

Dark matter, activist art and the counter-public sphere

by Gregory G. Sholette

Dark matter

Astrophysicists describe *dark matter*,¹ (and more recently *dark energy*) as invisible mass predicted by the *big bang* theory, yet so far only perceived indirectly by observing the motions of visible, astronomical objects such as stars and galaxies. Despite its invisibility and unknown constitution, most of the universe, perhaps as much as ninety six percent of it consists of dark matter a phenomenon sometimes called the "missing mass problem."² Like its astronomical cousin, *creative dark matter* also makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society. However, this type of dark matter is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture – the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators and arts administrators. It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices – all work made and circulated in the shadows of the formal art world. Yet, just as the astrophysical universe is dependent on its dark matter, so too is the art world dependent on its dark energy.

Contemplate the destabilizing impact on high art were hobbyists and amateurs to stop purchasing art supplies. Consider also the structural "darkness" within which most professionally trained artists actually exist. Yet, given the proportionally few individuals who achieve visibility within the formalized institutions of the art world there really are no significant structural differences between an earnest amateur and a professional artist made invisible by her "failure" within the art market. Except that perhaps against all real odds she still hopes to be discovered. Nonetheless, these shadow-practitioners are necessary for the institutional, elite art world. For one thing they are the educators of the next generation of artists. They also work as arts administrators and art fabricators: two increasingly valuable resources given the complexity of producing and managing contemporary, global art. By purchasing journals and books, visiting museums and belonging to professional organizations these "invisibles" are an essential component of the elite art world

¹ "There is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to astrophysics and cosmology than that of 'dark matter'," *The Center for Particle Astrophysics* at Berkeley California, <http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~astro7/dm/dark2.html>

² The *Scientific American* website has a fine introduction on this subject, see: "Dark Matter in the Universe" by Vera Rubin at: <http://www.sciam.com/specialissues/0398cosmos/0398rubin.html>; see also an excellent primer on dark matter from the *University of Tennessee Department of Physics and Astronomy* at: <http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/guidry/violence/darkmatter.html>

whose pyramidal structure looms over them with its upper levels eternally out of reach.³ Finally, without an army of allegedly lesser talents to serve as a contrast, the few highly successful artists would be impossible to privilege. A class conscious and materialist analysis begins by turning this equation on its head and asks: what would become of the economic and ideological foundations of the elite art world if this larger mass of excluded practices were to be given equal consideration as art? Nor should this question be dismissed as the domain of sociologists and anthropologists. Radical scholars and artists must take that inversion as a starting point and move to the next stage of analysis: the linking of dark matter to those artists who self-consciously work outside or against the parameters of the mainstream art world for reasons of political and socially critique.

These informal, politicized micro-institutions are proliferating today.⁴ They create work that infiltrates high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate websites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines in ways that do not set out to recover a specific meaning or use-value for art world discourse or private interests. This is due to the fact that many of these activities operate through economies based on pleasure, generosity and the free dispersal of goods and services, rather than the construction of a false scarcity required by the value structure of art world institutions. What can be said of dark matter in general is that either by choice or circumstance it displays a degree of autonomy from the critical and economic structures of the art world and moves instead in-between its meshes.⁵ But this independence is not risk free. Increasingly inexpensive technologies of communication, replication, display and transmission that allow informal and activist artists to network with each other have also made the denizens of this shadowy world ever more conspicuous to the very institutions that once sought to exclude them. In short, dark matter is no longer as dark as it once was. Yet, neither

³ According to the *Nationwide Craft & Hobby Consumer Usage and Purchase Study*, 2000, seventy percent of US households reports that at least one member participates in a craft or hobby. Meanwhile, the total sales hobby supplies was twenty three billion dollars in 2000. *Hobby Industry Association*: www.hobby.org. And for an enlightening report detailing the massive "cultural capital" of amateur arts in the US see: Research Report to the *Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College* entitled, "Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places" by Alaka Wali, Rebecca Severson, and Mario Tongoni (June 2002).

⁴ I have addressed this subject by discussing the work of such past and present artists' collectives as: *Temporary Services*, *REPOhistory*, *Group Material*, *Colab*, *Guerilla Girls*, *@RTmark*, *Critical Art Ensemble*, *Ultra Red* and *Political Art Documentation and Distribution* among others. See my essay: "Counting on Your Collective Silence. Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice", in *Afterimage. The Journal of Media and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Rochester), November 1999, p. 18-20.

⁵ The digital thievery of mash-ups and the fan cuts are perfect examples of this tendency. Mash-ups are made by pop music fans who illegally copy the vocal track of one pop song and graft it onto the instrumental track of another. The fan cut is similar to the mash-up, but involves a digitally re-edited version of a Hollywood film that is re-cut to please a specific group of fans. An example of the latter is the *Phantom Edit*, a reconstructed, fan-friendly version of *The Empire Strikes Back*, a George Lucas *Star Wars* episode. Ignoring issues of copyright infringement, the anonymous editor of this fan cut initially made the *Phantom Edit* available as a free Internet download. On mash-ups see Norris' writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Year in Ideas* issue, December 15, 2002, p. 102.

the art world nor global capital can do little more than immobilize specific instances of this shadow activity by converting it into a fixed consumable or lifestyle branding. However, this cultural taxidermy also comes at a cost to the elite, contemporary art world because it forces into view its own arbitrary value structure. In terms of combat therefore, the double-edged hazards brought on by increasing and decreasing visibility are vital to comprehend.

Look again at the art world and the dark matter it occludes. The lines separating "dark" and "light" creativity appear almost arbitrary even from the standpoint of qualities such as talent, vision and other, similar, mystifying attributes typically assigned to "high art". If indeed the struggle over representational power is reduced to skirmishes and fleeting advancements and retreats, then the reality of this new combat requires a turning away from the realm of the exclusively visual and towards creative practices focused on organizational structures, communicative networks and economies of giving and dissemination. It is an activity that necessarily points to the articulation of what theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call the proletarian or counter-public sphere.⁶

The counter-public sphere

"Federal elections, Olympic ceremonies, the actions of a commando unit, a theater premiere—all are considered public events. Other events of overwhelming public significance, such as childbearing, factory work, and watching television within one's own four walls, are considered private. The real experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work, cut across such divisions...the weakness characteristic of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely, that [it]... excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole."⁷

⁶ First published in Frankfurt/M. Germany in 1972, my citations are from the English translation of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's book *Public Sphere and Experience. Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1993. Note that the authors' use the term plebian or proletarian public sphere to differentiate it from that of the bourgeois public sphere. In later writings Kluge came to substitute the terms oppositional or counter-public sphere for this formulation. I prefer the latter term because it privileges a broader, more heterogeneous conception of resistance that includes not only manual and service oriented workers, but also artistic and mental labourers. I would also include sub-proletariat and sub-cultural identity positions. For more on Negt and Kluge's definition however, see Miriam Hansen's introduction in the English volume, especially p. xxxv. Also, for a keen analysis of activist public art using the theories of Negt and Kluge see: Philip Glahn's essay, "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice & the Possibilities of Critical Articulation," *Afterimage*; Dec. 2000.

⁷ Negt and Kluge, p. xl
iii and xlvi,

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the full complexity of Negt and Kluge's theories regarding the inherently conflicted constitution of contemporary public spheres, except to say that they pivot on the actual, life experience of workers and others normally excluded from the idealized realm of citizenship and public opinion. It also seeks to account for the impact that relatively new modes of communication and deception, famously termed the *culture industry* by Adorno and Horkheimer, are having on both worker acquiescence and resistance to capitalist totality. What I will do however, is introduce two key aspects of Negt and Kluge's work that are especially relevant to my arguments about dark matter, including: 1.) The subversive potential of working class fantasy as a counter-productive activity that is hidden within the capitalist labor process, and 2.) The authors' insistence that it is politically and theoretically necessary to weave together the fragmented history of resistance to capital into a larger whole or a counter-public sphere.

The authors define fantasy as a multilayered defense mechanism providing, "necessary compensation for the experience of alienated labor process."⁸ This does not mean that fantasy, any more than dark matter, represents an inherently progressive force. Instead, "In its unsublated form, as a mere libidinal counterweight to unbearable, alienated relations, fantasy is itself merely an expression of this alienation. Its contents are therefore inverted consciousness. Yet by virtue of its mode of production, fantasy constitutes an unconscious practical critique of alienation."⁹

Working class fantasy therefore appears to offer a twofold, critical function. At its most basic level it is a counter-productive surplus that constitutes a de-facto mode of resistance to alienation. This is not merely a metaphysical limit, but a material force generated by the "residue of unfulfilled wishes, ideas, of the brain's own laws of movement..."¹⁰ However, at the same time, the content of fantasy does

⁸ Ibid, p. 33. Curiously, T. W. Adorno also comments on the necessary link between work and fantasy but strictly with regard to artistic labour stating, that "labour and fantasy are entwined in each other – their divergence is always an index of failure – is evidenced by the sense artists have of fantasy being subject to their command. What they feel sets them off from the dilettantes is the ability deliberately to set in motion the spontaneous, i.e. fantasy... Works of art are placed in relation to a set of problems. This gives rise to a possible definition of fantasy as being an aptitude which invents approaches and solutions to the work of art, carving out a sphere of freedom in the midst of determination." Yet, Adorno appears to hold little hope that the working class person trapped within the determining coils of production could ever experience this "sphere of freedom". See: T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. London and Boston (Routledge & Kegan Paul) 1984, p.249. First published in German in 1970.

⁹ Negt and Kluge, p. 33.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 37. This position regarding the materiality of mental functions is similar to that Sebastiano Timpanaro raises in his book *The Freudian Slip. Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism* (new edition on Verso, due March 2003). See also: Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*. London (Verso) 1975.

occasionally represent specific instances of anti-capitalist or at least anti-authoritarian sentiment.¹¹

Much like working class fantasy dark matter is itself often composed of fantastic and libidinous forms of expression. Dark matter and working class fantasy occasionally resist and interrupt the normative structures of production and appropriation. However, this shadow realm also resists at the level of content even if its opposition appears in an undeveloped, inverted and sometimes infantile form. What must take place before this fragmented experience can be transformed into something more political?

This brings me to the second aspect of Negt and Kluge's work that directly concerns my argument: the importance of connecting these "unblocked" moments of working class fantasy with the history, or histories of actual resistance to capital, patriarchy, racism and nationalism. This connecting process also seeks to block capital from appropriating these "other" histories and desires for its own interests. The same danger of appropriation holds true for dark matter. At the moment these shadows become capable of collectively focused activity, as the margins link up and become visible to themselves, in and for themselves, they simultaneously become discernible to the voracious gaze of capital with its siren call of "life style" and the "joy of consuming."¹² Significantly, activist artists have devised strategies that recognize this dilemma borrowing dark matter forms such as zines and a do-it-yourself approach to creativity.

Activist art

¹¹ Negt and Kluge, p. 174. Examples of work place fantasies that were turned into action include the convenience store clerk who adjusted his pricing gun to create spontaneous discounts for customers; the model maker who added fantastic machinery to elaborately fabricated coal and nuclear power plant models; the assembly line date pitter who inserted her own messages into the fruit proclaiming such things as, "Hi, I'm your pitter" or simply "stuff it" and "Aaagghh!!!"; the Heritage Foundation mailroom attendant who shredded fundraising letters meant to raise funds for her employer's conservative agenda; the low paid, white collar stock broker who used his access to a Wall Street phone system producing actual fluctuations in market shares; and the professional muralist who rendered Nazi storm troopers and a Francis Bacon painting in the background of a painting made for a Walt Disney hotel and worked images of severed heads into another mural for a restaurant in Las Vegas. These examples are taken from the book *Sabotage in the American Workplace. Anecdotes of Dissatisfaction, Mischief and Revenge*, edited by Martin Sprouse and illustrated by Tracy Cox. San Francisco (Pressure Drop Press) and Edinburgh (Ak Press) 1992, pp. 5, 86, 21, 92, 137, and 30-31.

¹² This new "visibility" also risks attracting the attention of the newly constituted state surveillance institutions in the US. At the same time the fashion industry already understands the cash potential of dark matter. Worn out blue jeans and threadbare hooded sweaters with faded screen printed designs hint at the swap-shop aesthetic of anti-global demonstrators. Ironically, this ersatz "street" aesthetic is produced in volume by sweat shop labour. Indeed, even *Nike* advertisements for high-end running shoes have mimicked the hand-made style of the fanzine and the street stencil graffiti.

Least available for appropriation by the culture industry is not the "slack"¹³ look of dark matter, but its semi-autonomous and do-it-yourself mode of production and exchange. Zines for example are frequently belligerent, self-published newsletters that as cultural historian Stephen Duncombe argues do not offer, "... just a message to be received, but a model of participatory cultural production and organization to be acted upon. The message you get from zines is that you should not just be getting messages, you should be producing them as well. This is not to say that the content of zines — whether anti-capitalist polemics or individual expression — is not important. But what is unique, and uniquely valuable, about the politics of zines and underground culture is their emphasis on the practice of doing it yourself."¹⁴

The zine tactics bear a certain resemblance to other self-consciously politicized art-related collectives including: *Temporary Services*, *Las Agencias*, *Wochenklausur*, *Collectivo Cambalache*, *The Center for Land Use Interpretation*, *The Stockyard Institute*, *Ne Pas Plier*, *Take Back the Streets*, *Mejor Vida*, @RTMark, the *Critical Art Ensemble*, *Ultra Red*, *The Surveillance Camera Players*, *The Center for Tactical Magic*, *Radical Software Group* and the *Institute for Applied Autonomy*. All work within some aspect of public space, and many ascribe their approach as that of "tactical media," an activist deployment of new media technology.¹⁵ Yet, the engagement of the groups mentioned here extends well into the public sphere and involves issues of fair housing; the treatment of unemployed people, guest labourers and prisoners as well as global politics; biotechnology and even access to public space itself. Some groups design participatory projects in which objects and services are made to be given away or used up in public settings or street actions.¹⁶ Other groups use technology to encourage, "...the intelligent sabotage of mass-produced items."¹⁷

¹³ Brandon Taylor, *Avant-garde and After. Rethinking Art Now*. New York (H. N. Abrams) 1995, p. 153.

¹⁴ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground. Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. London, New York (Verso) **1997, 2001**, p. 129.

¹⁵ "Tactical media are what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself media' made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and the expanded forms of distribution (cable, satellite and Internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved or excluded by the wider culture," David Garcia, activist artist, March 2002. See: http://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/definingTM_list.html

¹⁶ *Temporary Services* projects have dispersed free clothes and informational materials at prisons, schools and even on commercial airplanes. See: <http://www.temporaryservices.org/> The Austrian based group *Wochenklausur* also creates social interventions with city councils, prostitutes and guest workers using art world resources. See: http://wochenklausur.t0.or.at/projekte_e.htm. Many of the groups mentioned in this paper are cataloged at: <http://www.groupsandspaces.net/intro.html>

¹⁷ @RTMark website, March 1997. See: <http://www.rtmk.com/> @RTMark exists entirely on-line and its website invites workers, students and other disenfranchised individuals to collaborate with them by purchasing "shares" of @RTMark stock. Because the group is a legally registered corporation it has successfully used limited liability rules to shield its members from personal lawsuits. The list of those who have sought to censor the group because of its "intelligent sabotage" includes major record companies, toy manufacturers and even the *World Trade Organization*. The *WTO* attempted to prosecute the group over a website the group created parodying the global juridical agency that not only sowed confusion, but spread detailed information about the *WTO*'s neo-liberal brand of global profiteering.

These same typically humorous re-appropriations and use of do-it-yourself, zine practices is also evident in the work of *Las Agencias*, an informally structured collective of artists and activists.¹⁸ Most crucial to my argument is the group's creative subversion of the riot police during street demonstrations and its tactical assault upon "lifestyle" marketing by global corporations. Take for example *Las Agencias* line of apparel designed for use in demonstrations and street actions. These colorful, "ready to revolt" designs contain hidden pockets that allow the wearer to conceal materials for buffering the blows of police batons or to conceal cameras for documenting abuse by the constabulary. Expanding upon the group's intervention into the couture industry is a more recent project entitled *Yomango*: a word that is slang for shoplifting. Mockingly playing off of the retailing strategy of the *Mango* clothing label that markets itself to young, European professionals, *Las Agencias* have developed its own "lifestyle" campaign that integrates a range of "anti-consumer" products and services with everyday acts of consumer sabotage. Specially adapted clothing and shopping bags are available on the *Las Agencias* label designed for disappearing products out of global retail outlets. **The group also provides** workshops on how to defeat security systems through orchestrated teamwork as shoplifting is re-framed as civil disobedience: a "reflexive kleptomania" directed against the homogenizing and instrumentalization effect of global capital.¹⁹

It is important to add a final note about the cunning of *Las Agencias* in relationship to the conventional art world. By 2002 the group had gained enough notoriety for a liberal minded curator to solicit its participation in the *Torino Art Biennial*. The members met and agreed to bring their *Yomango* campaign into the "white box" of the institutional art world. But they elected to do so in the form of an "installation" that replicated an actual retail franchise. Within this simulated store the audience would be invited to practice shoplifting and attend workshops on civil disobedience and activism. Furthermore, all of the shopliftable practice products were to be procured from nearby retail outlets prior to the exhibition opening. Upon hearing *Las Agencias* plans in advance the organizers of the Biennial evicted the group thus preventing the collective from "squatting" in their art exhibition.

Las Agencias tactics include counter-couture, anti-war graphics, strategy lessons, street actions and communication systems To the extent that they focus on the process and organization of creative work itself, rather than the production of objects, its "art" is difficult for the art world to appropriate. No art objects exist that could summarize group identity and unlike individuals artists such as Joseph Beuys, the group has so far avoided making fossils and souvenirs of their work for museums and collectors. Asserting collective authorship is a trait abhorred by the culture industry since it undermines artistic

¹⁸ More about *Las Agencias* can be found at: <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/web-agencias/>

¹⁹ Information on *Yomango* can be found at: <http://www.yomango.net>

values as defined by collectors who expect art works to be the product of one individual with one artistic vision. Finally, groups such as *Las Agencias* and others have adopted forms of creative expenditure and gift giving typically found within the informal arts but adverse to the formal art industry economy. It is my contention that this act of expenditure without the expectation of a specific return is aimed at building egalitarian social relations rather than optimizing one's position within a market. And it is this adaptation, rather than any formal resemblance to dark matter, that draw these oppositional practices into its gravitational field and away from the hegemony of the elite art world.²⁰

Conclusions

To paraphrase the cosmologists: there is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to cultural radicals than that of "dark matter." Collectives that operate within the contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere, openly and playfully expose its imaginary fault-lines dividing private from public, individual from collective, and the light from the dark matter. But while such groups offer a important models for cultural resistance, it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that the art collectives and dark activities touched upon in this paper provide a totally satisfactory solution to the radicalization of creativity now or in the future. Instead, these groups and practices are characterized by their overdetermined and discontinuous nature, by repetitions and instability. Their politics privilege spontaneity. Some favor anarchic forms of direct action over sustained organizational models. What is effective in the short term remains untested on a larger scale. And that is the point we appear to be approaching rapidly.

Where then are the "historians of darkness"? What tools will they require to move beyond a mere description of these shadows and dark practices and towards the construction of a counter-public sphere? In this text I have, as always, attempted too much. Clearly, more research is needed on how alternative or counter economic forms link up with collective patterns of engaged art making as well as how one measures the relative autonomy of critical art practices in relation to the culture industry. One thing is clear however; the construction of a counter-public sphere will necessitate that we move away from the longstanding preoccupation with representation and towards an articulation of the invisible.²¹

²⁰ Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1985. See also Bruce Barber and Jeff Dayton-Johnson, "Marking the Limit: Re-Framing a Micro-Economy for the Arts," in *Parachute*, no. 106, April, May, June 2002, pp. 27, 39 as well as the writings of Charles Esche. Several, recent art exhibitions have also taken up the concept of exchange and gift giving as artistic practice, if however in a politically limited fashion. See: *The Gift. Generous Offerings, Threatening Hospitality*, at the *Bronx Museum* from November 27-March 2, 2002/2003 organized by *Independent Curators International* in collaboration with the *Centro Arte Contemporanea Palazzo delle Papesse*, Sienna, Italy, (catalog by Charta, Sienna); and *Mexico City. An Exhibition about the Exchange Rate of Bodies and Values*, June 30 – September 2, 2002 at *P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center*, Lone Island City (catalog by Distributed Art Publishers, New York).

²¹ The act of covering over the copy of Picasso's *Guernica* during Secretary of State Colin Powell's televised call for war against the nation of Iraq at the United Nations on February 5th, 2003 suggests that the forces of Empire fully comprehend the nature of visibility within this new theater of battle.

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