

Twelve notes on collectivism and dark matter

Gregory Sholette *

I

“As a set of rules that define the events of discourse, the archive is situated between *Langue*, as the system of construction of possible sentences—that is, of possibilities of speaking—and the *corpus* that unites the set of what has been said, the things actually uttered or written. The archive is thus the mass of the non-semantic inscribed in every meaningful discourse as a function of enunciation; it is the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech.”

Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz.
The Witness and the Archive, 144.

II

From every swipe of your plastic debit card to the surveillance of so-called public spaces, an administered collectivity hides everywhere in plain sight. Every ‘I’ conceals an involuntary “belongingness,” every gesture a statistic about your purchasing power, education level, and the market potential of your desire. Effectively we are collectivized already. The only question now is: should we accept this type of involuntarily, serialized collectivity, or actively seek another? This is not merely one strategy to ponder among others. is a fundamental issue at every level of lived experience today within what Giles Deleuze aptly termed *the society of control*.

III

Meanwhile, vibrant popular images of collective resistance abound if we take the time to look for them. Think of filmmaker George Romero’s impromptu band of zombie killers in Dawn of the Dead, or the multiethnic multitude defending Zion in the Wachowski brother’s Matrix films, or perhaps most accurate of all cinematic portrayals of collectivism the 1999 comedy Mystery Men based on the Dark Horse comic book, “It doesn't matter what we call ourselves. We know who we are.” It is the archetypal gang of oddball renegades men and women thrown together by necessity who work collectively to defeat an overwhelming, and typically unnatural enemy.

Within the plastic arts however, collectivism resembles the creative equivalent of dark matter—the 96% of unknown mass that makes up the visible universe and keeps it from flying apart. At once figuratively amorphous and pragmatically indispensable collectivism appears abject when compared to properly framed and institutionally discernable forms of art. Yet its indispensability functions at several levels.

IV

Structurally, as a *corpus* or archive of all previously realized group practices, collectivism the archive surrounds every individual articulation. Each new claim of authorial originality and every artistic gesture is dependent on the persistence of its shadowy trace. (In Agamben’s terms it is the dark margin that encircles all concrete acts of enunciation.)

V

At the level of narrative, whether calling for the radical elimination of individual authorship as many early 20th century collectives asserted, or through the embodiment of diverse subject positions and multiple aesthetic vernacular as in the case of many contemporary art collectives, self-organized, collective practice forms a representational boundary as well as a specific horizon from within which conventional cultural narratives are constructed and beyond which they break apart.

VI

Finally, in pragmatic terms, collectivism, and by extension all species of dark creativity including amateur and informal art that by definition or inclination remain invisible to institutional high culture, provides the unseen but necessary verification that specific artistic acts are more than merely idiosyncratic occurrences. This is so no matter how unique or autonomous the accomplishment appears to be. And in this sense the archive of creative dark matter evinces the necessary presence of an artistic *Langue*, but in the broadest possible sense: a preexisting set of visual-organizational rules that always already threatens to radiate away from the narrow field of recognized artistry and dissipate into the uneven heterogeneity of the social sphere itself. This link between the *corpus* of collectivism and the generalized creativity of the multitude also explains why so many self-defined artistic collectives—from the Constructivists to Situationists, from Fluxus to Las Agencias— have called for the dissolution of art directly into everyday life.

VII

Lacking neither a distinct history, nor an adequate explanatory theory, collective artistic activity nevertheless bears down on the familiar cannon of proper names, stylistic innovations and formal typologies that populate the institutional art world. As part of the art world's structural shadow realm collectivism invisibly transforms the culture industry, its discourse and even its fondness for categorical and ultimately collectible brands of discrete cultural products. Yet because collective activity is in the first and last instance driven by social formations, economic circumstances and occasionally even organized political movements that are external to art world interests the occasional appearance of collectivism within art historical discourse typically falls within two broad representational modes: the curious anecdote or the vestigial stain. That is to say, either collective art making serves as a backdrop or way station for individual artists whose careers have permitted them to mature beyond participation in group activity. Or, far less decorously, collectivism is demonized. Its reoccurring expression within artistic circles viewed as a remnant of the early 20th Century avant-garde's affiliation with European totalitarian politics. Still nothing so volatile as self-organized human associations, especially those populated by artists and intellectuals, could possibly remain fixed in time, nostalgically recapitulating past ideological dogma. Instead, collective artistic practice is as complex and unpredictable as the social and aesthetic forces upon which it is contingent. In recent years the transformation within collective activity is so dramatic as to represent a virtual paradigm shift.

VIII

Contemporary artistic collectivism is typically characterized by its aesthetic informality, political anarchism and its performative approach to the expression of collective identity

itself. In practice, its inter-disciplinary approach is also frequently interventionist. Examples of this include the creation of works that tactically infiltrate 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. Indeed, many of these activities operate using economies based on pleasure, generosity and the free dispersal of goods and services, rather than the construction of objects and product scarcity that are essential to art world economics. *But above all else what the activist art collective makes tangible, and no doubt what is so anathema to the art market and its discourse, is the capacity for self-regulation over one's production and distribution.* Certainly this capacity is available and suppressed within all productive activity. Understandably, it is also viewed as a danger to system regulators who recognize the promise collective self-determination has held out to each successive generation.

IX

What can be said of dark matter in general is that either by choice or circumstance it displays a degree of autonomy from the critical and economic structures of the art world and moves instead in-between its meshes. But this independence is not risk free. Increasingly inexpensive technologies of communication, replication, display and transmission that allow informal and activist artists to network with each other have also made the denizens of this shadowy world ever more conspicuous to the very institutions that once sought to exclude them. In short, dark matter is no longer as dark as it once was. Yet, neither the art world nor enterprise culture can do little more than immobilize specific instances of this shadow activity by converting it into a fixed consumable or lifestyle branding.

X

For example groups such as Forcefield, Derraindrop, Paper Rad, Gelatin, The Royal Art Lodge, HobbypopMuseum whose names flicker impishly across the otherwise dull screen of the contemporary art world invoke not so much the plastic arts as the loopy cheer of techno music and its nostalgia for a make-believe 1960s epitomized by LSD, free love and day-glo -- instead of civil rights, feminism and SDS. As critic Alison M. Gingeras explains to us this new collectivity is not at all solemn, it is "insouciant." It eschews the "sociopolitical agenda associated with collective art making" and reflects "a juvenile disregard for historical veracity." But why this sudden rush to revamp the political rebelliousness of group artistic practice? To re-package it as "tribal," "exuberant," "insouciant"? Because when compared to almost every previous collective and many new ones, the recent crop of gallery sponsored art *groupettes* is unmistakably a product of *enterprise culture*. As put forward by historian Chin-tao Wu enterprise culture is the near total privatization of everything up to and including that which once stood outside or against the reach of capitalism including avant-garde and radical art. If communal activity, collaboration, egalitarian cooperation run directly opposite individuated forms of individualistic greed enterprise culture will not aim to overtly repress this tendency, but instead seek a way of branding and packaging contradiction in order to sell it back to us. No surprise then that this new collectivity is

organized around fashion with its members sharing “ nothing more than vacant facial expressions and good taste in casual clothes.”¹

XI

Cut the power and storm the museum. Barricade its entrance with Richard Serra’s sculpture. Cover its windows with Gerhard Richter paintings. Transform the sculpture garden into an organic produce cooperative; refurbish the boardroom to serve as a day care facility; place the cafeteria under the supervision of homeless people. Yet, in spite of this hypothetical uprising it is apparent that institutional power persists. Like gravity issuing from a collapsed star it draws us into the very orbit of what we once sought to escape because despite our protestations we continue to love it –or at least the unselfish image it projects– more than it could ever love itself. For no matter how imperfectly actually existing museums fulfill their social obligations, the symbolic position of the museum remains inseparable from notions of public space, democratic culture, and citizenship itself. Nevertheless, exploring what a liberated, post-revolutionary museum might look like, how it would function, and what its revitalized role within the local community would be is an approach often taken up today by younger, socially committed artists who have grown apprehensive of the virtually conventional form of institutional critique. Collectives that operate within the contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere, openly and playfully expose its imaginary fault-lines dividing private from public, individual from collective, and the light from the dark matter. But while such groups offer a important models for cultural resistance, it would be disingenuous to suggest such collectives and dark creativity can provide a totally satisfactory solution to the quest for freedom now or in the future. Instead, these groups and practices are characterized by their discontinuous nature, by repetitions and instability, by tactics rather than long-range strategies. What is effective in the short run remains untested on an extended scale. And that is the point we appear to be approaching rapidly.

XII

To paraphrase the cosmologists: there is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to cultural radicals than that of the "dark matter. ”

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¹ Some of this is cited from the author’s letter to the editor “Calling Collectives,” in the Summer issue of *Artforum*, 2004.