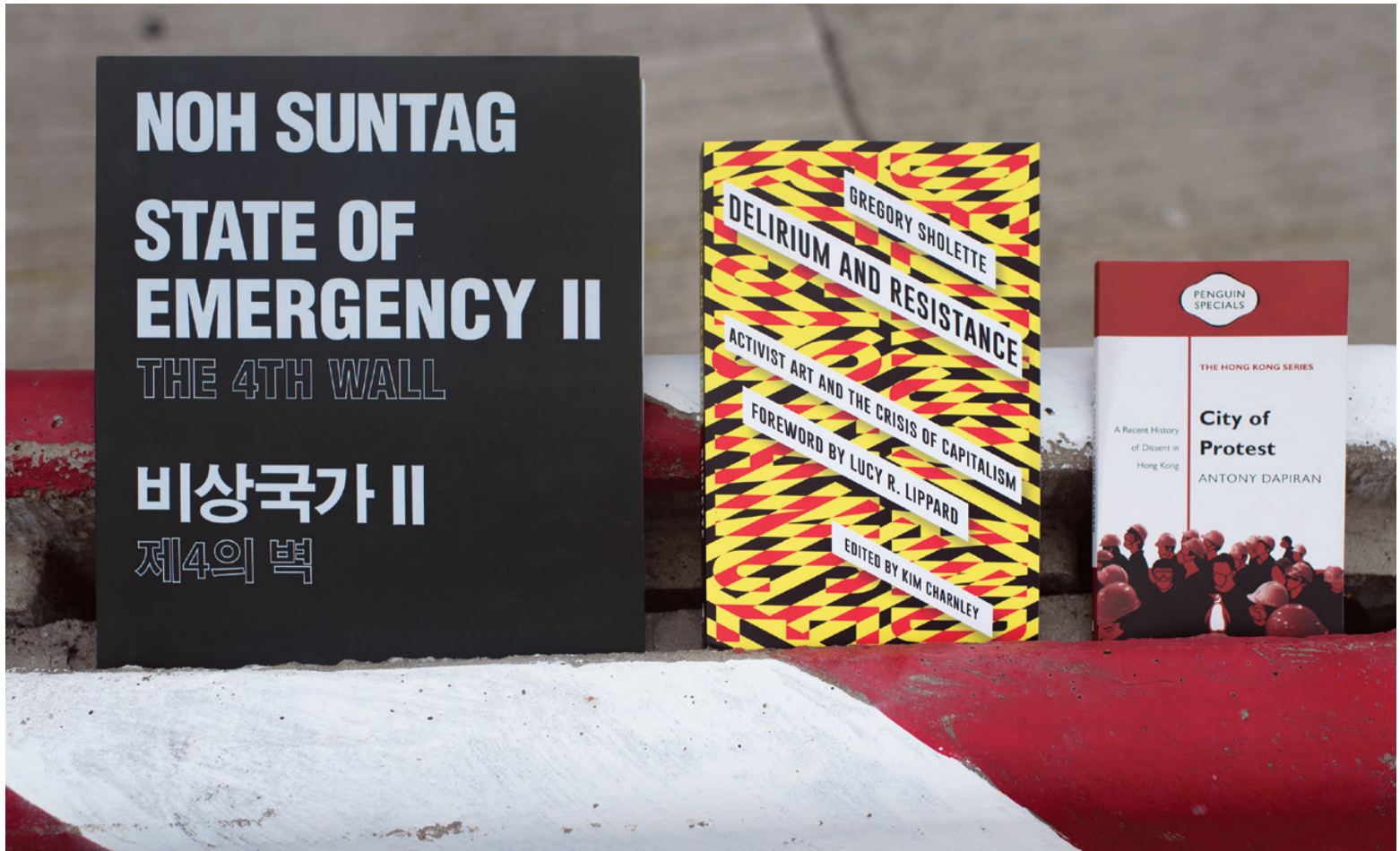


Art and Resistance

Three books help us see the hidden possibilities amid societal breakdown



How can art respond to a society in crisis? In 1940, amid the rise of fascism, theorist Walter Benjamin argued the job of the rebel should be to help society remember its unrealized dreams of liberation. To consider the past, wrote Benjamin, “means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.” If we can recall the tradition of the oppressed, we might realize that the “‘state of emergency’ in which we live is the rule”—in other words, that we share a continuous struggle with people in history, who have secrets to offer about our condition if we are perceptive enough to listen.

Seoul-based photographer Noh Sungtag’s recent monograph, *State of Emergency II: The 4th Wall*, borrows Benjamin’s turn of phrase, and attempts to puncture the bizarre surface of South Korean neoliberal state power. Noh, who entered university amid the waning days of the country’s long military dictatorship, said his political consciousness began with a suspicion that his own history was being hidden from him. “For students (in my generation), contemporary history since the Korean War was taboo or subversive territory,” he says in an interview in the book. “By prohibiting us from using the

past to understand the present, the military regime was ironically letting on the crisis it faced.”

The dynamics of South Korea’s conflict and resistance draws a line back to the 1980s *Minjung* (people’s) cultural movement, as artists joined with activists to protest the authoritarian leadership using visual art and performances that the regime attempted to brutally suppress. When the nation democratized at the end of the 1980s, the *Minjung* movement dissipated as neoliberalism took hold, absorbing the agitators into the new system. Noh said he watched as former idealists joined ranks with the oppressors. He wondered: “What on Earth is happening in our society, and why? What is the truth, and what is a lie?”

State of Emergency is a biting take on South Korea’s postmodern, post-*Minjung* condition. With deadpan criticisms and wry reversals, Noh indicts the hypocrisy of South Korea’s US-backed, militarized neoliberalism—in his conceit, the real crisis is society’s transformation into a farcical theater of violence, in which we are its helpless spectators behind the “4th wall.” In one series, ironically titled “Drought” (2008–15), Noh captures



STATE OF EMERGENCY II: THE 4TH WALL

By Noh Sungtae
Published by Art Sonje Center, Seoul, 2017.
Softcover, 263 pages.

DELIRIUM AND RESISTANCE: ACTIVIST ART AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

By Gregory Sholette, edited by Kim Charnley.
Published by Pluto Press, London, 2017.
Softcover with black-and-white illustrations, 224 pages.

CITY OF PROTEST: A RECENT HISTORY OF DISSENT IN HONG KONG

By Antony Dapiran
Published by Penguin Books, London, 2017.
Softcover, 134 pages.

Photo by Ryan Chiao for ArtAsiaPacific.

abstracted close-ups of the spray from water cannons aimed at the bereaved, protesting relatives of the Sewol ferry disaster victims. Another series documents police officers photographing protesters in order to construct a database of dissenters' faces—a goal of every regime in the world today. However, Noh's most wrenching images look not at moments of violence but the stillness in violence's wake. In the aftermath of an air strike, we see an overturned car in the snow, a plate of charred fruit, a single window smashed in a bedroom with orange walls. In these pictures, a viewer finds the real horror: the emergency is never over.

Noh's work pushes us to look deeper, but stops short of offering an alternative. "I don't think it's possible to prescribe a duty for art in terms of realizing a better society," he says. "Art can play a role in creating cracks in our hardened senses and perceptions . . . through constant questioning."

What happens when art is the emergency? Artist, activist and writer Gregory Sholette observes in *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, that art has been completely subsumed by the logic of the market, which has made "creativity" its newest frontier for appropriation. The contemporary art world—having unironically adopted the language of finance and tech startups—boomed even as the global economy plunged into shock in 2008. Concurrently, an ever-growing pool of art graduates find themselves trapped in debt and locked out of any hope of recognition within a system they help perpetuate, while being drafted as gentrification's ground troops. How does an artist expose a failing society, when, as Sholette writes, "the delirium and crisis of capitalism is also the delirium and crisis of the art world"?

Sholette theorizes that art contains revolutionary potential, a "dark matter" hidden within a mass of invisible labor. This consists of failed artists, amateurs and socially engaged art practitioners who make up the bulk of society's artistic activity, but who have not been allowed to surface in the art world, except as its unrecognized workers and consumers. However, in our pivotal moment, this dark matter is "brightening" as online distribution and the rise of protest movements make marginal and political art increasingly visible, and at the same time more vulnerable to co-optation. Rather than be subsumed and plumbed for resources, Sholette observes, more artists are electing to confront the art world, and they increasingly do so with activist practices.

In 2011, artists and culture workers gathered in New York's Zuccotti Park for the Occupy Wall Street protests, in the most vivid example of what Sholette calls art's "social turn." Artists, he notes, are moving "toward the choreographing of social experience itself," using "the social itself as its medium and material of expression." These practices reanimate the historical consciousness of art's dark matter, with all of its failed uprisings, incomplete interventions, and forgotten anti-capitalist dreams. "Until recently, the creative 'cognitariat' demanded neither a past, nor a future, but only an opportunity to be productive all the time, 24/7, as a mode of life," he writes. "That was tolerable, until capital placed its boot on the big hand of time. Suddenly both history and hope lurched into view, and memory, an archaic vestige, was foisted onto them like a millstone."

Sholette reads the events of Occupy Wall Street as an archival lesson, marking a reactivation of collective political memory and initiating new secrets to liberate

the future: "something being written, call it a promissory note, an obligation to a future reader from a place already dislocated in time." In this sense, what activists occupied in Zuccotti Park was not just space but time, shared with past and future resistance movements around the world.

The message was picked up by protesters in Hong Kong, three years after Occupy Wall Street. Increasingly desperate to achieve democratic elections before the expiration of its semi-autonomous constitution in 2047, Hong Kongers staged a dramatic street occupation in 2014 to demand universal suffrage.

According to lawyer and writer (disclosure: Also AAP contributing editor) Antony Dapiran's book *City of Protest*—published as part of a Penguin series around the history of Hong Kong—the Umbrella Movement was the ultimate expression of a genealogy of dissent reaching back to the 1960s. Drawing inspiration from local protest traditions as well as the wave of urban occupations around the world, tens of thousands of the former British colony's students, artists and supporters—the city's "dark matter"—transformed central highways and thoroughfares into spectacular utopian protest camps that stood for nearly three months before they were cleared by police. Like Occupy Wall Street, the Umbrella Movement was an artistic practice that took the ruthlessly free market city as its medium. The occupation had demolished the fourth wall between society and spectator, revealing dramatic social contradictions that demanded public participation to resolve. Similarly, upon its occurrence, the Umbrella Movement instantly became an archival space in which previously hidden political concerns were able to resurface and transmit themselves into the future.

While the demands of the Umbrella Movement were explicitly about democracy, Dapiran notes that they pointed to more fundamental concerns about history and existence. "These protests have always had at their core [an] anxiety about Hong Kong's identity. Hong Kongers were told that the 1997 handover had finally determined the issue, righting the historical injustice of the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties that had ceded Hong Kong to the British. But in a world where self-determination has come to be seen as a fundamental right . . . Hong Kong citizens seem to be asking again and again: what is Hong Kong's place in this post-colonial world?"

It has been three years now since the occupied highways were cleared and pressure-washed. In the protest's aftermath, many young Hong Kong artists and activists have embarked on their own "social turn" as they try to create new community practices emphasizing Hong Kong specificity as a type of cultural resistance. Concurrently, authorities have doubled down on repression, increasingly cracking down on political expression, targeting schools and media, both traditional and social. As it increasingly runs out of spaces to express itself, the resistance will likely have to find a way to survive underground.

Every society contains the potential for revolutionary change—waiting to be unlocked within its dark matter. The three books posit that because of this, artists must stay committed to their enduring task: to interpret, protect and pass on the secrets of our condition. In an age of perpetual crisis, they must ask, again and again: "What on Earth is happening in our society, and why?"

WILFRED CHAN

Copyright of ArtAsiaPacific is the property of ArtAsiaPacific Holdings Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.