sent the artists a death threat, forcing them to shut down under police protection for several days. Yes, paintings and other artistic projects have drawn hostility to themselves or their authors due to what or how they represent someone or some nation or idea, but in this instance, does it really make sense to defend Conflict Kitchen as an art project with a guaranteed first amendment right


459 Degree to which they provoke reflection on the contingent systems that support the management of life. An interest in such acts of support coincides with the project of performance,” Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Routledge, 2011, 29. Wright would likely respond that his idea of usership-driven art is work that is not performed as art, but literally and redundantly is action in the “real-world,” quite unlike performative practices whose content is, first and foremost, art, and then only secondarily perhaps an action, useful or otherwise, in the real world. See Wright, *Usership*, 16.

460 Stephen Wright’s idea of usership differs from better-known artistic theories of the performative vs. performance art, in so far as he proposes a change in the ontological status of art such that what an artist does is no longer engaging in an act as art, but the artist is doing what she or he is doing. Wright offers few examples but here is a citation from his book *Usership*, op cit., p. 22: “1:1 scale practices operating within a paradigm of usership, actually being what they are – house-painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants, mushroom hunts, whatever – and at the same time artistic propositions of what they are, can be described in different ways, depending on what set of properties (or allure) one wishes to emphasise.”
to free speech when the laws protecting commercial business, which is what C.K. is from a purely legal perspective is, are already enough? Conversely, first amendment rights would not prevent this culinary art project from becoming liable for, say, a food born illness, should one be accidentally transmitted to a customer.\textsuperscript{461} Operating in the real world also presents learning challenges for socially engaged practitioners trained by artists who paint, and draw, and make installation art in the isolation of their studio. Commenting on the challenge of this autodidactic learning curve, artist Theaster Gates explains with genuine surprise that while working on his Dorchester housing restoration projects in Chicago “I never learned so much about zoning law in my life.” To anyone other than an artist trained to deal with the representations of things, but not things themselves, gaining practical knowledge about zoning laws would have been self-evident.\textsuperscript{462}

Second, by working with human affect and experience as an artistic medium social practice draws directly upon the state of society that we actually find ourselves in today: fragmented and alienated by decades of privatization, monetization, and ultra-deregulation. In the absence of any truly democratic governance, works of socially engaged art seem to be filling in a lost social need by enacting community participation and horizontal collaboration, and by seeking to create micro-collectives and intentional communities. On the surface, it’s as if they were making a performative proposition about a truant social sphere they hope will return once the grown-ups notice it’s gone missing. If however they are instead incarnating the remains of society as I am suggesting, then the stakes are radically different, for better and for worse. It is for better when social practice and community-based artists engage with the political, fantastic, or even resentful impulses of people, a process that can lead to class awareness or even utopian imaginings much as we saw with Occupy Wall Street. It is for the worse when the social body becomes prime quarry for mainstream cultural institutions and their corporate benefactors who thrive on deep-mining networks of “prosumers” bristling with profitable data.\textsuperscript{463} Even the normally optimistic theorist Brian Holmes gloomily warns U.S.


\textsuperscript{462} Theaster Gates TED Talk, “How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art”. Published March 26, 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9ry1M7JlyE

\textsuperscript{463} Consider Nike’s elegantly designed fashion accessory Fuelband 3.0: an integrated cybernetic device in which the company monitors the muscular movements of the bracelet’s wearer in real time via Bluetooth. While Nike sends information about the customer’s physical fitness, it also aggregates human data useful for
that “the myriad forms of contemporary electronic surveillance now constitute a proactive force, the irremediably multiple feedback loops of a cybernetic society, devoted to controlling the future”.  

One way to grapple with the present paradox of social practice art’s predicament is to turn to the archive of past projects and proposals – including those that succeeded and those that failed – in order to reappraise certain moments within the genealogy of socially engaged art that might have unfolded differently. To find vestiges and sparks suggesting unanticipated historical branches that may have sprouted off into directions that would possibly be less vulnerable to the pressures for normalization, institutionalization and administration. One of these significant junctures took place shortly before two world-altering historical occurrences – the global financial crash of 2007/2008 with its devastating economic effects and the widespread surveillance, even criminalization of the electronic commons. The year 2004–2005 sits at a point where the counter-globalization movement was invisibly beginning to falter, and immediately after unprecedented global peace demonstrations distressingly failed to stop the illegal, U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. It precedes the full disclosure of the emerging national security state complex of today. Nevertheless, these realities had yet to fully sink in as artists, activists and intellectuals remained captivated by the utopian potential of new communications technologies and the “people-power” that seems to have led to the downfall of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire. Coming into focus was a group of tech-savvy, cultural activists whose whose bold hit and run interventions sought to undermine established authority by literally upending public spaces and turning the mainstream media’s resources against itself. Artists Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere of the group neuroTransmitter put it this way:

For U.S. this was a moment of heightened media art and activism. Artist were extending the possibilities of new technologies and re-inscribing the use of old media forms. It was a time of innovations in technology and communications media, yet we were interacting in physical space rather than through social media... where we both interacted on the street level as well as in the air.

Developing future products that the company will market to these same individuals. It is not hard to imagine a social practice type project that would operate in a similar way substituting, say, the Guggenheim or Museum of Modern Art for Nike.

465 Quoted Cited from in an email to the author from, Monday, March 23, 2015 at 10:04 a.m.
Decidedly non-ideological in outlook (other than an occasional nod of approval towards the Left-libertarian Zapatista Army of National Liberation (E.Z.L.N.) of Chiapas Mexico) tactical media interventionists dismissed organized politics. Some went so far as to castigate past efforts at achieving progressive political change describing the utopian aims of the New Left and May 68 as “vaporware”–a derogatory term used for a software product that while announced with much fanfare, never actually materializes. Geert Lovink and David Garcia argued that tactical media activism sought to hold no ground of its own; instead merely seeking to creatively interrupt the status quo with determined, short-terms acts of public sensationalism and cultural sabotage.

Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, not some vaporware promised for the future. But what we can do on the spot with the media we have access to.

In truth, Tactical Media benefitted from a particular historical opening, a quasi-legal loophole that existed before the heavily policed, privatized public sphere emerged full-blown, with its round-the-clock electronic surveillance closing down outlets for resistance, including the kind of critical gaps exploited by more militantly engaged political artists such as Critical Art Ensemble as I will discuss below. In other words, the illegal status of distributed denial-of-service (D.D.o.S.) attacks clandestinely carried out by hacktivist groups such as Anonymous in recent years were still in a gray zone into the early 2000s. In 1998 Ricardo Dominquez and Electronic Disturbance Theater designed a pro-Zapatista virtual sit-in platform aimed at overloading and crashing websites belonging to the Mexican Government. But in 2010, University of California Campus Police investigated Dominquez for a tactical media type application he devised that would assist undocumented immigrants crossing the Southern U.S. border. This was also before some forms of social practice art began to attract the attention of mainstream cultural institutions.

466 Ricardo Dominquez and Electronic Disturbance Theater designed a pro-Zapatista virtual sit-in platform aimed at overloading and crashing the Mexican Government’s website. This is a form of “hacktavism” still in use by the group Anonymous today.


468 A discussion of EDT’s floodnet is found here: http://museumarteutil.net/projects/zapatista-tactical-floodnet/

469 The situation escalated when Dominquez organized a virtual sit-in of the UC President’s website: http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2010/apr/06/activist-ucsd-professor-facing-unusual-scrutiny/
The second half of this essay focuses on this tactical media moment as it was presented in the 2004 exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, organized for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS M.o.C.A.) by their recently hired curator Nato Thompson. The show was dedicated to artists or artists’ collectives who explicitly conceived of art not as an object of contemplation for a passive spectator but as a sharable set of tools for bringing about actual social change. It also reflected a certain optimism that pivoted on the idea of tactics could be adopted by anyone, not just artists, to improve life conditions. What follows is not intended to serve as a diverting tale of speculative nostalgia. Instead, I hope to put this exhibition forward as one wrinkle in the archive of socially engaged art worthy of re-reading, and possibly rebooting its history. Endeavoring to leverage the euphoric concoction of delirium and confidence Mark Fisher attributes to Capitalism 2.0 for a project of archival redemption, I am reminded of a phrase used by Russian Avant-Garde theorist Viktor Shklovsky. I proceed therefore with the “optimism of delusion”.470

**After the Interventionists.**

This was no gray on gray presentation of “message art” intended to dutifully instruct its audience about political realities, any more than its content pointed to some romantic socialist vaporworld. Instead a visitor to MASS M.o.C.A. was confronted with a zoo-like menagerie of “magic tricks, faux fashion and jacked-up lawn mowers,” packed into the museum’s plaintive post-industrial expanse like a sideshow for activists. Rather than didactic lecturing these projects agitated for social change through ironic critiques, overt lampooning, and subtle co-optations of mainstream media and culture cunningly disguised as the real thing. Artist Alex Villar leaps over fences, scales brick facades and squeezes himself into cracks between tenement buildings, temporarily occupying overlooked urban spaces while performing his own Situationist-inspired version of Parkour.

If the political identity of these interventionist activists was intentionally difficult to pin-down, the exhibition certainly proved something else, something that most previous displays of socially engaged art had not attempted: it returned a sense of wonder and surprise to oppositional culture. Subterfuge could be fun. Unfortunately, this aspect of the exhibition’s

message was easier to take-away as a sound bite than its critical intent. Despite being on view for over a year (May 2004 to March of 2005) The Interventionists received no in-depth reviews, though a one-sentence recommendation for holiday travelers did appear in the New York Times, in which the show was cheerfully described as full of “pranksters and fun politically motivated meddlers”. The absence of serious, critical response cannot be blamed entirely on the lack of familiarity with Nato Thompson, still an untested curator, or with the exhibition’s off-the-grid location in rural New England. Nor was the carnivalesque enthusiasm that unapologetically permeated The Interventionists a reason for this dismissal. After all, a substantial theoretical discourse already existed for this kind of art, online and in Europe, but its authors, including Gene Ray, Brian Holmes, Rozalinda Borcila, Geert Lovink, Marcelo Exposito, Gerald Raunig, Marc James Léger and Stephen Wright among others, then, as now, have limited impact on cultural discourse in the U.S.. The failure of any critic to develop a substantial political and aesthetic analysis of The Interventionists is unquestionably a lost opportunity, especially when one considers the impoverished state of such criticism even up to today. Still, the exhibition managed to demonstrate two things above all. First that a thriving group of contemporary artists in 2004 considered social, political and environmental issues paramount to their practice, and second, that their critique could be delivered through the kind of stimulating visual format audiences of contemporary art had come to expect. Even so, there are two overlooked dimensions of The Interventionists more relevant to my argument still in need of excavation.

MASS M.o.C.A.’s sprawling labyrinth of rooms and obsolete industrial apparatus appealed then, as it does today, to vacationers grown tired of Happy Meals and theme parks and searching for that off-beat family experience, but one that promised at least a modicum of educational nourishment. On the occasion of The Interventionists a trip to the museum delivered something extra, a spectacle of imaginative dissidence whose quintessential onlooker was not the art world elite, but instead these same “holiday travelers,” whose demoralized collective unconsciousness theorist Michel De Certeau would call the murmur of the everyday. This was no coincidence. Thompson cut his curatorial teeth co-producing a weekend of guerilla-style

street actions in Chicago under the rubric The Department of Space and Land Reclamation or D.S.L.R.. Gleefully bringing together graffiti, agit-prop posters, hip-hop, illegal street art and impromptu public actions, D.S.L.R.’s bottom-up informality simultaneously paid homage to and deconstructed Mary Jane Jacob’s landmark 1993 public exhibition Culture in Action, all the while turning a blind-eye towards the city’s more art savvy neighborhoods. From gigantic balls of trash rolled down Michigan Avenue at lunch hour by men and women dressed up as sanitation workers to anonymous public sculptures attached to traffic signs and absurd performances including a sofa tagged “Please Loiter” plopped down casually on the sidewalk, DSLR was about as disconnected from the gaze of the art world as one could get in 2001.472

In the decade following The Interventionists numerous academic conferences, publications, and programs began to engage similar, Situationist-inspired themes, as debates about short-term tactics versus strategic sustainability and artistic instrumentality versus aesthetic value emerged, or rather re-emerged, often recapitulating similar or even identical artistic passions from key moments in avant-garde art history. Meanwhile, the exuberantly designed exhibition catalog—which I co-edited with Thompson—rapidly went into multiple reprints, most likely keeping pace with a renewed interest in conceiving of art as an instrument for social change. And while the counter-globalization movement began to lose energy after 2004, the World Social Forum, an international policy initiative dedicated to countermanding neo-liberal hegemony, drew thousands of participants to Porto Alegre, Brazil and other locations in the “Global South.” In 2004 the forum’s host city was Mumbai, India, and those who gathered collectively asserted: “another world is possible.” As if echoing back from a reconverted electronics plant in the winding hills of New England half a world away The Interventionists seemed to respond yes, and by the way, “another art world is also possible!”473

Viewed in this context The Interventionists coincided with a broader sea change already under way within contemporary art. Not only were many privileged cultural practitioners beginning to raise questions about the social purpose of their professional activities, but the mainstream art world itself was poised to embrace a more performative, participatory, and at times ephemeral artistic

472 See: Department of Space & Land Reclamation website: http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dsrl/
473 “Another Art World is Possible,” happens to be the title of an essay by theorist Gene Ray from the same years as The Interventionists exhibition in Third Text, vol. 18, no. 6, (2004), pp. 565-572.
experience prefigured by watershed moments such as Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta 11* in 2002, but also Catherine David’s *Documenta 10* prior to that. Arguably it is this very shift away from displaying art objects towards generating experimental platforms for discourse and research-based practices that have opened up a legitimatizing space for social practice art today. Nevertheless, there was nothing predetermined about the path leading from an exhibition of tactical media troublemakers at MASS M.o.C.A., into the white walls of M.o.M.A. or the Tate Modern. Furthermore, if we construe Thompson’s own tactics as being at least in part a pointed response to Nicolas Bourriaud’s incipient concept of Relational Aesthetics, which similarly celebrated everyday social activity but explicitly rejected overt political content or any self-awareness of artistic privilege, then at least one alternative trajectory for social practice art suggests itself. In this scenario art would still engender social interaction, but it would do so without severing such experimentation from a radical critique of either post-Fordism or the deregulated micro-economy of the contemporary art situated within it. But there is another, darker reason *The Interventionists* might be a significant nodal point for re-thinking the archive of social practice art and its genealogy.

C.A.E.’s predicament also provided a singular opportunity for socially engaged artists to reconsider what the stakes of their practice were within a broader conception of politics. Sometime around 9PM on May 29th, 2004, about fifty people, many of them engaged artists who were attending the opening of *The Interventionists*, gathered behind the museum’s main entrance hall. Spread by word of mouth, the objective of the emergency meeting was to develop a coordinated, collective response in Kurtz’s defense. Several of those present had already been issued subpoenas to testify before the Grand Jury, or face imprisonment. However, the discussion that ensued quickly divided into two camps: Kurtz supporters who argued for a pragmatic vindication of the artist based his defense on the artist’s right to free speech under the first amendment, and those hoping to spotlight the investigation’s underlying agenda, which, hinged it was asserted, on George W. Bush’s government’s efforts to stifle political criticism and criminalize “amateur” scientific research carried out by artists, activists, and environmentalists. The late and gifted Beatrice De Costa who was had already been subpoenaed, articulated support for the second, long-range view pointing out that a collective response to accusations should focus on a broader set of rights. Nevertheless, the constitutional

---

defense won out.\textsuperscript{475} Four years later after much effort and expense Kurtz was finally exonerated when a federal judge refused to allow the government’s case to go to trial for lack of evidence.

Which brings me to a final point regarding these archival musings. With so many practitioners of tactical media and activist art present for the opening of *The Interventionists* there was an exceptional organizational opportunity opened up for envisioning a broadly conceived and theoretically nuanced genus of socially engaged art. Ironically, C.A.E.’s misfortune might have jump-started a social practice future in which the proven effectiveness of tactical media complimented, rather than eclipsed, a strategic, long-range vision of political transformation. If another art world was possible in the Spring of 2004, ignition failed. Maybe that was inevitable. And yet, it begs the question. Did the C.A.E. incident inadvertently scrub clean more militant forms of art leaving a more manageable strain of socially engaged art behind?\textsuperscript{476}

Or was the very lack of a broader, strategic political view also to blame? To put this differently, is vaporware really such a bad thing? After all, some version of collectivism operates within even the most battered social terrain. The question is: what does that collective project look like. Stimson puts it this way:

> there are only two root forms of collectivist practice – one based in political life and the state and another in economic life and the market – and our time is marked by a historical shift from a greater degree of predominance for the first to an increasingly influential role for the second.\textsuperscript{477}

\textsuperscript{475} The CAE Defense Fund, which at the time of the “Interventionists” opening had already been established by artists Claire Pentacost and Gregg Bordowitz, along with Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos of The Yes Men, emerged from the emergency meeting with a constituency of supporters ready to go to work raising legal funds and publicizing the senseless injustice of the accusations against Kurtz. While the overall outlook of the Defense Fund’s members continued to argue in their lectures and writings in favor of amateur scientific research and the right to engage in political disobedience via forms of tactical media, Kurtz’s actual legal case pivoted on the artist’s First Amendment guarantee of free speech. Caught up in the need to defend a fellow politically active artist from what appeared to be government railroading I endorsed this “free speech” defense with its more pragmatic view. Ultimately, however, the government’s prosecutorial position was defeated by its own flawed logic, though not after many thousands of dollars was raised. (Thanks to Lucia Sommer for this correction to my previous note in an email dated Monday, Sep 7, 2015 at 5:34 PM)

\textsuperscript{476} This is certainly seems to be the position of artist Rubén Ortíz Torres who was an artist Thompson exhibited in The Interventionists. Torres believes that the occasion of the 2004 show was “supposed to be the moment when the art world (or at least part of it) would recognize the practices that a lot of artists (if not most) do in art schools and, alternative spaces and other circuits outside commercial galleries and museums. However it seemed that the Steve Kurtz incident cancelled or was used to cancel that opportunity.” Notably he adds “I see “social practice” as a very ineffective way to do politics trying to validate them and justify them as art. It seems a way more bureaucratic, moralistic, self righteous and pretentious notion than the more open, anarchist and situationist one of “Interventionism.” Cited in an email to me from Monday, October 14, 2013 at 8:45 p.m.

How might our narrative about social practice art collectivism be imagined differently, or perhaps better yet, how can it be shifted away from the market-based notion of “community as consumer-based demographic” that often, surreptitiously dominates it? And yes, we are talking about conscious political resistance, which may ultimately come from any number of unlikely places. It might, for example, involve a process of engagement as disengagement, something akin to Wright’s notion of escaping through a trap door. Or perhaps it will emerge as John Roberts proposes in the form of artistic communization? Recent national demonstrations focusing on police violence against people of color and the unexpected success of the Leftwing Syriza party in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or the “Pirate Party” Piratar in Iceland, also suggest possible pathways to politicized collectivism. But resistance could also involve less savory forces, such as the mobilization of a Nietzschian ressentiment, something that we can see already visible in Greece’s far right wing party Golden Dawn, Ukraine’s Svobada, France’s National Front, Austria’s Freedom Party, as well as many who voted for the Brexit in the U.K., and the White Supremacist Alt-Right movement that supported the recent Republican presidency in the United States. It would also be a mistake to overlook the fact that these same political, technological, and economic shifts that gave rise to neoliberal enterprise culture also played midwife to numerous process-oriented, self-organized, collective

478 One need only browse the titles of books and papers on mass marketing to see the way that such things as brand loyalty, patterns of consumption, income statistics, and, in the U.S., even zip codes come define the notion of a community under modern day capitalism. When this approach is then applied to Internet activity through the use of cookies or tracking Face Book and similar online trafficking sites, the very notion of community as a body of citizens, for example, is replaced by a quantity of consumers. The danger that this holds for socially engaged artists is that without an alternative model of who the individual is, or what the collective is, the default will too fall to convenient and available models based on mass consumption.

479 “The thing changes not one bit, yet once the trapdoor springs open and the ‘dark agents’ are on the loose, nothing could be more different.” The dark agency is for Wright the allure of the thing that is both a proposition about art, and a completely redundant activity, object, practice of everyday life. Wright, Usership, 7.


481 For a still-timely application of Nietzsche’s concept of ressentiment to current events that was written just one year after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, see Karyn Ball, “Wanted, Dead or Distracted: On Ressentiment in History, Philosophy, and Everyday Life,” Cultural Critique, No. 52, Everyday Life, Autumn, 2002, pp. 235-267. In it she cites Nietzsche’s own definition of the term ressentiment as the “uncanny intertwining of the ideas of ‘guilt and suffering’…[which] by now may be inseparable.” Ball invokes this formulation in relation to both the U.S. and Al Qaeda in 2011, but it can also be put to work again today in light of the global move towards extreme forms of nationalism that are typically combined with targeting migrants and refugees as the cause of a country’s cultural and economic shortcomings, often I should say imagined shortcomings. For example, despite Trump’s ability to mobilize the anger and resentment of large numbers of white voters in 2015 elections citing their alleged economic decline, most Americans fared better overall under President Barack Obama than the prior George Bush Jr. administration. See: Christopher Ingraham, “Gallup: Life got better for pretty much everyone under Obama,” The Washington Post, August 31, 2016: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/08/31/gallup-life-got-better-for-pretty-much-everyone-under-obama/?utm_term=.33c571e4d8b5
art organizations as previously stalwart barriers between artist and audience, artist and curator, and artist and administrator began to blur and blend.

One result is that cultural institutions now resemble components of a “system” that swap and amplify cultural capital, rather than spaces where rare things are collected, guarded and cared for. It’s no surprise therefore, that Thompson’s approach to *The Interventionists* embodied many of these same unresolved contradictions, or that historical contingencies determined which of these threads would prevail and which would be suppressed. Writing about the Museums Quartier in Vienna at about the time as *The Interventionists* Brian Holmes observed that, “the welfare states may be shrinking, but certainly not the museum. The latter is rather fragmenting, penetrating ever more deeply and organically into the complex mesh of semiotic production [outside of its walls]”.482 Laudable attempts at continuing this type of institutionally-based curating, such as Charles Esche at the Van Abbemuseum, are too few and too far between one another. Meanwhile, the stage has been set for the current phase of post-Fordist administration and the transformation of cultural institutions into modifiable platforms for staging temporary, project-based installations, spectacles and events. This administrative turn seems to keep pace with a modified neoliberalism in which both risk and regimentation operate side by side, or as Jan Rehmann summarizes “neoliberal ideology is continuously permuted by it opposite: its criticism of the state, which is in fact only directed against the welfare state, flows into an undemocratic despotism, its “freedom” reveals to signify the virtue of submission to pre-given rules”.483 Either way, the question remains: What loopholes of resistance were lost in and around 2004? Which might still remain? And how will we usefully uncover those that might still be present?

In the decade that followed 2004/2005, the massive private appropriation of public capital by self-damaged investment corporations marked a return, already under way since the 1980s, to forms of worker exploitation and precarious inequality typical of capitalism prior to the banking reforms and collective pushback orchestrated by organized labor in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1929 stock market crash. Following the recent financial collapse an optimistic army of young “knowledge workers,” including many artists, probably experienced

shock rivaling that of middle class homeowners with foreclosed property. These privileged “creatives” had been assured that Capitalism 2.0 needed their non-stop, 24/7 yield of “out-of-the-box” productivity. Well, apparently not. Then came the high-profile prosecutions of Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, the government targeting of WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange, and revelations about National Security Administration spying by whistleblower Edward Snowden. Even the realm of non-market, digital democracy was clearly becoming a target of government regulators, to which we can add the increasing move away from fair use World Wide Web content, and towards the private, corporatization of intellectual property in both physical and http-coded binary form. Nor did the art world provide a refuge for the most challenging forms of tactical media. C.A.E. for example stopped experimenting with bio-art after 2007, and the group has found little purchase in the U.S. art world, traveling to Europe for most of its ongoing research projects.

Today, social practice artists are busy planting herb gardens, mending clothes, repairing bicycles, keeping bees and giving out assorted life-coaching advice free of charge. Groups of professional designers are improving the “quality and function of the built environment”. In run-down inner-city corridors, they categorize what they do under the avant-gardeish rubric “Tactical Urbanism”. In the Bronx, working class tenants are asked to invite a couple of artists into their homes for dinner. In exchange the artists paint their hosts a still life. Sitting on a sofa everyone is photographed with the painting hanging in the background like a commentary on social values that are too often absent from the skeptical art world. In New York City’s East Village, a funky storefront installation of assembled, found materials highlights the street culture of a gentrifying neighborhood. One artist collaborates with passerby to turn used paper cups into art, as another encourages residents to engage in “critical dialogue” about their precarious future. Artists distribute free beer, hand-picked fruit, glasses of ice tea, and home-made waffles to participating members of the public. These

---

484 Tactical Urbanism/The Street Plans Collaborative: http://issuu.com/streetplanscollaborative
485 Op Cit, note 290.
gifts are offered up like a sacrifice to some missing deity whose flock has been abandoned.\textsuperscript{488} The absent god is of course society itself, defined as a project of collective good, from each according to her ability, to each according to his need. Instead, the community Capitalism 2.0 offers is based on the gospel of mutually shared selfishness, and certainly any attempt at countering such a credo is justified, even participatory waffle sharing, though it must also be said here that the way to hell is undoubtedly paved with many good interventions.

To be sure, the argument put forward here does not deny that artists earnestly struggle to change society, even if the art they produce frequently serves, for better and for worse, as a symbolic resolution to irresolvable social contradictions. And yet what has changed is the phenomenal aggregation of networked social productivity and cultural labor made available today as an artistic medium, and at a time when society is intellectually, culturally and constitutively destitute. Art, along with virtually everything else, has been subsumed by capital, resulting in the socialization of all production. One outcome is that artists are becoming social managers, curators are becoming arts administrators, and academics are becoming tactical urbanistas. Meanwhile, social practice artists collect the bits and pieces of what was once society like a drawer of mismatched socks. Is it any surprise that these social artifacts only seem to feel alive in a space dedicated to collecting and maintaining historical objects (and I am speaking, of course, of the museum)? But in a field that is weakly theorized even in the best of circumstances, art’s “social turn” makes the passage of engaged art out of the margins and into some measure of legitimacy all the more compelling as a matter for urgent debate. Because if art has finally merged with life as the early 20th Century avant-garde once enthusiastically anticipated, it has done so not at a moment of triumphant communal utopia, but at a time when life, at least for the 99.1 per cent, sucks.

“Flexibility,’ ‘nomadism’ and ‘spontaneity’ are the hallmarks of management.” As nearly impossible as that struggle seems today, if we do not strive for a broader conception of liberation, then we resign ourselves to nothing less than bad faith, while abandoning hopes of rescuing that longue durée of opposition from below that so many before U.S. have endeavored to sustain. Once upon a time, art mobilized its resources to resist becoming kitsch. Now art must avoid becoming a vector for data mining, social asset management, or from becoming a means of alleviating unbearable social realities, or a method for withdrawing from politically

\textsuperscript{488} Examples of gift art are drawn from Ted Purves, \textit{What We Want is Free}. (Op Cite, 3.2 Note 39).
challenging conflicts whose intensity is clearly on the rise. Nevertheless, delirium and resistance prevail today, forging an indissoluble amalgam of two predictable responses to current circumstances. But it is this same dizzy feverishness that might drive U.S. onwards in the form of a persistent, low-grade fever for social justice. What remains paramount is recognizing the actuality of our plight, including its paradoxes, while asking how we can be more than what the market says we are. The terrain thereafter is a delirious terra incognita. It is waiting to be mapped. We must get there first.