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Into the Dark

Gregory Sholette. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 2010. 304 pp., 20 b/w ill. \$30 paper

The term “art world” represents a nebulous but also ubiquitous and maybe ultimately indispensable metaphor. Still, this world is a sphere that seems already to exclude most artistic activity; that is, most artists, and most patrons of the arts, are on the outside looking in. Hence, when one pronounces where the art world is now, one announces a privileged place from which to speak and a referent of a small number of relevant actors who define and constitute this space for the rest of us to observe from afar. More concretely, it describes a real geography of cities and spaces—new bohémias (which double as scenes for gentrification and hipster entertainments), gallery districts, auction houses, fairs, museums, and art colonies. Thus in Sarah Thornton’s quasi-insider account, *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008), the author circulates among the cosmopolitan constellation of prestigious fairs, high-end gallerists and collectors, and star producers in cities like New York, Tokyo, London, and Venice. Perhaps, though, art worlds, like stars and planets, are the illuminated spheres within a much larger (and mostly dark) universe of artistic production and consumption. Such is the image evoked by Gregory Sholette, an activist, artist, and professor based in New York, in his provocative new book, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*.

The metaphor is taken from astronomy: “Astrophysicists describe dark matter . . . as forming an invisible mass . . . only perceived indirectly by observing the motions of visible . . . objects such as stars and galaxies. Despite its invisibility . . . most of the universe, perhaps as much as 96 percent of it consists of dark matter. . . . Like its astronomical cousin, creative dark matter also makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society” (1). What constitutes artistic dark matter? “It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices—all work made and circulated in the shadow of the formal art world, some of which might be said . . . [to reject] art world demands of visibility, and much of which has

no choice but to be invisible” (1). Provocatively, Sholette makes the argument that this largely unseen and unremarked, if incredibly productive, sphere of creative energy, while seemingly wholly excluded by the formal art world, nonetheless creates the gravitational field in which the artistic activities designated as relevant are suspended. It forms “a vast flat field upon which the privileged few stand out in relief” (3), made up of teachers and students, engaged amateurs, purchasers of art supplies, attendees of exhibitions, subscribers to magazines, and candidates—even as “outsider” artists—to break down the door and thus perpetuate the fantasy that the art world is open, democratic after all. Sholette wishes to construct a history of this artistic dark matter over the past three decades; to imagine how it sustains itself in the shadows, how it relates to an increasingly marketized and nakedly entrepreneurial network of fairs, galleries, and museums (i.e., “enterprise culture”); and most of all, to explore what political potentials are contained within this vast social space of exclusion from the formal art world.

In launching this project, Sholette displays a high degree of ambivalence. He is steeped in Marxist theory and a materialist conception of culture, but is also heir to the post-1968, postmodern turn in art and politics—the exhaustion of grand narratives that leaves little room for heroic art, mass political movements, or the imagination of large-scale social transformation. This duality generates a deep fissure running through the book. On the one hand, Sholette offers a Marxian critique of the neoliberal economy and the historically specific ways in which it penetrates the universe of artistic activities—art world and dark matter. On the other, the book catalogues artistic interventions, coming from the margins, which reject revolutionary praxis in favor of tactical practices of resistance, inspired by the (increasingly dated) theories of the Situationist International and of the later, post-Marxist French critic Michel de Certeau.

Sholette argues, relatively persuasively, that the contemporary state of artistic dark matter is profoundly conditioned (determined in the last instance?) by the current configurations of capital accumulation, which are variously identified as postindustrial, post-Fordist, and neoliberal, terms that are substantially familiar to initiates into the variants of neo-Marxist regulation theory,

most prominently advanced in the United States by David Harvey. The text of *Dark Matter* is not especially generous to those uninitiated in these traditions, but to clarify, each is directed at identifying major political-economic shifts in the Western world since the postwar period.

Postindustrialism signals the decline of industrial manufacturing in the highly developed countries and of once-prosperous industrial cities such as Detroit and Manchester; Sholette is concerned with the ways in which artistic activity interacts with the spaces left vacant by the flight of manufacturing capital and the decimation of the blue-collar working class, facilitating gentrification on the one hand (converting warehouses into galleries and bestowing on blighted space a new aura of hipness), but also offering vehicles for protest, such as by the Baltimore Development Collective, whose members critique “culturally amplified gentrification without sidestepping their own role as white middle-class art school graduates within this system” (176).

Post-Fordism signals not only the decline of the industrial economy in the West, but also of the institutional foundations that sustained it—huge, paternalistic corporations such as General Motors, in cooperation with powerful labor unions and a regulatory state also charged with providing an ever-expanding social safety net. This system delivered a historically unprecedented degree of income equality and strong economic growth for two decades after the war, while still displeasing many on the cultural Left with its excessive “gray flannel suit” conformity, and entrenched racism and patriarchy. In any event, Sholette suggests that by the 1970s these arrangements were in crisis, as the rigidity of the Fordist system could not adequately respond to new pressures brought on by oil shocks, increased global competition, and technological advances in transportation, communication, and automation. Post-Fordist arrangements are oriented to increased flexibility, a major consequence of which, as Sholette notes repeatedly, is the increased instability of employment relations in the contemporary United States. Provocatively, Sholette connects the improvisational and highly contingent quality of artistic careers more broadly with the new reality of employment, in which workers must be both more individually creative on the job and more acclimated

to personal risk. This point, well detailed in chapter 5, is not exactly original, though.

Sholette quotes Pierre Bourdieu identifying neoliberalism as “a program for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic” (quoted on 116). The post-Fordist shift to enhanced flexibility is legitimated by a resuscitation of free-market ideology, in which unrestrained, unregulated global capitalism is taken to be the best and only mechanism for the assignment of value and the production of desirable social outcomes. A major consequence of this ideological shift, strongly departing from the postwar Keynesian consensus, has been the breakdown of barriers impeding currency and capital flows between nations, and the dramatic expansion of the financial sector, which has, Silicon Valley notwithstanding, become the major mechanism for consolidating enormous fortunes in the hands of a privileged few. Moreover, the logic of highly speculative market exchange has, according to Sholette, infected the art world as never before, perhaps not surprising, as New York remains the world capital of both art and finance.

Like the financial world, the art world has grown both more abstract and more global, and it has enriched a relatively small transnational elite. According to Sholette, this has had the effect of neutering the art world politically and aesthetically. Thus the state of the fine-art marketplace in the past two decades is obscenely lucrative and creatively moribund, as increasingly well-trained young painters sell beautifully rendered, hopelessly derivative decorative pieces to investment bankers. “Between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, sales of young, emerging artists . . . grew at a phenomenal rate. Anti-theoretical, a-political, and deeply entrepreneurial, the deregulated neoliberal economy reinforced artistic tendencies markedly different from the austerity of conceptual and minimal art. Chin-tao Wu describes this change in art world values as *enterprise culture*” (85, italics in original). Sholette repeats the oft-noted correspondence between the gentrification of New York coming out of the grim 1970s urban crisis and the emergence of the “wild” lower East Side gallery scene: “This sustained process of dispossession and demolition was followed by the restructuring of city life around notions of risk-taking and entrepreneurship, including real-estate and financial speculation, but also cultural ventures that sent prices for contemporary art to

new heights” (64). Sholette further quotes Angela McRobbie’s claim that art-world artists are “reinventing themselves ‘for the increasingly global market. They can be successful, sell their work; they no longer have any reason to be angry social critics’” (quoted on 38).



Of course, art has been co-opted or worse by capitalist logics in the past—see T. J. Clark on the French Impressionists, or Serge Guilbaut on the Tenth Street School. Still, in the post-Warhol, postmodern present, the melding logics of high finance and high art seem particularly unapologetic. Moreover, with the collapse of state socialism (no unwelcome development) and the post-1968 “exhaustion” of utopian revolutionary ideals, one sees precious little tension at the core—just a homogenizing market triumphalism mirroring Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” in the cultural sphere: “Paradoxically, the contemporary art world is at once more global and yet less varied, more visibly diversified and yet neither more porous nor malleable in its aesthetic range” (121).

Still, Sholette is not very concerned with the art world, which is small and also at the moment boring, but with artistic dark matter, which is vast and maybe more interesting. Of course, much of this dark matter is made up of individuals who would like to be in the art world but can’t. Among the side effects of neoliberalism, with its dismantling of social supports, its exaltation of individual

industry and ambition, and its aggressive naturalization of market outcomes, has been the dramatic increase in economic inequality, and this is mirrored in the artistic universe—that is, art-world rewards flow increasingly to a small segment of elite producers, even as the reservoir of lumpen artistic labor swells around them, including a massive number of veterans from the fine-arts training programs that today proliferate to an unprecedented degree.

What is going on here? How is this massive pool of failure sustained, and what are the forces that perpetually add to its numbers? “If the oversupply of artistic labor is an enduring and commonplace feature of artistic production, then the art world must inevitably draw some specific, material benefit from this redundant workforce” (116). True, oversupply has been a problem of the art world since the nineteenth century saw the collapse of the old patronage system and the birth of the modernist bohemia in Paris. But as noted above, the precarious existence of the artistic producer has become more and more analogous to ordinary workers in the postindustrial present, performers of immaterial labor in contingent, unstable, winner-take-all markets. “Rather than a historic compromise between artistic creativity and the neoliberal economy, what has fixated neoliberalism onto the image of the artist as ideal worker is . . . the way the art world as an aggregate economy successfully manages its own excessively surplus labor force, extracting value from a redundant majority of failed artists” (135). In fact, the value generated by this redundant dark mass is irreducible to art markets—the vaunted fantasies of *la vie de bohème* create a workforce ideally suited to the demands of small but central portions of the postindustrial urban environment, buttressing gentrification and “new economy” enterprise.

Artistic dark matter may model the mechanisms for the creation and the pacification of the surplus labor in what some neoliberal theorists call, following Mario Tronti, the “social factory”—indeed, the neoliberal scholar Yochai Benkler uses the metaphor in just this manner: “The social production of goods and services . . . is ubiquitous, though unnoticed. It is, to be fanciful, the dark matter of our economic production universe” (quoted on 149). But Sholette is not merely interested in identifying a historically specific neoliberal mode of

labor-force exploitation. He wishes to glean the progressive potential contained within this dark matter—after all, the art world proper has already been shown to be thoroughly hopeless on this front, so the margins provide our best and only hope. Here, Sholette has considerable skin in the game—he cofounded two of the left-leaning, “subversive” artist collectives that he describes at length in the book, PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution) and REPOhistory. PAD/D represented an archive of left art interventions from around the world, with an apparent emphasis on anti-gentrification art work, while REPOhistory placed signs throughout New York City proffering alternative histories intended to challenge and repudiate official narratives. Despite his intimate involvement with these projects, Sholette’s depiction is impersonal—there is no first-person reflection on these projects or their efficacy, though one can glean ambivalence in his depictions of how easily these moments of aesthetic resistance are ultimately absorbed by the neoliberal system. Moreover, given that part of this pacification process involves incorporating subversive artistic projects into Museum of Modern Art exhibitions or subjecting them to the scholarly gaze of books like this or untold numbers of PhD dissertations, it becomes questionable whether the most prominent of these political interventions should be classed in the dark matter at all, or whether they form another sort of illuminated sphere among the art worlds.

One senses both Sholette’s commitment to his own past political interventions and to the similar movements that he documents throughout the book, and also frustration at the exceptionally limited vision of political action and social change afforded by post-modernism. “Unlike a century ago, when art aimed to be useful for building a revolutionary society, the aesthetic laboratories and pedagogical experiments of today operate within an ill-defined neoliberal landscape of fractured resistance” (174). In place of revolutionary politics, the “movements” that Sholette documents, such as Tactical Media or the REPOhistory street sign initiative, engage in “tactical” acts of “resistance” designed to “interfere with” the hegemonic order. Thus, the Tactical Media theorist Rita Raley “immediately distances herself from the ‘embarrassing’ and ‘nostalgic’ desire for revolutionary transformation associated with

May 1968. Raley insists that TM activists, by contrast, ‘cede control over outcomes,’ willingly surrendering political aspirations to a ‘postmodern roll of the dice’” (35). Given his clear commitments to the Marxist tradition, at least as an explanatory mechanism, one cannot be surprised that these “post-modern” aesthetic games leave Sholette feeling unfulfilled. One strains, in slogging through this smart but also jargon-filled and redundant book, to find an alternative model for doing “art and politics in the age of enterprise culture,” as suggested by Sholette’s investigations and lived experience as a politically conscious and apparently marginal artist (part of the dark matter). He is not satisfied ultimately with PAD/D or REPOhistory (the book has no interest in self-congratulation, mercifully), but what has he learned from the experiences? On this point, Sholette appears to be straining too. *Dark Matter* ultimately is the latest demonstration that though the post-1968 generations of artists and activists exploded the grounds for utopias and grand narratives—in art and politics—they have yet to be able to put anything in its place that can effectively challenge the hegemony of capital, which now more than ever owns the art world, and the dark matter too.

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