



GREGORY SHOLETTE

DELIRIUM AND RESISTANCE

ACTIVIST ART AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

FOREWORD BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

EDITED BY KIM CHARNLEY

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Art on the Brink: *Bare Art* and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

Kim Charnley



Figure 2 The Illuminator/GULF, April 18, 2016. Gulf Labor Coalition, Global Ultra Luxury Faction (GULF), Occupy Museums and The Illuminator respond with a night-time guerrilla projection onto the Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 27, 2016 following the museum's refusal to discuss with these activist art groups the improvement of wages and working conditions for migrant laborers in Abu Dhabi, where a new Guggenheim museum has been in the works

(Image courtesy GULF/The Illuminator)

Over the past two decades, artist, critic and curator Gregory Sholette has produced an important body of theoretical work exploring the shifting relationship between contemporary art and politics. Sholette uses the concept “dark matter,” explored in his 2011 book of the same name, to describe the art world “from below”: taking the part of the imaginative and creative energies that are excluded from visibility because the art system requires a surplus of “failed” artists in order to function.¹ Although this art

system allows a gestural politics into contemporary art, it also regulates dark matter by excluding the most politically committed work. Dark matter, is therefore a “missing mass” or “surplus archive,” metaphors that are kept in play to allow Sholette’s analysis to range across critical frames of reference. Indeed, the instability of the imagery that Sholette finds in dark matter seems to be required by the bizarre logic that permeates neoliberal culture, where record numbers of museums are built, where art markets boom as financial markets crash, and where gentrification spirals out of control.

Activist art, for Sholette, is part of the dark matter of the art world: representing the labor of artists at the base of the art pyramid, far from the market and its penumbra of artistic celebrity. His essays, published in *Afterimage*, *Third Text*, *e-flux*, *Text zur Kunst* and *Mute*, have contributed to the many debates around the “social turn” in art since the 1990s, playing a key role in the resurgence of interest in art activism, artists’ collectives, and artistic labor. In this volume, the texts have been organized into three sections—Part I “Art World,” Part II “Cities without Souls” and Part III “Resistance”—each focusing on one aspect of the complex relationship between activist art and neoliberal capitalism. In each part, the essays are arranged in chronological order, culminating in reports upon the present, so that fault lines can be traced from the triumph of neoliberalism in the 1980s through to the Great Crash of 2008 and its aftershocks, which continue to reverberate through social and political institutions almost a decade later.

Rather than consider each text separately, this introduction will explore one line of thought from among the many suggestive possibilities presented by Sholette’s work. The central focus here will be *bare art*, the term that Sholette uses to examine the now banal obviousness of art’s subservience to the interests of capitalism. Sholette’s analysis is attuned to the crisis conditions that have emerged in a period when the revolution in communications technology makes possible new forms of resistance but also reveals the disfigured social relations of capitalism. As with dark matter, though with a different emphasis, *bare art* is art on the brink of tipping over into politics, forming a space in which to assemble resistance against the neoliberal capitalist order.

Throughout the neoliberal period, emergency conditions have existed on the margins of global capitalism, often deliberately created to allow rapacious exploitation of the commons. Now, however, after the crash of 2008, the austerity policies that sought to revive the ailing capitalist system are the proximate cause of the rise of the far right in Europe, the Tea Party in America, Brexit and of course the anarchic populism of the

successful presidential campaign waged by Donald Trump. Spending cuts have stripped back welfare provision, punishing the most vulnerable. Even where they are not directly affected, fear of downward mobility has taken hold in the middle class to the extent that unstable political energies have been unleashed. Crisis conditions now affect the institutions of liberal democracy in the wealthiest capitalist states. Political elites long to return to the politics of consensus, the listless indifference that was always the most important precondition for neoliberal reform. It seems unlikely that any such return will take place, but even in its weakened condition liberal democracy loathes and fears the left—Sanders, Corbyn, Podemos—far more than it does the xenophobic far right. This political conjuncture threatens to move in a frightening direction. Such is the terrain in which the political implications of *bare art* must be evaluated.

Activist Art and Neoliberal Culture

The emergence of neoliberal capitalism is usually dated to the mid 1970s, linked to the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1973, the market reforms and suppression of left-wing organizations that took place after the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile, and comparable economic restructuring that took place in New York, after the city became bankrupt in 1975.² It was not until the electoral success of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, however, that neoliberal economic policy was placed at the heart of a new hegemonic political project. It was also during the 1980s that the expansion of the art world gathered pace, which is why changes in art since this time, driven by speculative capital investment, are often cited as having been symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism. Under the influence of neoliberalism, contemporary art has become a global phenomenon, but it has also become incoherent, over-abundant, a proliferation of styles that are corrosive to any stylistic category. This art world assimilates critiques of the prevailing system that never quite amount to a qualitative transformation of it, but instead add material to the relentless expansion. Sholette's polemical engagement with the art world that was created by an influx of financial capital has been coruscating, and it is worth quoting him at length:

Contemporary art appears indiscriminate in appetite; a maw perpetually opened in uninterrupted consumption as vats of chemicals, butchered animals, dirty mattresses, mass-produced commodities, disposable packing tape, cast-off pieces of cardboard, even acts of coitus enter the

art world through its specialized showrooms in New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Paris (and, minus the sex, also now in Beijing, Shanghai, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi). Animal, vegetable, mineral: like a steady flock of coarse penitents, the more profane in outer appearance, the greater the artistic yield. For there seems to be one constant leveling everything entering this global cultural matrix: faith in the institutional art world's ability to drag some aesthetic meaning out like a confession from any object, person, or situation.³

How is this transformation of the art system related to the characteristics of neoliberal capitalism? This depends on the definition of neoliberalism that is employed. For a long period, art theorists have tended to assume that neoliberalism is a self-reinvention of capitalism, characterized by intensified exploitation and the "restoration of class power," in the terms first used by Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy and developed by David Harvey.⁴ Others have disputed this account because it seems to concede the ruling class an unprecedented mastery over the contradictions that grind away within the capitalist system. For the Marxist economist Andrew Kliman, for example, the term "neoliberalism" is misleading when it is used to suggest a new period of capitalist development, free from the contradictions that Marx first identified in the nineteenth century.⁵ Certainly, the era of neoliberalism, from the 1970s onward, can be understood equally well as one in which ruling elites have tried and failed to address crisis tendencies that first emerged in the 1970s, leading to successive financial and economic crises culminating in the Great Crash of 2008.

Sholette's essays make use of the concept of "neoliberalism," or the closely related ideas of "post-Fordism" or "enterprise culture," because they seem indispensable to the discussion of the transformation of art since the 1980s. The concept *bare art* strategically repurposes Giorgio Agamben's formulation "bare life" to speak of a moment in which the art system has revealed, in all its banality, the extent of its subservience to the interests of global power elites. The final text in this collection, "Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn" (chapter 11), examines the most recent effects of the transformation of art under neoliberalism. Sholette observes that the art market has, up to now at least, entirely avoided the effects of the crash of 2008. In fact, it has prospered: there is a boom in museum building and auction sales for contemporary art continue to rise. Even a few years ago, art dealers were reported to avoid revealing the commercial dimension of their practice for fear of undermining the value of their wares.⁶ Now they

openly refer to art as an asset class, a “hedge” or an alternative currency: the financialization of art is apparently complete.⁷ The art system, bloated by finance capital, has become delirious and cynically disenchanting. Art has been insulated against the crisis tendencies of neoliberal capitalism but also restructured to serve the interests of finance capital. After 2008, the art market showed itself to be immune to financial collapse, not least because it became a useful place to hedge investments, using the money pumped into the system by “quantitative easing.”

In some respects, art activism has prospered within this situation. “Social practice,” a term used to describe the various legacies of activist art, is increasingly accepted by the status quo, as Sholette notes in two of the essays in this book, “Art after Gentrification” and “Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn” (chapters 7 and 11). At the same time as prestigious art world prizes have been awarded to groups and individuals whose work might be described as social practice—for example the collective Assemble and the artist Theaster Gates, who were both honored in 2015—signs of class struggle have emerged within art, discussed in “Art after Gentrification” (chapter 7), an essay written for this volume.⁸ Artists’ groups such as WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) are working to address the low wages and poor working conditions that are endemic within the sector, while also linking this political action to struggles beyond art. Gulf Labor and GULF (Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction), operating in the same spirit, have undertaken a successful series of actions to highlight the exploitation of laborers working on the Guggenheim Museum’s new outpost in Abu Dhabi.

Crisis conditions are making themselves felt within art, even within artworks, but it is difficult to understand the kinds of changes that they may presage. Activist art is increasingly acknowledged as an important presence within politics, especially since the global insurrections of 2010/11. The “Movement of the Squares”—in Spain, Greece and then the international Occupy movement—was inspired by the “Arab Spring,” but also drew upon imaginative organizational methods and media interventions that are part of the art activist tradition.⁹ The discussion of *bare art* addresses this complex situation: an art world where the interweaving of art and capitalism is self-evident, at the same time as critical categories are distorted by the social upheaval that emerges behind their backs. Sholette has developed a compelling examination of the way that neoliberal crisis has permeated art by examining the contradictions that drive this instability. His aim is to

clarify the political stakes of art, in the hope that art, now that it is laid bare, might uncover new forms of solidarity.

Histories of Art Activism

Based in subversion on the one hand, and empowerment on the other, activist art operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture.

Lucy Lippard¹⁰

The emergence of the term “art activism” is closely linked to Lucy Lippard’s critical advocacy in the 1980s, though the category has since grown to accommodate new waves of radical practice, including tactical media and interventionist art.¹¹ Taken from “Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,” an essay published in 1984, the definition cited above is remarkable for its concise report of the stakes involved in activist art: to subvert existing cultural forms while simultaneously working to permeate culture with radical democratic principles. The Black Power movement, the anti-Vietnam counterculture and later radical feminism all had an important influence on collectives like the Art Workers’ Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. Subsequent New York-based art activists were also influenced by politicized post-conceptual art, exemplified by figures like Margaret Harrison and Conrad Atkinson, which emerged in Britain in the 1970s. Experimental art in Latin America was also important, having been politicized in the 1960s by struggles against reactionary dictatorship, most famously in the work *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is Burning), created by the Rosario group in 1968.

All of these forms of activist practice continue to have an influence on the present, as Sholette observes in the essay “Let’s Do it Again Comrades, Let’s Occupy the Museum” (chapter 2 in this volume). Activist art combines the ideals of participatory democracy, the community art tradition, as well as avant-garde experimentation in art and theater. For this reason, the label disrupts conventional art historical markers of style and periodization: art activism does not designate a movement located in a particular time and place, but instead connects struggles ever more widely, on the boundary between art and politics. It would be misleading to look for an origin of activist art in any one time or place, therefore. There can be no *history* of art activism, only *histories* of art activism, where art in its broadest anthropological sense is linked to political struggle.¹² For this reason, “art activism” has been regularly reinvented to describe the new forms of aesthetic protest

that have accompanied the alter-globalization movement from the 1990s up to the present.¹³ In short, art activism resists any linear model of cultural transmission, though strategies do return, often after long periods during which they are seemingly forgotten.

These historical peculiarities are captured in Sholette's work, which aims to amplify the challenge of art activism by inverting the "figure and ground" of art historical narrative.¹⁴ Some of the groups that Sholette writes about—Group Material, Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), Red-Herring and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change—are now increasingly incorporated into art historical revisions of the development of contemporary art. However, it is characteristic of Sholette's essays that they open out onto a strange cosmos of other names, some of them extremely obscure: Carnival Knowledge, Madame Binh Graphics Collective, the Royal Chicano Airforce, Syracuse Cultural Workers, La Raza Graphics workshop, Kearney Street workshop.¹⁵ These historical references resonate with the many groups who work in the present on the margins of artistic visibility, whose local struggles become stronger by being interconnected, even across time.

Having said all this, it is also true that for Sholette the early 1980s are a recurring point of reference, and it will form a starting point of sorts for the narrative explored here. This was the period in which he was a founding member of PAD/D, the collective that is discussed in a number of the early essays in this book. PAD/D was closely linked with Lippard's integral contributions to the flourishing of political art in New York, founded in response to a meeting advertised on the reverse of an invitation for an exhibition that she curated at Artist's Space in 1980. In retrospect, the vibrant activist scene that emerged around PAD/D, but also across the United States and the UK, as well as in Australia, appears to have been a late flowering of the radical legacy of the New Left, doomed to be overtaken by the rise of neoliberalism. At the time, however, it was to all appearances to be a "massing of energies," harnessing the discontent that had grown among the capitalist crises of the 1970s, and focusing it against the unpopular early Reagan and Thatcher administrations.¹⁶ The neoliberal onslaught against unions, resistant subcultures and state funding for the arts was yet to reach its full intensity; the legacy of the "left shift" among artists of the 1970s was still potent.¹⁷

PAD/D features in a number of the essays in this book, approached from different perspectives in the essays "Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance ..." and "Counting on Your Collective Silence" (chapters 4 and 8) for example. For Sholette, the group exemplifies tensions that affect art

activism, the precarious relationship to history and to the rise of gentrification that has been a key effect of the transformation of culture under neoliberalism. Although the archive of political art collected by the PAD/D has been held by the Museum of Modern Art since the collective disbanded in 1988, outside of Sholette's and Lippard's writings, the activities of PAD/D were largely overlooked in histories of 1980s art. This fate, to be buried in the heart of the institution and seemingly forgotten there, has certainly influenced Sholette's account of the subversive potential of dark matter as "an antagonistic force simultaneously inside and outside, like a void within an archive that is itself a kind of void."¹⁸ There are echoes in this enigmatic statement of Lippard's definition of art activism as a "Trojan horse," "within and beyond" high culture. However, Sholette's work responds to the complexity of a period in which capitalism has become increasingly subversive, and an art world in which the relation between inside and outside has in turn become more elusive.

From Dark Matter to Bare Art

Theorization of activist art practices not only has to avoid codification inside and outside the conventional canon, it also has to develop new concept clusters in the course of its emergence and undertake to connect contexts not previously noticed in the respective disciplines.

Gerald Raunig¹⁹

Bare art, like dark matter, is a "concept cluster" of the kind described by Gerald Raunig, one that allows the political stakes of the interpenetration of art and neoliberal capitalism to be examined. By approaching the art world "from below," Sholette develops a distinctive perspective on the task of criticism and its response to crisis. The early signs of a "crisis in criticism" were already evident in the early 1980s, as the influence of neoliberal policies began to be felt in the cultural sphere. Hal Foster's famous essay "Against Pluralism" was among the first to diagnose the early effects of speculative capitalism upon the art market. Since that time art has become increasingly protean, shot through with the capillary action of financialization, while at its boundaries myriad art projects blend into daily life. Pluralism, for Foster, described a position in which "no style or even mode of art is dominant ... for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and rendered impotent."²⁰ There were two causes of this malaise, he suggested at the time: "an art market confident of contemporary art as an investment" and "the

profusion of art schools—schools so numerous and isolate as to be unaware they constitute a new academy.”²¹

In his book *Anywhere or Not at All*, the philosopher Peter Osborne cites “Against Pluralism” as an early identification of the “constantly renewed, self-declared crisis” of criticism.²² For Osborne, the way out of this trap is to develop a more philosophically robust account of judgment in contemporary art, via a clarification of the complex temporal stakes involved in the description “contemporary” and an exploration of the way that the “transcategorical” forms of post-conceptual art might be made legible within criticism.²³ Osborne’s ultimate aim is to restore the philosophical cogency of art criticism, as a means of examining, through dialogue with artworks, the stakes involved in our present. Undoubtedly, this is a philosophically powerful project, but there are other implications that might be drawn from Foster’s remarks, which are prescient because they understand change within art to be driven by the interplay of demographic and institutional factors—resulting in increased numbers of artists—as well as by the altered demands of financial capitalism.

In *Dark Matter*, Sholette identifies the political significance of the “glut” of artists, which has steadily increased since Foster spoke of the proliferation of art schools in the early 1980s. The 2005 US census shows that over 2 million American citizens claimed “artist” as their primary occupation, and 300,000 as their secondary occupation. The 2010 census puts the figure at 2.1 million. As Sholette observes: “This makes the ‘job’ of being an ‘artist’ one of the largest single professions in America, just slightly smaller than those employed in the active-duty military.”²⁴ He cites figures that show the number of employees in the European Union cultural sector to be 5.8 million, more than the combined working population of Greece and Ireland. Of course, statistical categories can be deceptive, especially because the growth of service and cultural industries has created professions that are difficult to classify. In the US census results, the terms “artists” and “fine artists” are used to describe both designers and animators. Nonetheless, Sholette makes a powerful polemical point, which focuses attention on the changing role of cultural production under neoliberalism.

In the words of art historian Carol Duncan, whose work is a key influence on Sholette, art organizes “vast amounts of artistic labor” to “spill most of it down the drain in order to get a little of it to show in a few places for the benefit of a few people.”²⁵ The violence of this system has the potential to politicize artists, just as it shows the deep connections between art and the capitalist system. Sholette’s interpretation of this argument is anchored in a simple sociological observation: “failed” artists form the most important

audience for museums and galleries, fill administrative roles within the art world and purchase art supplies. At the same time, the “failed” artist represents all those who judge their success in terms different from those dictated by the mainstream art world: the art activists who turn art to political ends. Finally, and most importantly, the reserve of dark matter contains the suppressed fantasy and creativity of the working class, those who are both economically exploited and excluded from acquiring protocols of elite taste, as discussed in “Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-public Sphere” (chapter 9 in this volume).

Sholette’s examination of *bare art* begins from the same problematic as Osborne and Foster, but refuses the idea that problems manifested in the art world can be addressed from within art criticism, however thoroughly it may be reformed. The transformation of art is too fundamental to be resolved in this way, because art can no longer be held apart from the forces that seek to integrate it into neoliberal capitalism. This does not spell the end of art’s critical potential: rather, that critical potential now derives from the contradictions within capitalism that have been exposed by the rapid expansion of the art system. Sholette’s criticism, rather than responding to discrete works, identifies, through the precarious working conditions of artists under post-Fordist capitalism, the lineaments of a political subject that might come to resist it, alongside new forms of class struggle. Art plays an important part in these debates because it has become the model for flexible, high-reward labor under neoliberalism, where a small number of creative workers experience enlightened working conditions.²⁶ For the majority, however, the esteem in which artists are sometimes held becomes compensation for a precarious existence.

The complicity between art and neoliberal capitalism becomes the pivot of Sholette’s analysis: “Is it possible that this enterprise culture has so de-radicalized art that something approaching an historic compromise or *détente* is taking shape whereby artists gain improved social legitimacy within the neoliberal economy while capital gains a profitable cultural paradigm within which to promote a new work ethic of creativity and personal risk-taking?”²⁷ Artists tend to be inured to uncertain cycles of income, and high levels of self-exploitation, spurred on by the gratification of creative autonomy and the possibility, though never the promise, of reward. The dissembling and ruthless competition that is encouraged by art’s hierarchical structures has been identified and criticized by politicized artists since at least the 1970s.²⁸ For ideologists of neoliberalism, art’s highly motivated, individualistic and unregulated labor offers a compelling model for new forms of work in the service sector. The cultural theorist Andrew