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"Artists, Embrace your Redundancy," An Introduction to Gregory Sholette's *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise*

MATERIALS

Gregory Sholette

As early as 1984 art historian Carol Duncan pinpointed a fundamental, though typically overlooked feature of high culture: that the majority of professionally trained artists make up a vast surplus whose redundancy is *the normal condition of the art market*.

More than twenty years later, a policy study by the California-based Rand Corporation reinforced and updated these observations describing an even more unsettling picture of the 2005 art world. Its key finding was that although the number of artists had greatly increased over the previous decades, the always-evident hierarchy among artists "appears to have become increasingly stratified, as has their earnings prospects."

One of the key questions addressed in my book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise* is not only what this glut of creativity consists of, but what function does it have in relation to the art world establishment? Is this less visible, *other* art world a kind of noise over which the bright articulate signal of success and value is superimposed? Or is there yet a deeper complicity between noise and signal? After all, doesn't any complex system in which the majority of practitioners are invisible extract some hidden benefit from this so-called surplus?

To answer these questions I appropriated a concept from theoretical astrophysicists who inform us that as much as ninety-five percent of the visible universe is allegedly made up of an unknown, unseen form of matter and energy. What is key here is that the gravity generated by this "dark matter" stabilizes the five percent of the visible universe that we exist within. Applying this admittedly sci-fi like hypothesis to the contemporary art world the book

insists that the majority of artists are also like dark matter, a non-reflective but structurally necessary aggregate of creativity that while *systematically underdeveloped* secretly stabilizes the art world's symbolic and financial economy by actively reproducing its exclusionary hierarchies. After all, this shadowy surplus plays a key role in the art world by purchasing art supplies, trade magazines, and museum memberships, while also serving the system in the role of studio assistants, interns (often unpaid), adjunct teachers (always underpaid), art fabricators and installers and so on. At the same time this dark matter "surplus" also forms the topographical boundary and backdrop upon which that smaller zone of successful artists and art institutions are brought into visibility.

All this may seem obvious, or it may come off as extremely cynical, however what I attempt to do in the book is take this metaphor of cultural dark matter a step further by asking if this missing mass is not also a potential seedbed of resistance to the system that dominates it, a resistance that might, circumstances permitting, overtake and reshape the very topography of the contemporary art world? To explore this possibility the book begins by examining some of this hidden surplus beginning with the history of two, politically engaged artists's collectives that I was involved with in New York City—*REPOhistory* in the 1990s, and *PAD/D or Political Art Documentation and Distribution* in the 1980s.

By naming and delineating this artistic glut, by effectively celebrating its redundancy and negativity, I attempt to reveal dark matter as a potentially vibrant agency already engaged in proto-political processes of non-market gift giving, informal self-organizing,

and in some cases, overt political resistance. At the same time I also admit the possibility that what I am describing as a missing creative mass could also become a reactionary force of resistance. The final lines of my book allude to this haunting though unpredictable power by suggesting that every now and again,

"This *other* social [non]productivity appears to mobilize its own redundancy, seems to acknowledge that it is indeed just so much surplus—talent, labor, subjectivity, even sheer physical-genetic materiality—and in so doing frees itself from even attempting to be *usefully productive for* capitalism, though all the while identifying itself with a far larger ocean of 'dark matter', that ungainly surfeit of seemingly useless actors and activity that the market views as waste, or perhaps at best as a raw, interchangeable resource for biometric information and crowdsourcing..."

Either by coincidence, or simply as a result of the same historical urgency that compelled me to write *Dark Matter* in the first place, it was only a few months after the book appeared in print that events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and then the occupations on Wall Street and elsewhere emerged, dramatically redefining the theoretical parameters of my thesis.

Once face-to-face within the confines of Zuccotti Park, this surplus army of "creatives" drew upon previously unused capacities. A mini-commonwealth emerged, complete with food and trash services; gray-water recycling system (though not entirely functional); a generator-powered digital media station; and an expanding collection of books and publications dubbed "The People's Library". At the same time, the occupation breathed life into dozens of smaller subdivisions and working groups, from the practical, such as Jail Support, and Medics, to the more imaginary such as Direct Action Painters, and Arts and Culture—one of the largest groups, which in turn spawned its own sub-subdivisions including Arts and Labor, Alternative Economies, and Occupy Museums.

Over the past few months these subgroups have generated a series of teach-ins, email exchanges, website postings, and .pdf readings attempting to restore to themselves local knowledge about such groups as Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), Artists Meeting or Cultural Change (AMCC), Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), Group Material, Gran Fury, and Guerrilla Girls, thus

refocusing attention on their own little-known genealogy. Rejecting sleep, embracing redundancy, acknowledging the archive: not only has Occupy Wall Street (OWS) attempted to re-write its relationship with capitalism, but its fair to say OWS artists demand to know where their history is, why it has been exiled, and by whom?

The final lines of my book insist somewhat enigmatically that the "archive has split open. We are its dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead." What is *Dark Matter* about you ask? It is an intervention and *call to arms* for the ninety-nine percent.

IMAGES OF THE PAD/D ARCHIVE at MoMA (showing examples folders, many of unknown content. All images courtesy of Gregory Sholette/MoMA):

Selections from the PAD/D Archive: 51.2 linear feet of material including posters, street flyers, notes, documents, letters, periodicals and images, much of it located in uncategorized manila folders collected by the group throughout the 1980s. PAD/D aka Political Art Documentation/Distribution was founded in 1980 by Lucy R. Lippard, among others. The group, which included the author, produced a newsletter, street art, public events, and organized the PAD/D Archive which was dedicated to social and political art roughly between the mid 1960s and early 1990s. It contains a range of materials including folders on anarchism, graffiti, gentrification, and feminism, but it also houses documents about dozens of individual artists who submitted their work to the group and whose stories were ultimately included in the collection. Many (if not most) of these artists's names are now unknown, effectively transforming the PAD/D Archive into a site of artistic surplus whose actual content is chaotic and messy and very much at odds with the codes and laws that order the institution within which it is housed. The PAD/D Archive is today located in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and is accessible to scholars and interested researchers by appointment.



The corner of Avenue A and 10th Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side, renamed "The Guggenheim Downtown" by PAD/D for its 1984 anti-gentrification guerrilla street art exhibition, *Not For Sale*. (Image: G. Sholette)



A large inflatable *Uncle Sam Pac-Man*, one of several protest artworks created specifically for use in anti-war demonstrations by PAD/D in the mid 1980s. (Image: Herb Perr)

PROPAGANDA Performances Part II

THE NEW YORK STREET THEATER
CARAVAN, Dictator's Rock and Other Hits

December 9th 1984

FRED HOLLAND, November 18, 1978
And An Installation / Performance in Progress
Above The Rosebank (see below)

DEC. 8, PATERSON, MONTA COLLEGE AUDITORIUM (68 ST. & 16X. AVE.)
FISAL EVENT OF RADICAL WEEK OF ASSISTANCE TO U.S. IN CENTRAL AMERICA. WATCH FOR OTHER EVENTS. INFO 242-1040.

Franklin Furnace, curated by Lucy Lippard
Sunday, December 9, 7:30, 54, Franklin Furnace, 112 Franklin St., NYC (925-4871)

More propaganda at Franklin Furnace: Emil de Antonio will introduce and analyze old propaganda films, December 2, 8:30, \$5.

Made possible in part by the New York State Council on the Arts.

Every second Sunday of each month in the early 1980s PAD/D organized public lectures and performances on topics related to art and politics. (Image: G. Sholette)

IMAGES FROM THE GROUP REPOhistory, 1989–2000 (courtesy Gregory Sholette/REPOhistory):

The REPOhistory collective consisted of NYC-based artists and activists whose primary conceit was to act as the self-appointed amateur historians for those who lacked visibility within public spaces where official commemorative statues and bronze plaques held sway. The group was active from 1989 to 2000 and organized eleven projects including three on the streets of New York, one of which the "law and order" mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried (unsuccessfully) to stop in 1988/1989. The group sought to temporarily "repossess" the unknown, overlooked, or repressed histories of poor immigrants, slaves, abolitionists, radicals, feminists, trade unionists, indentured servants, child-laborers, and the forgotten narratives of transients, native people, and gay, lesbian, and transgender activists. In reality, these disenfranchised minorities shared nothing so much in common as a mutual superfluousness to the mainstream public sphere: its electoral process, its history, but also its museums, cultural institutions, and official educational curricula. REPOhistory made the past uncomfortable for the present, directly on the streets of the city. The group's final project CIRCULATION was an attempt to map the history, economy, and symbolic dimensions of human blood as a natural / social / metaphorical substance. Because the City would no longer let the group put up public signs, the project consisted of a fluxus-like series of circulating postcards, and a website still archived online at <http://rephistory.org>



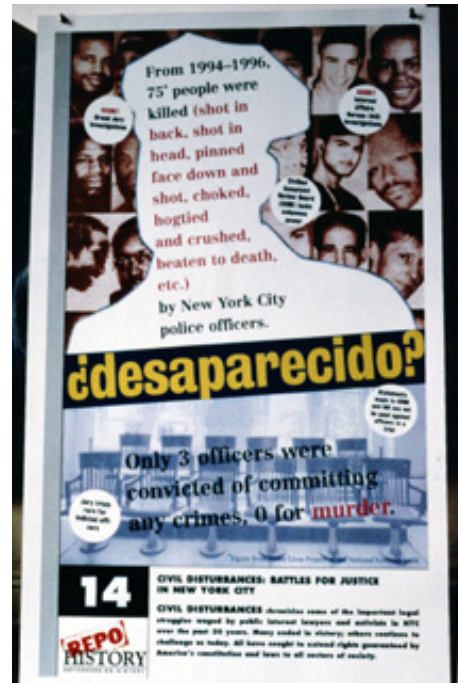
News coverage of The Lower Manhattan Sign Project, REPOhistory's first street-sign project, 1992 showing REPOhistorian Tom Klem installing one of the group's signs with a NYC Department of Transportation permit. The street signs, which "repossessed" unknown or repressed histories at specific sites, were permitted to remain in place for one year. In later projects the group encountered strong resistance from the City regarding its controversial re-mapping of New York's past.



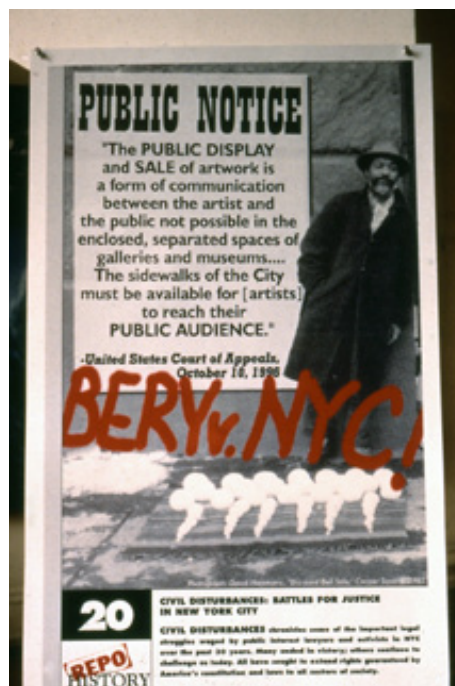
REPOartist Jim Costanzo (today a.k.a. Aaron Burr Society) with his sign "Advantages of an Unregulated Free Market Economy" just outside the New York Stock Exchange building on Wall Street (by coincidence it was the 200th Anniversary of the Exchange). REPOhistory, NYC, 1992. Photo Tom Klem.



After REPOhistory forced the City to install its 1998–1999 project, *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City*, the group discovered several of the signs missing including this piece by Marina Gutierrez protesting illegal discriminatory housing quotas at a City-owned building in Brooklyn. Here the New York City Police Department allegedly investigates the sign as having been reported on in the pages of the tabloid paper *New York Post*.

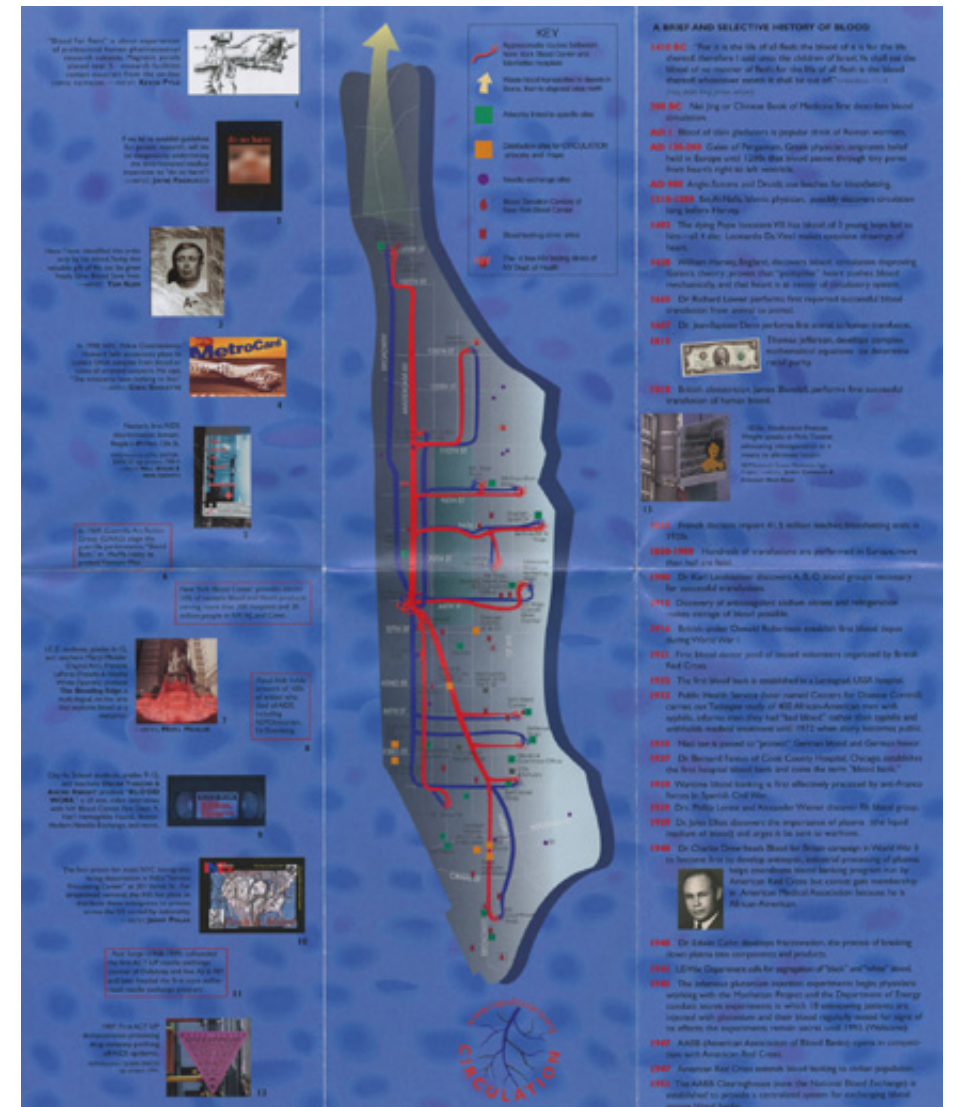


A controversial anti-police misconduct sign created by Jenny Polak and David Thorn for REPOhistory's project, *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City*, 1998–1999.



Just about the time REPOhistory became entangled with the administration of Rudolph Giuliani in 1998, the Mayor had lost an important case brought against him and the City for confiscating the work of artists who were selling art on city sidewalks. The lawsuit stated that such sales fell under the Constitutional Protection of Freedom of Speech, and the judges agreed. REPOartist George Spencer illustrates the case using a famous image of artist David Hammons selling snow balls outside Cooper Union in the 1970s.

The final REPOhistory project in 2000 entitled *CIRCULATION* was not a street sign installation because of new restrictions put in place by the City about public art that came about as fallout from our previous project *Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City*. *CIRCULATION* was a mapping of human blood as a political, economic, metaphorical, and natural substance and the project consisted of circulating postcards designed by individual artists on the subject of blood, a website (<http://rephistory.org>) designed by a team led by Jim Costanzo with digital projects and documentation of all of REPOhistory's work, a series of educational projects in public high schools, and this project map designed by Janet Koenig and Gregory Sholette, which was widely distributed.



"Do You Know Where Your DNA Is?" An adhesive postcard designed by Gregory Sholette for the final REPOhistory project, *CIRCULATION* in 2000 with this text printed on the reverse side:

On December 31, 1998, NYC Police Commissioner Howard Safir announced plans to collect DNA samples from the blood or saliva of any suspects. Safir assured New Yorkers, "The innocents have nothing to fear." Two months later an innocent African man named Amadou Diallo was shot nineteen times by NYPD.





A space set aside for poster-making within the Occupy Movement's Zuccotti Park Encampment, September 27, 2011. (Image: Gregory Sholette)

Music and dancing at Zuccotti Park, October 1, 2011 (Image: G. Sholette)



Occupy Detroit, October 26, 2011. (Image: G. Sholette)



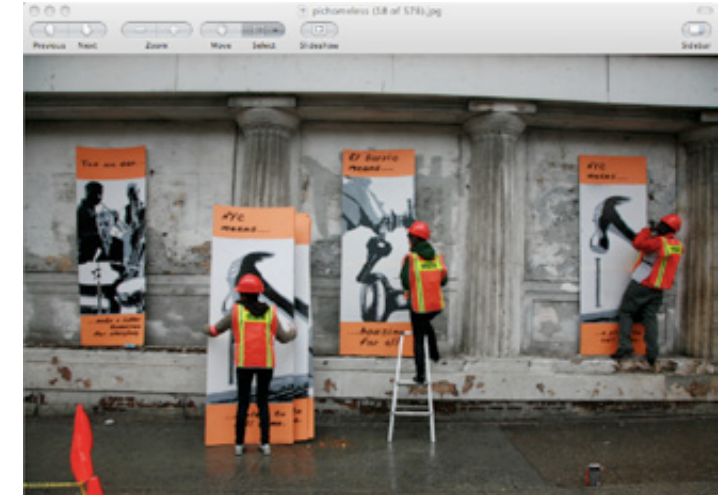
On December 20, 2011, members of Occupy Wall Street's Arts & Labor Working Group staged a "photo-op" intervention on the High Line Park in Chelsea, New York, to comment on the artist John Baldessari's enormous billboard piece, *The First \$100 000 I Ever Made*. Passersby were encouraged to stop and paint their own cardboard message "dots," and then pose with them before the billboard. Responses ranged from "I will never have this much money," to "End For-profit Education," to "Trickle Down". Arts & Labor is a working group of Arts & Culture, OWS. Pictured is video artist Ernie Larson. (Image: G. Sholette)



Occupy Galway, Ireland, November 1, 2011. (Image: G. Sholette)



Occupiers leaving Zuccotti Park on their way to the Brooklyn Bridge carrying aloft a cardboard painting along Lower Broadway, October 1, 2011. (Image: G. Sholette)



Not An Alternative and allies dressed as street workers in collaboration with Picture The Homeless during a building occupation on March 19, 2009, in East Harlem, El Barrio, NYC. The temporary, guerrilla street installation was part of a campaign to bring attention to the contradiction and failure in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's five-year plan to end homelessness by making visible the thousands of City- and bank-owned properties sitting vacant. Not An Alternative is a non-profit organization based in Brooklyn, NY, whose mission integrates art, activism, theory, and digital technology around core themes of spatial conflict, gentrification, and a critique of the "creative class." (Image: A. Stern)

Survey visualization graphics designed by Worksight.com from *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), and also available online along with the raw survey data about artists' collectives at <http://darkmatterarchives.net>



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Colophon

PUBLISHED BY
Manifesta Foundation
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Manifesta Journal is made possible with the generous support of



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Cover image REPOartist Jim Costanzo (today a.k.a. Aaron Burr Society) outside the New York Stock Exchange building on Wall Street, REPOhistory, NYC, 1992
From the REPOhistory Archive, MSS #113
The Fales Library & Special Collections/ New York University
Photo Tom Klem



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