Public Art in a Post-Public World
Complicity with Dark Matter
Gregory Sholette

> *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.*
> Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*

Something is reshaping our concept of public space, something unsettling, yet commonplace. Theorists Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge might describe it as the partial unblocking of the counter-public sphere: a realm of fragmented publics and working-class fantasy generated in response to the alienating conditions of capitalism (Negt and Kluge 1993). A more specific cultural interpretation would attribute it to the irrepressible brightening of creative dark matter: the marginalized and systematically underdeveloped aggregate of creative productivity, which nonetheless reproduces and maintains the material and symbolic economy of high art (Sholette 2010). Three factors appear to be at work in this transformation: all involve paradoxes of neo-liberal capitalism. First, the ultra-deregulated marketplace has devised the technology for extracting value out of previously resistant areas of social productivity. This includes everyday mental, biological, and cultural processes once considered so intimate as to be immune to marketization. Second, these same global communication networks make it possible for a range of previously invisible partial publics to represent themselves, to link up and thicken connectivity, even to imagine the possibility of asserting a degree of autonomy from the market. Finally, as corporate interests transform private desire into pseudo-public property, this extraction and labor-saving process converts more and more of the population into an unemployable and often over educated surplus. The results are explosive, especially as rising expectations encounter an increasingly derelict public sphere.

Recent mass demonstrations and occupations of public spaces around the globe suggest that this quandary is reaching a tipping point precisely as

capitalism finds it progressively difficult to derive profits from an increasingly automated economy (Rotman 2013; Marx 1993 [1867]). Skeptics will dismiss this situation as one more mutiny "from below," a momentary flaring up of public expectations for greater political and economic equality. Perhaps invoking May 1968 or other similar micro rebellions, they will describe the rise and fall of radical hopes that ultimately leave behind a smattering of positive change, but also fragmented memories and failed ambitions (Virno 2004). Others, such as Evgeny Morozov, see the likely outcome as fatal to *any* version of public life or democratic culture, arguing neo-liberalism melts everything solid into a matrix of sterile data pixels (Tucker 2013). Still others believe there is an unprecedented positive dimension to this situation, describing what might be called a post-public sphere as uniquely inclusive and sustainable (Benkler 2006). Regardless, the brightening of this once hidden social surplus is simultaneously exhilarating and unpredictable. For just as the post-public sphere appears accessible, generous, and horizontally structured, it inevitably opens up a space for less savory forms of thought and conduct to materialize and cohere into racism, sexism, and other authoritarian tendencies. Therefore the political stakes are high, their outcome far from determined. This uncertainty is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the field of contemporary art, especially socially engaged public art.

The Political Economy of Art

Think of the legions of artists, curators, writers, and other cultural workers whose time, labor, expertise, and personal finances (manifest as debt) either directly or indirectly stabilize the field of contemporary art. This includes installers, project fabricators, studio assistants, art magazine subscribers, volunteers, and interns. Most hold advanced degrees in a discipline where a less than 1 percent "success rate" is treated as orthodoxy. Consider the still more multitudinous ranks of informal talent whose non-professional engagement with "creativity" is often denigrated as an irrelevant pastime or hobby. Unburdened by art world demands for non-stop novelty and transgression, Sunday painters and home crafters engage in a type of pleasurable, self-directed production once claimed to be the exclusive prerogative of "serious" artists. Many amateurs devote their off-work hours to perfecting craft techniques long since abandoned by the de-skilled vassals of contemporary art. Consider, too, the inert semantic contribution made by informal artists. After all, for an artist to be labeled an "amateur" is still a grave insult. That may not be true much longer. Attempts at making "serious" art appearing more amateurish are so commonplace today that theorist John Roberts predicts sophisticated visualization technology allows the amateur on the "way up" to encounter the de-skilled professional artist "on the way down" (Roberts 2007). Meanwhile, artists' groups like W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), Arts and Labor Working Group, and Debt Fair have initiated a new round of debates focused on their own poor

working conditions, invoking similar disputes made by the Art Workers' Coalition in the late 1960s (W.A.G.E. et al., 2011–2014).

From the point of view of the contemporary art world, all of this interest in artistic labor and the rights of the marginalized appears to be something of a "kitchen revolt." The "art proletariat" is questioning if it should keep performing general maintenance on the household of high culture. But for artists and other cultural workers irrepressibly drawn toward this materializing everyday phenomenon it has opened up new possibilities for public art. Whether developing sustainable farming, reenacting historical labor demonstrations and political lectures, providing public services lost to decades of deregulatory economic policies, or initiating local bartering systems and environmental clean-ups, for many public artists the day-to-day world has become an enormous production warehouse generating forms of social sculpture of which Joseph Beuys could only dream (Kuoni 1990). Consider Boris Groys' dramatic assertion that no one sits in the audience any longer, "*everyone is on stage*" and thus art is no longer an exceptional pursuit but an "everyday practice" (Groys 2009). Or Grant Kester's pedagogical claim that "there is a lot to learn from the way in which people respond to, and resolve, the struggles they confront in their everyday life" (Kester 2011). Tom Finkelpearl underscores the public inclusivity of this new tendency by stating it is "created through shared action, not by active artists for inactive spectators" (Finkelpearl 2013). In political terms Roberts flatly insists that "the everyday is the site of the voiceless" (Roberts 2006). But even as Claire Bishop cautions "participation" should not replace "aesthetics" – acknowledging the significance of art's "social turn" – Nato Thompson boldly contends that "living" itself is now an aesthetic form in its own right (Bishop 2012; Thompson 2012).

Regardless of individual distinctions one common axiom prevails: the most important site for social, political, and artistic investigation today is the everyday world. Far less certain is what this unexceptional "everyday" consists of, or why the "social turn" has gained momentum at the very moment when actual public spaces, parks, and plazas are being systematically privatized, when sweeping surveillance technology erases individual autonomy, and when billions of private individuals enthusiastically post terabytes of confidential information online. The paradoxes are indisputable. Nevertheless, though some see the new normal as a data mining opportunity for capitalism, others see the rise of digital networks as a more inclusive form of the embodied public sphere once famously theorized by Jürgen Habermas (1991). Feminists, minorities, laborers, and political dissidents who always lacked the time, social visibility, and appropriate language skills were never full participants in the liberal public sphere anyway (Fraser 1990; Negt and Kluge 1993). By contrast, the "cyber commons" appears to give these borderline groups – along with informal artists, independent journalists, information leakers, and a range of "crackpots" and racial supremacists – the means with which to establish their presence, to generate decision making self-governance, and in Roberts' terms to "speak for themselves." Nor have these possibilities and paradoxes remained purely theoretical.

Tactics, Occupations, and Beyond

Perhaps most relevant to the question of public art is the practice known as Tactical Media (TM). Coinciding with the rise of the decentralized, counter-globalization movement of the 1990s – and the almost simultaneous collapse of Soviet style socialism – TM eschewed all forms of ideology. It drew inspiration from the post-1968, post-Situationist writings of Michel de Certeau who championed everyday acts of resistance rather than the development of oppositional organizations or political parties. De Certeau argued for tactics involving temporary maneuvers of advance and retreat, mimicry and deception, but not the seizing or occupation of space (de Certeau 1984). So when The Yes Men convinced BBC journalists that they were legitimate spokespeople for Dow Chemical Corporation, and then publicly condemned Dow's negligent environmental policies on live television, they represented no ideological faction (Yes Men n.d.). Behaving more like digital pirates they temporarily pillaged the reputations of powerful financial and governmental institutions before retreating to plan their next caper and set of false identities. Advance, retreat. But as significant as this challenge to enclosing public space through privatization has been, the terrain shifted once again in response to the September 11 attacks and the worldwide financial collapse less than a decade later. What has emerged since is a new amalgam of economic austerity coupled with global surveillance. In places like Greece and Spain the forced fiscal restructuring is melting away democratic public institutions, leaving behind a brutish residue. A similar fate awaits targeted populations within seemingly stable countries including the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe. Not surprisingly domestic reconnaissance drones and mass wiretaps are presented as necessary steps for maintaining public security. Therefore even as mainstream pundits implore us to accept a jobless, privacy-less future, TM's hit and run tactics no longer appear completely satisfactory. And yet the paradoxes of the post-public sphere have not vanished. Another response was inevitable. Following the world financial collapse of 2008–2009 countless individuals took to streets, parks, and squares around the globe denouncing authoritarian rule and economic injustice. Taking advantage of the same networking capacities TM exploits, demonstrators connected en masse using cell phones and social websites. Their embodied actions radically transformed public spaces in Tunisia, Cairo, Wisconsin, Madrid, Athens, New York, and Oakland – and continue to do so years later in Istanbul and across Brazil, among other cities and nations. It's an ongoing process. Responding to Occupy being "written-off" by mainstream media, long-time activist and theorist Frances Fox Piven points out that "movements for justice are irrepressible," adding that they "may appear to us in retrospect as a unified set of events [but] are, in fact, irregular and scattered" (Piven 2012). Piven's description could also be applied to the predicament of public art in the post-public world.

Complicity with Dark Matter

As hedge fund operators and investment bankers transform contemporary art (along with practically everything else) into an instrument of investment, dark matter's unwieldy surplus aesthetic – if the term aesthetic has any meaning in this context – delivers its own contradictory cogency: a shadow archive overflowing with odds and ends, narrative gaps and lacunae, a love of mimicry, bathos, vulgarity, distraction, imitation and resentment, coupled with a fondness for everything that was once considered inferior, low, and discardable. Meanwhile, for those artists who refuse to play the game of pretending to unlearn their professional training (but who nevertheless are unwilling to abide by the disciplinary rules of the mainstream art world) practical options are limited. Even if a professionalized artist is no longer constituted as dark matter (if that ever was the case) just to embrace this missing redundant mass of surplus creativity delivers one into a "living form" dominated by paradoxes and plot twists. Perhaps in the short run these intrigues serve as a perverse substitute for artistic values lost within what Julian Stallabrass calls "Arts Incorporated" (Stallabrass 2004). Or maybe the artist is instead tempted to escape art altogether as theorist Stephen Wright proposes (Wright 2012). Still, one thing is definite: artistic production is once again at the center of a struggle over definitions and possibilities not only regarding what might constitute a genuine avant-garde practice, as Marc James Léger argues in his book *Brave New Avant Garde* (Léger 2012), but also about the very nature of creativity, democracy, political agency, and public space. The public artist in a post-public world enters this arena with eyes wide open as a devout blasphemer.

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Further Suggested Reading

Arts & Labor: http://artsandlabor.org/.

Art Workers' Coalition Primary Information:
   http://www.primaryinformation.org/index.php?/projects/art-workers-coalition/.

Debt fair: http://www.debtfair.org/.

Groys, Boris. 2010. "The Weak Universalism." *eflux journal* 15. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-weak-universalism/.

The Artist as Debtor: www.artanddebt.org.

W.A.G.E./Working Artists and the Greater Economy: http://www.wageforwork.com/; Arts & Labor: http://artsandlabor.org/; Debt Fair: http://www.debtfair.org/; Art Workers' Coalition Primary Information: http://www.primaryinformation.org/index.php?/projects/art-workers-coalition/.