

WHAT MATTERS

Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture

By Gregory Sholette

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In the past forty years, neoliberalism has radically transformed the place of art in globalizing societies. From a distinct set of art practices in specific locations, focused on a small number of international centers for art, has emerged a far more extensive set of “art worlds.” These art worlds range from a seemingly endless supply of biennales, art fairs, and global galleries, to the proliferation of both local and national art galleries and activities. While the

new omnipresence of “contemporary” art has been widely documented by art historians and critics, this place of creativity in the global economy has not been addressed by those versed in art and visual culture. Into this gap steps Gregory Sholette with an important new book that offers a counter-history of the rise of the global art world from the perspective of a politically engaged artist and activist. This book is far more than a conventional art history; it aspires to be a political economy of creativity under late capitalism.

The “dark matter” of the title is a metaphor borrowed from physics, in which the “dark matter” of the universe, invisible as it is, is nonetheless indispensable to its coherence. For Sholette, the invisible portion of the global creative economy is equally necessary, ranging from as-yet-unsuccessful artists to the fabricators who make work for “name” artists, all the way to those of us buying materials at art stores or attending exhibitions and gallery shows.

Sholette draws on thirty years of experience in art collectives and other forms of political art. His book details some of that experience while offering a set of analytic principles to measure the irresistible rise of art and the creative economy. In addition to his own work as an artist, Sholette has co-authored two well-known volumes: one with Blake Stimson, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (2007), and the other with Nato Thompson, *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (2004).

Neither cover nor title are altogether representative of the importance of this book. The blurbs and subtitle suggest a book wholly preoccupied with the anxieties of the present crisis. In fact, Sholette offers us an archival history of art *in and as* activism, drawing on his own experiences in New York City and Chicago, but with an impressive awareness of related activity worldwide. *Dark Matter* is a fascinating history of radical art collectives from the Art Workers Coalition of the 1970s, to Political Art Documentation/Distribution in the 1980s, REPOhistory in the 1990s, and a range of current groups such as Temporary Services, Yomango, and Critical Art Ensemble. Anyone with an interest in this work will learn a great deal from Sholette’s account, well-illustrated with striking images often taken from his own archives. The book contains an abundance of intriguing detail. For example, we learn of the Mexican performance group Proceso Pentágono “staging mock kidnappings and automobile accidents on the streets of Mexico City as a public protest against the rise of a generic and bureaucratic urban modernism” (55). One thinks at once of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Amores Perros* (2000), which centers around automobile accidents and the legacies of the failed Mexican revolution of 1968—as well as the kidnapping crisis of recent years. *Dark Matter* is full of such provocative interactions.

Still, this is a much more significant project than the recuperation of fascinating details about radical collectivity. Drawing on Italian Marxist theories of autonomy, Sholette shows that neoliberalism is “wholly dependent upon the presence/absence of that which it excludes, an ever-present oversupply of cultural production that is mechanically encircled and expelled” (40). There is a systemic need to overproduce culture, whose capacity to “mobilize excess” is precisely what “makes it an attractive model” (43). The “shadow economy” of cultural labor—all those adjuncts with PhDs, actors working as waitstaff, classical musicians performing at children’s birthday parties—sustains and stabilizes the “high culture industry” from which it is excluded (44).

Far from being a pessimist, however, Sholette discerns in a range of new cultural practices the old goal of turning “art into life” (106)—that is to say, the attempt to erase the distinctions between culture as a commodity and the practices of everyday life. At some points, he seems to suggest that the “dark matter” is “coagulating” (40), perhaps offering a different social formation. His conclusion points more to “flashes of defiance” (188), ranging from workplace resistance to artistic performance and interventions. Almost as soon as *Dark Matter* was published, the current revolutionary wave began spreading across North Africa and the Middle East—a refusal by youth to maintain the precariousness of neocolonial labor under dictatorial regimes, making use of networked tools and defiant street performance. This is just what Sholette is hoping for, what his book suggests is possible, and is perhaps the best testament to the truth of *Dark Matter*.

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