

HEART OF DARKNESS

A Journey into the Dark Matter of the Art World



We can measure the waste [of artistic talent] not only in the thousands of “failed” artists--artists whose market failure is necessary to the success of the few--but also in the millions whose creative potential is never touched... This glut of art and artists is the normal condition of the art market.

—Carol Duncan

All men are intellectuals one could say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals

—Antonio Gramsci.

Temporary Services , One Week Boutique, Chicago 2000

1. Invisible Worlds

An estimated ten thousand hopeful artists entered graduate level art programs within the United States in 1998.³ Assuming a modest graduation rate of sixty percent the total number of academically trained professional artists holding Master of Fine Arts degrees between the dates of that statistic and the time of this writing must hover around twenty four thousand individuals. The MFA was initiated under the GI Bill in 1944. Extrapolating from these past four years we might therefore expect the total number of artists with such degrees to top several million people.⁴ But this number would be greatly amplified if we add to it individuals who received a non-degree certificate in programs such as the Art Students League in New York or the Philadelphia Academy of Art. The size of this pool of cultural producers grows larger still if we include artists who only hold undergraduate degrees and the figure virtually explodes beyond enumeration if amateur and self-trained practitioners are included in the statistics.⁵

Clearly the size of the art producing masses in the US is nothing less than astronomical and like other informal regions of social life may



This text is being made available for scholarly purposes only. You are free to copy and distribute it, but never for commercial profit. Please attribute the author whenever quoted or cited. All illustrations are included here solely for educational purposes.

This essay was first published in the book *Visual Worlds*, John R. Hall, Blake Stimson & Lisa T. Becker editors, (NY & London: Routledge, 2005), Pages, 116 - 138.



Panamanian bus with home-made decorations 1986

prove impossible to gauge.⁶ What is unequivocal however is the way this multitude greatly exceed the small coterie of artists visible within the formalized region known as the art world. This is true even if we focus only on those practitioners who have received graduate level training in the past four years. Is it the case therefore that the majority of creative activity in our post-industrial society remains invisible to the institutions and discourses -the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators and arts administrators-- which manage and interpret contemporary culture? If we set aside the standard art historical explanation that significant cultural production takes place only within a narrow zone inhabited by visionaries, several additional questions arise. First, just where are these other practitioners, these informal artists and shadow creators and what impact might they have on contemporary culture if any? Second, how would the hegemony of the art world be affected if scholars began to discuss, classify and assess the work of “Sunday” painters, amateur artists and hobbyists in terms similar to those used for “professional” artists? It is worth noting that specific examples of this work are far from invisible, we encounter them far more often than we do “serious” art. Rather what remains out of bounds is any consideration of this work as complex or compelling or forming its own cultural category. This taboo extends especially to the sort of irregular systems informal culture has evolved for circulating work outside the dominant art market. This paper will not only address these issues, it will argue that the gravitational force of this indefinite shadow realm is already having a definite affect on the elite art world. If this essay seeks to open these questions up for examination however, it does so not with the aim of expanding the hegemony of the art world into this shadow zone. Instead the hope is to find within this nether world what Walter Benjamin understood as the explosive power of the inconspicuous and overlooked.⁷

The term I choose to give to this vast and heterogeneous pool of conspicuous yet unseen artistic activity is “Dark Matter.” It is a term borrowed from the science of cosmology. Dark Matter is what cosmologists call the enormous quantity of non-reflective material predicted by the Big Bang theory. Theoretically, this unseen matter makes up most of the universe and provides an explanation for why the universe will not continue to expand indefinitely. In a sense, cosmic Dark Matter serves as a sort of counter-weight to the powerful thrust of the Big Bang explosion that initiated time and space eons ago. Yet despite the omnipresence of DM so far its presence has only been inferred indirectly by observing the motions of visible objects such as planets, comets, stars and nebula.⁸ Like its astronomical cousin, artistic Dark Matter makes up most of the cultural universe in contemporary, post-industrial society. Yet, while cosmic Dark Matter is actively being sought by scientists, the size and composition of artistic Dark Matter is of little interest to the men, women and institutions of the art world. This apathy would be of little significance if it were not the case, or so

I shall argue in this paper that the art world is highly dependent on its Dark Matter much in the same way the physical universe depends on the presence of cosmic Dark Matter.

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 prefer this admittedly stingy, even economically determined notion of art world to the often-cited definitions coined by sociologist Howard S. Becker or philosopher Arthur C. Danto respectively. Becker explains his term art worlds as: “The network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art work that art world is noted for.”⁹ And while I agree with Becker that there are multiple, overlapping art worlds more or less collaboratively organized he loses a great deal of analytical power by ignoring the historical and class-based antagonism between different conceptions of art that make up these “art worlds.” Danto’s coinage of artworld on the other hand from his influential 1964 essay “The Artworld” states that “in order to know one was in the presence of art, one needed to know something of the recent history of art and be able to participate in the defining theoretical discussions of the moment.”¹⁰ Danto mystify art practice. He does so when he emphasizes the accumulation of specialized information a viewer must possess in order to recognize what is and what is not art rather than the key role played by the highly privileged art market in defining its products and services. Ironically, by providing credibility to the hermetic expert culture surrounding art he contradicts the claims of avant-garde artists who once sought to democratize culture under the slogan, “art into life.”

Because I am interested in socially critical and activist art I perceive the role of engaged artists, scholars and critics as an interventionist one within an already antagonistic field. The initial focus of this paper therefore is on the relationship that Dark Matter has to the most visible of art worlds, more accurately understood as the elite art world. The latter is dependent on the accumulated wealth of the economically privileged and it has hegemony over the very idea of culture. But why if forms of cultural Dark Matter are already successfully operating outside this hegemony should one bother intervening in the art world at all? There is no easy answer to this question. In fact, to a large degree many artists are self-consciously doing just that, turning their collective backs on the formal art world and exploring alternative and somewhat autonomous systems of exchange and production of art. However there is a danger in thinking that one can achieve autonomy in a cultural environment as rapacious as ours simply by ignoring the obvious forms of institutional power. From my own experience in New York in the 1980s, it did not take long for the art world to selectively choose its political art “stars” during a similar wave of col-

laborative and socially engaged art activism as that of today. Nor am I proposing that one merely work “within” the art world. It is instead a question of first knowing where the existing pitfalls of building alternative operating platforms lie and second of finding ways to leverage both the actual and symbolic power of the elite art world for purposes other than the aggrandizement of art collectors and large art institutions. In other words, it is a matter of historical analysis coupled with a strategic practice.¹¹

At the very least the elite art world is a significant site of critical intervention because of its near-virtual hegemony it wields over notions of “serious” cultural value. Such values may be generated by a relatively small group of individuals including collectors, dealers and curators, but the influence on everything from public policy to the direction of art education takes its queues from who and what the elite art world draws into its inner circle of light.¹² It is key to my argument however to understand that the line separating prominent artistic value from all other artistic production is, in theory, an arbitrary one. I will return to this important point in more detail in the section on value. But first, what might the general lack of interest, even selective contempt expressed by the art world towards this realm of informal art suggest? Is it the case as I am suggesting that within Dark Matter there is a hidden, counter hegemonic potential? Considering that a once socially dissident avant-garde now asserts itself as a marketing prototype for hip fashion designers, advertising agencies and information technocrats even the possibility of critical opposition is refreshing. I hope to do more than intimate such an appearance while avoiding the typically dispassionate forms of “academic insubordination.” Indeed, this essay asks that we not only understand the subordinate ranking of informal artists as equal to the “glut” of professionally trained artists who remain in the shadow of the mainstream art world, but it insists we take careful aim and overturn the way cultural values are generated. One weapon in this deconstruction is the theoretical and practical mobilization of Dark Matter. And this means doing more than challenging the exclusion of specific groups of people from the art world which has been the dominant “oppositional” practice of the last ten to fifteen years. Rather it means defining the possibility of an inclusive and liberatory artistic practice that: 1. moves beyond the elitist discourse of the art world and its markets, and 2. constitutes a politically radical challenge to the increasing privatization of the public sphere in general. This paper will examine several specific “shadow” practices in light of this agenda. First however there is one additional aspect of the Dark Matter phenomena that is important to my argument: Dark Matter it seems is getting brighter.

The demise of modernist formalism and the legitimation of vernacular and “outsider” art are no doubt two reasons for the increasing visibility of informal art. It is my argument however that these are minor reasons and do not account fully for the shift in status we are

seeing for some forms of Dark Matter. Instead, it is my contention that the visibility of informal art is due in large part to the increasing accessibility of inexpensive digital technologies that allow for the precise replication, appropriation and virtually free distributing of information and images. However before expanding on this assertion I want to explain why the increasing visibility of non-professional art has not yet brought about the undermining of the elitist art world as promised. Let me start with a definition of the way the elite art world produces artistic value in the first place.

2. Art Worlds

The art world is structured like a pyramid. Most practitioners are massed at the base and a select group of artists occupy the apex nearest the light. Superficially it is similar to other competitive fields that employ highly educated workforces. Specialized filters regulate upward mobility. Those who reach its summit are well rewarded and find themselves made extremely visible to those beneath. In this sense, the art world is not greatly different from the culture of academia or politics or other professions such as medicine, science, engineering or law. However, if we look more closely at the structure we find striking differences. For one thing these other professions provide most of the many individuals gathered at the base of their salary pyramid with reasonable employment in the field. Not true of the art world. Unlike these other highly educated professionals, artists typically work two or three jobs, often in other areas than art, just to make a living wage. In 1990, as many as half of all artists earned less than \$3000 from making art. A quarter earned only \$500 from art sales!¹³ Not surprisingly unemployment is chronic amongst artists with a “drop-out” rate far than in other specialized professions. Remarkably, those who give up making art actually tend to earn more money than those who continue to practice it.¹⁴

All of which indicates what many of us artist knew already: that artists are over-educated, overworked, and structurally unemployable. But just what differentiates the practice of the small number of successful artists from the many who “fail”?

According to the economic anthropologist Stuart Plattner this phenomena can be explained by applying what is known as the Tournament Model to the art world. It works like this: In many sporting competitions just one athlete’s performance will be recognized even if it is a mere fraction of a second faster or better than that of other competitors. This one individual wins “the prize” and many others loose despite achieving outstanding athletic performances. Plattner insists that,



CNN Headline News showing the 27.4 Million Dollar record-breaking price fetched for Brancusi’s sculpture, Bird in Space at Christies, May 4th, 2005

“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.”¹⁵ In other words, given a group of similar looking aesthetic products there will ultimately be just one that is considered truly significant in art historical and therefore art collectible terms. However, if this “winner takes all” formula offers an explanation for why nearly identical objects or activities can wind up at radically different locations on the sloping sides of the art world pyramid, it does not provide how this happens. In other words, how are often minute differences in artistic practice evaluated by the art industry thus producing profoundly dissimilar values? Unlike in the Tournament Model, in the art world there are no clear goal posts or records to compete against. Therefore what criteria are used in the art world to judge winners?

This question becomes especially interesting when we think about the pricing of art works. Unlike other commodities, the cost of an art object can not be evaluated simply by using patterns of supply and demand or other, traditional means of determining market value. Once again Plattner’s work is useful as he applies the notion of Consumption Capital to explain the paradoxical nature of the art commodity. Consumption Capital is the accumulated knowledge one requires in order to become an efficient consumer of a given commodity (Plattner, 14). One way to explain why artists with similar looking work are valued differently, or why well-crafted and labor intensive work is often less costly than an informal installation made on the cheap, is to consider the way accumulated consumer knowledge or Consumption Capital is used for determining what art is collected and what is critically rewarded. A collector, who compiles a great deal of Consumption Capital about an artist, not only increases the pleasure of purchasing a high-end, luxury item such as a painting or installation, but this informational accumulation also helps insure the long-term value of an acquisition. Since every consumer inevitably wants to economize the process of gathering knowledge about what they consume, most collectors inevitably focus more attention on those artists frequently referred to within the art world itself. This “insider knowledge” is circulated amongst other collectors as well as critics and curators who are know to already hold substantial amounts of Consumption Capital.

Curiously however, the art world’s dependency on Consumption Capital also leads to a paradox in which the artist who lowers the price of a given work loses value in the market because a drop in price signals to collectors not a bargain but a loss of demand. Compare this quandary to purchasing almost any other commodity such as groceries or computers but also most luxury items such as high-priced cars or even stocks. This paradox means that in the art world, a large dollop of oily fat scooped into the corner of a white room, or a stitched together clump of discarded dolls can command a higher price in the art market than a skillfully rendered realistic painting or sculpted bronze. Note that if we revisit for a moment Arthur Danto’s artworld in light of this

Consumption Capital model we can see that his ideal artworlder, the expert who knows when they are in the “presence” of art, has acquired a different, more realistic countenance. Far more insightful is the work of artist Hans Haacke whose installations offer a more precise definition of the art world.

For the purposes of my argument however, it is enough to assert that establishing value in the most elite strata of the art industry has very little to do with the quality of workmanship, the caliber of materials used, or the amount of labor time invested in making the art. Instead it is dependent on such intangibles as the network of journals, dealers and institutions most highly regarded by the wealthy collectors of contemporary art. Returning to the question of Dark Matter, in what specific ways is the art world dependent on the realm of informal art and does this have significant consequences? In order to answer this question, let us imagine that cultural Dark Matter, including hobbyists and home crafts-people as well as “failed” artists, simply ceases to exist as of tomorrow morning? In other words, the shadowy base of the art pyramid is disappeared. In order to offer a picture of why this would be a problem for fine artists let me turn to an important study by Columbia College of Chicago entitled “The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places. “ The study asserts that the formal and informal arts,

“operate on a two-way continuum, upon which information, personnel, financial benefits and other resources flow back and forth....the informal arts create employment opportunities for professionally working artists, play a “research and development” role, and provide knowledgeable and committed audiences for the formal arts sector.”¹⁶

The report admits that, “despite its popularity, informal arts practice remains largely hidden from view.” And certainly what I call Dark Matter does provide professionals in the arts with opportunities such as teaching all those artists who feel they are not yet professional enough or who simply want to learn more about a specific art technique. The visual arts in particular offer a unique set of employment positions ideally suited to people with some art skills already in place. These include the studio assistant and the art fabricator, two niche jobs that take advantage of Duncan’s “glut” of trained artists within the marketplace. Another aspect of this co-dependency are those artists who make a living photographing the work of other artists for portfolios and for grant applications. And there are artists who take on administrative tasks such as grant writing or curating. One can see why the Columbia study uses the phrase “two-way continuum.” To look at this question of how the formal arts are dependent on Dark Matter, consider the impact on the availability and cost of art supplies if hobbyists, Sunday Painters and “failed” artists stopped producing work. Should the demand for

art supplies suddenly become limited to the small group of successful artists, inevitably the cost of canvas, pigments, and brushes would skyrocket.¹⁷

There are still other ways Dark Matter directly and positively affects the art world and its institutions including subscriptions to art journals and museum memberships. All of which leads the Columbia College study to finally recommend that these shadow practices be brought into the light and to be recognized as vital to the entire cultural community. Among the study's specific recommendations include a call for further research into the informal arts as well as the suggestion that informal arts receive direct assistance from cultural foundations and public arts agencies. In light of this apparent symbiosis you may ask where is the radical conflict between formal and informal art that I have insisted upon? What became of the potential for sweeping change that Dark Matter secretly harbors? To answer this, I turn offer a passage in the same Columbia College study. It reads as follows:

“It will be helpful to understand the “informal” in informal arts as involving the “process” and the “context” of art-making, not, as a threshold matter, the “product” of the activity, nor the characteristics of the artist’s training.”¹⁸

How to read this inelegant sentence? For one thing it appears that the members of the research team had difficulty agree on some definitions and key aspects of their findings. More importantly it asserts that before informal art can hope to shed its pejorative associations embodied in words such as amateur, unskilled and dilettante, those who mold cultural values will have to shift their emphasis away from a reverence

for collectible objects and brand names and towards the far more ephemeral practices of creative activity itself. In light of I have written so far about the way art world value is constructed the kind of shift proposed here is nothing less than radical. It challenges the very heart of the modern art market and its roots in capitalist society dating back at least to the 18th century. With our attention now hopefully drawn to the potential “oppositional” charge hidden in Dark Matter’s gravitational field, let me next offer an explanation for how the formal and elitist art world is already being contorted by this dimly seen mass, this Dark Matter.

Mike Kelley installation with found stuffed toys



3. Slack Art and the Illumination of Dark Matter

In his book *Avant-garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*, the British art historian Brandon Taylor adopts the term “Slack Art” to describe the way certain younger artists use ephemeral materials, a marked disinterest in skilled craftsmanship and an extemporaneous approach to organization and display in their installation works. Unlike the concep-

tual artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the new disinterestedness in artistic craft does not appear aimed at either democratizing the practice of art or a rejection of the art object's status as a valuable commodity.¹⁹

Taylor describes the politics of this self-consciously adolescent slack art style as an anarchy that percolates but “never exceeds a slow boil.”

In other words, this new species of de-skilled artist (to borrow a term from the late Ian Burn) may indeed be aware that rejecting formalism once implied a political act on the part of artists. Nevertheless today, at least prior to the events of September Eleventh, there has been little desire to move one's artistic focus beyond the self-absorbed and seemingly autonomous art world itself. In this sense at least, Slack Art is a recent, conservative reaction to the informally constructed but highly political work of artists such as Martha Rosler (garage sale), or Mierle Laderman Ukeles, or more recently the art of Renee Green.²⁰

To restate my earlier contention, if informality is one of the outstanding features of contemporary art, this fact is due to the increasing visibility of the creative activity I am referring to as Dark Matter. Indeed, could we not just as accurately describe the direction that artists including Mike Kelley, Julie Parsons, Jason Rhodes, Sarah Lucas or Thomas Hirshhorn to name only some of the better exemplars of “slack art” as an amateurization of high art practices? As if what is taking place is some form of mimicry by which the art world responds to the danger of Dark Matter by reflecting its appearance if not its substance. In order to put a finer point on the arbitrariness of where these lines are drawn I will turn to a specific form of visual culture that appeared in the streets following the tragic events in New York City, September Eleventh, 2001.

A month after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers I visited the Fireman's Memorial on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It is a limestone monument designed by H. Van Buren Magonigle in 1913 to honor those fire fighters killed in the line of duty and several miles from ground zero. What I discovered was that the memorial had become host to a spontaneous shrine for the victims of the September 11th. Like numerous other sites around the city, this shrine consisted of flowers, candles, and children's drawings not unlike those that appear at the sites of automobile accidents along highways. Attached to the side of the monument is a plastic covered photographic depicting some of the New York City fire fighters lost when the towers collapsed. For the purposes of this essay I want to call attention to a grouping of soft toys bunched together like silent mourners, in the middle of this informal memorial that included a frayed teddy bear and at least one character from the television series Sesame Street. All of the toys had become soiled and stained from a month of sitting out of doors. In spite of, or perhaps because of this desolate condition they managed



Makeshift memorial post-9/11

to reflect quite powerfully the theme of the Fireman's Memorial itself: the veneration of civic responsibility even at the price of personal sacrifice. Now the unambiguous, signifying force of this informal display is an important reminder that the art world holds no monopoly on expressiveness, even if this particular kind of statement is dismissed by "serious" artists and critics as mere sentiment or kitsch. (I hope to deal with the role played by sentiment in the informal arts in more detail in a future essay.)

More importantly for my argument here however is to consider exactly how this impromptu shrine with its polyester-filled homunculi differ from the stitched together stuffed-toys displayed by the well know artist Mike Kelley in museums, and prestigious art galleries? Specifically, why is there a volume of art writing about the way someone such as Kelley produces significant cultural and artistic value while the display of toys by grieving neighbors is relegated to the status of, at best, noteworthy social phenomena noted by journalists or anthropologists? Now the aim of this paper is not to open up another tired discussion about high versus low art or the use of Duchampian irony by the neo avant-garde. To do so means uncritically accepting the same narrow conditions set up in Danto's version of artworld. My interest in comparing these outwardly similar arrangements of commonplace objects is to raise what I hope is a broader set of questions, including why the elite art world requires the separation between "professional" and amateur art and how precise is the partition?

What if there exists work by artists who have "professional" credentials, yet who extol not merely the look, but also the less visible value structure of Dark Matter? Consider as an example of this self-conscious informal art practice the project One Week Boutique. It was produced in July of 2000 by a group of Chicago based artists that go by the name Temporary Services . Like the work of Kelley and company, One Week Boutique or OWB was "rendered" in an informal, amateur-like mode. But unlike such "Slack Art" it did not aim for an ironic, artistic naïveté or sink into an intellectual melancholy or play at radical politics by indulging in "luke- warm" anarchism. Rather OWB self-consciously stepped outside the exchange economy of the art market while seeking an audience indifferent to the self-reflexivity of contemporary art.

One Week Boutique or OWB was promoted Via email, word of mouth and photocopy flyers and consisted of donated clothing, neatly hung within the small office space the group rented at that time in the Chicago Loop area. It is important to note that the Loop is the city's office district. It is located far from Chicago's art gallery scene. During the OWB exhibition, Temporary Services invited the public to "come by, drink coffee, look at our booklets,²¹ try on clothes in our dressing room and take whatever clothing they want." OWB actually wound-up lasting several months with a constant stream of visitors many whom apparently came because they needed clothing more than

craved “art.” This attention prompted Temporary Services to realize several other versions of the project including one in the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

As Temporary Services member Brett Bloom explains, the intent of OWB involved,

... a conscious decision to make One Week Boutique hard for the art world to participate in- not so much to discourage them, but not to cater to their expectations. OWB wasn't an installation...we didn't steal the aesthetics from these situations “found in the world”, but used them to create a unique and interesting social situation. OWB was intended to exist somewhere between a high-end boutique and a thrift store. The clothing was all in good condition. ...We talked about the project in terms of the aesthetics of expected situations...[and] tried to articulate things in terms of applied aesthetics of daily, lived experience. People up off the street interacted immediately as they would in any clothing store. The questions and strangeness of the situation came only when the economics were discussed.²²

It is crucial to my argument to understand that the reason OWB does not fit comfortably within the current bias of the art world is NOT because the work lacks “quality,” at least as this is defined by current art world discourse. Nor is it because the project looks radically different from what is currently being exhibited in established museums and leading art galleries. Temporary Services project One Week Boutique is less recognizable as “art” because it focuses on the process and organization of creative work itself rather than the production of objects. It is my contention that such self-governing yet still experimental practices are most similar to the kind of creative self-validation typical of much amateur and informal art but no longer conceivable within most of the contemporary art world. Nor is Temporary Services unique. A partial list of artists and organizations operating in the various shadow zones of the art world include the on-line collaborations of RTMark and Critical Art Ensemble; counter-globalization activists and urban interventionists such as Reclaim the Streets (located internationally), Ne Pas Plier (France), Las Agencias (Madrid & Boston), and The Reverend Billy (NYC); the list also includes organizations that focus on re-mapping space such as Ultra-Red, The Center for Land Use Interpretation (both LA), and REPOhistory (NYC); in addition there are educational activists such as Jim Duignan and The Stockyard Institute, as well as Video Machete (both Chicago); and finally there are groups centered on alternative forms of exchange or institutional infrastructure including Collectivo Cambalache (London), and Dan Peterman's Experimental Station (Chicago).²³

All of these informal institutions challenge the uniquely authored collectible art necessary for sustaining art world hegemony. Furthermore, these informal, politicized micro-institutions make 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 either art world discourse or private interests. To put this more succinctly: the work of informal, collective, politicized artists, including Temporary Services, might be seen as structurally closer to the anonymous, installations I witnessed at the Fireman's Monument than to the very similar looking work made by any number of highly visible, contemporary artists recognized by the art world. In this sense, I offer Dark Matter as an alternative narrative to the now conventional genealogy of avant-garde and neo avant-garde art. At the center of this counter-interpretation are the informal and often perverse social exchange systems Dark Matter spawns for circulating work.

4. Dark Matter as A Gift Economy

Today, one can hardly escape an encounter with informal art. It is a vast and heterogeneous bounty of production radiating from homes and offices, schools and streets, community centers and cyberspace, especially in cyberspace. Furthermore, Dark Matter exhibits qualities that are anathema to notions of serious or high art including fantasy, nostalgia, and sentiment. This informal artistry ranges from the whimsical to the inspired, from the banal to the absurd and to the obscene. And it is incontinent. Unlike the art world's market Dark Matter does not impede its own production in order to create a fictional scarcity. Most important to my argument are those species of Dark Matter that partake of what Georges Bataille described as a "principle of loss," a pathological economy of expenditure without precise utility. Bataille borrows some of his perverse anti-capitalist concepts from the anthropologist Marcel Mauss whose concept of gift giving among Native American cultures is focused on strengthening social relations rather than optimizing one's position in a market. In many instances the gift economy serves to level-off differences of power and wealth amongst individuals in the same social group.²⁴ An example of Dark Matter built around the form of a gift economy is Elfwood.

Elfwood is an on-line art gallery that serves non-professional artists who produce images and stories about dragons, witches, wizards, and of course elves. An amateur artist named Thomas F. Abrahamsson hosts the site. Abrahamsson lives in Sweden and makes a living as a computer specialist. Elfwood claims to host some 14,968 artists. (That is more than half the number of estimated MFA graduates in the US since 1998!) Not unlike Temporary Services and the other groups mentioned above, Elfwood is financed with enormous amounts of in-kind labor as well as donated cash. Nor does it appear to provide any direct income to Abrahamsson or any of the artists who use the



<http://elfwood.lysator.liu.se/about.html?9986>

site. Several additional features make Elfwood relevant to my discussion of Dark Matter. For one thing it has several levels including one called Lotherlorien that is named for an imaginary place described in the writings of J.R.R Tolkien. Lotherlorien is governed by a stringent policy whereby the only art accepted onto the site is made by amateurs who make no money off their work. The rules for Lotherien state that “you may not use Elfwood to promote yourself...” At the same time Elfwood imposes few “aesthetic” filters on the art stating that “we are not the ones who judge if art is good or bad.” The Elfwood mission statement re-affirms this commitment to a judgement free exchange of ideas and images stating:

“Showing pieces of art from the wonderful world of fantasy to the general public. Letting all amateur fantasy artists show their work for free, helping them to get a name and reputation. Helping other artists with inspiration by giving a chance to look at fellow artists’ art.”²⁵

One lesson drawn from this is that the capacity of the internet to host a large volume of images and information in an inter-active format has made it possible to create a virtual art community that is the size of a large museum. Because the cost and skills required for capturing and processing images, sound and text from a wide variety of sources continues to spiral downwards, the growth of Dark Matter such as Elfwood is inevitable. One last example of Dark Matter offers still another form of gift giving only made possible by this increasing accessibility of digital technology.

The fan cut is made by and for the viewing pleasure of aficionados, who share an interest, some might say an obsession, with a particular film or television program. If the better known fan zine takes advantage of the first generation of copying technology such as photocopiers and facsimile machines the fan cut consists of a digitized copy of an original media product re-edited to suit a particular group of fans. One of the largest fan networks centers around George Lukas’s Star Wars series. Participants occupy hundreds of web sites and chat rooms as well as meet in person whenever possible. Recently a fan cut known as the Phantom Edit circulated within the Star Wars fan community as a free download. The Phantom Edit is based on Lukas’s Star War episode, the Phantom Menace. According to reports it eliminates twenty minutes of the studio version of the film including most appearances by one animated character uniformly disliked by Star Wars fans. According to one on-line star wars web site the new version has “fixed a large number of things the fans are upset with in Episode One.”²⁶ Significantly this unauthorized cut was made on a Macintosh G-4, 400 megahertz computer using Final Cut Pro, a professional quality program for editing digital images that is nevertheless relatively inexpensive and “user friendly.”

Temporary Services project Free For All, one day art give away in Chicago, February , 2000.



Selling art in an auction



Elfwood and the Phantom Edit indicate how digital technology can amplify the social networking and gift economy typical of informal art practice. In the second part of this paper these qualities will be connected to certain activist and oppositional cultural practices including the growing counter-globalization movement. I conclude with a summation of the key points outlined in this paper.

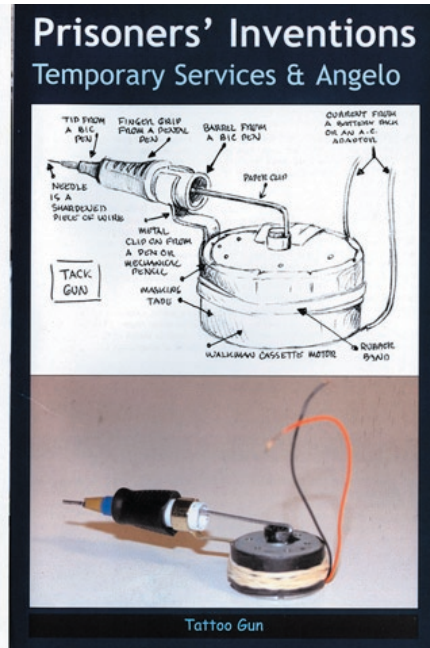
5. Summary

HIGH ART VALUES

The elite, high art market is stabilized by the routine production of minor differences. These differences are based less on formal characteristics of art works than on a systematic segregation of non-commodifiable practices such as those I have detailed in this paper. Seemingly identical products are valued in radically different ways in a process that, from the perspective of a non-participant, seems entirely arbitrary. However, as I have attempted to show, there are ways to account for this activity if we understand the economy of the art world as predicated on the concentration of knowledge and capital rather than a wholesale expansion of the market for artistic goods and services.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DARK MATTER

At the same time, it is clear that most of the people who graduate with professional degrees in art as well as all of the people who identify themselves as hobbyists or amateurs, represent a far larger and hetero-



Temporary Services brochure of Product Placements monthly public event flyer, circa 1985

geneous mass of creative activity than that which appears within the limited sphere known as the art world. It is this vast pool of largely invisible art making that I have provisionally called Dark Matter. Meanwhile, this nebulous region is getting brighter thanks in part to ever more affordable information related technologies. And not only does this increasing visibility permit informal art to be seen by art world institutions, but it permits informal artists to better see one another.

ART IN THE SHADOWS

By contrast, the work of Temporary Services and the other groups I have presented perceive not only the visual intensity of these “informal,” amateur practices, but also the economic subversiveness they



Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D) and Prisoners' Inventions by Angelo

theoretically exemplify. And it is this engagement with how Dark Matter behaves rather than what it looks like that segregates such practices from those of the elite, art world, no matter how similar they superficially appear. Meanwhile, this simultaneously forces the work of Temporary Services, REPOhistory, RTmark and other non-conventional groups into an alignment with the vast majority of cultural practices unrecognized by the art world described here as Dark Matter. ■

Gregory Sholette is a NYC based artist, writer and a co-founder of the artist collectives REPOhistory and PAD/D. He is co-editor with Nato Thompson of *The Interventionists: A Users Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (MIT: 2004 & 2005); and *Collectivism After Modernism* co-edited with Blake Stimson (University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

NOTES

1. Carol Duncan “Who Rules the Art World?” from *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*. Cambridge University Press: 1983. 172 & 180.

2. Quoted by Carol Becker in her book “The Artist as Public Intellectual” from *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, US & UK: 2002, 14.

3. Andrew Hultkrans and Jef Burton, “Surf and Turf,” *Artforum*, Summer 1998, 106-9.

4. The MFA degree was initiated under the “Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944” better known as the GI bill. see MaLin Wilson-Powell, “After They’ve Seen Paree,” *Art Issues*, No 64, Sept/Oct. 2000, 23-6.

5. According to the 1997 National Endowment for the Arts Survey entitled *Public Participation in the Arts* some 31 million people paint, sculpt or draw pictures while 33 million make photographs. Compare this very statistic to the just under 2 million who self identified themselves as “artist” for the 1997 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. All figures taken from the Columbia College Chicago Center for the Arts research brief “the Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places.” Spring, 2002.

6. Compare the problem of defining the informal art world with that of economists facing the informal or “shadow” economy. To some degree the questions raised can be equally applied to culture: “The lack of consensus in formulating a unified theory of the shadow economy, or even a precise definition of the components that comprise it, suggests that important questions remain unanswered. To what extent does the exclusion of shadow economic activity distort official estimates of macroeconomic variables, including output, employment and inflation? What are the policy ramifications of these exclusions? What is the distribution of shadow economic behavior between unrecorded, but legal, and illicit activities? Can the overall size of the shadow economy be estimated, and is it changing over time? Do countries at different stages of development possess different types of hidden economies? What is the relationship between regulatory (in)efficiency and the size of the shadow economy?” from *The Shadow Economy* by Matthew H. Fleming, John Roman, And Graham Farrell *http://www.britannica.com/magazine/article?content_id=171785&query=currency

See Benjamin’s essay “Traumkitsch” in Volume 2 of his selected writings published by Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 1999.

An excellent piece by Vera Rubin called “Dark Matter in the Universe” can be found on the Scientific American website at: <http://www.sciam.com/specialissues/0398cosmos/0398rubin.html>

Howard S. Becker from his introduction to *Art Worlds*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1982.

Aurth C. Danto, "The Artworld" *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964)

I have written elsewhere on these themes and humbly refer the reader to the following four texts: On the complications of collective practice see "Counting On Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice," *Afterimage* 11/99. On the issue of institutional autonomy see my essay "Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: In and Beyond the Contemporary Art Museum" forthcoming from *Third Text*, Summer 2002 as well as the essay "Some Call It Art: From Imaginary Autonomy to Autonomous Collectivity" forthcoming from *Social Text* and also accessible at: http://www.eipcp.net/diskurs/d07/text/sholette_en.html. On the issue of the co-optation of 1980s activist art by the art world please see my essay "News from Nowhere: Activist Art & After." *Third Text* Winter #45, 1999 and in the book *Kunst, Kultur und Politik in den Großstädten der 90er Jahre*, ed. by Jutta Held.

Not only do we find more and more museums displaying exhibitions of popular art and commercial art including Armani fashions, star Wars props and even Hip Hop culture, the latter dispossessed of its potentially abrasive, socio-economic context, but according to a 1992 NEA report U.S. museum attendance figures topped 164 million in 1992. With close to half the population attending institutions specializing in exhibiting culture the influence of the visual arts is practically unprecedented. Nevertheless it is important to note that the national as well as even international art market remains anchored in a handful of global cities including most prominently London and New York. According to the economic anthropologist Stuart Plattner "only elite-gallery exposure in New York creates art historical significance" Plattner points out that over 80% of artists do not live in NYC, despite the fact that what he terms the "gatekeeper galleries" are located there. Furthermore, 94% of the artists in New York City are "not significant sellers of work in the high end, elite market." To drive home the idea of hegemony: it seems clear that most of the thousands of art world actors in New York have more in common with their St. Louis counterparts than they do with the well-publicized, but extraordinarily few, art stars represented in the national media." Stuart Plattner, *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market*, University of Chicago Press: 1996, 3,8.

Neil O. Alper and Gregory H. Wassall, *More Than Once In a Blue Moon: Multiple Jobholdings by American Artists*, Research Division Report #40, (Washington: NEA, 2000), p. 97.

A study of 300 graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago were tracked between 1963 to 1980 by researchers Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi, Jacob W. Getzels and Stephen P. Kahn in *Talent and Achievement* (Chicago:1984, an unpublished report), p. 44.

See Plattner:12, 13.

Columbia College Chicago Center for the Arts research brief "the Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places." Spring, 2002.

7. According to the Hobby Industry Association's Nationwide Craft & Hobby Consumer Usage and Purchase Study from 2000, 70 % of US households reports that at least one member participates in a craft or hobby. Meanwhile, the total sales hobby supplies was 23 Billion dollars in 2000. Inevitably manufacturers of high-end art supplies depend on sales by less demanding hobbyists simply to remain in business. See the Hobby Industry Association website at www.hobby.org.

8. Columbia College Study, *Ibid*.

9. Brandon Taylor, *Avant-garde and After : Rethinking Art Now*, H.N.Abrams, New York:1995, 153.

10. For more on the connection between informal art practices and radical, feminist theory I refer you to a short yet provocative essay that parallels some of my

arguments here entitled, “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s “Hobby Art”) by Lucy R. Lippard. The essay first appeared in *Heresies*, no. 4, Winter 1978 and is reprinted in the book *Get the Message* by Lucy R. Lippard . New York 1984. Dutton Books. 97, 104.

11. All quotes about OWB are taken from an October 2001 email sent to the author by Brett Bloom, a founding member of Temporary Services. The booklets Bloom makes reference to are self-published, zine-like brochures the group produces about each of its public art projects. A selection of these photocopied booklets include the documentation of a stealth installation involving artists books the group inserted into shelves of the Harold Washington Library in Chicago. Another booklet describes a one-day “give away” of donated art called Free For All. And still another brochure detailed the results of the group’s Public Sculpture Opinion Poll in which citizens were given the opportunity to respond “in the street” to an abstract public art work sponsored by the city. (One copy of this booklet of mostly negative opinions was sent to the city’s Public Art Department.) SEE: <http://www.temporaryservices.org/>

12. Ibid.

13. Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. See also Bruce Barber and Jeff Dayton-Johnson, “Marking the Limit: Re-Framing a Micro-Economy for the Arts,” *Parachute*, no. 106, April, May, June 2002, 27, 39.

25. See the Elfwood web site at: <http://elfwood.lysator.liu.se/>

26. While the maker of Phantom Edit distributed his fan cut for free, others were not so “gift” oriented. Bootleg copies of the Edit were soon being made and sold. Meanwhile, Lucas has taken legal action against the distribution of the new edit and formally requested ebay, the largest online auction site, to voluntarily not list the Phantom Edit, an action that further underscores the potentially destabilizing power of Dark Matter especially when it collides with the formal, cultural economy.