

Boicot, barricadas e instituciones paródicas. De la crítica institucionalizada a las paradojas de la resistencia en un mundo del arte desnudo

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Boycotts, Barricades, and Mock-Institutions: From Institutionalized Critique, to the Paradoxes of Self-Organized Resistance in a Bare Art World

Gregory Sholette, 2021

Throughout history, living labour has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production—within fantasy.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the sweeping international program that had sought to first expose and then dismantle the culture of bourgeois capitalism lay in tatters. The voids left over from this failed experiment were swiftly filled by a newly deregulated capitalism with its own global agenda. In developed nations, the type of precarious labor conditions thought to be a thing of the past soon returned, even as the hazardous, uncertain existence that had always defined the norm for most workers of the world, became more and more commonplace. In his astute conference outline, Alberto Alberto López Cuenca points out that since the defeat of actually existing socialism at the end of the 1980s, all politically committed artists and intellectuals have had to face a profound *crisis of calling*.

On the one hand, they have inherited the emancipatory discourse of the early avant-garde that once linked art with a communist horizon in which, as Marx imagined it, we would all be able to fish in the morning and do critical theory at night, without becoming fisherman or critics or artists for that matter. On the other hand, with the practical demise of the USSR and its first attempt at realizing a post-capitalist society, politically committed artists and intellectuals were thereafter freed from having to defend the floundering Soviet version of Marxism, and yet simultaneously left on their own, wandering the capitalist desert without a roadmap or compass. In other words, speaking now as one of these artist intellectuals, we have received an inheritance that has no singular political or historical endowment.

The response to that ambivalence has generally speaking been more ambivalence, with successive attempts at reconnecting radical, or dare we say avant-garde art to a politically liberatory project, one that too often involves a radical formalism shorn of its

sense of obligation to any particular constituency. It's as if we could sever Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect—a technique that sought to undermine the seemingly naturalistic tropes of bourgeois realism— from the poet and playwright's lifelong commitment towards the self-determination of working class and oppressed peoples. And yet that is precisely what so much contemporary art has settled for in its effort to be subversive of capitalism: a tasty commodity that mimics or perhaps as Fred Jameson suggests, symbolically offers a solution to the seemingly unresolvable, ideologically driven contradictions of our day-to-day lives. (186)¹

I wish to offer an alternative genealogy of creative resistance that draws upon a broader dissatisfaction with capitalism than that which has been expressed by self-defined radical artists. Though perhaps genealogy is even too strong a concept here. Think of this imaginative repository as an overstuffed “surplus” archive brimming with experiments, repetitions, interesting risk taking and minor victories, as well as compromises, dead ends and outright failures. Envision this pot-marked and fragmented vault as a crypt or enclosure closeted within or beneath mainstream art history. And finally, visualize it as suddenly unsealed and split open by the very same forces and events Aleberto Lopez QuenKa describes as a booming neoliberalism, that we might further describe as a deregulatory culture of entrepreneurship, or simply enterprise culture.

What oozes out from this breach is a weak yet super abundant ectoplasmic force whose previously sequestered yet paradoxically proximate existence had everything to do with replicating the mainstream art world, its markets and discourse and hierarchies of visibility and labor. I call this the dark matter of the art world: it includes the 99% of professionally trained creative workers who maintain and reproduce contemporary art (a form of dark matter that is invisible in plain sight), as well as those artists who, for either economic or political reasons, have self-marginalized their practice, and finally the legion of untrained, amateur creatives that simply fall outside the event horizon of contemporary high culture. I maintain that without this shadow multitude, the art world as we know it could not exist. Remarkably, however, in the past few decades, this surplus archive has been mobilized in all sorts of ways, sometimes with a progressive motives, though sadly it seems, more and more often, this dark matter agency has brightened up and revealed a disturbingly reactionary agenda.

But allow me to back up...

¹ Jameson is actually citing Levi-Strauss “The model for such an interpretive operation remains the readings of myth and aesthetic structure of Claude Levi-Strauss as they are codified in his fundamental essay “The Structural Study of Myth.”⁵⁷ These suggestive, often sheerly occasional, readings and speculative glosses immediately impose a basic analytical or interpretive principle : the individual narrative, of the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.” Political Unconscious. P 62.

ECTOPLASMIC AMATEURISM

Not that long ago it was easy for the intellectual, the academic, even the snobbish art aficionado to dismiss such things as weekend painters and after-work hobbyists, but also the improvised Do It Yourself (DIY) wall graphics and architecture of urban squatters, public protestors or illegal street artists. Unless these practices happened to directly intersect with the institutions of highbrow culture they represented no threat to elite art. In fact until recently it was easy to disregard the value of any creative activity not recognized by one or more establishment gatekeepers such as an international biennial or art fair, or a jet-setting celebrity curators or ponderous art historical reference book.

I offer two similar yet contrasting examples.

In 2000, Bulgarian born artist Daniel Bozhkov took a position as a greeter at a Wal-Mart in Maine. Bozhkov was teaching fresco at a nearby artist-residency program and with the approval of the store's manager, Bozhkov devoted his time between shifts to painting a 15 X 7 foot fresco on a wall in the Layaway Department, where customers could store items being paid for in installments. The fresco depicted local Skowhegan buildings, Wal-Mart merchandise, and members of the artist's family—all in a palette designed to match the company's color scheme of gray and dark blue.

In 2004, Wal-Mart implemented a nationwide change in color scheme, to soft peach and tan. Bozhkov's fresco no longer blended into Wal-Mart's overall corporate identity and had to be removed. The plaster was extracted and is now shown in gallery settings. The wall that was once home to Bozhkov's painting is now covered by two undifferentiated fields of Wal-Mart's new colors—no longer a fresco, but perhaps a pair of monochromes

For more than thirty years a close relation of mine worked in the shipping and received department of a non-unionized Pennsylvania factory. Early on in his employment in the 1980s, this relative and several of his co-workers spent their work breaks attaching newspaper clippings, snapshots, spent soda cans, industrial debris, trashed food containers and similar life-fragments to one wall of the plant. After a few years this accumulated clutter expanded to include the entire wall. They christened their impromptu collage, *Swampwall*. The factory's owner, an elderly sole-proprietor in a world of mergers and multinationals, long tolerated this workplace diversion until 1998 when a global corporation bought up the company and the *Swampwall* was swiftly expunged.

My family relation and his fellow workers were high school graduates but they never attended college, and they had never visited an art museum. In short, their messy, collaborative frieze was not meant to be "art." It was instead a silent expression of non-productivity that was visible only to those with business in that particular, wing of the factory; an uninviting, sweat-soaked warehouse ruled by packing crates, forklifts, and tiers of loading pallets, set far from the tidy cubicles or product showrooms polulated by white collar staff and plant managers.

My point is simply this: consider how very differently we take stock of artist Bozhkov's incredibly funny Wal-Mart intervention, as opposed to the artifact of daily detritus known as *Swampwall*, knowing that the latter was not intended for display in a museum or an art gallery, and certainly not rooted in any type of artistic intent or discourse. But I would contend that *Swampwall* was a fantasy of autonomy. It made

manifest a desire to direct some small portion of one's energy as one pleases, without workplace discipline. As a concrete representation of that desire it demonstrated the possibility of punching-in on company time, and of also being *elsewhere*.

FROM MOCKINSTITUTIONS TO SOCIAL PRACTICE ART

All in all, this cultural partitioning between what was considered art and despite appearances, what was considered not art, remained in effect even as the type of objects, images and practices celebrated by the art establishment began to become indistinguishable from the objects, images and practices produced on its margins by non-professionals. So for instance when a celebrated artist such as Thomas Hirschhorn fabricates a makeshift squatter-like space in the South Bronx, or cigarette covered plastic lawn gnome by Sarah Lucas is displayed at the Tate Modern, or when Jeff Koons turns children's toys into durable metal monuments, the same art world gatekeepers celebrate these actions as sophisticated commentary on the nature of art and contemporary society.

The embrace of amateurism, love of the informal, and ephemeral, and thrown-together by artists might be seen as an attempt to underscore the qualitative gap between artist as thinker and a technician (a concept inherited from the Renaissance), but the shrinkage of that difference since Lucy R. Lippard announced art's dematerialization following her historic encounter with Tuceman Arde in Argentina in 1968, and years later Ian Burn proposed art's deskilling from approximately that same date, has begun to exhibit a qualitative shift of its own. It is a transformation that coincides with the art world's embrace –something that was seemingly impossible only a decade or two ago- of socially engaged art and even activist art. In some exhibitions featuring social practice art there are more brightly colored post-it notes than anything that resembles familiar art objects (and even here we can visit a category of so-called amateur “post-it note art” distinct yet often identical to social practice exhibition tropes). Under such circumstances, maintaining the division between the inside and the outside the art world is definitely becoming more challenging, especially for those invested in such categorical and cultural policing. Take for example the phenomenon I call the Mockinstitution.

One other result of this brightening of Dark Matter was a process of self-institutionalization by marginalized groups and individuals including artists that I called “mock-institutions”: informally structured invented agencies that *overtly* and often ironically mimic the name and to some degree the function of larger, more established organizational entities including schools, bureaus, offices, laboratories, leagues, centers, departments, societies, clubs, bogus and even corporations. Mockinstitutions thrive within the voids left by an increasingly fractured political landscape whose social coherence is faltering thanks to rampant privatization, economic deregulation, ubiquitous personal risk and precariousness. But in another ironic twist, these bogus organizations run by artists often turn out to be better functioning institutions than those they seek to mimic or mock. Mimicry, in other words, is pushed to the point of inversion, back to what it represents.

BARE ART at a 1:1 SCALE

Theorist Stephen Wright has even gone so far as to suggest that contemporary art is now scaling itself up to become identical with the world it once sought to represent. He describes this as 1:1 relationship between art and the world. If Wright is correct, and I suspect that he is because this 1:1 phenomenon reflects the brightening of what I term

dark matter in general, then this shift from representation to a sort of weird embodiment, then inevitably social forces including creative labor are also becoming increasingly self-evident. The rising interest by the mainstream art world in social practice art or socially engaged art is, I suspect, a direct outgrowth of this no longer dark, dark matter condition. In addition, this process of unconcealment and the apparent spurning of artistic representation and metaphor parallels a condition I call *our bare art world*.

With apologies to Giorgio Agamben. Bare Art is a condition in which cultural contradictions lie fully at the surface level, and artistic bad consciousness is normalized and taken for granted. Surviving –perhaps impossibly it seems - one step beyond Adorno’s bleak assessment of cultural compromise, contemporary art evolves into not a representation of capital, or of capital in the commodity stage, but a form of capital itself in so far as art has become an investment vehicle that pushes previously half-glimpsed contradictions into full frontal visibility and therefore also political engagement. Contemporary art conspicuously entwines itself with the laws of economic value production, and therefore also with the chronic and ever more rapidly reoccurring political crises of global capitalism. And yet, the *bare art world* can not help but transform us -its social-productive forces that are always so *invisible within plain sight*- into its most empowered nemesis because our opportunity for resistance may never be so clear as it is now under these dreadful circumstances. This is where the committed artist, rather than rejecting capital’s subsumption of art in total (*te coor tout court*) or falling into a Lovecraftian despair as she blubbers all resistance is futile, turns instead to coldly confront these contradictions, which happen to extend well-past the threshold of what is considered high culture proper. Still, does the rising visibility of social production in art and capital’s contradictions in general actually represent an entirely new phenomenon, or is it the materialization of something already present? Neither. Or both. Because I suspect these normalizing temporal references are impeding our understanding of the situation.

Thus when the always perceptive Boris Groys comments that “the phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon”² We respond by pointing out that this vibrant, archival, dark matter agency is instead made up of past, present and future possibilities, always already compromised, certainly, but also simultaneously brimming with probabilities and uncertainties. Which is why any new wave of art activism is not only *not* “new,” *it is entirely new*, it is a repetition of the type that can only happen once, and then once again, and then once again.

ACTIVIST ART REDUX

OR

THIS IS NOT YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER’S INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE, its not really institutional critique at all)

Especially since the 2008 financial crash, we have seen a surge of creative hybrid art and activist experiments that appear to inherent the practice of institutional critique first developed in the 1960s by artists such as Hans Haacke and later expanded by Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser. This activist tendency addresses fair labor practices within the multibillion dollar art world and includes groups such as Working Artists for the Greater Economy (WAGE), Occupy Museums/Debt Fair, bfamfaphd.org, among others post-

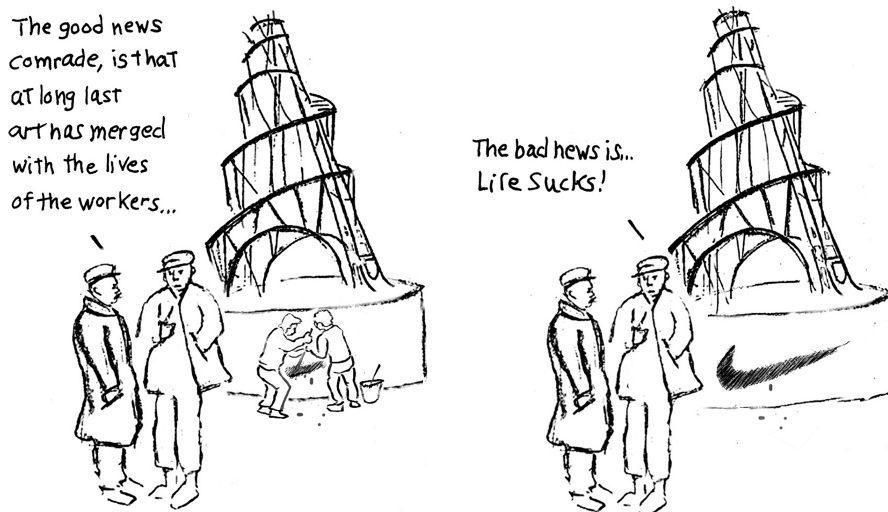
² Groys, On Art Activism, e-flux 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>

Occupy collectives. But it does not end there. Recently staff members of the New Museum and Guggenheim in New York –many of whom are artists– successfully voted to form labor unions, despite overt efforts by administrators to stop the process. It’s as if a generation of MFA graduates forced into jobs that reproduce the art world’s hierarchical structure, were suddenly putting into practice the principles of institutional critique that they undoubtedly learned as students. Thus, even as Frazer decries the institutionalization of institutional critique, a growing part of the art world’s labor force is bringing the concept back home to roost, ruffling more than just feathers along the way.

A different, yet entwined facet of art activism calls for supporting non-art workers building the museums in Abu Dhabi where Western style human and labor rights are spurned, or demands the de-colonizing of museum holdings organized (mostly stolen) by wealthy white men and recently extended to a successful campaign that forced Whitney Museum board member Warren Kanders out over his ownership of the tear gas manufacturing company Safariland LLC. Still, caustic collisions over art, artifacts and cultural labor is not novel -one need only revisit the history of Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (1969-1984), Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (1975-1977), or the protests, performances and petitions organized by Art Workers Coalition (AWC: 1969-1970). This “cultural detoxification” demand goes considerably further than any of these previous waves of politicized art activism and this chapter argues it embodies a desire to fundamentally upend the practice known as contemporary art.

SOME NON-CONCLUSIONS

Tatlin in Hell



After 98 years Tatlin discovers that he is in avant-garde Hell

1. Activist art actually fulfills the early avant-garde's maxim to transform art-into-life, except it does this in a world far removed from the socialist utopia envisioned by such radical cultural innovators as Vladimir Tatlin or LOOBOVF [Lyubov] Popova or Kazimir Malevich. Instead, the dream is made flesh at a moment of profound social disenchantment, as initially demonstrated by Brexit, and then with the 2016 US election results, among many other bad omens. Under such conditions what kind of oppositional culture is possible, if any?

Welcome to what political scientist Rebecca Bryant terms "the uncanny present," a present that is unfamiliar in its presentness³ and what I am calling a bare art world.

2. The artworld is evolving into an unconcealed planetary totality (or perhaps better labeled as an over-totally or fracktality), and yet this *bare art world* can not help but turn to its once-invisible social productive forces into works of art (it always took a village to make any given art work or career and this unseen dark matter was always right out there in front) by imbuing this inert stuff, this dark matter, with a weak market vitality even as art/s ontological and epistemological grounds art caught up in the whirlwind of recurring world crisis *ad nauseam* (networked stupidity, the para-militarization of everyday life, neoliberal enterprise culture devolving into an authoritarian nationalist capitalism, and so forth

3. While the emptied-outedness of contemporary art subsumed by capital is claustrophobic in the extreme: it is also a habitually repeated void within a void waiting to be filled up with the delirious predicament of the present. From within this moment of delirium and resistance a materializing RESONTY-MON *ressentiment* sets up its own laws and coded meanings of expression. Thus the structure of dark matter is a narrative in which "winning," that is to say becoming part of the illuminated sphere of art world success, is losing, though of course losing is also losing. What allows for a way not so much out of this paradox, but to confront it "authentically" is recognizing this structural repetition as well as one's bad faith for what it is: to either acknowledge or to overtly refuse the kind of self-objectification and redundancy that capitalism holds out to most of us (artists) as the price for belonging (that is to say, for being part of the bare art world even if that belonging demands we remain in the shadows). Its as if the whole system of success and failure was undermined by a narrative of resentment from the get-go (paraphrase of Jameson page 205 "I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully" artists stealing from the bare art world and academia and redistributing these resources into the corridors of dark matter... Sartre on Bad Faith (Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings Ed by Stephen Priest (London and New York: Routledge) 2001 p 204 – 220

4. Curiously, strangely, artistic production once again finds itself at the center of various struggles over definitions and possibilities not only about what constitutes a genuine avant-garde practice, but regarding the very nature of labor, subjectivity, democracy, and the political agency of the surplus archive that I am calling dark matter. While this may not be a truly satisfying substitute for the grand project that Alberto López Cuenca crucially points to in his analytical framing of this conversation (symposium), it may what our generation will have to come to terms with. After all, the task of maintaining a history "from below," even after the end of capitalism, which seems ever more imminent, is never going to be monumental or heroic in that epic, classical sense of struggle.

³ Rebecca Bryant, "On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present," in "Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe," Daniel M. Knight and Charles Stewart, eds., special issue, *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2016): 27.