



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Delirium and Resistance: activist art and the crisis of capitalism

Sholette, G.G.

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Other version

License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sholette, G. G. (2017). *Delirium and Resistance: activist art and the crisis of capitalism*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

vi. Conclusion

Neoliberal capitalism's networked communications technologies have generalized the exchange and display of aesthetic expressivity and personal fantasies including that of amateur painters musicians, writers, filmmakers and poets, while providing visibility to innumerable micro-communities populated by both progressive and reactionary formations and every political shade in between. Concomitant with this spectacularization of a previously shadowed sphere of cultural activity we have witnessed the capture and appropriation of artistic productivity itself by capital's so-called new economic model or capitalism 2.0. This has in turn brought about a shift in the constitution of certain forms of labor leading sociologists to apply such labels as "The No Collar Movement" (Ross: 2002); "The Rise of the Creative Class" (Florida: 2004); "The New Spirit of Capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello: 2007); "Neo-Bohemia" (Lloyd: 2010); or "The New Culture Industries" (McRobbie: 2016). The impact of these economic and social transformations has simultaneously converted the customary, antagonistic profile of the artist into a paragon of innovative entrepreneurship, i.e. the model of the new *creative worker*. But simultaneously, these socio-economic changes have undermined, if not eliminated altogether, the traditionally privileged status of art as an exceptional and autonomous sphere of production.

While others, including Bourriaud (2002), Terranova (2004), Bishop, (2012), Gielen, Boomgaard, and Bruyne (2012), Mitchell (2013), Groys (2016), and Beech (2016) have addressed the impact of these paradoxes upon the world of fine art, my study, together with my previous writings, activism and artistic projects, has endeavored to focus attention on how neoliberal enterprise culture challenges and transfigures artistic practices that explicitly aim to critique social and political injustices. Thus, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* attempts to map out how cultural contradictions are first played out within the artworld, and secondly within the gentrifying city spaces,

where artists live and work. And finally within those artistic circles consciously dedicated to activism and socially engaged practices.

By way of conclusion therefore, I will in turn revisit each of these three thematic sections –artworld, gentrification, resistance –in light of my initial research questions regarding contemporary art’s heightened contradictions over the past three to four decades, but also with added emphasis regarding my own participatory role in the topics that my thesis sought to investigate. Thus, equipped with the insights gained from the preceding chapter’s arguments and case studies, as well as my own experiences, I turn now to *Section One: Artworld*.

Section One: Artworld.

As the first goal of the thesis, it sought to provide an overview and critical analysis of, among other things, the assertion by theorists such as Yates McKee and Pamela Lee discussed in the Introduction to Section One, (pages 32-48) that to describe contemporary art as a fully-integrated world is a misnomer, and that, instead, art’s institutional and ontological unity is really the immediate phenomenal appearance of a highly disaggregated reality, too taxonomically diverse ever to be considered a single narrative. My counter-argument has sought to make the case that one cannot fully grasp, or critically penetrate, the institutionality of contemporary art by conceiving of it as a diverse and scattered array of disparate interests, communities and markets that just happen to loosely intersect, or better yet, happen to merely overlap, within certain prominent museums and art galleries or at art fairs, a few influential journals and their intellectual discourse, and a handful of global cities including New York, Paris, Dubai, London, and Berlin. With its autonomy worn thin by a ceaseless and voracious process of monetization the previously hidden substructure of this “highly complex and uneven landscape,” to cite McKee, is laid bare.⁴⁸⁹ Taking this critique a step further, I assert that to ignore this totality of the artworld narrative is ultimately to undermine claims regarding the possibility of activist and socially engaged art itself, but also to critique such notions as pre-figurative political aesthetics that McKee, Graeber and other theorists have linked to Occupy Wall Street. One cannot have it both ways. Either there is a grand narrative to overcome, even if that very narrative is inherently complex and uneven in its symbolic

489 McKee, op. cit. page 43, note 38 of the thesis.

and material economy, or there is merely layer upon layer of signifying texts. Nonetheless, resistance to the hegemony of the art market and its established canon in an age of enterprise culture must grapple with the contradiction of art also being part of that very same socio-economic system and ideological narrative.

The research presented here, but also my own experience as an artist, organizer and activist over the past three and a half decades, has lead me to conclude that virtually all cultural outposts, including those located at great distances from global cities, as well as also those which overtly reject identification with the field of contemporary art as many activist artists prefer to do, in fact play a necessary, supporting role within the aggregated cultural sphere known as the contemporary artworld. And grasping this totality is especially important for critically and politically engaged artists who wish to comprehend the current circumstances of culture that operate in a globally networked, post-cold-war society, precisely because it is simultaneously unified and fragmented by capitalist hegemony. This is what makes its current crisis following the 2008 economic collapse both a danger and an opportunity. While both Right and Left populism have arisen in response to capitalism's failures, unfortunately it is those forces favoring isolationism, nationalism and even authoritarianism which are currently in ascendancy. This inevitably compounds the conflicts and the contradictions faced by artists seeking to overturn discriminatory social systems and exploitative regimes. That challenge informed the politics of this study.

Chapter one laid out the possibilities of resistance within a total system by seeking out the gaps and internal conflicts typically found in art institutions, small as well as large. It did so by focusing on the paradoxes I experienced working as a teacher and arts administrator in Chicago during the late 1990s. But it also drew upon my unconventional background as an activist artist from New York, including my co-founding of the collective *Political Art Documentation/Distribution* some ten years prior to the Chicago move. Chapter one examined the strong ambivalence I experienced towards the artworld and to its institutions. On one hand it focused on my sense of rebellion, while on the other hand it acknowledged a definite affection for high culture, including the art museum. This irresolution then took on a more sardonic tone in the following chapter, when, some fifteen years later, I questioned a collective of mostly younger artists calling themselves *Occupy Museums*. My vexation with the group was initially based on their lack of historical awareness.

Specifically, *Occupy Museums* was doing exactly what their name implied, entering the lobby of The Museum of Modern Art and holding an Occupy Wall Street style general assembly with the attending art-going public (regardless if they wanted to be part of this assembly or not). However, group members were not even aware that *Art Workers' Coalition* had carried out virtually identical museum interventions in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Two findings stand out from the material in this chapter. The first involves a question that I posed directly to members of *Occupy Museums* just before they agreed to set out to become a sort of collective-as-exhibition within the 2012 Berlin Biennial. I asked them exactly what does *Occupy Museums* want from the Museum in the first place? Unlike *Art Workers Coalition*, who had submitted a list of thirteen, long-range and very specific demands to New York's museums with the aim of reforming the artworld's institutions in 1969, *Occupy Museums* seemed satisfied taking temporarily over museum lobbies as their primary political statement. This is linked of course with pre-figurative politics, in so far as seizing private space in the name of a future public commons was also the *modus operandi* of Occupy Wall Street itself. And yet, in response to my question, the group provided no answer.⁴⁹⁰ The second observation of chapter two was to recognize the all too obvious repetition of previous historical moments and actions at work within *Occupy Museums*. They were, in other words, unknowingly reinventing that which is already present within the archive of socially engaged art. Still, rather than dismiss their agency, I come to the conclusion that one must simultaneously accept these actions as they are, that is to say, as examples of a far larger surplus archive of creative dark matter that has been robbed of its history so to speak, while also challenging *Occupy Museums*, as well as other similar activist artists, to confront their own contradictions and historical repetitions. This study is thus one attempt at fulfilling that objective by intervening within the practices of socially engaged art with its own critical, mnemonic mission.

The third and final chapter that concludes section one returns to the questions raised in the

490 I raised this very question just days before some members of *Occupy Museums* traveled to Berlin for the Biennial during a public meeting held at 16 Beaver Street alternative space in NYC. However, one reason perhaps the group did not answer is because it had no reason to do so. Why? Because much like *Occupy Wall Street*, the very name of *Occupy Museums* describes not what it is, but its manner of operating? Contrast this with *Art Workers' Coalition*, a similarly sprawling and informal artists' group, but one whose name refers us back to the nature of the collective itself. In other words, Occupy (Museums, Wall Street, etc...) is a verb, and therefore presumes no further explanation is necessary?

introduction about the total narrative of contemporary art, but now with an added level of urgency, as well as provocation. By using the term “Bare Artworld” I suggested that we are now in a truly post-autonomous artistic landscape, one in which art objects have evolved into investment instruments for the 1%. Why? Because the highly unregulated art market was and remains an excellent place to park one’s money at a time of crisis. Art was one of the few investments that continued to rise following the 2008 crash in part due to an influx of capital by the ultra-wealthy as their personal assets grew thanks to the privatizing of public resources via Quantitative Easing and the Wall Street bailout. With this, the delirium and crisis of my investigation’s title is brought fully into play as artistic autonomy is compromised and has panicked cultural policy-makers into calling for the “rationalization” of artistic production by adjusting its supply and demand through market-based methods of management. In New York this urgency is focused on the large and growing number of highly indebted art school graduates. As one commentator exclaimed in a state of alarm, the situation is “unsustainable,” meaning that there appear to be too many artists, and too few resources to accommodate them, thus making those already “in the game” all the more precarious.

But once again the problematic presence of historical amnesia addressed in chapters one and two come to the fore here as I pointed out that there have *always* been “too many artists.” Citing the research of French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger my argument focused on centuries of market-based art practices in which far larger numbers of mostly invisible, or (in my words) “pre-failed” artists, are required in order to add value to the works of those few who do succeed in gaining visibility, and/or financial recompense. In accordance with the introduction to this section, therefore, *our* artworld emerged as a unified system, but hardly a harmonious unity, for it is dependent on a large, unseen domain of labor, which is structurally unknowable. (Of course ironically, this hidden support system is by its very nature discontinuous and subjected to processes of social destructuring as described by Antonio Negri.⁴⁹¹)

Consequently, if contemporary art appears on its surface to be a “highly complex and uneven landscape,” as McKee insists, that is because, counter-intuitively, it has an underlying architectural unity built upon historical hierarchies in which cohorts of brighter and darker cultural workers,

491 Antonio Negri, “Capitalist Domination and Working Class Sabotage,” 1979, *Red Notes*: <https://libcom.org/library/capitalist-domination-working-class-sabotage-negri>

smaller and larger institutions, and indebted students and interns, are aggregated together to form the artworld's economic and symbolic foundation. Thus, no matter how fragmented the artworld may appear locally, it depends upon its dark matter anchoring system to buttress and reproduce its own aggregate structure as a whole.⁴⁹² This in turn has given rise to a renewal of resistance focused on this unseen and largely unremunerated sphere of shadow labor within the contemporary artworld.

Section one concludes by acknowledging the emergence of this resistance by discussing such groups as Working Artists and the Greater Economy, or simply W.A.G.E.; the Debtfair project, which is an offshoot of Occupy Museums that seeks to make the supporting role of dark matter visible (see the illustration at the top of *Chapter Three, Section One*); and Gulf Labor Coalition (GLC), of which I am a core member, and whose mission is to pressure Western museums seeking to build new facilities in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, to establish fair labor standards and serve as model institutions in a region known for its harsh exploitation of migrant workers. In this way resistance is rekindled, even under the most chaotic and paradoxical conditions. Nonetheless, artists are also culpable, often unintentionally, as agents of exploitation within the delirium of neoliberal enterprise culture. Nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in the complex interaction that takes place between artists and other precarious cultural workers confronting the processes of urban gentrification and real estate speculation. The next segment of my thesis pivoted on this very conundrum.

Section Two: Cities Without Souls.

Artistic working conditions are inherently unjust. And yet at the same time they are linked to a still prevailing ideology that art is an exceptional and autonomous form of human

492 Evidence of this structural asymmetry is not hard to find, but perhaps the incredible velocity of financial growth generated by “flippable” paintings offers an explicit example. Flipping art is a practice in which the price of an emerging artist's painting accelerates through a series of sales and re-sale over a very short period of time. Now it is a procedure that has migrated from delirious speculation on works by emerging artists, to rapid-fire gambling on art by such historical figures as Francis Picabia whose 1941-1943 portrait *Sans titre (Visage de femme)* is purported to have made a 220% profit for its owner through a six-month whirlwind of sales. But how would this be possible without access to a totalizing narrative, even if that symbolic economy never appears front and center, but remains instead available just offstage? Like any risky investment mechanism there must be a belief in the solidity of the instrument's value within a larger ideological plot in which there are extraordinary winners, such as the 220% Picabia-flipper, and also many losers, or dark matter practitioners, who serve to hold the system together. See: Katya Kazakina, “An Art Flipper Made 220% on This Painting in Six Months,” *Bloomberg News*, June 2, 2015: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-06-02/art-flippers-target-masterpieces-as-french-painting-gains-220->

labor. Being “creative” is a license to work freely, to dissent, and even to socially misbehave. That liberty comes at a price in which most artists face continuous financial insecurity and existential risk. And yet, today, in a multi-billion dollar global art market, how can it be just that the majority of artists remain precarious, while a few bright stars, a handful of trending galleries, and a small coterie of very wealthy collectors bask in the artworld’s limelight? At the conclusion of Section One we encountered what seemed to be a post-2008, post-Occupy awareness on the part of many artists as to the inequitable reality of the artworld’s economy. In truth, this awareness is the reemergence of previous, though now largely forgotten, historical moments in the 1930s, and 1960s when artistic laborers began to organize around their mutual interests. The same today, except in a couple of important respects.

First, as discussed above, artistic production has become glorified to some degree by neoliberal capitalism. While this is no doubt largely superficial, the ideological shift involved is unprecedented in recent history. That strange state of complicity was addressed in Section One, and returned in Section Three. But there is another difference between the present conditions of artistic exploitation, and those of the past. Not only is the figure of the artist paradoxically viewed as a privileged contributor to the broader community, but she or he (or any other gender pronoun) has also become an infamous representative of gentrification in which low-income residents are displaced, or virtually expelled, by wealthier townspeople moving into previously ruined parts of the city.⁴⁹³ These realities were the focus of *Section Two: Cities Without Souls*, which added an essential background to the contradictory realities of art activism as directly experienced by my peers and I. While the dispirited sounding title of this section is borrowed from comments made by noted urban sociologist Sharon Zukin, the section’s five chapters attempted to trace a curious, and complex arc of cultural reaction to gentrification, starting with the work of a small number of artists in the 1980s, myself among them, who sought to oppose gentrification through their art practice.

This early phase of resistance was followed by a sense of resignation in the 1990s as I realized

493 The argument could be asserted here that artists moving into New York’s SoHO district in the 1960s were similarly positioned, however, it was not until Sharon Zukin’s book *Loft Living* appeared in 1982, along with two related essays by Craig Owens in *Art in America*, and Rosalyn Deutsche in collaboration with Cara Gendel Ryan in *October* journal just a couple of years after Zukin’s publication, that the link between art and gentrification was truly cemented, thereafter providing a paradigm with which to judge all generations of artists that followed.

just how inextricably complicit with the problem we had all actually become. But, some ten years after that a number of high-profile artists appear to have turned the tables on gentrification by developing affordable housing and other urban services into art projects. However, as the final chapter of this section concluded, what seemed to offer a limited solution to gentrification brings with it a new set of contradictions. Still, we might describe this historical arc, in other words, as one in which artists have evolved from being harbingers of gentrification, to becoming victims of displacement themselves, to discovering how to manipulate the real estate market and the “creative city” paradigm in general towards what they believe are socially useful outcomes.⁴⁹⁴ This state of affairs, however, does not eliminate contradictions. In fact it seems even further to accelerate the paradoxes that art confronts within the delirium and crisis of neoliberal enterprise culture. These contradictions could be seen in the real-estate art project of Theaster Gates on Chicago’s South Side. It was most clearly demonstrated by comparing Conflict Kitchen –an art project that is also a financially self-sustainable, and soon to be unionized, restaurant in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania– with a seemingly similar enterprise in SoHo known as FOOD in the early 1970s.

Three SoHo artists –Gordon Matta-Clark, Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard– founded FOOD in 1971. According to their opening announcement it was a space where “friends, gallery-goers, and passers-by” could stop by for “free garlic soup, gumbo, chicken stew, wine, beer, and homemade breads”.⁴⁹⁵ But FOOD closed its doors just three years later, though not because it failed as a business venture. On the contrary, FOOD succeeded all too well, and the founding artists found that the demands of running an actual food service establishment were too time-consuming and soon turned their focus back towards their own art practices.⁴⁹⁶ By comparison, the founders of Conflict Kitchen (CK) initiated their undertaking as an art project right from the beginning, and have continued to describe CK as an art project, even as it has become, according to the directors, a successful business in its own right with most of its revenue derived from direct sales.⁴⁹⁷ Which is where this contrast becomes most interesting.

494 A description of the creative city paradigm is found in note 150 on page 97.

495 Excerpted from FOOD’s opening announcement in the Fall 1971 issue of *Avalanche*, cited in Waxman, *Ibid*, p 24.

496 This is the well-supported conclusion art historian Lori Waxman reaches in her essay, “The Banquet Years: FOOD, A SoHo Restaurant,” *Gastronomica*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Fall, 2008,

497 This assertion was expressed to me in an email from C.K. founders Rubin and Weleski dated November 8th, 2016 in response to the following question:

For the most part FOOD was perceived to be a secondary pursuit by its artist founders whose careers were, as with most artists, oriented towards legitimation by critics, galleries and museums. And yet, at least two of FOOD's creators –Goodden and Clark– did consider their undertaking to be an artwork in its own right. According to historian Lori Waxman, Matta-Clark even suggested that the famed art dealer Leo Castelli purchase FOOD.⁴⁹⁸ Whether this was meant seriously, or in jest, there does not seem to have been a sufficiently decisive or widely agreed-upon discursive and theoretical framework available that would have permitted FOOD to be readily situated as an authentic, let alone *collectable* work of art in the early 1970s.⁴⁹⁹ Things would be entirely different today, I suspect, not only because of the broader understanding and acceptance of conceptual art, but because of the availability of such theories as Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 1998), Dialogical Aesthetics (Kester 2005), and Participatory Art (Bishop, 2012) with which to frame such practices. Rubin and Weleski's CK offers conformation of this paradigmatic shift in perspective.⁵⁰⁰ But my juxtaposition of FOOD with Conflict Kitchen also underscored a process that extends well beyond the artworld.

The nature of this transformation is such that art has radically shifted away from being an activity with some degree of autonomy from the marketplace, to one in which the work of art steps forward into the everyday world, and by doing so must encounter the heteronomous demands and interests of society including its laws, fiscal demands, labor struggles and other

Sholette: Would it be accurate to say C.K. has some administrative support from C.M.U. though no direct funding? I ask because I recall our conversation at dinner in Feb 2015 and I asked you about payroll management and I recall one of you saying that this was handled by C.M.U.. Also, the union seems to be negotiating with the school, not with CK directly, no?

Rubin and Weleski answer: It is correct that C.M.U. handles the payroll, but it is misleading to state that they fund the project as we bring in all of our own revenue from outside the university. That revenue then pays for all of our staff (including benefits costs), publications, and public programs. As stated, 97% of our revenue is earned directly from food sales and the remainder has come from foundation support, of which the university takes a 12% admin fee. By housing the project at a research center at C.M.U., all of the project staff are eligible to receive university benefits, which are also financially supported by Conflict Kitchen (not the university). This does technically make the University their employer, thus the union's negotiations were directly with the university. In summation, we, in fact, pay the University to be housed by their research institution, not the other way around.

498 Waxman, p 28.

499 While conceptual art was still a prominent art form in the early 1970s, and certainly in theory could have embraced FOOD as a work of art within its small circle of intellectually-oriented artists and critics, conceptual art did not begin to have a strong market presence until after the 1995 exhibition *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, at the The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

500 Almost certainly Rubin and Weleski were aware of FOOD as a precedent to their project in 2010, and it is also perhaps not a coincidence that art historian Lori Waxman's –whose 2008 research paper on FOOD I have cited above– is also the wife of Michael Rakowitz, who is in turn the founder of the 2003 Enemy Kitchen, a direct, though unacknowledged influence on Conflict Kitchen, see page 163 - 173.

institutional realities. With barely a sliver of light left visible now between art, and that which we experience as phenomenal reality, it seems that we have finally fulfilled the artistic avant-garde's century-old art objective to merge art with life. However, because this merger has taken place at a time when life is subjected to a ubiquitous and spectacular monetization all the way down to the smallest detail, but also up to the broadest level of lived existence, then this historical resolution appears more like a scandal than as a triumph. This leads me to rethink a speculation made earlier in the thesis when I wrote that Bertolt Brecht would have approved of an art project like CK, in which food workers are also artistic performers, and visa versa. Brecht, I suggested, would have seen this as akin to his alienation effect in which artistic staging is revealed to be an illusion (page 168). But taking into account what has been argued in this thesis it would be more accurate to conclude that under contemporary conditions of financialized spectacularity it is not that Brecht's estrangement technique – or those of Schklovsky, Joyce, Beckett or other radical modernists– is incapable of exposing the underlying truths of our social condition. Instead, what makes this encounter with reality critically ineffectual today is the inability of distinguishing between the before and the after, of this revelation. On the one hand CK, does perform an act of estrangement, but on the other hand, even if the restaurant's customers were to become aware that they are participating in a performative art project no greater epiphany would take place in a world already saturated with reality television and other forms of everyday meaningless trauma and spectacularization. Thus, as argued in my thesis, CK simply takes its place alongside other service-oriented enterprises within the economy, never really disturbing our experience of capitalist reality, despite being a work of art. I have, throughout this thesis, used the term "bare art" to reflect these circumstances, a situation whose paradoxes are only just beginning to become apparent.

Evidence of this paradigm is strongly suggested by examining the way FOOD was re-appropriated by the 2013 Art Frieze New York Art Fair. Described by Frieze.Com as "a restaurant and performance stage FOOD 1971/2013 was a space where cooking and art were discussed, inspired and produced",⁵⁰¹ Frieze even imported two surviving founders of the original SoHo project –Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard– who performed themselves by serving home-made soup, fresh bread and tea, much as they did in 1971. Of course,

501 From FRIEZE.COM projects site: <https://frieze.com/fair-programme/food-19712013>

re-enactments and recreations of iconic artworks, as well as iconic historical events, have become a now familiar trope within contemporary art. In 2003, LGBTQ performance artist Sharon Hayes “re-spoke” the words of kidnapped newspaper heiress Patty Hearst by memorizing and repeating audio-tapes Hearst sent to her wealthy parents while she was being held by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. Similarly, in 2014, African-American artist Dread Scott arranged to have himself blasted by a high-pressure fire hose, thus restaging a classic 1893 image from the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama. And this practice is broader still, impacting the work of more traditional artistic object-makers as Miwon Kwon reports about minimalists Carle Andre and Donald Judd who “wrote letters of indignation to *Art in America* to publicly disavow authorship of sculptures attributed to them that were including in a 1989 exhibition at the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles”,⁵⁰² because the works in question were carefully fabricated *recreations* of Andre and Judd’s earlier pieces.

In all of these instances, we are pulled ever further into the world’s spectacularity. Meanwhile, the once liberating experience of crossing lines that separate fact from fiction, or the real from the fabricated, no longer seem to produce a defamiliarizing shock or surprise. Artistic labor and restaurant labor have become interchangeable with all other forms of spectacularized and yet totally mundane work. Indeed, neither appears as “work,” but instead as artistic performance, or as material standing ready to be incorporated into an art project.⁵⁰³ Likewise, a housing project created by an artist in collaboration with creative city agencies policy wonks, real estate investors, and cultural philanthropies, may be experienced as an art project, but

502 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004, p 39.

503 Perhaps the only moments when this odd and mesmerizing theater-like world gives itself away now take place, ironically, within the art museum. In November of 2011, an outsourced janitorial worker at the Ostwall Museum in Dortmund, Germany cleaned up what she believed was an unwanted dirty puddle inside a black plastic trough sitting beneath a three-meter high lattice-like tower made of wood planks. The stain turned out to be an integral part of million-dollar art work by the late Martin Kippenberger entitled “When it Starts Dripping from the Ceiling.” Internet blogs and mainstream media websites alike exploded with reports about this incident. A Google search on December 21, 2016 for “Cleaning Lady Destroys Art” returned over four million hits, some about the Kippenberger episode, but also dozens of other, similar incidents in which contemporary art was accidentally damaged by cleaning personnel in a museum. Begging the question, just what is it about such a simple action that attracts so much attention from audiences far beyond the artworld? Is it the guilty pleasure of reading about the destruction of an expensive cultural commodity? Or is it perhaps, the experience of *Schadenfreude* when what appears to be a charade perpetrated by contemporary elite art on the average person is humorously exposed in public? Or might it be the way innocent gestures by a humble janitor tears a small hole in the envelope of the aestheticized spectacle that we cannot seem to escape: puncturing for a moment the uncanny sheathing tossed over reality ever since Duchamp? As if suddenly, Kippenberger’s informally assembled arrangement of scrap wood and black bucket were once again nothing more than an arrangement of scrap wood and a black bucket. Whatever the reason, society is drawn to these rare moments like moths to a candle. And yet, still nothing changes.

it is also a material investment. The outmaneuvering of urban gentrification by some artists today remains fully integrated into the hegemony of the neoliberal economy. Resistance, however, is not futile, even if its outcome is seldom immediately visible, as for example the slow, but steady diversity of artists shown by major museums, as well as a growing awareness of artist's rights, two demands that Art Workers' Coalition made in 1969 as discussed on page 69. The periodic and predictable nature of capitalist crisis is also a process that opens onto spaces of action, including re-reading the sense of hope contained within the surplus archive.

Section Three: Resistance.

Something extraordinary did happen during the events known as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and the Movement of Squares, roughly between the years 2010 and 2012, when everyday urban spaces were concretely, if temporarily, reimagined as a type of public commons. The Third and final section of my thesis reasserted the necessity for art to overcome its own compounding contradictions, especially those practices committed to social and political change. Perhaps just as importantly, the need to recognize the challenge of these paradoxes cannot be allowed to become an excuse for artists to withdraw back into an exclusive, autonomous, studio-oriented practice. This would be the ultimate form of nostalgic *re-enactment* (though mixing together forms of autonomous artistic production with socially engaged activism does perhaps open-up one possible, if makeshift response to the delirium and crisis of present conditions).

Chapter One: Section Three began by contending that we are always already collectivized, which is a reality that in theory flies in the face of high art and the value it places on the uniqueness of singular artistic authorship. However, my assertion sought to avoid a simple dichotomy that pits individual agency, against collective action. The alternative reading presented here proposes that we are already confronted with two modes of collectivism: one that is involuntary and reflexive, in which we are socially united only as so many alienated monads. As a population of widely distributed nodal points we do collectively log-on, or queue-up together, but only in order to purchase goods or services. And while we are online, our so-called "personal" information is being aggregated by sophisticated marketing algorithms that assemble us into communities of *datasets* constructed out of our purchasing habits, or our neighborhood demographics, or based sometimes on information extracted from the content of our emails. This is truly an inert

manifestation of the collective unconscious. But I argue that there is another, intentionally constructed mode of collectivism that, perhaps, does not *completely escape* the undertow of this corporate data mining, even though this other collectivism does set out to *deliberately resist* or *intervene within* the disciplinary structures of the status quo.

The case studies in Chapter One focused on the seldom-studied experiences of members who belong to such intentional collective organizations, including groups in which I have participated, such as PAD/D and REPOhistory. However, my argument did not propose that this type of deliberate collectivism is free of contradictions. On the contrary. I contended that the more a group of artists and/or activists attempts to assemble themselves into a consciously oppositional organization, the more augmented the destructive social relations that are already present are concentrated become, amplified by this very same attempt at establishing a radically alternative art practice. This was established through several testimonials I gathered from members of artists' collectives that are highlighted throughout the chapter. But, it is also clear from this same testimony that the artists' collective offers participants moments of extraordinary discovery and liberation that are not possible within the traditional model of one person, one studio, and one artistic style that is central to the normalized world of fine art.

Moving one step further in the second chapter I focused on the unacknowledged, often invisible collectivized labor that is essential to the maintenance and reproduction of artworld's status quo. In it we found both an *exposé* of high culture's internal labor practices, –including its uncredited and mostly unremunerated dependency on a vast and redundant surplus population of artists that I labeled the dark matter of the artworld– but also a broader theoretical endeavor that sought to link this shadowy mass of obscured producers with Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt's concept of the proletarian, or counter-public sphere in which “fantasy constitutes an unconscious practical critique of alienation”.⁵⁰⁴ And most importantly, I also asserted that this dark matter creativity is becoming brighter, not only in the artworld, but also across all levels of society, as previously hidden forms of production, matrixes of gift economies, open-source sharing and informally connected communities of interest manifest themselves within networked micro-publics. Ironically, what makes this transformation of

504 Negt and Kluge, 33.

shadow into light possible is the very-same processes unleashed by capitalism, including its drive to reduce labor costs and subdue resistance, but also a need to spread production and consumption across ever-greater regions of the earth, a phenomenon that is often referred to as post-Fordism, or “just in time” production, in which standing inventory is reduced through globally networked labor and consumer markets.⁵⁰⁵

However, along with that networked new world comes a host of previously suppressed and/or darkly invisible resentments and social prejudices. Which is to say that Kluge and Negt’s fantasy production may offer a critique of alienation and capitalist reification, but neither is it free of anti-democratic, misogynist, xenophobic or racist tendencies. As we have come to see, the capacity for this darkest of dark matter to coalesce into active constituencies has led to concrete political outcomes with a marked attraction to ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism growing across the globe.

The penultimate chapter of my thesis addressed precisely this potential for a no-longer-dark matter agency to constitute a force of reaction and resentment. *On The Maidan Uprising* weaves together my own art practice with my theoretical aspirations as a writer and researcher. In April of 2012 I installed the collaborative art project Imaginary Archive in Kyiv, a short distance from the square (maidan) where the Ukrainian public clashed a few months earlier with the armed forces of its pro-Russian government, ultimately ousting that regime, but also experiencing ideological chaos and fatal armed conflict in the process. During this time armed camps converged on the square that were made up of forces ranging from the extreme Right to the conservative center, with a small number of outliers that including feminists, anarchists, and artists. On The Maidan the dark matter imaginary was made manifest in all its paradoxical strangeness and allure. *Imaginary Archive* and its accompanying workshops pivoted on providing participants with the means of “imagining” alternatives to the post-cold war narrative Ukrainians were expected to accept as history. By asking contributors to submit a document about a past whose future never arrived, the *Imaginary Archive* allowed participants to re-read, and artistically reinvent, their individual and collective identities. Ideally, by opening-up time and memory, as well as the promise of history, *Imaginary Archive* becomes an experiment in parallel, or even contrary historical possibilities that confront the

505 See Section One, Chapter Three, pages 187-206.

normalization of the past as well as the future. Curator Larisa Babij who invited Imaginary Archive to Kyiv expressed this aspiration within the context of Ukraine:

Last year, when I invited Greg and Olga to present Imaginary Archive in Ukraine, none of us could have imagined that the country would be transformed by street protests, eventually ousting the corrupt president and shifting the balance of power from a rigid hierarchy run by oligarchs and their clans to a weaker coalition of politicians beholden to serving the people's demands. We also did not imagine that, immediately following the Olympics in Sochi, Russia would send its troops in unmarked uniforms to occupy Crimea, essentially declaring war on Ukraine without any legitimate basis. With the future of the country teetering in maximum uncertainty, the need for intense artistic reflection and discussion of historic choices and possibilities is as great as ever.⁵⁰⁶

The final chapter of my thesis revisited *Imaginary Archive's* para-fictional tactics by proposing the need to construct a counter-historical genealogy of socially engaged art out of the surplus material of the dark matter archive. This re-reading would ideally challenge the normalization of such practices by the mainstream artworld narrative, a process already underway.⁵⁰⁷

Final Remarks.

I believe the second of two primary questions raised at the start of this investigation— “What significant changes have taken place since my the completion of my previous research on into so-called artistic dark matter in was completed in 2008?”— has been sufficiently answered in the preceding discussions about Occupy Wall Street, W.A.G.E. Debtfair, Gulf Labor, Occupy Museums, Theaster Gates' Rebuild Foundation, Assemble, and Conflict Kitchen among other collectives and socially engaged art projects that have self-organized over the past eight years. And while these examples represent a diverse set of practices, I believe we can acknowledge with a strong degree of confidence that by emphasizing such issues as fair labor practices, gentrification, student debt, they form a definite aesthetic rejoinder to the delirium and crisis of neoliberal capitalism, especially as it has unfolded in the aftermath of the so-called great recession. In addition, and as predicted in my previous study, *Dark Matter*, the once shadowy

⁵⁰⁶ March 2014 curatorial statement by Larisa Babij posted on the fundraising website INDIEGOGO: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/imaginary-archive-kyiv#/>

⁵⁰⁷ As note 36 on page 37 reports, on May 12, 2016 the Guggenheim Museum announced the launch of a “new social practice art initiative,” and one of the first recipients is Jon Rubin of Conflict Kitchen: <https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/85742>

archive has grown steadily brighter: for better as well as for worse. While it is true that socially engaged art and activist art practices have been able to fully step out of the art historical closet so to speak, simultaneously, we find other, less savory cultural and political manifestations gaining visibility and asserting their right to legitimacy.

Thus bringing me to the first and most challenging question that this thesis sought to address, “How can a truly critical and politically resistant artistic culture be possible when art is becoming thoroughly entangled and perhaps even subsumed within capitalist forms of production, marketing and financialization?” With regard to this conundrum my investigation offers no final closure or unqualified conclusions, and – if anything – the evidence reported here confirms that these contradictions are becoming intensified by the current instabilities of both capitalist economies and Western democracies. Yet, despite this compounding predicament, artists continue to seek out forms of opposition, often exploring one set of tactics and then switching to another as the first loses its critical edge. Perhaps the one definite outcome, therefore, of my study is the recognition that refusing to yield to the processes of normalization, institutionalization, or to repressive regimes constitutes an aesthetic of resistance in its own right. Which is why, woven throughout this thesis, are lessons drawn from the cultural work that I, and my peers, have engaged in as artists, teachers, organizers, and activists over several decades. This is also why the conflicts and contradictions described here, as much as the aspirations and sense of urgency, developed out of an immersion in the praxis and the histories described. Put differently, this thesis would have been inconceivable if it were not for my many years of personal engagement in the very phenomenon that it seeks to analyze. And although its subject matter has become increasingly common within contemporary cultural research internationally, my three major thematic sections of study –the art world, gentrification, and resistance– do not appear here by happenstance. Instead, they developed directly and logically from a life lived as an artist, writer, teacher and organizer in a particular city, at a specific period of time.

Nevertheless, having asserted this personal link to my subject matter, I believe the preceding investigation is quite different from an idiosyncratic memoir or an autobiographical narrative. Instead, what I have sought to accomplish here is a contextualization of these lived experiences within a broader, and hopefully critical, and theoretical framework. In the process, one level

of knowledge, the one based in experience, is lifted up into a very different architecture involving history and interpretation. This operation brings with it certain challenges and pitfalls, including the danger of self-delusion, or of falling prey to blind spots in one's analysis. But, the very act of subjecting a particular set of memories and experiences to a hermeneutic critique generates its own unique mode of exploration, one that appears suspended between a process of deliberate cognitive mapping, where elements of a particular archive –in this case my life and work narrative– are called upon to step forth and introduce themselves as part of a concrete historical narrative generated around particular questions, but simultaneously, quite a different and less self-reflexive practice also comes into being in this operation, one that I believe is an aesthetic procedure in its own right. Strengthened by the findings of this dissertation, this is the future direction my practice aspires to develop in response to the delirium and resistance encircling us now in this time of crisis.