

The leading edge of the globally operating world of business is becoming keenly concerned with changes in today's social, economic, and ecologic environment. At the top echelons of management an intense search is under way for up-to-date modes of thinking and acting. It comes to the fore in the emphasis managers place on corporate strategy, corporate identity, corporate philosophy, even corporate ethics. An *organizational revolution* is underway, as managers seek to communicate their vision with their collaborators.<sup>1</sup>

Social production of goods and services, both public and private, is ubiquitous, though unnoticed. It sometimes substitutes for, and sometimes complements, market and state production everywhere. It is, to be fanciful, the *dark matter* of our economic production universe.<sup>2</sup>

## **Arte y revolución in the age of enterprise culture**

Gregory Sholette, February 6, 2007

*Towards the end of the 1970s New York City underwent severe fiscal triage in an effort to bring to an end years of financial hemorrhaging. Union wages were scaled back, public assets privatized, housing markets opened for speculation, and the social safety net for poor and working class New Yorkers slashed. What took place in New York City some thirty years ago has proven pivotal for the evolution and spread of neoliberalism from Chicago to Budapest to Madrid. For that reason, the politically engaged practice of radical artists in New York City in the early 1980s takes on particular significance. The aim of this paper is to show how the successes and failures of two militant artists' collectives from that era significantly prefigure the collectivized interventionist practices of today. My focus is on the way certain artistic practices have organized the process of collective production itself in an effort to resist the political economy of the art world. It is my contention that the survival index for such organizations has less to do with their ideological or aesthetic position than with the style of collective self-management they adopt. Certainly that was the case for the two groups whose case studies I present in this text.<sup>3</sup> And in the age of enterprise culture style and business have come to mean, if not everything, then certainly a very great deal. What follows therefore is an attempt to write this other history as a history "from below," with all such a counter-narrative implies, for better and for worse.*

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Following World War Two, the predominantly elite art audience of the United States preferred to keep the connection between big business and high culture conspicuously discrete. No matter

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<sup>1</sup> Ervin Laszlo, "The Evolution of the Culture of Enterprise," in *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*, 1998, (Vol. 52.), pp. 181-186. <http://www.cejournal.org/GRD/Culture%20of%20Enterprise.html> (*My italics.*)

<sup>2</sup> Yochai Benkler in, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 117. (*My italics.*)

<sup>3</sup> Please note as a disclaimer that both of these case studies are drawn in part from personal experience. And while additional research was carried out in the PAD/D Archives at the Museum of Modern Art NY, and at the Archives of American Art in Washington DC, I want to warn the reader that if she or he seeks here a history written "degree zero" they will be disappointed. The biographical shadings of this essay, however nuanced, together with my partisan, political outlook, cheerfully militate against the disinterestedness of formal academic methodologies. Instead I offer here a marginal history that is grounded not by an official canon provided by the culture industry, but draws instead from that vast archive of understudied, rejected, resistant, and frequently informal creative labor I call the "dark matter" of the art world. (See note 15 below.)

how disingenuous in reality, private sponsorship of culture kept a reverential distance between the work of art and corporate self-promotion (eg, A company logo prudently tucked-inside an exhibition catalog; a brief mention that Mobil Oil had made possible this or that television performance; the functionalist architecture of a bank lobby complimented by a monumental Frank Stella painting.) The intentional collapse of that distance by the artist Hans Haacke was met with hostility and censorship in the early 1970s. Haacke revealed corporate agendas that were frequently at odds with the liberal outlook of most fine art devotees. It is extraordinary therefore, that so much has changed in so short a time. Over the past twenty years the world of fine art has shed its aura of autonomy –only to be reborn as an upscale brand name in its own right within the global entertainment economy. The precision of Haacke’s institutional critique notwithstanding, fewer and fewer people today find the art world’s blatant affiliation with fashion, wealth, and power troubling. On the contrary, young people flock to art programs at Yale, UCLA, and Columbia University knowing that they have a modest to fair chance of professional success, some even before they graduate. (Of course, many others incur tens of thousand of dollars in personal debt that will force them to become full time studio assistants, art fabricators, administrators, website designers, and even art critics.) Indeed, these are bullish times for the art world, especially if you are a dealer, an art advisor, or a hedge fund operator who specializes in portfolios of contemporary art. Still, it would be a mistake to celebrate such blessings without acknowledging the forces that lie behind this paradigm shift. As art historian Chin-tao Wu points out in her important study *privatising culture*, it is the spirit of entrepreneurship that now dominates, “every phase of contemporary art – in its production, its dissemination and its reception.”<sup>4</sup>

At such a moment old-fashioned appeals to the deep, transcendental meaning of art are no more constructive than are calls to return to the principles of revolutionary avant-gardism. If the former seeks to salvage an already lost aesthetic autonomy, then the latter is incapable of breaking away from the logic of an all-pervasive capitalism. Thus art historian Julian Stallabrass proposes the term “Art Incorporated,” which reflects the dominance of collectivized finance capital as the governing metaphor of value today, much in the way Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s culture industry referred to Taylorism and factory work. Stallabrass argues that Art Incorporated churns up “all material, bodies, cultures, and associations in the mechanical search for profit making.”<sup>5</sup> Thus one discovers nothing is exempt from aesthetic display within contemporary art venues, neither vats of chemicals or dead animals, nor copulating couples, nor even political statements. And though we may never witness a major exhibition of anti-war art sponsored by Dow Chemical or IBM, it is not inconceivable that Apple, or Nike, or Google would be willing to bankroll such a project. Imagine an aluminum foil cavern by Thomas Hirshhorn plastered with pictures of downtown Baghdad, and a neat stack of free, Richard Serra posters protesting the torture at Abu-Ghraib, One can even envision a grid of amputated veterans arranged by Venessa Beecroft. Meanwhile, the entire exhibition could be promoted creatively, using a viral marketing campaign that combines stealth advertising with targeted astroturfing.

I need go no further with this perverse fantasy except to ask why it is relatively easy to visualize political dissent by artists and art institutions, and so difficult to imagine radical social change in one’s workplace, neighborhood, or nation? Needless to say, there is also a reward for

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<sup>4</sup> Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, (London/New York, Verso, 2002), p 161.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Stallabrass in, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p

corporations who support all but the most extreme types of avant-garde art. On the one hand, CEO's gain a particular form of cultural capital through their vicarious identification with subversive art. Nothing new here really, except perhaps a rise in the level of what Marcuse termed repressive tolerance. On the other hand, by associating with transgressive cultural practices the corporation offers a pedagogical example to its employees who, under enterprise culture, are urged to work creatively, like artists, by "thinking outside 'the box.'"

All of this makes the appearance of a new wave of activist, political artists that much more curious. Often working collectively they incorporate new as well as old media into their practice, treating all technology in a tactical rather than programmatic way. Most of these artists express strong anti-authoritarian tendencies and many, through not all, operate outside and against market culture. And yet this new interventionist art has arrived at a moment when the mass-movements of the 1960s and 1970s have long since declined, when labor unions are enfeebled by concessions to capital, and when free market hegemony is virtually global in reach. Over the past ten years or so these socially engaged artists have made "work," that is, performed or distributed in public spaces using mass media, or over the internet in such a way that their art becomes the property or the experience of an unknown recipient – a recipient who in turn carries out the logic of the intervention without necessarily recognizing its artistic origins. Examples of recent interventionist art include inflatable plastic shelters for homeless people, graffiti spraying robots, testing kits for detecting genetically altered food, mobile message boards and clothing designed to help carry out civil disobedience, software for mapping urban surveillance systems.

Nevertheless, at the risk of sounding old-fashioned, or even reductivist, what *no* artistic practice, regardless how politically astute or theoretically informed, will ever do *by itself* is move from the act of engaged representation, or even skillful moments of tactical intervention, into the sphere of direct politics, without the existence of a broader social movement. This is not meant as a nostalgic cry for a return to the politics of some golden age of radicalism whether one understands this to be the 1910s, 1930s, 1960s and 1970s, or even the 1870s for that matter! For clearly a significant shift is taking place in the way political resistance is now organized and imagined. This change is fully consonant with the horizon of our current situation. Nor am I am the first to suggest that the condition of precarious labor today may be a return to normal following the brief and exceptional interlude known as the "welfare state," that was itself a concession forced on capital by the militant and highly organized labor movements of the 1930s. Regardless, nothing I am arguing here is meant to imply that returning to a golden revolutionary past, or to a Leninist style, top-down party, or some other centralized form of resistance is the solution. At the same time, how can the question of revolution, whether preceded by the article 'a,' or 'the,' or with the word itself crossed out, be fully considered without taking into account those rare moments of mass insurrection in which entire ways of life are overturned and re-imagined? The ripple effect such events have broad and lasting impact, even when they fail to reach the revolutionary stage just described. Nor is it surprising that the last major wave of politically engaged collectivist art in the US began in the 1960s and came to an end in the mid to late 1970s, with some residual activity continuing till about 1989. These historical brackets – roughly the mid 1960s to mid 1980s - are significant because on one hand they correspond to the rise and fall of the New Left, civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements. And on the other hand they demarcate the transition from the post-war, social welfare state with its culture of administration into the neo-liberal culture of entrepreneurship. At the heart of this essay therefore is the memory of that most recent, failed revolution.

Between 1968 and 1980 debates about the social and political function of art in the US took on an intensity not witnessed since the 1920s and 1930. Dozens of artists organizations emerged during this time including, The Art Workers Coalition, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change,

Black Emergency Coalition, Art & Language, Red Herring, Heresies Magazine Collective, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Alliance for Cultural Democracy, Paper Tiger, S.P.A.R.C. (Social and Public Art Resource Center), Carnival Knowledge, and Border Arts Workshop. These varied groups had no unified political or aesthetic program. However, they did generally share two things: First, a belief that art as a communicative activity is uniquely capable of disclosing the hidden structures of power and repression. And second, to one degree or another each was informed by the cultural politics of the New Left: that indefinite amalgam of students, anti-war radicals, feminists, progressive labor unions, and minority rights activists who, despite endless debate and fragmentation, still appeared as late as 1979 to be capable of coalescing into a genuine mass political movement. In reality, by the late 1970s this hope had become fiction. Nevertheless the depth of the challenge radicalized students, feminists, minorities, and disgruntled workers posed to the capitalist system in the United States during the previous decade was anything but a fantasy.

Throughout the era, demands for an end to stultifying working conditions were conjoined with calls for the liberation of personal, sexual, and cultural expression. Nor was these rising expectations confined to the elite universities. By the end of the 1960s colleges of lower middle class and working class students such as Kent State in Ohio, and Wayne State in Detroit were shaken by militant activism. Later these campuses would be the setting for direct military repression against anti-Vietnam War protestors. Likewise, the street fighting between students and police outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 signaled a level of near-revolutionary intensity that had counterparts in Germany, Mexico, Italy, and of course France. Meanwhile, industrial leaders and traditional labor unions were beset by a new generation of workers who insisted on being more than a pair of hands on the assembly line. They wanted the democratic and cultural changes taking place around them reflected on the shop floor. This was particularly strong amongst public employees who launched a series of strikes in the late 1960s and early 1970s unlike anything witnessed since the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> In Detroit, where the Ford manufacturing plant and other automobile factories are located in a predominantly African-American city, black workers organized such groups as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and ELRUM (the Eldon plant version of DRUM). Both groups were connected to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers which has been compared to the Comitato Unitario di Base radical workers organizations in Italy in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Radical unionists shut down production again and again throughout the mid to late 1960s using a series of coordinated wild-cat strikes and also made contact with their counter-parts in Turin Italy.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps the insurrectionary threat posed by this activism to the status quo in the United States is most clearly revealed by the level of repression used against it. Perhaps most insidious was the invention of COINTELPRO, a counter-intelligence program set up by the FBI to “expose, disrupt, and otherwise neutralize” the Black Panthers, the New Left, and anyone who the government perceived to be an enemy. Many have also noted that the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968 took place only hours before he was to lead an unprecedented march aimed at strategically uniting the civil rights movement with labor’s demand for economic justice.

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<sup>6</sup> *Who Built America? Working People & The Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture & Society* Volume Two, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 597.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Aronson Beck, Reggie Emilia, Lee Morris and Ollie Patterson in “Strike One to Educate One Hundred,” Chapter Two *A Seeds Beneath the Snow* Publication see: [http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/italy/strike\\_one\\_2.html](http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/italy/strike_one_2.html)

<sup>8</sup> “Individuals traveled back and forth between the two countries to discuss common problems and tactics. In those moments, when a lot of wine had been consumed, people would speculate on the impact of a joint strike in which auto-workers in Turino and autoworkers in Detroit wildcatted against their unions and their companies at the same time. These speculations revolved around groups such as Potere Operaia (Workers’ Power) and Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), extra-parliamentary groups that were then very active in Italy, with units in automobile factories as well as universities.” Dan Georgakas in “Revolutionary Struggles of Black workers in the 1960s,” from the *International Socialist Review* Issue 22, March-April 2002, [http://www.isreview.org/issues/22/black\\_workers.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/22/black_workers.shtml)

By the mid 1970s militant labor, the liberation struggles of African Americans, women, gays, Chicanos, and the radical anti-war movement had entered a period of factionalization and organizational decline. And yet, this was also the moment when the U.S. military was forced to retreat from Southeast Asia and the Nixon Whitehouse was toppled by the Watergate conspiracy. For many within the circle of Left activists that I knew, the imminent collapse of capitalism still seemed to be at hand as late as 1979. Indeed, two US-backed regimes, one in Nicaragua and one in Iran, were defeated by popular insurrections that year. Meanwhile, a major insurgency was under way in the US client state of El Salvador. 1979 was also the year of the near meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. In November, the US embassy in Tehran was stormed by Islamic students, its staff taken hostage. Along with these political set-backs the US economy was experiencing soaring inflation rates and had just entered a second deep recession possibly precipitated by the Arab Oil Embargo – that as it turns out was orchestrated by the Nixon White House. Within my circle of artists and political activists the crisis late capitalism was experiencing seemed poised to shift the nation to the Left. Nothing, as it turns out, could have been more wrong. The revolution had already stumbled and was over.

Some will stop me here and insist that the structural changes brought about by the 1960s within the dominant culture, especially with regard to women's rights and expanded personal freedoms, do represent a de facto revolution. And certainly the status of women and minorities has greatly improved, although they remain very far short of actual equality in wages and opportunities compared to white men. Nevertheless the militant desires expressed at the height of rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s expressed something larger than a mere adjustment within the system. As Paul Virno argues,

“I believe that during the 1960's and 1970's there was, in the West, a defeated revolution — the first revolution aimed not against poverty and backwardness, but specifically against the means of capitalistic production, thus, against wage labor... It is not difficult to recognize communist inspiration and orientation in the failed revolution of the 1960's and 1970's.”<sup>9</sup>

An end to wage labor? Now that is revolutionary. And perhaps, like the sudden shiver caused by a half repressed memory the new interventionists have been visited by the spirit of a radical past they were too young to experience directly? If so, what is the shape of this haunting? What is its genealogy? And most of all, what adaptations have been necessary for revolutionary art to survive in an age of enterprise culture?

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It was not the New Left, but the neo-conservative movement that catapulted itself into power in the United States by leveraging the political, cultural, and especially the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Their aim was to produce a leaner, more flexible, and more productive work force by taking away the social safety net and crippling an already weakened union movement. It was a process of demolition that would only become fully visible with the breaking of the Air Traffic Controllers Union by Ronald Reagan in 1981. But it was the processes of gentrification, displacement, and privatization taking place in formerly working class sectors of Manhattan that lay the groundwork for the Reagan Revolution.

According to David Harvey, the first opportunity for launching neo-liberalization in the United

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, translated by Isabella Bertoletti and James Cascaito, (Brooklyn: Semiotext(e), 2004),

States was New York City. The city's shrinking tax base and loss of blue collar manufacturing from the mid-1960s onward had created a massive fiscal crisis, thus making it the ideal test site for a wholesale reconstruction of the urban environment in the image of enterprise culture. Above all this meant fostering a 'good business climate' that redirected public resources into support for the private, business sector. By the mid 1980s the process was taking hold. Businesses were returning to the city again, but primarily in the financial and service industries -- not in manufacturing. A wave of young professional service workers were moving into low-income neighborhoods, pushing up rents and pushing out long-term residents. This shift in demographics also paved the way for cultural changes that became especially evident on the city's Lower East Side. By the mid 1980s dozens of small, commercial art galleries were operating in this ethnically diverse, and economically impoverished neighborhood. Renamed the East Village by real estate speculators the youthful pseudo-bohemianism art scene meshed with the city's fiscal bail out in so far as it helped to raise rents while generating cultural assets that attracted increased private investment.

Within this shifting cultural and economic landscape two, politically radical, art collectives emerged whose political aspirations not only clashed with those of the east village art scene, but who also sought to inspire opposition to the politics of the Reagan-era itself. Born on the cusp of neo-liberalization these groups initially developed a similar analysis of the art world. And yet by adopting contrasting modes of collective organization, one of these artists collectives, Political Art Documentation and Distribution or PAD/D (1980-1988), a group I was a founding member of, was destined for early extinction, while the other, Group Material (1979-1997), survived into the late 1990s, but only by largely being assimilated into the art world it once rejected. I will now compare the organizational structure of PAD/D and Group Material in order to better understand the limitations and the possibilities of cultural resistance in the age of enterprise culture.

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Less than one year after its founding in 1980, Political Art Documentation and Distribution or PADD produced its first public statement of purpose in a four page newsletter:

"Our goal is to provide artists with an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system."<sup>10</sup>

In a short time PAD/D was operating on a number of levels simultaneously including programming public events, networking with other organizations, publishing its own newsletter and producing temporary public artworks denouncing US involvement in Central America, Reagan era anti-terrorist policies, and gentrification of the Lower East Side. The group also developed an elaborate governance for itself involving a central steering committee, numerous sub-committees, and rules for making proposals, voting and becoming a member. In sum, PAD/D was structured like a bit like a Leninist-style institution, except that it was rendered in pastel colors producing a sort of Leninism LITE. For after all the group was made up of artists not generally known for their revolutionary discipline or fondness for authority. However, the group's identification with the political left led it to openly reject the art world.

"PAD [/D] can not serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art..."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1st issue. Political Art Documentation/Distribution. (New York: issue no., Feb. 1981).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

In place of OR to the side of the institutional art world PAD/D called for...

"... an international, grass roots network of artist/activists who will support with their talents and their political energies the liberation and self-determination of all disenfranchised peoples."<sup>12</sup>

PAD/D anticipated this "pre-revolutionary" network would be woven together from politically sympathetic exhibition spaces including university art galleries, labor union headquarters, community centers, even church halls (note: liberation theology).

It would be fair to describe the driving force behind PAD/D's frenetic, multileveled activity therefore, as a desire to unilaterally revamp the entire, corrupted world of bourgeois art from the bottom up. But a makeover that would supplant the existing, market driven system, with a alternative sphere of cultural production and engaged political practice. Ideally this counter-public sphere of Left culture world would provide concrete expression to art's true social purpose.

By the mid 1980s it became clear that PAD/D was not going to build a lasting bridge to what was in fact a fast fading US Left. The group began hemorrhaging members worn down by the nonstop demands of voluntary labor necessary to carry out its own, overly ambitious mission. In 1988 PAD/D came to an end. It was the same year that the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized an extensive exhibition of activist graphic art including work by many PAD/D group members. Significantly, and ironically, the PAD/D archive of social and political is now part of the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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About one year prior to PAD/D, Group Material was founded, also in New York City. In 1979 Group Material described itself as a independent collective made up of several designers, a couple of teachers, one electrician, one telephone operator, a waitress and a computer analyst. Much Like PAD/D, Group Material expressed exasperation with the conformist art world of the 1970s. Unlike PAD/D, Group Material never fully turned its back on the mainstream art world, but instead challenged it to live up to its own avant-gardist ideals. Using language reminiscent of the Russian Constructivists, Group Material charged the art world with ideological hypocrisy and artistic ossification:

"we are desperately tired and critical of the drawn-out traditions of formalism, conservatism and pseudo avant-gardism that dominate the official art world. As artists and workers we want to maintain control over our work, directing our energies to the demands of social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market."<sup>13</sup>

And yet, over the course of its seventeen years Group Material wound up producing some of its best-known work for significant venues within the official art world, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Dia Foundation, and the 1987 Documenta. In fact the group actually went through three distinct phases, or adaptations to changing conditions of artistic production. The first was a short, yet intensive year when they operated as an alternative exhibition space in a Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood of the Lower East Side

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Group Material flyer, "Calendar of Events," 1980-1981.

programming exhibitions on political themes, providing classes and film screenings and writing manifestos like the one I just quoted. This was followed by a four-year period in which Group Material downsized from twelve members to a four member collective 'cell.' They also abandoned their exhibition space, denounced all such fixed venues including so-called alternative spaces, and began operating much like today's interventionist artists by creating projects anonymously and sometimes illegally in public spaces. The collective's final and best-known period of activity started roughly in 1985 when they were invited to exhibit at the Whitney Biennial and continued until they disbanded in 1997. During this time Group Material functioned as a independent curatorial collective - often working for established art world institutions to produce what has become their signature style of meticulously designed installations on themes such as democracy, US intervention in Latin American, and the AIDs crisis.

I want to focus for a moment on the middle period when they developed a mobile interventionist practice roughly between the years 1981 and 1985. In 1981 Group Material, now with only four members, abandoned its "alternative" space on east 13<sup>th</sup> Street. They marked this shift with a new manifesto entitled "Beware Alternative Space" that was also a self-critique. It read in part:

"As Group Material closed its first season, we knew we could not continue this course. Everything had to change. The mistake was obvious. Just like the alternative spaces we had set out to criticize, here we were sitting on 13<sup>th</sup> St. waiting for everyone to rush down and see our shows instead of us taking the initiative of mobilizing into public areas."<sup>14</sup>

The statement ended with this new directive:

"Group Material Wants To Occupy The Ultimate Alternative — That Wall-Less Expanse That Bars Artists And Their Work From The Crucial Social Concerns Of The American Public."<sup>15</sup>

The new emphasis on mobilizing the public sphere led to some of Group Material's most innovative projects including an exhibition held in the advertising spaces of subway cars and buses, installations for dance clubs, and an illegal public poster-project it called Da Zi Baos that was inspired by the "big word posters" of the Chinese Democracy Wall movement. But the public interventions slowed after Group Material was invited to create an installation for the Whitney Biennial in 1985. It was soon invited to other mainstream art venues and participated, or perhaps pioneered to some degree, the practice of outsourcing that would come to mark the 1990s art scene with the rise of the independent curator as artist/the artist as curator. The fact that Group Material's exploration into the means of cultural production was carried out just as hope of a broader, progressive political movement was in decline, is undoubtedly what led the collective inextricably into the role of functioning arts administrators, and finally into the halls of the same mainstream art world they once rejected, or that at least the group once hoped to radically reform.

It strikes me therefore, that Group Material's collectivist practice of the 1980s which was small scale and cell-like in structure all the while guided by what it believed was an authentic vanguard mandate to narrow the gap between creative production and the everyday world – that this combination of features provided the collective with the means to successfully operate within an emerging world of enterprise culture. While by contrast, the more cumbersome PAD/D collective with its 20 or more members, elaborate public programs, and highly articulated organizational

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<sup>14</sup> Group Material flyer, "Caution Alternative Space," circa 1982.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



structure was destined to sink along with the remnants of the hopelessly fragmented US left that it incorrectly believed was still capable of re-animation.

There is a bit more to be gleaned by comparing these two models however.

For one thing, PAD/D had taken for granted that a disorganized, but already existing sphere of oppositional thought and creativity existed which they --as politically aware artists-- were uniquely capable of mobilizing. It seemed that this oppositional universe only required enough political will and organizational know-how to bring it from the shadows into the light. What PAD/D got very wrong of course was the imminent demise of the left AND the rise of neo-conservatism as a fully articulated sphere of opposition in its own right.

Group Material also recognized the significance of creative practices that circulated outside the discursive and institutional parameters of the mainstream art world as evidenced by their incorporation of popular and amateur art into exhibition programming. But rather than view these changes in production as a way to launch a counter-institutional practice --as PAD/D proposed-- Group Material sought an all out return to the avant-garde dream of merging *art into life*. BUT not, *art into life* in the sense of an aesthetic vanguard that would lead the masses into some type of socialist future, but rather, *art into life* as in the celebration of actually existing, popular visual culture: that is to say, all of the ways in which working people construct their cultural identity from both low and high culture. And yet if this were to be a revolutionary practice it would depend upon the absolute undermining of privileged hierarchies, a project that would require more than a cultural revolution no matter how insightful or clever.

In the end Group Material's urge to erase the boundaries between high and low culture coincided with the rise of enterprise culture, which had its own plan to collapse these polarities. Unlike Group Material's radically democratic objectives however, the leveling process that neo-liberalism fostered has pushed all culture in one direction: That of mass consumerism within the free market. In the process, all that was previously rejected as boorish, cheap, and uncultured by modernism has metamorphosed into what Julian Stallabrass has so aptly calls *high art LITE*. At the same time it is fair to say that in the shadow of the failed revolution all opposition is inevitably bound up with both progressive desire and reactionary *ressentiment*. And in between the two models of critical engagement presented here --PAD/D on one hand and Group Material on the other-- there lies a telltale rift that corresponds to the difference between the administered culture of the social state apparatus and the enterprise culture of neo-liberalism. To flagrantly misuse a well-known axiom of Adorno's: the response PADD and Group Material made to an emerging neo-liberal agenda was like the two torn halves of a true cultural and political revolution, but one that could not add up to a whole.

Still, some readers will no doubt want stop me at this point and ask how I can describe the above as a marginalized history if one of the two collectives, Group Material, has been afforded a modest profile within the official narrative of contemporary art, and the other, PAD/D, has its archives residing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York? The answer to that question is not solely because I focus on the least known and least commodifiable phase of Group Material, or the fact that as useful as an archive is, it also functions as an institutional mechanism for managing difference. Such a reply would be an easy and dubious response. Instead, to answer this question we must recognize the necessity of writing history differently by taking a journey into what I call the dark matter of the art world.

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The term *dark matter* is borrowed from astrophysics where it stands for an unknown type of mass and energy allegedly making up ninety percent of the universe, but which has never directly been observed. According to the theory of the Big Bang this unidentified gravitational force acts as an essential counter-weight to the infinite inflation of time and space. As I have sought to show elsewhere creative dark matter functions in much the same way by invisibly maintaining the cohesion of the art industry.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not an argument for the existence of some “authentic” aesthetic suppressed by the commercial art world. Instead, the shadow zone of dark matter is itself a heterogeneous assortment of practices and forms, some progressive, others reactionary, many of which collide and influence mainstream art while remaining structurally marginalized by its institutions. This unacknowledged art world productivity includes the army of professionally trained artists who no longer show up on the radar screens of contemporary art, and yet who nonetheless continue to support the industry through museum memberships, magazine subscriptions, educational programs, administrative positions, and assorted fabrication and installation trades. It also includes the non-professional artists whose amateur status provides a sort of juridical threshold for what is and what is not worthy of aesthetic evaluation. And of course this shadow zone is headquarters to the precarious posses of politicized cultural workers who have exiled themselves, partially or wholly, within the folds of dark matter for primarily ideological reasons.

Separately the inhabitants of this shadow space have little in common with each other. But looked at structurally, as the art world’s unseen gravitational pivot, they form a massive informal economy upon which mainstream cultural institutions depend. To put a sharper point on this assertion, just imagine for a moment if art fabricators went on strike, or demanded an exhibition of their own work as payment for services? What if volunteers refused to serve as docents or help with museum membership drives? Or if art magazines were boycotted until they made their glossy covers reflect explicit opposition to the Iraq war? Imagine what would happen to the local art economy if regional amateur artists insisted on equal representation at The Tate, or the Reina Sophia, or the MoMA, and refused to attend exhibitions, or art classes, or worse yet, agreed to stop purchasing art supplies until their demands were met? <sup>17</sup>

Creative dark matter therefore is neither fully contiguous with, nor symmetrical to, the products, institutions, or discourse of high art. And yet it is intimately connected with them. More significantly however, as a zone of social production that is motivated by such things as political opinion or individual pleasure and which is *not* dictated to by marketplace needs, dark matter has the makings of what Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge describe as a counter-public sphere. Such a realm is organized around the counter-productivity of working class fantasy and imagination.

“Throughout history, living labor has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production—within fantasy...by virtue of its mode of production, fantasy constitutes an unconscious practical critique of alienation.” <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See my essays “Dark Matter, Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere,” in *As Radical As Reality Itself*, eds. Hemingway, Leslie, & Beaumont. Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007; and “Heart of Darkness: A Journey into the Dark Matter of the Art World,” in the *Visual Worlds Reader*, eds. John Hall, Blake Stimson. Routledge Press, 2005. pp.1126-138.

<sup>17</sup> I realize that in nations where there is still strong governmental support for cultural institutions a museum boycott may be ineffectual, nevertheless it is worth noting that according to the *Nationwide Craft & Hobby Consumer Usage and Purchase Study, 2000*, seventy percent of US households reported that at least one member participates in a craft or hobby. Meanwhile, the total sales hobby supplies was twenty-three billion dollars that year. (see: Hobby Industry Association <http://www.hobby.org> ) My point is that the ripple effect of an amateur art consumer boycott would force up the cost of such materials for professionals considerably.

<sup>18</sup> These combined citations are from the English translation of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s book *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.) The English volume was translated by P. Labanyi, J.O. Daniel and A. Oksiloff and contains a foreword by Miriam Hansen.

Negt and Kluge also insist that such counter-productivity is not merely a metaphorical limit, but that it is a material force generated by the,

“residue of unfulfilled wishes, ideas, of the brain’s own laws of movement...” And because of this they warn “In its unsublated form, as a mere libidinal counterweight to unbearable, alienated relations, fantasy is itself merely an expression of this alienation.”

Thus we find examples of creative resistance that range from giving spontaneous discounts to customers, and the addition of secret messages to manufactured products, to stealing company internet time for video games. One low-paid stockbroker even used his company access to a Wall Street phone system to create random fluctuations in market shares apparently as a form of personal entertainment. Yet what remains unarticulated in all this is a larger vision of how such “unblocked” moments of working class fantasy might connect up with broader-based resistance to capitalist exploitation, racism, environmental degradation, and perhaps our most immediate threat, U.S. led imperialism.

Efforts to theorize a radically new, democratic movement not linked with the ideologies of the past are vitally important, whether we call this new work force a *precariat*, or a *multitude*, or simply the new working class. Mapping its flow and forging temporary, tactical alliances between creative labor and undocumented workers, across lines of national, or ethnic difference, making links between telephone operators in India and assembly line workers in China, all of this is essential today. And yet the organizational limits imposed on us at this particular moment should not be ignored, or worse still, be transformed into a political asset, simply because no other vision of sustained, strategic resistance is discernible. At the same time one can see the strength and weakness of our predicament reflected in Geert Lovink’s recent meditation on the state of tactical media, some eleven or more years after its initiation in Amsterdam,

"Tactical media is a short-term concept, aware of its? temporality, born out of a disgust for ideology. It surfs on the waves of events, enjoying the opening up of scenes and borders, on the look out for new alliances." <sup>19</sup>

If therefore one were to somehow illuminate this dark, counter-public sphere they would find no grand history of revolutionary accomplishments, but rather transitory moments of resistance, local insurrections, and a tangle of informal social networks where the free-exchange of goods and services count more than the accumulation of professional status. This is what remains marginalized by the contemporary art market. Such counter-productive processes are simply incapable of appropriation, not without undermining essential aesthetic hierarchies and the linear art historical narrative that support them. Still, that has not prevented the art world art from trying, especially given the way younger artists are again interested in socially engaged art. However, there is another, more important reason why such informal creativity is being noticed by the culture industry: dark matter is simply not as dark as it once was. The very same communication technologies necessary for capitalist globalization have paradoxically permitted a range of informal creative practices to become visible, both to themselves as social networks, but also to the churning feed lines of Art Incorporated. Nevertheless, when mainstream cultural institutions try to incorporate transient forms of art, or devise terms like relational aesthetics to package it, the result typically comes off as so many frozen assets, so much art world real estate

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<sup>19</sup> Geert Lovink, “Updating Tactical Media: Strategies for Media Activism,” quoted from the contents of a forthcoming text emailed to the author by Lovink in 2007.

popped down on the multi-billion dollar monopoly board where players have one eye on the game, and one eye scanning the next investment opportunity in Asia or Africa or Latin America.

Consequently then, what I am calling creative dark matter does show up, if selectively, usually very selectively, in various official art histories, and sometimes even in museum collections. This should not come as a surprise. Artists and especially artistic movements have consistently intersected with this realm. Nor would any mainstream art historian deny this fact in principal. What is not recognized, what cannot be admitted to by the maintenance crews of the high culture industry, is the degree to which not only the art world's imaginary, but also its economy, are stabilized by the invisible labor of this far larger, shadow economy. While efforts to normalize marginalized or partially marginalized practices are inevitable, the aim of a radical art history and criticism is to place normality itself under duress by enunciating a space of critical autonomy, a dark matter space, which is never fully recoverable by the culture industry, and by virtue of that asymmetry serves to destabilize the cultural speculators of the elite art world.

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The comparison I have made in this paper is first and foremost structural and historical, rather the aesthetic or political. The members of PAD/D and Group Material fought the good fight, and continue to do so individually, as historian Alan Moore points out.<sup>20</sup> At the same time it is evident that many, if not all of today's interventionist art collectives share more with the organizational model adopted by Group Material than that of PAD/D. Indeed, as Lovink makes very clear, many contemporary artists' collectives reflect a strong skepticism towards all forms of organization, as well as Left politics. Some even chafe at group identity itself. As *Critical Art Ensemble* (CAE) put it succinctly, "cellular collective construction" produces "solidarity through difference."

To put this another way, if we agree that the objective of modernist collectivism was always in the last analysis transcendent—either resting on grand collective aspirations such as the creation of an entirely new society, or the construction of technological utopias, or by totally rejecting such goals through the celebration of the unconscious, or artistic primitivism---- then by contrast, contemporary collectivism is unified only by its invocation of collectivity as pragmatic, plastic, and performative. That may be why we discover an entire taxonomy of organizational forms amongst contemporary interventionist artists, from bogus businesses to pseudo-bureaucracies to mock research centers and even ministries. Examples include *The Center For Tactical Magic*; *Bitter Nigger Inc.*; *The Church Of Stop Shopping*; *Bureau Of Inverse Technology*; *La Agencias*; *Carbon Defense League*; and *the Institute for Applied Autonomy*. I would suggest that the primary means by which interventionist artists have adapted to enterprise culture therefore—from Group Material on up to today's Tactical Media practitioners-- is by performing the political with the same degree of skepticism towards politics that contemporary entrepreneurs express towards conventional business management. That is to say, the new interventionists *represent* collective resistance, culturally, by constituting themselves as a facsimile of what a decentralized revolutionary organization might look like if, and when our hoped for ~~revolución~~ does arrive.

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<sup>20</sup> Alan Moore, "Artists Collectives 1975-2000: a Focus on New York City" in *Collectivism After Modernism*, edited by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp 193 – 221.