

Dark Matter: Socially Engaged Art and the Political Economy of Contemporary Culture

GC: Mon. 2:00-4:00 P.M., 3 credits, Rm. 3421, [20170]; cross-listed with ASCP 81500

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Art is big business: a few artists command huge sums of money, the vast majority are ignored; yet these marginalized artists remain essential to the mainstream cultural economy serving as its missing creative mass. At the same time, a rising sense of oppositional agency is developing within these invisible folds of cultural productivity. Selectively surveying structures of visibility and invisibility, resentment and resistance, this seminar will focus on the present and past state of the archive made up of alternative hybrid cooperative networks, systems of artistic gift exchange, tactical media, and community based public art. Participants will research such artists' groups as Pussy Riot, Viona, W.A.G.E., W.H.W., The Yes Men, Temporary Services, Group Material, PAD/D, while reading historical and theoretical texts by Adorno, Brecht, Bishop, Bourdieu, Debord, Lippard, Mouff, Enwezor, Steyerl, Kester, and others. Auditors by permission.

Requirements: Students will choose a research topic and give oral presentations with class discussion and use this feedback to fine-tune a fifteen-page research paper due at the end of the semester.

Preparation and Attendance

The readings and viewings listed below are to be done prior to class. Unless otherwise indicated they will be available online at I-site. You are asked to prepare a list of 2-3 discussion questions based on the reading/viewing to bring to class each week (for example: *what is the author's central argument and is it well defended in the text? What are the operative terms and definitions employed? How would the same facts or arguments sustain a different thesis or answer? What would Theodor Adorno or Walter Benjamin or another thinker we will study think of this argument? Does the essay appear have a direct relationship to your own art or research practice and how?*). These 3 questions must be turned in at the beginning of class.

Research

This is a research seminar, and a list of potential research topics is included below, however, you can also propose a topic of your own that is not on this list. A statement indicating your choice of research topic and a preliminary bibliography is due by April 1st. Please consult with me before about your choice. Be prepared to engage in original research including interviews and archival investigation because little published material exists on these topics.

Presentations

The last three weeks of class will be devoted to student presentations. These are to be based on your research, but not a straightforward reading of your papers due at the end of the course. The aim of the presentation is to *teach your classmates (and professor) about the artist, group, or phenomenon you have been researching*. You will be responsible for assigning a reading (one article each, to be distributed the week before your presentation), and giving a 12-minute lecture on your topic (with images) leaving 10 minutes for discussion.

Presentation topics will be chosen in consultation with the instructor.

Presentation Format: Five Components

1. Start with a premise or thesis about your topic or artist.
2. Provide background details, dates, and relevant information. (* who-what-why-where-when.)
3. Elaborate on your thesis, but don't give your opinion.
4. Whenever possible quote directly from relevant texts, documents, and/or the artist or group.
5. Conclude by raising a series of questions your research has raised.

Books recommended but not required

Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era, Julia Bryan-Wilson, U. California, 2009.

Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985, Julie Ault, ed., U. Minnesota, 2002.

Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, Ault, Ashford, Locks, eds., Four Corners Books, 2010.

Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945, Stimson & Sholette, Minn., 2007.

Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture, Sholette, Gregory, Pluto Press, 2011.

Research Paper

In your final, fully footnoted paper (15-20 pages) you will *answer* one or more of the questions you raised in your presentation by developing an original argument about your topic. In other words, in order to give the presentation you will have to have decided what the most important aspects of the topic are, and for the paper you will have to decide what you think about them.

SYLLABUS

(Most of the readings for this class can be downloaded here:

http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/?page_id=252%C2%A0)

Week One, Jan. 28: Introductions & Preliminaries

Along with introducing ourselves to each other we will review the syllabus, requirements, expectations, and research interests for the seminar. In the time that remains we will focus on some of the key polarities, concepts, and terms that arise when we study the theory and practice of socially engaged art. Several students will be asked to read excerpts from Bertolt Brecht's play *St. Joan of the Stockyards* followed by a discussion of Adorno's critique of Brecht and his condemnation of "committed art."

Preliminary Readings:

Theodor W. Adorno: "Black as an Ideal" (1970), and "Commitment" (1962).

Week Two, Feb. 4: Antagonisms of Artistic Production

We continue our debate regarding the pros and cons of art's social engagement by addressing why Plato sought to exclude certain types art from his "ideal" Republic (who or what is he protecting?) comparing this with Walter Benjamin's call centuries later that artists and intellectuals should identify with organized working class revolution during the 1930s, before turning to more contemporary arguments about socially engaged art.

Readings:

"Book X" of *The Republic*, Plato, 380 BC.

"The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin, 1934.

"Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," Claire Bishop, 2004.

"A Place Under the Sun," Natasa Ilić, 2006.

Grant Kester on Claire Bishop, *Artforum*, 2006.

* Week Three, Feb. 11: Special Guest MARISA JAHN: The institutions and its other

Marisa Jahn is an artist whose work explores, constructs, and intervenes natural and social systems. Ranging in practice from deeply personal to highly participatory, her work often relies on the collaborative authorship and distributive intelligence of surrounding people and situations. Of Chinese and Ecuadorian descent, Marisa Jahn is an artist, writer, and activist. Her work has been presented at The White House, IDEO NY, Lincoln Center, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Museum of Modern Art, Walker Art Center, and public places and grassroots venues around the world. She is the co-founder and Executive Director of [REV-](http://www.rev-it.org), a team of artists, advocates, media makers, low-wage workers, immigrants, and youth working to spark the public imagination and accelerate social change. www.rev-it.org

Readings:

From the book *Byproduct*, p.8-18, 34-38, 109-112; and *Agonist* pages 7-15. *

* Note College Art Association Conference takes place NYC: 2/13-16: <http://conference.collegeart.org/2013/sessions/>

*** Week Four, Wed. Feb. 20th: Collectivism After Modernism**

A diffused or serialized state of collectivity is virtually constitutive of subjectivity in the post-industrial social sphere, and yet communally produce art remains highly suspect within the traditional art historical narrative. We will explore this apparent paradox together with the changing nature of artistic collectivism during and after modernism, but also the hive-like collective organisms recently generated by the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and the Movement of Squares.

Readings:

“Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” Judith Butler, 2011.

“Periodizing Collectivism,” Blake Stimpson and G. Sholette, 2006.

“Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology:… versus the people’s archive,” Sholette, 2011
Excerpt from October Magazine’s special issue on the Occupy Movement, 2012.

Additional Readings on collectivism and art:

“Counting on Your Collective Silence,” Sholette, 1999.

“Artists’ Collectives Mostly in New York, 1975-2000,” Alan Moore, 2006.

“The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Groupe Amos and Huit Facettes,” Okwui Enwezor, 2006

* Note class is rescheduled from Monday the 18th this week only.

Week Five, Feb. 25: From Administered Culture to Deregulated Precarity

In the Post-War era a group of artists known as Art Workers’ Coalition demanded that museums and galleries not only provide all artists with greater social security, but also that they recognize their labor as central to the formation of cultural capital. About a decade later the social safety net for all workers undergoes dismantling by neoliberal economic policies as the welfare state is transformed into a society of risk. We will examine the collective and individual response to this new precariousness amongst artists as well as other cultural workers. (But are artists really cultural “workers”? And what exactly does that really mean?)

Readings:

“Art Workers Coalition: Not a History,” Lucy R. Lippard, 1970.

“Glut, Overproduction, Redundancy!,” Sholette, 2011.

“From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks,”
Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 2007.

Artists Pension Trust Annual Report: *APT Insights*, 2007.

Rand Report: *A Portrait of the Visual Arts*, 2005.

(Please also review assorted AWC documents available on website.)

“From Artists to Art Workers,” in Julia Bryan Wilson’s *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, 2009.

Week Six, March 4: The “Missing Mass” of Art Inc.

Art historian Julian Stallabrass acerbically describes contemporary art as *Art Incorporated*: virtually a corporate business operation with little pretense of deep aesthetic or social significance. We will discuss the production of cultural meaning and cultural capital by asking how is artistic value determined, and why are so few artists successful while most others appear to be pre-failed? Who makes art, literally? Do informal and amateur artists also contribute to artistic meaning, and what does all of this have to do with the political economy of art?

Readings:

“Art Advisors,” Mia Fineman, *The New York Times*, 2006.

“The Function of the Dealer,” Edith G. Halpert, *College Art Journal*, 1949.

“When is a Day Job a Work of Art?,” Juri Lynn Keyser, 2006.

“Looks Brilliant on Paper. But Who, Exactly, Is Going to Make It?,” M. Fineman, *NYTimes*, 2006.

Additional readings:

Making 'Exclusive' Exclusive Again Marc E. Babej and Tim Pollak, *Forbes*, 2006.

“Summary: A portrait of the arts...” Kevin F. McCarthy et al, Rand Corp., 2005.

“A Most Ingenious Paradox: The Market for Contemporary Art,” Staurt Plattner, 1998.

Week Seven, March 11: Yarn Bombing and other Knotty Tactics

Despite a pervasive cyber-aesthetic a recent wave of younger craft-based artists have revived puppet making, DIY street art, and even needlecraft as a vital form of artistic practice, sometimes combined with public art, and/or social activism. But in fact such practices as “yarn bombing,” and “craftivism” have not so much rejected the dominant digital paradigm as they have made use of the networking power of the Internet to generate wide-spread knitting circles made up of individuals who will likely never meet in person. Sharing and transmitting information about wool and patterns actually makes perfect sense if we reflect on the very moniker: the World Wide Web. At the same time, the production of woven materials and crafted objects has played a central role in human civilization including classical myth: think of Penelope’s making and unmaking of the tapestry in the Odyssey, or the golden thread Ariadne weaves through the Minotaur’s labyrinth.

Readings:

“Dark matter, activist art and the counter-public sphere,” G. Sholette, 2004.

“Abstract Hactivism,” Otto von Busch & Karl Palmås <http://www.isk-gbg.org/99our68/AbstractHactivism.pdf>

“Becoming Fashion-able,” Otto von Busch

http://www.hdk.gu.se/files/document/fashion-able_webanspassahd%20avhandling_OttovonBusch.pdf

Week Eight, March 18: Special Guest, artist Dread Scott who makes revolutionary art to propel history forward. He first received national attention in 1989 when his art became the center of controversy over its use of the American flag. President G. H.W. Bush declared his artwork [*What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?*](#) “disgraceful” and the entire US Senate denounced this work when they passed legislation to “protect the flag.” To oppose this law and other efforts which would effectively make patriotism compulsory, he, along with three other protesters, burned flags on the steps of the US Capitol. This resulted in a Supreme Court case and a landmark First Amendment decision.

Week Nine, April 8: Tactical Media, Critical Art Ensemble, and Bio-Terrorism

How do we define engaged cultural tactics as opposed to strategies within the means of production, communication and distribution? What is Tactical Media? Is it an entirely new approach or does it have historical precedents? How does art that aims to be political, activist and resistant confront the complexity of modern (and postmodern) forms of ideology, mass culture, media and globalization? Is that even possible? The case of the Critical Art Ensemble and the FBI will be discussed in detail.

Readings:

“A Hacker Manifesto [4.0],” McKenzie Wark, 2006.

“Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Giles Deleuze, 1990.

“The theory of the Dérive,” Guy DeBord, 1956.

“A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway, 1991.

“Fuzzy Biological Sabotage” Critical Art Ensemble, *ONLINE AT:

<http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.jsp;jsessionid=4AFDEB8B2B4C16077974A98413839DC8?objectnumber=38074>

Week Ten, April 15: It’s the Political Economy, Stupid

The severe financial catastrophe of recent years is also a major crisis for representative democracy. Today the very idea of the modern nation state is jeopardized by the deterritorialized flow of finance capital, or as Marx once wrote about capitalism: all that is solid melts into air (though perhaps today it dissolves into raw material for market speculation and bio-political socially-networked asset mining). Theorist Slavoj Žižek puts it this way: “the central task of the ruling ideology in the present crises is to impose a narrative which will place the blame for the meltdown not on the global capitalist system as such, but on secondary and

contingent deviations (overly lax legal regulations, the corruption of big financial institutions, and so on).” Today we will examine the way artists have sought to respond to this crisis through their work.

Readings:

“It’s the Political Economy, Stupid!”

“The Political Economization of Art,” John Roberts

“Sick Sad Life: On the Artistic Reproduction of Capital,” Kerstin Stakemeier

“Art After Capitalism,” Brian Holmes

Spring Break - NO CLASSES - March 25 to April 1st

Week Eleven, April 22: Interventionism, Gentrification, & Enterprise Culture in the 1980s.

This is a tale of two, politically engaged artists’ collectives Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D 1980-1988), and Group Material (1979-1997), which emerged in the 1980s with similar missions that later bifurcated to become on one hand a form of institutional critique (Group Material), and on the other hand a type of public interventionism (PAD/D). Following a presentation about these groups we will focus our discussion on how the deregulated neo-liberal economy together with the collapse of public arts funding affected the theory and practice of these collectives while setting the stage for a new wave of artistic communalism quite different from that of the past.

& a presentation on REPOhistory: History That Disturbs the Present.

A discussion and presentation about the *REPOhistory* collective (1989-2000) whose urban memory-mapping projects initially worked in tandem with city agencies, historical preservation societies, and local communities only to ultimately come up against the neo-liberal privatization and criminalization of New York City’s public sphere in the late 1990s.

Readings:

“Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,” Rosalyn Deutsche, 1987.

“A Collectography of PAD/D: Political Art Documentation/Distribution,” Gregory Sholette, 2001.

“The Problem with Pluralism,” Craig Owens, 1984.

"History that Disturbs The Present," interview with Dipti Desai re: REPOhistory.

Week Twelve, April 29

Research presentations by Group ONE

Please be sure to post reading for your presentations at least one week before.

Week Thirteen, May 6

Research presentations by Group TWO

Please be sure to post reading for your presentations at least one week before.

Week Fourteen, May 13

Research presentations by Group THREE

Please be sure to post reading for your presentations at least one week before.

Final Week, May 20: Class Wrap-Up – let’s discuss

1. One thing you have learned from this class (can be anything: a significant historical fact, an understanding of an argument or debate, a statement of historical change you have noted, an idea you have encountered).
2. One big question you will take away from this class into future study, research, practice

Please email me your paper no later than May 24th