would spread from New York City to Chicago, London, Berlin, Copenhagen, Mexico City, Budapest, and beyond. The critic's essay did not end on a pessimistic note however, and instead, in a gesture invoking Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," Owens called upon artists to reject their own class interests in order to work "within the community to call attention to, and mobilize the political and economic interests East Village art serves (as the artists affiliated with PAD/D, who are responsible for the illustrations accompanying this text, have done)."[4] Owens parenthetical comment referred to several graphics that had been part of a guerrilla-style poster campaign PAD/D directed (ineffectively) against the gentrification of the Lower East Side. The street exhibition was entitled *Not For Sale*, and it overtly parodied the informal character of East Village art galleries in a bid to stimulate some form of social involvement by an otherwise politically passive art scene. By linking his text with these agitational graphics, Owens likewise shifted the tenor of his commentary from that of a purely analytical tract, to something approaching political pedagogy, and therefore closer to the tendentious style of Benjamin's anti-fascist essay.

However, when I opened the posthumous collection of his writings the *Art in America* essay appeared quite different. There were no reproductions of PAD/D's images, and no parenthetical statement praising the group's anti-gentrification stance. I turned to the index. There I found an entry entitled PAD/D 266. But this index entry was all that remained of PAD/D, a small residuum certain to be overlooked by even the most observant reader. The most interesting angle to this minor art-historical mystery is not why or how PAD/D's presence was excised from the text—such editorial oversights happen all the time and no doubt my book is no exception—but rather it is the way this textual ellipsis relates to my own project, which seeks to unearth this and other accidental remainders, or, more accurately, to point to their present absence. Granted, it is a warning that almost certainly comes too late. With increasing, often cybernetic energy, a shadowy social productivity now haunts the very notion of a proper artistic canon with its exemplary practices and necessary acts of exclusion. These ghosts pour out from the crypts and basements of culture's dwelling places, including its poorly kept records and shadowy archives of over-productivity. They multiply faster than any newly devised tomb (or text-tomb) could even hope to retain them. Along with the explosive activity of non-artists, the increasing visualization of countless failed professionals, and the diminutive trace of activist groups such as PAD/D, the uncomfortable but growing presence/absence of culture's missing excess mass announces its arrival. Think of this book therefore, as a tentative "lumpenography" of artistic dark matter.[5]

# INTRODUCTION: THE MISSING MASS

The dreaming collective knows no history.
Walter Benjamin[1]

## Dark Matter

Astrophysicists describe *dark matter* (and *dark energy*) as forming an 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 96 percent of it consists of dark matter, a phenomenon sometimes called the "missing mass problem." The gravitational presence of this unseen force presumably keeps the universe from flying apart. This book borrows the metaphor of an unknown but ubiquitous stellar mass and applies it to the world of art and culture. 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, some of which might be said to emulate cultural dark matter by rejecting art world demands of visibility, and much of which has no choice but to be invisible. While astrophysicists are eager to know what dark matter is, the denizens of the art world largely ignore the unseen accretion of creativity they nevertheless remain dependent upon.

Consider the destabilizing impact on high art were some of these hidden producers to cease or pause their activity. What would happen for example if the hobbyists and amateurs who purportedly make up a billion-dollar national industry in the US simply stopped purchasing art supplies or no longer took classes with "professional" artists, or ceased going to museums to see what bona fide artists do?[2] And why consider only the tactical withdrawal of amateur participation, which is by definition marginal? What about the dark matter at the heart of the art world itself? Consider the structural invisibility of most professionally trained artists whose very underdevelopment is essential to normal art

**1st ISSUE** **POLITICAL ART DOCUMENTATION /DISTRIBUTION**

**February 1981**

## PAD: Waking Up In NYC

**PAD** (Political Art Documentation/Distribution) is an artists' resource and networking organization coming out of and into New York City. *Our main goal is to provide artists with an organized relationship to society;* one way we are doing this is by building a collection of documentation of international socially-concerned art. **PAD** defines "social concern" in the broadest sense, as any work that deals with issues—ranging from sexism and racism to ecological damage or other forms of human oppression. We document all kinds of work from movement posters to the most personal of individual statements. Art comes from art as well as from life. Knowing this makes us want to learn more about the production, distribution and impact of socially-concerned art works in the context of our culture and society. Historically, politicized or social-change artists have been denied mainstream coverage and our interaction has been limited. We have to know what we are doing. In New York. In the US. In Canada and Latin America. In Europe. In Asia and Africa. **The development of an effective oppositional culture depends on communication.**

## UN CERTAIN ART ANGLAIS!

A Certain English Art, (Postcard) Rasheed Araeen, 1979

**PAD** celebrated its first birthday with a Valentine's evening of entertainment and discussion around a slide show of political art (followed by dancing, but not in the streets—yet). We began in February 1980 as an amorphous group of artworkers dimly aware of a mutual need to organize around issues, but without much notion of how to do it. We met at Printed Matter once a month and agreed to start collecting documentation so we would have a physical core from which to reach out. For a while we looked at each other's work, discussed it, and thought about a social club and various possibilities for cultural activism. Then in late Spring we were offered a room in a former high school on the Lower East Side under the aegis of Seven Loaves—an umbrella group for community arts organizations. Suddenly we existed physically. We *had* to be in the world, and that led to the present structuring, still in process.

We have three kinds of meetings now: 1) The relatively flexible core or work group of 15-20 people gets together on three Sunday afternoons a month at the Seven Loaves space (when not too cold). Here we deal with: soliciting and handling of the archive materials; how to connect with other cultural organizations in NYC with similar purposes so there's no overlapping and duplication of work. (For instance, we are working with Cityarts Workshop, which has an impressive resource center on the community mural movement, and with Karin di Gia of Gallery 345, who has a collection of original political art.) We are also beginning to connect with and inform each other about the political events and struggles taking place in the city, understanding the ways these relate to national and international situations. Finally, we are thinking about collectively created issue-oriented exhibitions in public spaces, such as windows, subways, libraries, etc.

2) The open meetings with which we began. They take place on the second Sunday of every month at 8 PM at Printed Matter (7 Lispenard St., NYC 10013; 925-0325). Here reports are made from the work group and a brief visual or verbal presentation is given by a **PAD** member or guest as a sort of laboratory to stimulate discussion, education, consciousness raising and activism.

3) We are just beginning a series of public events centered around specific social issues seen in their historical perspectives, focusing on how they were opposed or supported by the socially concerned art of the time; for instance in May, a day on militarism in the "cold war" era, the Vietnam era and today, discussed by people from WRL (the War Resisters League), CARD (Committee Against Registration for the Draft) and artists who have done work with anti-militaristic content. We want to understand how the dialectic between oppositional art and society changes and takes different forms at different moments. These public afternoons will be publicized, and will lead up to an Autumn conference, at which we hope to bring together a wide coalition of cultural groups and artists. (For more information on events, see the "Calendar" section of **PAD**.)

**PAD's** theory is going to develop out of real experience instead of from the idealized and romanticized notion of a

The first newsletter of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution), a single folded offset page published in February 1981, approximately one year after the group's founding. Shown is the group's mission statement "Waking Up in New York City," as well as the artwork "Un Certain Art Anglais!" by artist and founder of the journal *Third Text*, Rasheed Araeen. Image courtesy Gregory Sholette Archive.



world functions. Without this obscure mass of "failed" artists the small cadre of successful artists would find it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the global art world as it appears today. Without this invisible mass, the ranks of middle and lower level arts administrators would be depleted, there would be no one left to fabricate the work of art stars or to manage their studios and careers. And who would educate the next generation of artists, disciplining their growing numbers into a system that mechanically reproduces prolific failure? Furthermore, by purchasing journals and books, visiting museums and belonging to professional organizations, these underdeveloped "invisibles" represent an essential pillar of the elite art world whose pyramidal structure looms over them eternally out of reach. And yet there is no material difference between an earnest amateur on the one hand, and a professional artist made invisible by her "failure" within the art market on the other; except perhaps that against all the odds she still hopes to be discovered? How would the art world manage its system of aesthetic valorization if the seemingly superfluous majority—those excluded as non-professionals as much as those destined to "fail"—simply gave up on its system of legitimation? Or if they found an alternative to it by creating a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) network of support and direct sales bypassing art dealers, critics, galleries, and curators? Indeed, to some degree this has already begun to take shape via media applications of Web 2.0. What has not happened is any move towards re-distributing the cultural capital bottled up within the holding company known as high art.

All of these forms of dark matter play an essential role in the symbolic economy of art. Collectively, the amateur and the failed artist represent a vast flat field upon which a privileged few stand out in relief. The aim of this book is to raise an inevitable question: what if we turned this figure and ground relation inside out by imagining an art world unable to exclude the practices and practitioners it secretly depends upon? What then would become of its value structure and distribution of power? The answer is not to imagine the emergence of a more comprehensive social art history in which the usual art subjects are better contextualized. Nor is it to take part in some rarified tour of this dark-matter world in which the mysterious missing cultural mass is acknowledged, ruminated over, and then re-shelved or archived as a collection of oddities. Instead, when the excluded are made visible, when they demand visibility, it is always ultimately a matter of politics and a rethinking of history. This is often the case with artists' collectives, groups, and collaborations whose communal self-embrace inevitably spotlights the general superfluity of artistic production and producers. But something has also happened in recent years to that far larger mass of inert dark matter. It is a change that dramatically alters the relationship between visible art and its shadowy other, between professional and amateur, the institution and the archive. Dark matter is getting brighter. And simultaneous with that change in status, this once missing mass has also been forced to undergo its own adaptations and mutations. The

essays that make up this volume do not seek to link the growing illumination of imaginative dark-matter productivity with a market-generated notion of outsider art or some other facile locus of cultural colonization. Rather, their allegiance is with those artists who self-consciously choose to work on the outer margins of the mainstream art world for reasons of social, economic, and political critique. In a sense, these artists have learned to embrace their own structural redundancy, they have chosen to be "dark matter." By grasping the politics of their own invisibility and marginalization they inevitably challenge the formation of normative artistic values. Here "politics" must be understood as the imaginative exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of fantasy, all within a radically defined social-artist practice. Such informal, often highly politicized micro-institutions are proliferating today, and have been growing in number for the past 15 years at least. This kind of self-organized dark matter 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. Which is why the responses to this growing illumination made so far—including the various narratives and theoretical attempts to manage dark matter, from the academicization of public art to relational aesthetics—are no doubt transitory, and merely part of a greater shift taking place within the broader cultural paradigm.

Look again at the art world and the dark matter it occludes. Few would deny that the lines separating "dark" and "light" creativity, amateur and professional, high from low have become arbitrary today, even from the standpoint of qualities such as talent, vision, and other similarly mystifying attributes typically assigned to high culture. What can be said of creative dark matter in general, therefore, is that either by choice or circumstance it displays a degree of autonomy from the critical and economic structures of the art world by moving instead in-between its meshes. It is an antagonistic force simultaneously inside and outside, like a void within an archive that is itself a kind of void. But, as I hope to show, the archive has split open, its ragged contents no longer hidden from view. Still, this growing materiality is not necessarily a politically progressive event. Increased visibility not only poses certain risks for any institution that seeks to enclose it but also—by privileging spontaneity and discontinuity, repetitions and instability—dark matter can seldom be sustained as a political force. What proves effective in the short term or locally remains untested on a larger scale. And that is the point we appear to be rapidly approaching: an encounter with matters of scale and the need for a new sustainable political culture of the Left. Dark matter's missing cultural mass is both a metaphor for something vast, unnamable and essentially inert, as well as a phantasmagoric proposition concerning what might be possible at this moment of epistemological crisis in the arts and structural crisis in global capital.



## Commitment

This then is a book about the politics of invisibility that could only have been written at a moment when invisibility itself has emerged as a force to be contended with, or, conversely, a provocation to be selectively controlled. It is as much dedicated to those who refuse the capture of their invisibility, as it is to those whose very visibility has been and continues to be refused. But this is also a study of something else. We might call it the ubiquitous gaze of the "social factory" that now looks back at us tirelessly, unblinkingly, and with an unprecedented historical hunger. The collision of these visibilities and shadows, appetites and circumventions defines the spaces of my text, as well as the very conditions that artists, myself among them, must operate under within a post-Fordist enterprise culture. And yet, as odd as a book about invisible artists and artwork may seem, my methods are less orthodox still. In his essay "The Author As Producer," Benjamin called upon cultural workers to become producers transforming the very means of their artistic production.[3] What follows is my attempt to respond to that call. Throughout these pages I have sought to write *tendentiously*, in the critically engaged manner proposed by Benjamin, producing, I hope, a committed work that never disengages from its political core. By turns it invokes historical research, critical theory, empirical observation, and journalistic reportage approached from the bottom up, from the viewpoint of a cultural worker who necessarily labored at numerous ignoble jobs from janitor, to dishwasher, to industrial fabricator before becoming a college instructor, all to maintain his existence as an "artist." And while these sundry work experiences were admittedly privileged by gender, ethnicity, and education, they nonetheless remain deeply instructive for my work and mark this volume in ways that have sometimes taken its author by surprise. This fundamental identification as a cultural worker leads me to push my critique of enterprise culture beyond an analysis of representation in order to examine artists' working conditions and the power of the market. It also draws directly from my own history as an artist, specifically with two artists' collectives—Political Art Documentation/Distribution, or PAD/D (1980–88), and REPOhistory (1989–2000)—both informally structured groups whose relationship to the art world was, and remains, marginal at best. Finally, whenever possible, attempts to define art and aesthetics have been avoided. For obvious reasons an artist is not able to step outside of such discourse into some detached critical space. Instead, I allow those who claim to make "art" to define it on their own terms, even if their identification with the practice is provisional, ironic, or tactical, as for example when artist Steve Kurtz insists "I'll call it whatever I have to in order to communicate with someone." And perhaps this playful relationship to the word "art" has its downside, given that Critical Art Ensemble, the Tactical Media group Kurtz co-founded, has received very little direct financial support from cultural foundations.[4] My aim in other words is not

to separate art from non-art, the rubbish from the dross, but to examine how these self-defined cultural practices operate within a changing economy involving material and symbolic rewards and penalties, visibilities and shadows. I leave it to the reader to decide if this idiosyncratic approach permits the airing of ideas and histories that would otherwise remain in the dark. What follows therefore is one admittedly partial attempt to articulate the politics of this missing mass. To paraphrase the cosmologists: there is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to cultural radicals than that of "dark matter."

## Redundancy

"We can measure the waste of artistic talent," the art historian Carol Duncan perceptively observed as early as 1983, "not only in the thousands of 'failed' artists—artists whose market failure is necessary to the success of the few—but also in the millions whose creative potential is never touched." Duncan adds that this glut of "art and artists is the normal condition of the art market."[5] As an artist trying to make my way through the complexity of New York's cultural scene in the 1980s her comments struck me as both accurate and suggestive of an unglimpsed reality just below the surface. It seemed as though some vaguely visible structural condition peculiar to contemporary art had briefly flashed up before me. After several decades of working at being an artist, political activist, writer, teacher, curator, and founding member of two political artists' collectives, Duncan's comments returned to me with a vividness that only lived experience can furnish: The oversupply of artistic labor is an inherent and commonplace feature of artistic production. Why? In preparing this study I reinterpreted the art historian's remarks as a series of questions. What do the many, necessarily "failed" artists, as Duncan calls them, actually provide to a system that handsomely rewards some of its participants? Artists are educated by the art world to see such failure as a kind of chaff that must be removed to release a small nucleus of value. Yet, even this agricultural metaphor reminds us that a "wasted" husk once protected a valuable seed. Perhaps most importantly, this creative chaff maintains and reproduces the system's *symbolic* hierarchies by exchanging information about the luminaries of the art world at openings, parties, on blogsites, doing so reflexively, like a vast field of heliotropic flowers always oriented towards a brightly lit center. Even if the soil at the margins of this field is sewn with bitterness, such gossip reinforces the apparent naturalness of the overall art economy and its hierarchies. To restate this point with a shift of metaphors, the artist Martha Rosler was once brazenly informed by an art dealer that either you're on the art world "table" or your not. The question today is, who supports the table?[6]

As peculiar as the cultural economy of fine art may be, there is no getting around the fact that an increasing number of individuals are choosing to become artists.[7]



This is all the more striking given the past 30 years in which a form of deregulated capitalism has dominated the global economy transforming increasing segments of the population into an under- or simply un-employed surplus population that exceeds even the necessary "reserve army of labor" essential to the functioning of capital. So why has art, an inherently precarious activity in the best of times, actually flourished during this process of competitive global austerity? Needless to say, the answer appears to lie not strictly within the art establishment, but is instead part of a broader change in the status of culture within the neoliberal economy of the past 30 years. For one thing, enterprise culture requires a kind of enforced creativity that is imposed on all forms of labor. Workers, whose livelihoods have been made increasingly precarious by the collapse of the traditional social welfare state, are expected to be forever ready to retrain themselves at their own expense (or their own debt), to labor continuously even when at home or on vacation, and finally, they are expected to be constantly creative, to think like an artist: "outside the box." Such universal demand for imagination and innovation inevitably places added value on forms of "creativity" previously dismissed as informal or non-professional. In a very tangible sense dark matter is simply not as dark as it recently appeared. The spread of information technologies including the World Wide Web directly enhance this process of illumination while expanding forms of creative economic discipline into the affective and domestic spheres of human life. As never before, producing, copying, re-mixing, printing, uploading, and distributing images and information has become (almost) everyone's privilege, even their social responsibility. Digital technology also functions like a prosthetic memory permitting the excluded to document and narrate ephemeral, everyday activities and overlooked forms of expression or resistance. As Boris Groys insists, no one sits in the audience any longer, everyone is on stage.[8] Which brings me to the third and most important phenomenon and the one this book is most keen to address—the way this twin expansion of neoliberal demand and creative "mining" technology has inevitably led to a kind of rupture within a vast surplus archive "from below," a vault of pent-up ideas and desires, hopes and frustrations, littered with odds and ends, and structured (if that word applies here at all) by narrative gaps and lacunas. In an age of enterprise culture, when concepts of labor and class and resistance are being taken apart and put back together again, it is to this shadow or surplus archive that artistic dissidents and rebels now look for inspiration on "how to fight." For what post-Fordist enterprise culture and its precarious dependency on social networks have unleashed may not be fully compatible with the kind of giddy, self-regulating free market idealism digital libertarians have cheerfully promoted. The new electronic commons might instead be thought of as the return of an old commons, or, as Blake Stimson and I proposed: "the newness of the new e-collectivism, like the newness of the new Arab street, is only a rebirth of intensity, the welling up of spirits from the past,

a recall to the opportunities and battle lines of old."[9] This materializing missing mass is no doubt permeated with its own historical baggage, half-submerged resentments, but also a sense of anticipation. Under these circumstances, even once formidable modes of artistic dissent such as institutional critique have become deeply ambivalent about the role of self-criticism.[10] In a sense, the once-hidden surplus archive is now eating its host. Or, more precisely, like some extraterrestrial vegetal pod it is *becoming* its host. But I am getting ahead of things.

The book begins by selectively examining politically committed forms of mostly collaborative art that arose on the cusp of the post-Fordist structural adjustment of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Following an initial chapter that serves as a broad, introductory overview of the entire project, the second chapter focuses on the archival work of the New York City based collective PAD/D. Founded in 1980 this group's collective mindset was still deeply indebted to the mass opposition movements and liberation struggles of the 1950s, '60s and '70s in which students, soldiers, women, minorities, and many workers rejected not only the culture of capitalism, but also its work disciplines within the factory as well as the office. Though it was already in decline by the early 1980s, PAD/D sought to maintain this antagonistic spirit by establishing its own separately networked art world apart from both the commercial market and that of mainstream museums and not-for-profit spaces. This quite literal counter-culture would ideally evolve its own exhibition venues, material support, and critical discourse and look forward to the post-capitalist society yet to come. Indeed, it was still possible even then to think this way about history and its inevitable forward movement towards greater social and economic democracy. In many ways, PAD/D actually harkened back as much to the organized Left of the 1920s and '30s as it did to the less formal New Left of May 1968 and after. Notably, the group's demise took place exactly as the socialist "East" finally fell apart. In retrospect, this was also the end of a phase of political and cultural experimentation by many post-colonial nations in search of an alternative to capitalism. It was also the moment when a wave of deregulation and privatization began to rapidly displace inner-city residents in places like Manhattan's Lower East Side where PAD/D's offices were located. What PAD/D left behind to a gentrified New York was its archive of social and political art, now housed within the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).[11]

Chapter 2 addresses the obvious irony of this outcome, as well as the structural changes going on in the 1980s art community. However, it also goes inside the PAD/D Archive to examine some of its many documents about unknown or little known politically engaged artists and artists' groups. The primary question this chapter raises concerns how this entombment of a "radical" art functions, or potentially functions, within the MoMA. To look at this from the other way around, what does a key pillar of the art world establishment gain from this



internalized bit of dissent, which, setting content aside, also represents a virtual core-sample of the massive overproduction artists generate at any given moment? One answer is to think of this *other* archive of critical, surplus cultural activity as a mark or bruise within the body of high art. The system must wear this mark of difference in order to legitimate its very dominance. Absolute exclusion is out of the question. Thus the image of the archive becomes an internally exiled exclusion, like a crypt or tomb that harbors meaning through a kind of negation (deathly remains) for the jurisdiction of the household above it. The surplus archive—as well as artistic dark matter—is therefore both a presence and absence within the material and symbolic economy of art. Except that an archive can never remain purely abstract, at some point it crosses the threshold into actual, content, even if, as in the case of the PAD/D Archive, this 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 chapters that follow this exploration of MoMA's encrypted *other* play upon this double nature of the surplus archive: its ambivalent structural relation as internally outlawed content which is at best a catalog of multiple aesthetic and political attractions (and perhaps also repulsions). One way to explain the structure of this book, therefore, is as an attempt to infect the "lawfully" embodied systems of exclusion and visibility beginning with the art world's inner foundation and spreading outwards: a procedure potentially brought within reach by the very demands of enterprise culture for ubiquitous creativity and amplified by its own prosthesis of electronic memory and networked intelligence. Still, there are complications.

In Chapter 3 the archive returns, but now being written directly on the skin of a gentrified city that very much wants to forget its past. This essay focuses on the momentary bubbling up and fading away of this *other* urban narrative as an openly revanchist neoliberal urbanism typified by the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani swept over New York City in the 1990s. During this period the group REPOhistory carried out several site-specific, "Do It Yourself" (DIY) public art projects, using street signs to focus public attention on little known, forgotten, or politically inconvenient histories. Eventually REPOhistory ran afoul of municipal and cultural authorities, and the subaltern archive was slammed shut once more. The chapter also sets REPOhistory's work within a broader context of public art practices that emerged towards the end of the Cold War and focused on historical memory and forgetting, as if a certain archivalization was only (temporarily) possible once the danger it represented had passed. Like REPOhistory a number of these public art and history projects in Buenos Aires, Berlin, Pittsburgh, and Oakland California also mimicked the official street signs and other systems of spatial administration. As global neoliberalism turns urban spaces into zones of managed consumption and ubiquitous surveillance, it seems

Phone items to (212) 251-6800 • Fax (212) 696-0487 MANHATTAN NEIGHBORHOODS 23

NY-M

# Art Signs Challenge 'History'

By Melissa Tarkington
STAFF WRITER

At the corner of William and Fulton Streets next week, passersby will be greeted by a sign welcoming them to "Gotham City." Washington Irving, the sign reads, once gave New York City this nickname after an English village whose residents practiced tax evasion by running around acting demented.

Is this history?

You decide, say artists who designed this sign and 35 others denoting infamous or little-known facts about city history as part of the Lower Manhattan Sign Project, which will be officially opened in Battery Park tomorrow. The 18-by-24-inch metal signs are being placed on lampposts primarily in the financial district along South Street Seaport, the World Trade Center, Battery Park and near the Liberty Island ferry landing in lower Manhattan.

This collection of artwork, which offers an alternative, multi-ethnic view of history, is the result of three years of research, permit-gathering and historical verification by about 50 artists, performers, writers and teachers.

"We wanted to examine and question the way history was written in a public art project," said Lisa Maya Knauer, a participating artist. "We wanted to see what kind of relationship Lower Manhattan had with history — its ties to the past and then offer our findings in an objective, scientific way."

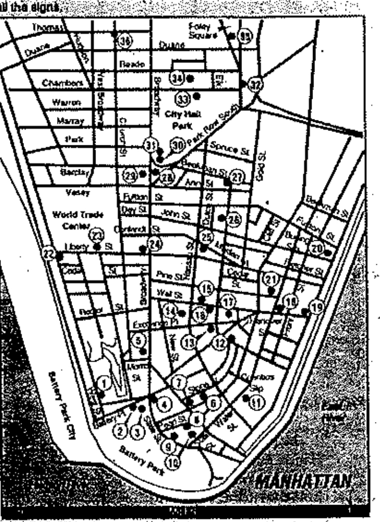
Through words and pictures, the signs will broach such subjects as epidemics, racial and sexual equality, the slave trade, subway fires, international health care, the "inequality of the U.S. Senate," New York's Chinese community and exploitation in boxing, among others.

"Each sign has a series of questions that addresses the viewer and directly engages that person," said Alan Micholson, who researched John Jacob Astor and fur trade. "We want people to think of the place they are in — we hope everyone is going to see a different thing."

**The Lower Manhattan Sign Project**

The themes and locations of all the signs:

1. Potter's Field/Ellis Island
2. Indian Giver or When Will America Be Discovered?
3. Great Negro Plot of 1741
4. Leisler's Rebellion
5. Bullet made from Statue of King George
6. Homelessness: Forgotten Histories
7. Whitehall Street Induction Center
8. Origin of Pearl Street
9. Nelson Mandela's visit to NYC
10. Origin of the Word Indian
11. Indian Settlement Sites
12. India House
13. The Other J.P. Morgan
14. Stock Market Crash
15. False Democracy: Inequality of the U.S. Senate
16. Subway Fire
17. Insurance and National Health Care
18. Meat Market/Slave Trade
19. Rose Schneiderman: Union Activist
20. Chinese Community in NYC
21. Jacob Astor and Native Americans
22. The Story of the Waterfront
23. Madame Restell and Anthony Comstock
24. Office Workers Eat Their Lunch
25. What's in a Name?
26. Gotham City
27. Epidemics
28. Frances Wright: Racial and Sexual Equality
29. Vito Marcantonio: Radical Congressman
30. Civil Defense Drill Arrests 1950s
31. Boxing and Exploitation
32. Forlorn Hope/Debtor's Jail
33. The First Alms House
34. Negroes' Burial Ground/The City Limits
35. Smith Act Trials
36. United Tailoresses Society




Tom Klem, who designated homelessness as forgotten history on his sign, said he hopes the project prompts analytical thinking. "Perhaps someone will just read the questions, stop and think. Everyone could see completely different things. We've given a lot of thought to how the public will interpret this project."

Greg Sholette, who created a sign titled "The Other J.P. Morgan," said they expected mixed reactions for challenging conventional "correct" history. "Any questioning of history is seen as threatening to so many people that we are expecting to get some backlash," he said, "and if this is seen as a liberal attack, it won't be effective at all."

Knauer said the project was initially planned as guerrilla art because they expected strong opposition and censorship.

"We thought we would be going out in the dead of night to do it," she said. "We thought we would be prevented from doing it directly."

The project, however, has received approval from The New York Historical Society and funding from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Andy Warhol Foundation, among others. None of the organizations attempted to censor their work, Knauer said. "We believe in a full range of voices being heard — so much about history has not been shared," said Erika Sanger, coordinator of public programs at the New York Historical Society. However, Sanger said the historical society at first was skeptical about the project's authenticity.

"There were actually some historical questions," Sanger said. "I had my doubts, but I went through and researched questions with one of the artists and the artist proved me wrong."

The artists view themselves as creators of an original project.

"What makes our project different," Micholson said, "is that we have gone out and done a marker project and also that we are focusing on social history. There is almost nothing marking social history in this city."

CLOSEUP

The project is a combination walking tour and public art viewing and will run through December 27, 1992. The opening begins at 2 p.m. at Castle Clinton in Battery Park tomorrow. The artists are scheduled to lead the first walking tour from 3:30 p.m. until 5 p.m.

Maps of the walking tour are free and may be picked up at the visitors information booth at the World Trade Center.

Artists Lisa Maya Knauer, Todd Ayoung, Alan Michelson and Tess Timoney with a sign by Michelson entitled "John Jacob Astor and Native Americans."

NEW YORK NEWSDAY, FRIDAY, JUNE 26,

*New York Newsday*, June 28, 1992, reporting on REPOhistory's Lower Manhattan Sign Project including a clip-and-carry do it yourself walking tour map of the installation. Shown in the photograph from left to right are "REPOhistorians" Lisa Maya Knauer, Todd Ayoung (standing), Alan Michelson, and Tess Timoney. The newspaper is no longer in print. Image courtesy Gregory Sholette Archive.



that the battle for public memory must be played out from within the city's own repertoire of semiotic management.

Chapter 4 continues to examine the tactics of urban intervention with a study of the Illinois-based artists' collective Temporary Services. As if thumbing their collective nose at the fate of being merely another "creative glut," the group has spent the past decade developing a series of archival projects, public interventions, publications, its own publishing house, and an exhibition and program space located on Chicago's North Side. Like an independent cultural municipality, Temporary Services substitutes a gift-based economy for the managed scarcity of the market. How does it manage this host of "services," especially given that its three members no longer reside in the same city? The digital communications capacity unleashed by neoliberal capitalism has brought some of what PAD/D once imagined within reach via the Internet. However, this chapter also looks at these new forms of self-organization and networked generosity from a decidedly darker angle, one that even enterprise culture is loathe to acknowledge (although it is entwined within it). For just as powerful networking technology amplifies the power of a few artists in Illinois, it also opens the public floodgates to what Nietzsche described as *Ressentiment*, or what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick understood as the structural complexity of ignorance.[12] Inevitably, the perforation of a once suppressed archive exposes the wounds of political exclusions, redundancies, and other repeated acts of blockage that wholly or partially shape this emerging sphere of dark-matter social production.

With Chapter 5 we return to the questions raised by Duncan in more detail by sketching the political economy of contemporary art from the bottom up. This chapter tries to describe its system of promises, self-made identities, exclusions, and hierarchies from the inside, the way an art worker sees it. Its primary case study compares the efforts to gain greater social security for artists by the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) in the late 1960s with those of the Artists Pension Trust (APT), a private, global investment fund established this past decade, at the apex of the art market's inflationary bubble. The main point of this comparison is to understand how the ever-present "glut" of artists either define and manage their own precarious redundancy, or have it defined for them within a continuously changing capitalist economy. To put this differently, how and when does the allegedly blissful new affair between "creative" labor and neoliberal capitalism become more than an arrangement of overlapping interests? When is it more than just a shared "script," as sociologist Olav Velthuis has argued, and when does it emerge as a fully blown antagonism with potential political consequences?[13]

The sixth and seventh chapters extend and refocus these various lines of inquiry through an examination of Tactical Media (TM), a form of interventionist cultural activism that typically borrows new media technology made accessible by global capitalism in order to turn it against state and corporate authority. Its practice

includes media pranks, culture jamming, digital swarming, hacking corporate websites and other hit-and-run electronic guerrilla tactics aimed at what Guy Debord described as the society of the spectacle. TM marks a moment of change within resistant cultural practices, one that divides the politically engaged art associated with 1968 from that of 1989. Unlike PAD/D, REPOhistory, AWC or many of the groups discussed in the earlier chapters, TM was not only born out of the cold cinders of the Cold War, it was immediately at home within the digital Zeitgeist of post-Fordism: a form of imaginative resistance that could only fully emerge within the precarious networked world of neoliberalism. By its own carefully invented epithets TM's principal practitioners—Critical Art Ensemble, RTMark, The Yes Men, Institute for Applied Autonomy, Bureau of Inverse Technology, 0100101110101101.org—typically mirror or mimic the appearance of entrepreneurial culture itself, including bootstrapping start-up ventures and creative micro-institutions. However this mirroring process is not as simple as appears. TM's logic claims to be above ideology, yet it remains romantically anti-capitalist, perhaps even to the point of collectively mourning an unspecified aesthetic wholeness, glimpsed here and there as mere remnants and tatters within the spectacle of enterprise culture. Curiously, this very abhorrence of ideology seems to link it with neoliberal processes of social collapse and extreme reification that may provide the raw material for new social organs to grow and cohere. After World War II, as ideological combat continued by other means, Western state and corporate interests sought to legitimate their power, publicly aligning themselves with secular democratic society and even modern experimental forms of art. Theodor W. Adorno described the art thus generated as a sham. Beneath its cheerful façade was concealed the cold brutality of capitalist instrumental logic. For Adorno, true art had no choice but to draw (regrettably) upon the dark negativity of this administered welfare culture itself. Dissonance and blackness were his ideal aesthetic response to the world of administered culture.[14] In the 1980s the culture of the welfare state and Left politics were not so much superseded with a new order as they were shattered into fragments, becoming the rubble of what Margaret Thatcher once sneeringly labeled "society." This post-modern landscape is strewn with bits and pieces of dissolved social organizations, ghosts of mass movements past, ruined states, and crippled notions of the public sphere. Yet as much as remnants of nineteenth-century culture became for Walter Benjamin a kind of allegory brimming with a potential for redemption, so too have the fragments of a lost social commons, however imperfect in reality, become today a kind of allegorical detritus.

No less than opportunistic capitalists, TM and other interventionist activists have learned to tinker with this wreckage, taking it apart, reassembling it again, parodying or clowning about with its elements, mimicking its functions. And yet by default, some of these tactical practices appear to be developing what may be the closest thing to a sustainable twenty-first century dissident culture. The penultimate chapter suggests that a new form of progressive institution building is already under way, not through traditional organizing methods, but more like an accidental side-effect of defensively generated mimicry and imitation. As if superimposing two different states of being in the world—one deeply suspicious of institutional authority of any sort and therefore informally organized, and one mimicking, sometimes with impressive precision, the actual function of institutions, these mock-institutions appear to be filling a gap left by a missing social reality. Perhaps the clearest example of this is visible in the wave of new pedagogical structures being assembled around the world by art students from the United States, Great Britain, and Europe to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Using materials and means they salvage from the very edifice of a crumbling social system, students and artists are reinventing sustainable democratic forms. Nevertheless, the nature of this new mock-institutionalism is quite unlike the "alternative art movements" of the 1960s and 1970s. Though it borrows from these past tendencies (after all this too is part of the rubble), the new social architecture is discontinuous and contradictory, sometimes borrowing aspects of traditional not-for-profit organizations, at other times looking more like temporary commercial structures, and still other times appearing as a semi-nomadic band or tribe stumbling across a battered social landscape made all the more dire by the economic collapse of 2007–8. The brief, concluding chapter enters this ontological "gap" from below, comparing its chiaroscuro of visibility and invisibility to Marx's historic concept of the *proletariat*, which, as philosopher Stathis Kouvelakis reinterprets it, is not the figure of some hoped-for totality to come, but the very "embodiment of the impossibility of full totality" that is nevertheless no less animated or capable of mutiny or even revolution. For in light of the massive structural adjustment foisted on us by global capital, such terminology no longer seems embarrassing, as one young scholar of Tactical Media insisted as recently as 2009. Perhaps it is now time for the contemporary *ragpicker* to search again amongst the wreckage of past rebellions and uprisings for some kind of meaning, some promissory note to the present or the future?



## "It's Worse Than We Thought"[15]

I began my research for this book long before the start of the so-called Great Recession and the growing resistance to it in Greece and elsewhere.[16] Indeed, the current economic contraction has brought with it a renewal of political and cultural debate that vanished three decades ago, more or less as neoliberal enterprise culture began its ascension onto the world stage. At some point in the mid 1980s, when Western finance capital was about to triumph over a deteriorating socialist East, the flexible, entrepreneurial spirit of post-Fordism seemed to offer every

cultural and ethnic interest a commodified niche-market all its own. And at this moment the very concept of class as a category of economic exploitation appeared problematic. Some Marxists argued that the situation was simply an empirical problem that would be resolved once the actual working class (as it was configured under "late capitalism") could be definitively located. Others insisted that the very narrative of class was in need of deconstruction together with the notion that history was propelled by antagonisms between the many who produce, and the few who own the means of production. At the forefront of this latter critique were Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, a duo of anti-Marxist Leftists whose influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* attempted to prove that any universal economic explanation of society is merely a fetish or myth dreamed up by Marx and elaborated on by his followers. According to Laclau and Mouffe, if economic relations really do determine human subjectivity then the economy would have to be "defined independently of any specific type of society; and the conditions of existence of the economy must also be defined separately from any concrete social relation."[17] Their alternative thesis is a greatly modified version of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, except this post-structuralist version of hegemony maintains that "social agents lack any essence."[18] If there is such a thing as political agency, therefore, it must take place within a social "text" that consists of different, differing, multiple, and sometimes conflicting social positions. No one privileged signifier—such as the economy or class status—could possibly affect all of these positions because capitalism is not a totality, it is instead a text with a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities that generate merely local conflicts of power and temporal moments of subjectivity. In a more recent essay, ostensibly about artistic activism, Mouffe reiterates her mid-1980s stance insisting that

> Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Society is not to be seen as the unfolding of a logic exterior to itself, whatever the source of this logic could be: forces of production, development of the Spirit, laws of history, etc. The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents.[19]

Thus the field of agonistic struggle inevitably includes the short-order cook in the local McDonald's food factory as well as the corporate CEO who owns the company. It comprises the museum director, as well as dissident artists demanding more rights of representation. And it encompasses the artist laboring as a graphic designer or data-entry specialist 80 hours per week along with her boss who also employs dozens of similar outsourced "creative" workers. The fact that each subject's position could just as effectively be defined by a greater or lesser degree of freedom over his or her material conditions of life is far less significant, so Laclau and Mouffe argue, than their particular hegemonic articulation within society,



which always remain provisional and indeterminate. Admittedly, in 1985 this utopian desire to distance radical politics from the reductive economism of much orthodox Marxism appeared as a necessary corrective to the brittle and seriously deflated Left that a sweeping neoconservatism had all but politically decimated. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union seemed to confirm the market's final triumph on an unprecedented global scale. And yet what was traded away along with the abandonment of class conflict was a primary *raison d'être* of the Left itself, including above all its historic demand for autonomy from the economic determinism of capital (a determinism that was apparently but an illusion all along). Ironically, this theoretical trade-off made in the name of deconstructing grand historical and political narratives came at the very moment when capitalism emerged as the totalizing world system. Workers' incomes rapidly dropped in the United States and other industrial nations, jobs shifted to the global Southern hemisphere and slavery reemerged as a hidden component of the global economy. And when the system did dramatically implode in 2008 its effects were predictably universal. Capitalism's crisis was everyone's crisis—or opportunity. All at once the "unfixed character of every signifier" [20] suddenly had one common referent. Which is to say that while some socialists and intellectuals may have had difficulty locating the modern proletariat, alternatively deflating or mythologizing its composition along the way, global capitalism never doubted the existence of the working class or its whereabouts (even if capital would never describe class relations in anything like those terms).[21] That said, within some influential academic and artistic circles Laclau and Mouffe popularized a useful, if limited critique of a classical Marxism, one that dovetailed with an assortment of militant liberation struggles by women, minorities, gay people, environmentalists, anarchists and other libertarian Leftists. However, even as this position was circulating in mid-1980s intellectual circles, a less well-known, but increasingly radical critique of standard Marxism had already been initiated in the 1960s and '70s in which the extraction of surplus time and value from labor remained the locus of cultural and political struggle. That analysis has proved far more applicable to the current crisis.

Despite many strong differences, this other tendency includes a range of libertarian Marxist thinkers, including those emerging out of the Italian Autonomist movement, or Potere Operaio (Workers' Power), such as Mario Tronti, Paulo Virno, and Antonio Negri; those coming from the very different tradition associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge; as well as a range of less well-known feminist, environmental, and Left-libertarian Marxists that includes C. L. R James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Vandana Shiva, and theorists associated with the Midnight Notes Collective such as Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, Harry

Cleaver, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and younger scholars inspired by their work like Leopoldina Fortunati and the members of edu-factory collective in Europe.

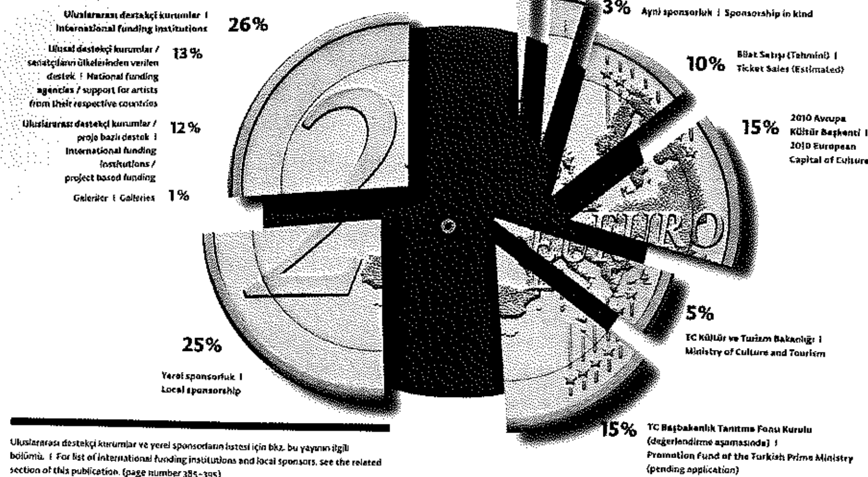
As diverse as these writers are they nevertheless reassert Marx's view that labor generates its own political and resistant forces from *within* the process of capital accumulation (it's the politics of the economy, stupid).[22] Furthermore, it is capital's attempt to overcome this resistance that fuels its continual geographic and technological expansion. Impossibly, this restless process seeks to eliminate capital's own dependency on living labor.[23] In the past few decades of deregulated post-Fordism, those workers who retain a function under neoliberalism hold on precariously, while a significant portion of the world's people has become a vast and redundant surplus population. But something has happened to make this apparent surplus army increasingly visible, not only to capital, but to itself. Almost as if a long forgotten crypt had split open, the dead, the redundant laborers, the excess population, is now speaking, visualizing itself, asserting a new form of collectivism that is also an old form of collectivism. Its visibility is dependent not only on the rise of global communication technology necessary to the deregulated enterprise economy, but also on its own sheer abundance and precariousness in relation to that economy.

Now, after a hiatus in which many influential Left and cultural theorists sought to treat class and economic exploitation as just one more discursive subject position within a field of shifting social antagonisms, a new generation of intellectuals, media activists, and interventionist artists, no doubt spurred on in part by the 2008–9 financial adjustment, are beginning to re-examine the role of labor in the so-called creative economy. As necessary as it once seemed to "rethink" the critical importance of class struggle and Marxist analysis during the heady, expansionist years of neoliberalism, it now appears just as necessary to rethink capitalism and its relationship to work, history, and culture. Young artists, often working collectively, have begun to address their relationship to work. Among many recent experiments is Working Artists and the Greater Economy, or W.A.G.E., an informal group that dates from the very start of the 2008 financial meltdown (although at a time when it was still being described simply as a serious mortgage crisis). The group has demanded a "working wage" for artists because artists make "the world more interesting."[24] Other fledgling efforts at self-organization include the Teaching Artist Union, a group of NYC art instructors whose membership is open to faculty at the university and college level, as well as in high schools and the lower grades.[25] In an age of enforced creativity and enterprise culture the very concept of a unionized cultural workforce may be nearly impossible to conceptualize. Not surprisingly the group's founding manifesto begins with a somewhat strained statement of self-identification as a generation of "freelance idealists" before continuing heedfully, "we are not angry laborers." (Admittedly this mission statement was penned before the depth of the "Great Recession" was fully apparent and layoffs began to hit New York's art and teaching community.)



Chicago-based Temporary Services recently compiled a number of these group manifestos and projects into a 40-page newspaper entitled *ART WORK: A National Conversation About Art, Labor, and Economics*. In November 2009, the group used its intensively developed social networks to distribute some 15,000 copies of the publication in cities from Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City, to Newark, New Jersey, Anchorage, Alaska, Washington DC, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Louisville Kentucky, and Gordo Alabama (as well as in Copenhagen, Leeds, London, Aberdeen, and Athens).[26] Meanwhile, the question of how artists choose to organize their labor under varying historical and economic circumstances has become a subject of interest to a growing number of art historians willing to risk upsetting dominant cultural paradigms by rubbing the art world—to paraphrase Benjamin—against its grain. A new wave of art scholarship is examining the role of cultural labor both within well-ensconced subject matter and historical periods, as well as amongst lesser known artists and art movements. Andrew Hemingway's important study of artists and the Communist Party USA in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s was recently complemented by Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, in which the theoretical impact of the New Left on the concept of artwork in the 1960s and '70s is examined through a series of case studies that reconsider the oft-visited work of Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Hans Haacke, and Lucy R. Lippard.[27] Even an industry mainstay like *Artforum* ventured into these waters following the Great Recession by printing an excerpt of anti-capitalist musings by the Marxist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.[28]

Meanwhile, debates, conferences, and exhibitions on the topic of art, finance, cultural markets, and creative labor have been organized by among others Carin Kuoni, director of the Vera List Center for the Arts, and Maria Lind, former director of the Center For Curatorial Studies at Bard College. Lind provocatively entitled her program, co-sponsored by the Goethe Institute, "What is the Good of Work?" In Turkey, four female curators from Zagreb who go by the collective moniker WHW (What, How & for Whom?) organized the most recent Istanbul Art Biennial around the decidedly militant theme "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" The line borrowed from the title of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil's song from *The Threepenny Opera* received a blunt answer in 1928: Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts of starvation, torture, and silence. No doubt the same answer is on everyone's lips today. Most of the artists in the WHW program were not previously seen at biennials and art fair circuits, the curators making an effort to disturb business as usual in the global art world. One installation entitled *Unemployed Employees*, by Turkish artists Aydan Murtezaoğlu and Bülent Şangar even provided "creative jobs" for recent university graduates in Istanbul. The




Graphic designer and collaborator Dejan Kršić worked with the collective WHW (What, How & for Whom: Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović) to create a series of pedagogical illustrations exploring the financial and administrative mechanisms of the Eleventh Istanbul Biennial (2009), whose title—What Keeps Mankind Alive?—the group took from Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil's 1928 production *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*). Image courtesy WHW and Dejan Kršić.

employees first had to apply for their temporary positions, which then consisted of folding and refolding piles of t-shirts, and pointlessly offering perfume samples to Biennial visitors. But perhaps it was an innovative mini-conference held recently at The New School University organized by artist Trebor Scholz that most clearly addressed the gap between theory and practice, virtual and material labor, doing so at least in part by accident. The question posed by the three-day program was whether or not the Internet is a creative "play ground," or an electronic "factory," or perhaps both at the same time.[29] Attended by a predominantly youthful, white male audience, the program included sessions described as "the Gift of Immaterial Labor," "Digital Labor and the Body," and "The Emancipatory Potential of Play." The very phrasing of the program's title—"The Internet as Playground and Factory"—is perhaps an unintentional reference to Mario Tronti's four decade's old expression "The Social Factory," in which the regulatory power of the capitalist market encloses social relations once found exclusively outside the workplace. But signs of how the new, networked economy actually extracts value from material, living labor unexpectedly bubbled up at the event when conference participants were confronted by a group of self-defined Cyber Sweat



Shop Workers distributing leaflets that bitterly, and ironically, denounced the anti-union policies of The New School, principal host of Playground or Factory.[30]

It would seem to be a given that capitalism has always secretly depended upon certain forms of production other than the obvious, male-identified physical labor of the factory or farm. This *other* productivity includes women's non-waged chores or "housework," as well as their sexual procreation that literally reproduces the workforce. But it also includes the semi-waged labor of students and children and the hidden dependency capital has with forms of slave labor, once an essential stage of what Marx described as primitive wealth accumulation, and which has now made a return in an era of deregulated labor, individual risk, and weakened states.[31] Perhaps it is time to rephrase a question first posed by Brecht some 75 years ago by asking: who builds the *digital* networks?[32] Who lays down its glass fiber cables, who cooks the meals for the system's designers and programmers as they sit in their cubicles, hour after hour, banging-out lines of html, drawing up spreadsheets, sizing images, designing templates, tagging data, and formatting websites? More basic still: who operates the injection-molding machines and lathes and grinders that stamp-out the computer chassis, mobile phones, and Blackberry's essential to the day-to-day function of the "cognitariat"? Who packs and ships the electronic components of the new, networked economy? Who hauls away its e-waste? And after piles of this electronic debris are shipped to towns and villages in Africa and South Asia, who is it that picks through this detritus for recyclable toxic metals that nonetheless pollute bodies, water, and soil? What appears to be immaterial play on one side of the digital terminal is something quite different at its other end. For somewhere on this planet a different workforce toils on a Fordist assembly line in order to make immaterial post-Fordist labor possible in the US, EU, and other developed nations.[33] It is this "other end," this invisible surplus not entitled to the Neo-Bohemian good life, that concerns us here, whether or not its ethereal "elsewhere" is located in Logos, Jakarta, or Mexico, or in some overlooked, non-union factory in London, Toronto, or New York City.

## Revenge of the Surplus

The scope of these issues is well beyond this, or perhaps any single study, which is why my focus remains largely on the changing conditions of production within and around the margins of the contemporary art world, and the resistance to those changes. But the underlying issue remains that of cultural labor, and what that means today, in a "creative" economy that, as Brian Holmes pithily points out, has made art the "linchpin of the workfare system, in the financialized era of image sign production."[34] How have the conditions of artistic production changed in this context? More importantly, how do those artists who remain critical of capital's disciplinary economic apparatus manage in the art-friendly world

of enterprise culture? Perhaps the Berlin-based art and media collective kleines postfordistisches Drama (KPD) has pinpointed the difficulty, with their fictional "sociological" documentary about creative industry workers just like themselves. In a series of video interviews they reenacted the mental life of art workers mulling over a set of questions including, "What do you consider a 'good life'? Should cultural producers, as role models for society, join with other social movements to work towards new forms of globalization?" Based on actual responses, the project reveals Berlin's creative workers trapped in their own feeble expectations about a "good life." We watch as they attempt to multitask hour after hour, with little or no transition between work and non-work, socializing and networking, or in some cases wakefulness and sleep. It seems the social factory has completely triumphed, and no doubt the observations from Germany are generalizable to the "cognitariat" in other global cities. The Berlin media collective's enigmatic name sums up the situation. Roughly translated into English it reads, *Small Post-Fordist Drama*. The group's operating thesis is amusingly summed up on their webpage that shows a single, acid-colored photograph of six hip-looking creative workers in a minimal office space posed precisely around an uncluttered worktable. The image appears to allude to one of Caravaggio's late, understated domestic dramas, such as his *Supper At Emmaus* (second version, 1606) in which a very ordinary-looking Christ quietly announces to several followers he has returned from the grave. As if to diminish any remaining theatricality still further, the image on the website has been reduced to the size of a postage stamp.[35]

Still, there are constant stirrings of resistance. Some of which are surprisingly familiar, though rendered in novel ways, and much that takes place not within the white cubicles of the art industry, but at the intersection of cognitive labor, precarious employment, and everyday, informal creativity.

In 2007 a very different sort of play within a play from that of KPD took place when a group of disgruntled Italian IBM workers, supported by UNI Global Union and the national IBM works councils (FIOM, FIM, COBAS national unions) carried out the first known job action in Second Life, a 3D virtual reality platform where players move about as computer generated characters or avatars in an immersive and interactive virtual world. The striking knowledge workers took explicit advantage of their dual status as both embodied and immaterial labor when they decided to collaborate "creatively" with Internet activists and graphic designers involved in Second Life Left Unity (SLLU), an anti-capitalist organization that exists only inside the online digital environment. Unionists Christine Revkin and Davide Barillari coordinated the organization of the virtual protest, generating colorful striking avatars with pixilated picket signs programmed to stage a 24-hour virtual protest against Big Blue in cyberspace. As anticipated, global media coverage was strong, and within a few months IBM capitulated to the demands of its employees' local works council, *Rappresentanze Sindacali Unitarie*

September 2007, avatars of striking Italian IBM workers stage the first virtual job walkout in the cyber-world known as Second Life. According to staff representative Davide Barillari: "Thanks to the massive use of new-generation communication tools, we moved a local problem to a global problem, so the image of the company was, for the first time, attacked ... the Virtual protest led to concrete results." Helping create the event was artist Christine Revkin, webmaster for UNI Global Union, which represents some 900 trade unions and 20 million workers employed by the global knowledge and services industries: www.uniglobalunion.org/Apps/iportal.nsf/pages/homeEn. Images courtesy Christine Revkin and Davide Barillari.

*of Vimercate*, agreeing to reinstate performance bonuses and contribute to the Italian national health insurance fund. The first mass union demonstration in a virtual world has serious implications in our real world: 20 days after the virtual strike in Second Life—in which some 2,000 avatars joined from 30 countries—the general manager of IBM Italy resigned. The immaterial job action was the start of a bigger international unionization project, called "unions 2.0." This small, post-Fordist drama directly improved the actual working conditions of creative laborers and reminds us, as autonomous labor theorist Bruno Gulli writes, that "communism is the liberation of time—not its framing in the factory system."[36]

Still, how does one go about mapping un-framed time and ethereal resistance? And why do so? Who is served by research into dark matter with its shadowy repertoire of tactical tricks, resentments, hidden locations, and implied link to some far broader counter-history *from below*? As Stephen Wright asserts, cultural activities that refuse to be seen at all, that are invisible-yet-undeniable, raise fundamental questions about the nature of art, labor, and creativity.[37] For example, the guerrilla projects of *Untergunther* who illegally repair public clockworks in Paris, or the anonymous sign projects of political activists such as Grupo de Arte Callejero in Buenos Aires demarcating the homes of unpunished generals from Argentina's "dirty war," as well as the sometimes obscene street provocations of the Voina (WAR) collective in Russia, or the low-tech urban interventions in São Paulo, Brazil, that theorist André Mesquita describes as zones of poetic activity at work, the online anti-corporate campaigns of the hacktivist group Anonymous, but also those everyday acts of imaginative interruption and temporal displacement carried out by temp slaves, warehouse workers, and cubicle serfs. Furthermore, the very trace of this curious mix of seen and unseen, active and inert, banal and confrontational dark matter is only possible thanks to networked global capital and the soulless specter of an absent society that haunts it. A strange inter-dependency is made possible, in other words, by the prosthetics of inexpensive communication, audio and video technologies. That this missing mass, this dark matter is materializing and getting brighter is not in doubt. Instead, what remains to be seen is just what kind of world it is giving birth to, and exactly how this "revenge of the surplus" will ultimately re-narrate politics in an age of enterprise culture.

# 1 ART, POLITICS, DARK MATTER: NINE PROLOGUES

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

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge[1]

## Swampwall

For more than 30 years a close relation of mine has worked in the shipping and receiving department of a non-unionized factory in Northeast Pennsylvania. Early on in his employment he and several of his co-workers spent their work breaks attaching newspaper clippings, snapshots, spent soda cans, industrial debris, trashed food containers and similar bits and pieces of day-to-day detritus to one wall of the plant. After a few years this accumulated clutter covered most of the wall. The workers christened their impromptu collage the Swampwall. The owner of the factory, an aging sole-proprietor in a world of mergers and multinationals, long tolerated this workplace diversion until a global corporation bought out his company. A structural adjustment followed. Dozens of "redundant" employees lost their jobs. The manufacturing division of the factory was downsized, services emphasized, and post-Fordist systems of inventory and just-in-time outsourcing implemented. Needless to say, Swampwall was expunged. And though its makers remained employed they were tasked with higher productivity as their pensions, sick pay, health care, and other benefits were reduced through privatization. What was Swampwall? Notwithstanding the recent popularity of de-skilled slack art and "clutterfuck"—slap-dash cartoons pinned randomly to gallery walls; clumps of ephemera or manufactured goods spread haphazardly over museum floors; recycled cardboard and cheap packing-tape sculpture, or paintings made to appear the work of an amateur or Sunday painter—Swampwall was not art. Just compare my description of Swampwall to the way the contemporary American artist Tony Feher reputedly transforms "humble, 'forgettable' materials that he finds—bottles, jars, plastic soda crates ... into work that is rich with human emotion and fragile beauty."[2] None of the factory workers ever attended college; none had likely ever visited an art museum. Their collaborative frieze was only visible to those