

Activating the Archive From Below at a Moment of Cultural and Political Crisis

Gregory Sholette

The delirium and crisis of capitalism – as well as of art – is now the delirium and crisis of liberal democracy. From India and Turkey to the Philippines and the Gulf region, from Hungary to Austria and Italy, from the US to parts of Central America and the UK, it appears that both developed and developing nations are being equally afflicted with a global contagion of nationalistic and authoritarian sentiment grounded in fear, hatred, and above all, pessimism about any government's or any politician's promise to provide a stable and secure future. Neoliberalism's postponement of crisis through consumer credit expansion has run its course. In its place we find a narrative invoking wealthy male leadership, military capacity and warnings of retribution towards one's perceived competitors as well as certain targeted minorities, be they other states, refugees, precarious and paperless migrant workers or even the disaffected surplus populace of one's own nation. On the positive side, the proponents of this toxic worldview who may previously have been hiding in the bushes have no more need for camouflage. The stakes for liberal civil societies have become much clearer and more urgent.¹

Meanwhile, art's mythical quarantine from everyday life, already made improbable under the conditions of what I call *bare art*, is clearly no longer viable in light of the gestating political and economic crisis we now face. A 'bare art world' has emerged, one in which art's mystique and romance have boiled away, and where its imagined historical autonomy from the

1 | Some parts of this essay initially appeared in the Postscript and other sections of my (2017) book *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*.

market place has collapsed to such a degree that the laws of supply and demand can be invoked about cultural production without irony. We see this nakedness at work when artworks are blatantly transformed into an investment instrument, making our nostalgic belief that creative work is inherently antithetical to capital vanish into thin air. As one senior manager of the global financial consulting firm Deloitte enthusiastically puts it, when the complete monetization of art takes hold its:

“financial activities will have ripple effects on other sectors of the economy. This evolution should create a new era for the art markets and for the benefit of the society as a whole by fostering culture, knowledge and creativity” (Picinatti di Tocco 2010: 23).

However, this state of cultural ultra-reification is not the end of art’s subversive potential. This process of reification has both positive and negative effects. For example, being subjected to the delusion that capitalism is an ahistorical inevitability is a negative deformation caused by reification, but confronting our bare art world without illusions is a potentially positive way of utilizing objectification, a chance to see our conditions clearly. The only catch is that the ‘real’ we perceive so plainly is itself delirious. In short, we have entered what Rebecca Bryant calls the “uncanny present”, which is a shorthand way to say that we seem to be experiencing the present as if it were unfamiliar and the future as a mere repetition of the present – known and unknown, anticipated and unanticipated, all at the same time (Bryant 2016: 27). This surreal feeling of displacement in an ersatz reality was neatly summed up by journalist Matthew Yglesias: “We’re living through a weird and disturbing dream and we don’t seem able to wake up” (Yglesias 2018).

That said, from this moment forwards, culture no longer serves as a salve for nervous souls. Art’s freedom – as long as it lasts – its peculiar license to speak up, to misbehave, mock and imitate reality, to blur genres and disciplines, must be deployed to prevent the normalization of the emerging authoritarian paradigm. And if it is blocked, it must then move underground to continue its mission as what I call a form of “artistic dark matter” (Sholette 2010).

Artistic dark matter refers to the marginalized and systematically underdeveloped aggregate of creative productivity that nonetheless reproduces the material and symbolic economy of high art. Think of the way

the majority of art school graduates will, ten years after graduating, find themselves working as exhibition installers or art fabricators, rather than living off the sales of their own art (that is, if they are still making art at all). Or similarly, the way countless collectives and interventionist art practitioners add energy and ideas to the overall art world from the margins, while only a few ever gain recognition within the white citadels of that same world. Instead, most participants in high art – the sphere of museums and galleries and international biennials – make up a necessarily redundant economy of artistic labor. Think of this as a residual agency that operates out of sight and from below, somewhere within a surplus archive of artistic hopes, possibilities, failures and alternative practices. I call that surplus archive, the *archive from below*. How this underground archive is continually developed and expressed against the force of repressive powers is central to my argument here, just as it is essential to the development of socially-engaged art practices that can offer any counter-culture to the growing authoritarian mainstream culture.

NEOLIBERALISM, COMPLICITY AND RESISTANCE

How art got to this juncture is politically and art-historically significant. In the 1990s, a fresh wave of activist art and cultural collectivism emerged to immediately challenge many key assumptions held by an earlier generation of politically engaged artists still linked to the rebellions of May 1968. Dovetailing with the rise of the counter, or ‘alt’ globalization movement (not to be confused with the more recent term ‘Alt-Right’), this new cultural activism was less concerned with demystifying ideology than creatively disrupting it. Unlike most of the critical art practices of the 1970s and 1980s, in which dominant representational forms were systematically analyzed through a variety of methods ranging from Semiotics to Marxism, Feminism and Psychoanalysis, the new approach plowed directly and some would say gleefully into what Guy Debord described as “the society of the spectacle” in 1967 (Debord 1994). Groups such as RTmark, The Yes Men, Yomango, Electronic Disturbance Theater, Nettime, and Critical Art Ensemble, among other artists’ collectives, took full advantage of increasingly widespread and affordable digital communication networks in order to practice what was often referred to as “tactical media”, a concept inspired as much by the Zapatista rebellion as it was by the Situationist In-

ternational. According to key theorists of tactical media David Garcia and Geert Lovink, the practice involved the appropriation of cheap, available technologies for the purpose of engendering political resistance amongst socially disenfranchised populations.²

What was unique to these 1990s antagonistic practices was the way technology-based artists took advantage of post-Fordist capital's distributed communicative networks in order to generate acts of disruption within its very structure. Tactical media did this by mobilizing those 'surplus' practices and practitioners of the archive from below. Though only informally structured, this 'secondary economy' of informal dark matter productivity functioned in cellular fashion, much like a social club or rock band. Sometimes it even established its own ersatz institutions, or mockstitutions, with intentionally unstable public identities (Robert 2015). This marginal agency was also structurally entangled with, or parasitic upon, the existing mainstream art world and mass media sector as well as (to some degree) their cultural markets, hence the term 'secondary economy'. In this way, tactical media practitioners diverged even further from the somewhat more hierarchically structured art activism of the 1960s-80s, with its vision of an entirely autonomous political cultural sphere.³ Instead, the cultural interventionists of the 1990s and 2000s championed small-scale, in-between spaces and ephemeral gestures for their work, often illegally infiltrating public squares, corporate websites, libraries, flea markets, housing projects and local political machines in ways that were not intended to recover a specific meaning or use-value for either art world discourse or private interests. And yet, this emerging interventionist culture also revealed certain definite similarities with the anarcho-entrepreneurial spirit of the neoliberal enterprise, including its highly plastic sense of organizational identity and a romantic distrust of comprehensive administrative structures, a propensity that simultaneously energized and deflated Occupy Wall Street (OWS) for instance.⁴

2 | For a guide to Tactical Media in the visual arts see Thompson/Sholette 2014.

3 | See for example the 1982 mission statement of art Political Art Documentation/Distribution, "PAD [/D] can not serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art" (Sholette 2011).

4 | Writing brilliantly about the rise of neoliberalism and Alt-Globalization politics before the emergence of Occupy Wall Street or Arab Spring was theorist Brian

WHITHER TACTICAL MEDIA?

Since roughly the second decade of the 21st century, contemporary social-ly engaged art has taken shape in the wake of these widespread, entrepreneurial tendencies, which coincide with the normalization and mainstreaming of the Internet as a full-on capitalist marketplace. Therefore, what I am describing as the raw condition of bare art is a state of affairs fully entwined with the dominance of a hyper-financialized and spectacularized society. Paradoxically, bare art also generates an increasingly politicized art world, perhaps because its participants cannot ignore the obvious collusion between art and capital or the fragility of the social reality that it has sprung from. This is the greatest contradiction that activist artists must now come to terms with at the theoretical, political, and artistic levels: How to invent, or how to reinvent, a partisan art praxis when deregulated capitalism has become a dead weight, and its social and political forms are imploding across the globe. We might think of this as an *urguard*, a self-appointed primitive rebelliousness that denounces contemporary society while purporting to belong to the cutting edge of the future. We have seen this outlook on the anarchist Left, but today witness it welling up within the far right. This far-right version is typified by raw and frequently barbaric language and opinion, including promoting racialized privilege and anti-feminist ideologies. These affects are then amplified by sophisticated communication networks (ironically a technology that is very much a part of the contemporary world being denounced) to generate an eerie, yet also farcical echo of the early-20th century avant-garde movement known as Italian Futurism, which infamously celebrated militarism, technology and machismo. As one of its key figures insisted, Futurists would be defined by their “aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist”.⁵

Holmes (2011), whose essays such as *The Flexible Personality*, substantially inform my analysis here.

5 | Excerpt from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's, *The Manifesto of Futurism* (1909). For an extended discussion about this assertion see my essay “Confronting Fascist Banalities on the Centenary of the Futurist Manifesto”, in which I propose that Trump and the Alt-Right are not genuine cultural radicals, but instead a “bathetic, bargain basement version of Futurism redux, more like an *astroturf* reinterpretation

Perhaps this paradox is most apparent if we contrast the surreal authoritarian right-wing culture that surrounds the current US president, with the spread of a generalized oppositional activism that takes on public forms of creative resistance such as legions of ‘Pussyhats’ or a giant inflatable caricature of Donald Trump floating above thousands of London protesters during his visit there in July 2018.

Even before Brexit, and the September 2016 US elections, or even President Trump’s startling travel ban and various videos showing police brutality towards unarmed African Americans, we had already witnessed swarms of bodies mobilized with the assistance of modern communications technology erupt into public spaces, actively interrupting automobile traffic flows and deregulating barricades and ordinances that segregate those who have access to visibility from those who have little or none. Think of groups such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), Occupy Wall Street (OWS) the Indignados in Spain, or the so-called Arab Spring and other self-organized forms of resistance, all of which are evidence that what I call marginalized dark matter resistance is no longer dark – that invisible peoples, labor and networks have been demanding recognition for several decades. After Brexit and Trump, these forces have become even more emphatic, and yet more than one paradox arises here. Along with the social antagonism that fully networked culture fosters with its panoptic vulnerability to surveillance and self-obsessive tendencies (such as sharing one’s privacy with thousands of others as well as corporate marketing specialists), there are also no barricades or prohibitions that prevent assemblies of authoritarian and white supremacist bodies from similarly using networked culture to assemble in an effort to eclipse (or to affirm) their own dark matter obscurity. And this is precisely what we have seen over the past few years across the globe, at an accelerating pace.

Anti-abortion activists, Tea-Party Loyalists, right-wing Brexiteers, Movement for a Better Hungary, Serbian ultra-nationalists, and of course Alt-Right Trump supporters are taking full advantage of inexpensive media tech and tactics borrowed from the playbook of 1960s counter-culture to assert their ideology within our uncanny present. Nonetheless, what these typically rigid bodies framed by authoritarian doctrine cannot conceal is their fidelity to dogmatic first principles and fundamentally un-

tion of the notorious avant-garde faction than a “roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire” to cite Marinetti again.

democratic ideas of racial sovereignty. Whether it is a Tea Party Loyalist dressed as George Washington or a neo-National Socialist wearing a 1930's swastika armband, the Right's mimesis is administered by a second-rate, Hollywood version of history filled with cardboard cut-outs of a highly mediated and phantasmagoric notion of the past. In contrast, movements such as BLM, OWS, 15-M/Los Indignados, and Take the Square celebrate a critical plurality and the essential uncertainty of an archive from below: a communal repository of innumerable attempts at resistance against authority, patriarchy, capitalism, now and then made concrete through the collective labors of mass protest, no matter how motley, ungainly or informal in appearance.

CLASH OF 21ST CENTURY REBEL CULTURES

Thus, today, two essentially contrasting dissident impulses confront one another, and in turn produce contrasting corporeal, visual and narrative public manifestations. One, exemplified by the Alt-Right, understands history and 'whiteness' as a rigid and unchanging guarantee of their own longed-for political dominance. That they dress this belief up in a narrative about white people as victims of liberal conspiracy, or even appropriate the hoodies and bandanas of Antifa or hipster fashion, only conceals the fact that neo-fascist acolytes are fundamentally attached to the construction of a homogeneous identity – one might even say to narcissistic self-representation – in ways that shallowly pastiche pop culture.⁶

The other rebel impulse recognizes the lacuna of the archive as its inheritance: a non-legacy in which the long-term struggle from below has no inventory to check-off, and no authoritative catalog of ideal prototypes to emulate. This elliptical uncertainty opens up a crucial space for an entirely different social horizon, one that not only resists the mainstreaming of far-right politics, but that can also situate its collective resistance within a broader socio-political struggle against inequality and exploitation. Thus, the surplus *archive from below* is about the politics of memory, as opposed to the memory of politics that a Right-leaning imaginary posits as a history of obedience and servility towards authority and mythical origins, such

6 | An excellent source of detailed reporting on the Alt-Right is found in Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies* (2017).

as whiteness. By embracing this overabundant surplus – this dark matter archive from below with its ambitions, meanderings, resentments, and uncertainties – rather than limiting access to it, or curating it into one or other official cannon, that critical openness has become the very quality that holds out hope for a radically heterodox socially-engaged art practice.

The task that stands before the forces of progressive culture involves *not* eliminating ambiguity and ellipsis from the historical imagination in the way we see neo-fascists and the Alt-Right push for. And perhaps this defence is *the* pivotal task, one that every progressive artist is called upon to carry out, lest, as Walter Benjamin somberly maintained, “not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious” (Benjamin 1969). Therefore, what is called for is a grammar of cultural dissent which does not turn innocently away from the chaotic and delirious state of contemporary social realities, or the contradictions of bare art, but recognizes this moment, this very dangerous moment, as ultimately historical in nature, and therefore also as a time and conflict that will one day be displaced, as all such moments are. One weapon in this battle is the difficult and continuous collective development of the archive from below, that activated space of surplus memories, marginalized hopes, as well as defeats, that the dead have passed to us, and we must pass on to future generations.

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