

Coming home to roost: How a new wave of institutional critique confronts our “Bare Art World” from deep inside the *Oikos*

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The art market is booming. Estimated global sales are topping sixty billion euros annually. This surge has been growing steadily since soon after the deep recession of 2008-2009. During this same time frame several dozen arts-focused investment and management funds emerged. They offer wealthy clients financial advising about the ins-and-outs of speculating in contemporary culture. Private banks are also getting into the game. One UK-based financial advisor at JPMorgan Bank described the current art investment frenzy as that of “amazing prices on almost an *exponential* curve upwards over a very short time”.¹ And yet something equally explosive is taking place within the art world’s arena of ideological production.



¹ Mr. Ben Williams quoted by Kate Beioley (2018).

Figure 1. Subway station near the Whitney Museum of American Art NYC, December 9, 2018 (image courtesy of the author).

This other escalating phenomenon delivers a critical disturbance to the art establishment. It is a confrontation that has been riding the shockwaves of the ruinous global financial meltdown a decade ago, just as much as it is a response to the surge of anti-global nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia that was brought so sharply into focus during the Brexit and the US presidential elections of 2016. In short, as a privileged site of production for social meaning the art world is being confronted with a dual political and economic challenge to its institutional, fiscal and symbolic structure. This mutiny comes from art's peculiar type of labor that is mostly unwaged, poorly remunerated and consistently precarious. At the same time, this productivity is always in apparent oversupply, though it is also largely invisible, even when it is conspicuously displayed for all to see.² Therefore it is in spite of the art market's triumph that the past decade has witnessed a steady and growing wave of museum boycotts, occupations, protests, and labor unrest. One could even say that this artistic activism has become the signature characteristic of 21st century high culture.

Of course, the presence of this new wave of art activism is not without precedents, any more than it is free of contradictions. For one thing, much of the post-2008, post-Occupy art generation of artists, curators, and even arts administrators outwardly despise the flourishing art market and the .01% ultra-wealthy that it epitomizes. For another thing, certain groups of artists who were once forced to the margins – including people of color, LGBTQ and indigenous people, and those activists who belong to what I call the dark matter of the art world – are today openly calling for a de-colonization of high culture. This sometimes involves carrying-out direct protest actions within major art museums and demanding substantial policy changes including calling for the resignation of specific trustees by name.

Still, it is important to bear in mind that the ideology of artistic production and consumption – at least within the Western art world – has for centuries imagined itself as an *exceptional* economy, and therefore imagines itself as set-apart from capitalism and the worldly sphere of politics. Nevertheless, this fantasy is rapidly melting into air. The once *vaunted* realm of high culture is falling fast to earth.

Here we arrive at another contradiction. On one hand, the citadel of high art is being pried apart and exposed to the everyday world of social struggles and economic precarity (not that these were ever really absent from the art world, but typically remained *hidden within plain sight* (Sholette, 2011). On the other hand, the “actual” world that art is “descending” into is a far cry from the *socialist* utopia once dreamt of by the early 20th century avant-garde when, for instance, Russian poet Mayakovsky (1918-19) proclaimed “The streets shall be our brushes, the squares our palettes”.

Instead, we confront today a global reality in which radically asymmetrical access to income security and basic human needs are presented as inevitable tradeoffs for an increasingly truncated version of democracy. It is a time in which the financialization of everyday life, as the late Randy Martin (2002) lamented, reaches into the very fiber of our being. And it is also a world where, as Jodi Dean (2005) vividly details, a networked *communicative* capitalism *robs us*, not only of our privacy, but also of any genuine political solution to these dire circumstances. All of this is taking place as we witness the strident return of authoritarian Right wing and fascist ideologies, and at a moment when—with every grim uptick in the planet's median temperature—we draw closer to environmental calamity. Given today's circumstances, perhaps even Mayakovsky would have reversed course and called upon art to return to its romanticized pedestal.

Still, as art joins with the commonplace world and its multiple unfolding catastrophes, and even as art sheds its centuries-old ideological aura of privileged freedom and self-determination, in exchange it gains a front-row seat to the conten-



Figure 2. Agata Craftlove sketch of the first anti-Kanders Whitney Museum intervention December 9, 2018 (images courtesy of the collective www.Themmm.us).

² Think of the thousands of fully accredited art school graduates who install exhibitions at galleries, kunsthallen and museums, fabricate the work of more successful artists, or labor hauling and storing highly priced art in freeports around the globe, all the while desperately trying to find time to spend in their own studios. See the thesis of my book *Dark matter: Art and politics in the age of enterprise culture* (2011).



Figure 3. New Museum union organizers setting up table outside museum for an action June 26, 2019 (image courtesy of the author).

³ Theorist Giorgio Agamben uses the term “Bare Life” to describe a human being deprived of all socially constructed legal rights and thus reduced to a state he calls *homo sacer*: no longer human but a purely biological entity. What I am calling “Bare Art” is a condition that emerges when art’s traditional autonomy, mystique, and romance boils away, leaving the world of high culture stripped down and subsumed by the forces of modern capitalism and its political ideology. I expand on this in my book *Delirium and resistance: Activist art and the crisis of capitalism* (2017).

⁴ The group’s most recent statement explains that “we were inspired by the struggle for worker rights taking place by students and faculty around the construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus and asked ourselves what we as art practitioners could do to address potential labor abuses for the Guggenheim Museum’s planned Abu Dhabi branch”. Note: I am a founding member of Gulf Labor Coalition. See: <https://gulflabor.org/2019/gulf-labor-statement-april-28-2019/>

⁵ Following some seven-months of collective actions that included denunciatory letters, protests, interventions, and boycotts the campaign against Kanders succeeded on the 18th of July 2019 when he officially stepped down from the Whitney Museum board stating that: “I joined this board to help the museum prosper. I do not wish to play a role, however inadvertent, in its demise”. Zachary Small, Warren Kanders resigns from Whitney Museum Board after months of controversy and protest [UPDATED], *Hyperallergic*, July 24, 2019: <https://hyperallergic.com/511052/warren-kanders-resigns/>

tious struggles surrounding the struggle to rethink and rebuild society at a time of extreme crisis. Likewise, the very term *art* is radically shifting, twisting, inverting as it undergoes an outright self-expulsion from itself, springing away from its familiar white cube sanctuary in order to occupy the uncertainty of the public sphere. I call this new cultural condition (with apologies to Giorgio Agamben) a *Bare Art World*.³

Bare Art is a state in which high culture’s professed autonomy and mystique is stripped away, and artistic production has been subsumed by the demands of networked capitalism, including the dictate to be “creative” in one’s labor and always think, like an artist, “outside the box”. As artists and cultural workers today, we therefore confront our *Bare Art World* as it is conspicuously entwined within an equally unconcealed and unending capitalist crisis. And yet, as I stated earlier, a certain wave of artistic opposition is also visible on this over-lit stage set.

Since the 2008 financial crash, we have seen a surge of creative hybrid art and activist experiments that address fair labor practices within the multimillion dollar art world, by groups such as Working Artists for the Greater Economy (WAGE), Occupy Museums, Debt Fair, bfamfaphd.org, Decolonize This Place and Gulf Labor/Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), a group that has targeted Guggenheim museums in New York and Venice with boycotts, occupations, and charges of abuse towards migrant laborers in Abu Dhabi, the site of a planned future Guggenheim outpost.⁴ Other forms of resistance have emerged from within the very institutional structure of the art museum.

Early last December, almost one hundred staff members of the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City wrote a confrontational letter to director Adam D. Weinberg calling for the immediate resignation of board vice chairman Warren B. Kanders⁵ whose defense manufacturing company “Safariland” is known to have supplied tear gas canisters that were deployed by US military at the Mexican border against men, women and children making up the so-called “Migrant Caravan”. After the letter was made public, a coalition of activists including Decolonize This Place sought to support the museum staff by staging nine weeks of activism in the Whitney’s lobby that included banners, chants and on one occasion a pot of burning sage mimicking teargas and ultimately drawing the New York Fire Department to extinguish the smoking container. Months later and across town at the New Museum, some seventy staff members voted to form a labor union. But when confronted with this pending unionization vote the New Museum administration hired the services of Adams Nash Haskell & Sheridan who strive to provide businesses with a union-free future by declaring on their website that “when we take action you take control”.⁶ Nine days later art handlers, installers and maintenance workers at the Guggenheim Museum repeated the same process of unionization, and confronted the same attempt at obstruction by management (Moynihan, 2019).

What appears to be taking place is a new wave of institutional critique, which involves the artistic unconcealment of the formal art world’s fiscal and power structures. As in the past, artists lead this new wave of institutional critique. Recall that the initial wave of institutional critique in the 1960s and 1970s involved conceptual art based practitioners such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, whereas the second wave of institutional critique in the 1980s was led by ethnographic based artists such as Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser.⁷ But by contrast, this new wave of institutionally critical agency comes from cultural laborers who are not being exhibited by museums, but who are employed by them. Here we must bear in mind that many of the staff at the New Museum, Whitney Museum, Guggenheim and so forth graduated with art degrees that included the study of institutional critique and its legacy. Today that critical endowment is coming home to roost from deep inside the institution itself.

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⁶ The vote took place on June 18, 2019. For more on this story see: Alex Greenberger (2019). The Adams Nash Haskell & Sheridan website is available at: <https://anh.com/>

⁷ For an elaboration of this genealogy see Hal Foster's "The artist as ethnographer?"

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