Dark Matter Games

An Interview with Gregory Sholette, Kuba Szreder and Noah Fischer by Marco Baravalle (S.a.L.E. Docks)


Artists, activists and researchers animated a program of interventions in the public space, round-tables and activities that responded to the urgency of focusing on the political economy of the contemporary art system, on the gender issues linked to it (issues of discrimination on one side, but also the emerging of powerful practices against any normativity on the other), on the effect of big art events on the urban space and, last but not least, on the need to create new models of cultural production that are autonomous from the neoliberal logic.

Here we publish the interview Marco Baravalle, a member of S.a.L.E.-Docks, conducted with three Dark Matter Games participants: Gregory Sholette, Kuba Szreder and Noah Fischer.

Gregory Sholette and Noah Fischer are New York based artists, the former suggested the metaphorical use of the term Dark Matter to describe the functioning of the art world, the latter presented DebtFair, a collective project by Occupy Museums that addresses the effects, the nature and the consequences of debt on the life and work of thousands of U.S. and Puerto Rican artists. The other researcher interviewed is the Polish curator Kuba Szreder, who co-curated the project of the Dark Matter Super Collider (https://www.darkmattergames.net/single-post/2017/04/23/Give-us-more-reclaiming-creative-surplus-Open-call-to-build-a-dark-matter-super-collider-at-SaLE-Docks-Venice), an open call for the construction of a permanent collection of expressions of dark matter (activist, queer, unconventional...) creativity.

Marco Baravalle: On May 12th, in the context of Dark Matter Games you launched your new book titled Delirium and Resistance. Here you claim that a new cultural economy emerged parallel to a new global political phase within these times of crisis, a phase marked by an apparent rupture with the neoliberal order (you mention both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as examples). You call this cultural economy the "bare art
"world". What do you mean by that and in what way this definition develops your previous reflection about dark matter?

Gregory Sholette: In my 2010 book *Dark Matter* I addressed the fascination that the arts held for neoliberal enterprise culture, arguing that this attraction was not entirely based on the “imaginative out-of-the-box thinking” or “restless flexibility” of cultural workers, qualities cited by most analysts for capitalism’s cultural turn, but it also involved:

the way the art world as an aggregate economy successfully manages its own excessively surplus labor force, extracting value from a redundant majority of “failed” artists who in turn apparently acquiesce to this disciplinary arrangement. There could be no better formula imaginable for capitalism 2.0 as it moves into the new century. ¹

Thus extrapolating from, but also not completely agreeing with Boltanski and Chiapello’s “artistic critique” argument, in which capital appears to assimilate the social and affective aspects of art’s Bohemian-inspired refutation of capital itself, I argued
instead it was the extraction of value from a large surplus population that drew
neoliberalism towards artistic production as much as, or more than any other social
factor. This integration of art and capitalism is more than a new and inverted work
ethic in other words. It brazenly illustrates capital’s fundamental need for constant
growth, a process analogous to the unfettered compound growth that is inherent
to all capitalist forms of economic organization. Simply put, capital, David Harvey
writes, requires an ever-expanding output of social labor, “a zero-growth capitalist
economy is a logical and exclusionary contradiction. It simply cannot exist. This
is why zero growth defines a condition of crisis for capital.” But this process also
means attempting to integrate the so-called dark matter or archival surplus agency
marginalized by the mainstream art world system.

The concept of dark matter creativity focuses on three type of cultural producers
with differing relationships to the disciplinary regulation of high art, including:

1.) Professionally trained “pre-failed” art students whose academic education most
likely emphasized subversive “avant-garde practices,” while in reality preparing
them to be part of an apparatus of reproduction in which the majority of artists
serve the multi-billion dollar industry as museum-goers, magazine subscribers, art
supply consumers, part-time art instructors or as poorly paid gallery assistants, art
handlers, fabricators and so forth.

2.) Informal, amateur, “non-professional” zinesters, live action fantasy role-play
gamers (LARP), “craftavists” knitters, devotees of Goth, Punk, and Do It Yourself
(DIY) sub-cultures, fan filmmakers and cyber-geeks who are engaged with creative
practices focused on pleasure, fantasy and networked communalism, and therefore
seemingly in conflict with both the career artist as well as the work ethic of capital-
ism and its markets.

3.) A smaller number of artists and artist groups, both professional and also infor-
mal, who explicitly link their artistic practices to radical social or political transfor-
mation and therefore have traditionally been positioned at the outermost margins
of the mainstream art world, its history and discourse, and most of all its political
economy.

These three marginal forces resemble what astrophysicists describe as dark matter
(and also dark energy): an gravitational force of unknown makeup that makes up
as much as ninety-five percent of the known universe. Without the weight of this
“missing mass” the visible cosmos would have dispersed into space long ago. Like
its astronomical namesake, creative dark matter can be said to makes up the bulk of
the artistic activity that is produced in contemporary societies. 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. Yet, just as the astrophysical
The universe is dependent on its dark matter, so too is the art world dependent on its
dark energy. This is a phenomenon sometimes called the “missing mass problem.” The
question my thesis asks therefore is this: if celestial dark matter is the principal
anchor that slows down cosmic expansion, what role then do redundant artistic
producers play in stabilizing the art world?

All of these questions are compounded by the current state of the multi-billion dol-
lar art world industry. As the American based artist Caroline Woolard and member
of the group bfa.mfa.phd asks with incredulity “What is a work of art in the age of
$120,000 art degrees?”

Whether or not today post-Fordist capitalism now resembles art, or visa versa,
virtually everything we thought we knew about "serious" culture has been peeled
away with astonishing force, leaving behind a raw, and in some ways vulnerable
thing. Today artists are simply another worker, no more or less. Following Gior-
ggio Agamben's notion of bare life we might best describe this new mise en scène as
simply “bare art.” It is a new cultural reality in which art's celebrated autonomy and
exceptionality have vanished, and in which artistic production has become fully
congruent with the political and economic emergency that marks our contempor-
aneous present. Claustrophobic, tautological, our bare art world is our bare art world
is our bare art world. It emerges in successive and accelerating predicaments that
keep pace with capital's ever-quickening swerves from crisis to crisis. But this does
not mean all artists like it, or that all are willing to yield to the harsh realities bare
art imposes on their practice or their lives.

What I believe we are witnessing under these conditions of bare art is also hap-
pening within the ongoing capitalist crises more broadly. It is capital's aggregating
compulsion in overdrive. Our world – both art and everyday world – is evolving
into an accelerating demand-machine that seeks to extricate ever more margin-
al and dispersed gains from an expanding pool of widely distributed participants
including indebted art students, underpaid cultural workers, unpaid artists and
interns, as well as the innumerable networked contributors, with or without creden-
tials, who assist in reproducing an increasingly bare art world.

Yet it is here that we glimpse the danger capital brings onto itself by subsuming
such non-productive, creative labor. For if the latest iteration of system failure has
left art naked, with no clear way of restarting the old narrative about art as an au-
tonomous sphere of ideas and creativity no matter how entangled its system is with
the marketplace, then this rupture also reveals a significant negation at work for
all to see. Because once art's mimetic non-productivity is subsumed within capital
its real threat materializes: art becomes the single most conspicuous demonstration of
capital's delirious con game.

And clearly a growing number of previously invisible cultural producers have begun
to see themselves as a hazardous category that is capable of operating in and for
itself as the social nature of art is unavoidably made visible. Like some weird re-
dundant agency, this no-longer dark matter creativity is at once commonplace – the art fabricators, handlers, installers whose own art practice always takes a back seat – and simultaneously bristling with a profound potential for positive change as well as an unpredictable and deep-seated sense of resentment.

Therefore as much as the condition of bare art yields predatory behavior and panic, so too does it give birth to “bad deeds” in the form of boycotts, strikes, occupations and demands for equality. And here, in a nutshell, sits the delirious potential of dark matter in a bare art world. A fully cognizant and ultra-accelerated dark matter agency inevitably questions who is supposed to fabricate the art projects of the art world’s successful 1%? Who will be disciplined into subsidizing museums and conferences and industry journals? Who would be expected to teach the next generation of dark matter surplus artists? It will not be us this shadow agency responds, not under current conditions of the art world’s hierarchies and its system of value extraction.

In the world in which we live what was previously (and perhaps in some instances thankfully) hidden from sight now becomes painfully manifest in the bare art world, for both better, and for worse.

Marco Baravalle: You recently focused your attention on the existence of different art worlds beyond the one characterized by the gallery-exhibition nexus. I’m particularly interested in knowing on what premises these other art worlds are based. Do you think that
ontologically it is really possible to define a zone completely outside the neoliberal devices of valorization? Especially when these devices have proven to be various and not limited to the aforementioned nexus. And finally, is the dark matter super collider an attempt to create a space of visibility for the creative power of the dark matter? How should this accelerator work?

Kuba Szebeder: I will respond with a question – how would you locate activities of such groups like S.a.L.E.-Docks, Macao, Isola or countless other independent art centres in relation to the institutions composing art market and their business models? The theory of art worlds, first coined by an American sociologist Howard Becker in 1984, and recently picked up by such action research projects like Plausible Art Worlds (Basekamp & friends), provides a viable intellectual framework for understanding the ground operations of such alternative, artistic systems. To explain
this in a language of operaismo, one can hark back to Antonio Negri and his concepts of *art of the multitudes* as a form of action/imagination aimed at rebuilding our social world and building new ones. Another useful concept is self-valorisation of artistic labour. This is really at stake here – do you really need apparatuses of evaluation embedded in emptied out, speculative biennale-fairs circuits, in order to feel positively valorised as a creative labourer? Obviously, these apparatuses do have their pull, and also are exploitative by nature.

Coming back to our question, the term “world”, especially in plural, sounds controversial. People tend to deride this term as an idealistic theory of alternative universes, supposedly located both outside capitalism and separated from the dominant sectors of art industry (which is far too often simply conflated with neoliberal capitalism per se). But “art worlds”, sociologically speaking, are defined as networks of social cooperation, with their own division of labour and value systems, which enable creation and distribution of what people call “art”. So for example, when S.a.L.E.-Docks organizes a protest in which you make use of radical creativity, which has a mixed status of art and action, you do it by mobilizing labour, attention and resources in a way differing from what happens in the gallery-exhibition nexus. If such activities are not a one-off event, they tend to build up into a social pattern, which Becker proposes to call an art world. In this way, S.a.L.E.-Docks, Isola or Macao constitute what Stephen Wright calls as “art sustaining environment”. Basically, these art worlds are not separated and localized, but also intersect globally, in a network of affinities and alliances. They constitute value-systems with their own distinctive aesthetical concepts and even ontologies, alternative or even conflicting to the value-systems operational for the gallery-exhibition nexus. Just think about it – people tend to make use of the word “art” to denote many differing things – on the one hand we call as art twenty meters high bronze sculpture which look like a tacky B-movie set design, like the recent line of Hirst-labeled-commodities, on the other we have such actions like Precarious Workers Pageant, which harks back to politicized aesthetics of avantgardes. The problem is that far too often we decry some of the hybrid activities (which happen on the one to one scale of artistic performance as social action) as “just art”, using blanket definition of blue chip art as the only possible and imaginable art. The theory of art sustaining environments (art worlds) tries to deal with this slippage. To repeat – it is about modes of self-valorisation, imagined as an expression of living labour, as art of the multitudes, as a *creative surplus*, which exceeds exponentially what is defined as an artistic commodity by the market-related art world.

Interestingly, the speculative and self-referential tendencies of the blue chip gallery nexus undermine its own systems of valorisation. In what Greg Sholette calls as *bare art world*, one does not need to pretend that art differs from a luxury commodity. Not surprising that art thus defined and peddled is so repetitive and utterly degraded. One needs to remember that markets mark the things marketed through them, like Neil Cummings like to say. In other words, art worlds do have some ontological effects. Things produced as art in different economic systems are tainted
by the systems by which they are produced and distributed. They are coloured by
political intentions and radical economies of S.a.L.E. Docks or Macao, or flattened
by price tags attached to them in blue chip systems (as the market marks the minds
of people thus marketed).

There is another element in your question - about the general, totalizing framework
of neoliberal capitalism. Just to make it clear. Every social world, including every
art world down there, is currently located inside and framed by the global, capital-
ist world-system. Dominating art worlds are dominating because they ride capital
flows and maintain social hierarchies based on huge disparities of wealth and status.
The members of radically politicized art worlds do struggle precisely against these
tendencies, with which the gallery-exhibition nexus is integrated. Art labourers
populating these art worlds might be exploited by various sectors of capitalist
economy (from housing to labour to educational markets), depending very much
on their positions in the global system (f.e. for people in mainland Europe student
debt is not such an issue as it clearly is for our American colleagues). One also
needs to take into account global disparities in wealth, and North-South divide. It
is much easier to make art and mobilize free labour and resources when one lives in
Brussels than when one lives in Kinshasa, in New York and not in Kabul - and this
disparity is a defining element in the emergence of art worlds.

The concepts such as bare art world, art incorporated or art factory, are well tuned
to emphasize links between art worlds and global capitalism. The problem is that
- in my opinion - they tend to be too generalist and might for example conflate a
particular, localized iteration of dominant art worlds with the art world in general. I
do not think that our art worlds look, operate or exploit in a precisely same manner
nevertheless if we are in London, New York, Warsaw or Milano. Even in Venice,
there are huge differences between what happens in Giardini, in Hirst exhibition,
and in S.a.L.E.. It does not mean that there is no exploitation or inequality or
wars for dominance. But we need much more grounded theory of apparatuses and
mechanisms of exploitation, struggles for distinction and emancipation – in order
to deal with them appropriately. These apparatuses and nexuses are transversal,
they run across differing social worlds, enabling exploitation of many by the few.
We need a kind of string theory of artistic universe, which would support both our
understanding and our struggles against the dominance of capital both in economy,
politics, and arts. And the Dark Matter Collider is such an exercise in struggle for
self-valorisation of artistic, of living labour, of art of the multitudes, which always
flows underneath, through and beyond a white box called “just art”.

Marco Baravalle: Together with the Occupy Museums collective you recently presented
the DebtFair project at the Whitney Biennial in New York City. Could you briefly ex-
plain what is DebtFair and could you please tell us how do you evaluate its impact within
such an institutional framework and major art event?

Noah Fischer: The impression was that in the aftermath of Trump’s election
even some very institutional parts of the art world were mobilized, taking part in
demonstrations and protests. After 100 days what is the state of the art? Beyond
the initial shock, what about important issues such as debt, race and gender? Are
they gaining visibility within the art debate? Are they fuelling cases of self-organiz-
ing?

In 2011 and soon after, Occupy Museums’s direct actions continually clashed with
museums from a movement-oriented position that primarily saw them as lever-
age-points onto a larger undemocratic system ruled by capital. Since this system
needed to be called out, and its spaces democratized and revolutionized museums
looked like accessible 1% sites that were more penetrable than Goldman Sachs. For
years we operated outside rather than from a critical position inside the Art World.
However, when the movement wound down, both our community and our practice
became more narrowly art-focused. Our project Debtfair at the Whitney Biennial
is an outcome of this transformation of our group and of history. It also begins to
address the question of how to politicize the atomized community of artists rather
than simply hitting the big art institutions.

Debtfair was also quite a personal project for me. During years of planning direct
actions with Occupy Museums, I would continually return to my studio and here
was a conundrum. I knew that studio art practice and art objects hold value but the
actions against art institutions had radically altered how I understood this economy.
On one hand there is therapeutic, intuitive value in art practice; its an activity in
which the end-result – the artwork – may even embody a personal way of seeing,
even a personal political understanding – as any other format cannot, clearly that is valuable. But can you square this with a fully transactional system? It seemed that objects when installed in most white box art spaces were fully captured by the game of capital. Most people know this and think its only about the art market – the speculative potential for sales and the creation of an art asset class as common measure of success (or more likely measure of failure). However the capture of art into financialization runs much deeper – most artist’s time is literally under a kind of financial control via personal debts paid as price of entry into the art world.

Occupy Museums did a study of this year’s Whitney Biennial for example – As far as we know, 100% of the artists went to college and most went to grad school and a large portion went to the best art schools. Most top art schools have the highest tuition of all colleges in the US, so all this education means debt, but artists don’t pay debt back very effectively, so we stay in debt permanently and this is one way art itself becomes a subject of financial control. This isn’t a conundrum that one could easily avoid. It doesn’t solve it to run away from the studio. I was always thinking that for the Left to give up the whole idea of art object creation to the hyper-capitalists in favor of political direct actions or community projects would be the definition of true defeat as if we have no right to the value of making (or enjoying) artworks.

So Debtfair came out of this sort of personal conundrum as an artist who had largely left the studio for the park. I tried to model a system for artists to shift the potential value of art from speculative to sustainable, proposing a kind of art-cur-rency to trade art objects directly against personal debts. Then I realized this has to be a community project and brought the idea to Occupy Museums members and we decided to bundle artists together and do the whole system collectively just as debts themselves are bundled. Just before this, an OWS group called Strike Debt had initiated their Rolling Jubilee project which seemed to create a mini debt-bail-out economy. We developed the Debtfair exchange system for a few years – at first it was based on trying to rethink how an art sale could work. Then we realized we needed to first create a new way to see the artworks – how can you see the invisible debt behind artwork? We would issue an open call for artists in debt, and then organize the participating artists based on their banks. So you have for example a bundle of JP Morgan Chase artists with a debt of ten million and so on. We decided to install these bundles inside of the gallery or museum walls rather than on top of the walls.

We were invited to stage a Debtfair exhibition in Art League Houston and this led to public debates about debt and responsibility. That seemed like a necessary first level of consciousness toward organizing around debt resistance in the art world. Then, last Spring, the Whitney Museum got interested in Debtfair. Most often in the US, Occupy Museums prefers to work with museums from an uninvited position – that is how we retain full agency for our actions and push campaigns as far as needed. However, exhibiting in a museum like the Whitney which is intimately tied
into hedge funds and real estate mega-companies through their trustees and corporate sponsors wasn’t a problem for us in this case. We had in fact designed Debtfair as a kind of Trojan Horse – a machine to reflect back on the visibility system of the museum itself. Debtfair meant bringing “Dark Matter artists” into a bright space as a lens to reflect on the overall value and selection system. The museum accommodated our project and we felt that they understood it.

In the middle of the process, Trump was elected. Perhaps the least among the many painful outcomes, it changed the political calculation of Debtfair because the project was aimed more at a Clinton Presidency where Neoliberalism could be on full view and targeted. In fact, we had found a specific target: a corporation called BlackRock which is an asset manager at a scale of 5.1 trillion. Much bigger than any bank, BlackRock was like the death star that connected all the types of debt situations American artists might find themselves in: from the colonial debts of Puerto Rico to student debt and credit card or medical debt. All this debt was traded by BlackRock and its CEO, Larry Fink (who is a trustee of MoMA) was talked about as Clinton’s treasure secretary. But then the Trump bomb fell and all of
a sudden the neoliberals became the protectors of the "sanctuary cities" rather than our corporate enemies from 2011.

As the inauguration approached in a form that looked Fascist it appeared politically strategic to create a large coalition in the arts--a blend of all the left groups and even neoliberal institutions that were willing. Many museums in New York such as MoMA and Met were officially silent. Some others such as Queens Museum, which serves a large immigrant population, were mobilizing very directly to protect their workforce and take on a resistance role. I called up the Whitney curators and discussed Occupy Museums hosting a Counter-Inauguration centering the voices of radical arts activist community at the museum. This was quickly organized as part of the #J20 art strike (or resistance events) around the country. The overall mobilizing against the inauguration as well as the successful Airport protests that pushed back Trump's anti-immigrant legislation created a feeling that the culture was shifting to one of sustained resistance. Currently however, we seem to be in a lull but in any case we have a long-term problem and need long term solutions.

When Trump was elected networks began to form. Now there are networks between institutions based on defining and supporting sanctuary spaces. There are
networks of academics like “Art Professors of America” preparing to defend both their students and themselves from right wing attacks. Most of the work I have carried out in the last years – in New York and in Europe (for example the occupation of Guggenheim Venice in 2015) came as a result of the 2011 Occupy/Arab Spring/M15 networks. Effective resistance completely depends on them. But online networks provide structure, not content and here is where the challenge for the Left lies. Occupy Museums’ experience trying to highlight the politics of debt at the Whitney Biennial so far shows that organizing around debt and class is much more difficult in the art world of the Trump Era. Or at least, it’s more difficult to make such politics go viral. As everyone knows, the race debate around “Open Casket” achieved historic levels of traction. Before that, the event we organized for J20 seemed to resonate as well and people can and do rally against some of Trump’s more violent policies. We don’t seem to have a very effective language, attention, or energy reserve currently to respond to the takeover of all levers of power by a group of billionaires and the system that continues to concentrate their capital.

However, part of the problem I think has to do with the way that art activism has over-aligned itself with the feedback loops of news media which are so highly influenced by the algorithms of Facebook and Twitter: a problem which was laid bare in the US election. This makes it incredibly hard to parse what kind of organizing is truly effective in the long run from what is simply sparking people’s momentary need for outrage. We are trying to take a long term view with Deftfair.

Occupy Museums is a platform focused to expose the transfiguration of art by financial power in the arts because its grip keeps tightening. We see sharply increasing debts and the boom of luxury real estate and rent prices in “sanctuary cities.” This means that such spaces to be continually less safe, there’s really nowhere to run. Now and in the future we have to organize and fight.

Marco Baravalle is a central figure at S.a.L.E. Docks, an independent space for visual arts, activism, and experimental theater located in what had been a former salt-storage facility in Dorsoduro, Venice. Baravalle is a member of Comitato No Grandi Navi (No Big Ships Committee), which protests against large cruise ships in Venice. He is also involved with the NO MOSE (No MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, Experimental Electromechanical Module) front, which opposes an impractical Venetian flood-protection project that was at the center of a national corruption case. Baravalle researches creative labor and how art is positioned within neoliberal economics.

Gregory Sholette is a New York City based artist, writer, and core member of the activist art collective Gulf Labor Coalition. He is the co-author of It’s the Political Economy, Stupid; and Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture, and author of Delirium and Resistance. He currently teaches in the Queens College art department at City University of New York.
Kuba Szreder is a curator, writer and editor. He holds a practice-based PhD from Loughborough University School of the Arts, England. In 2009 he co-founded the Free/Slow University of Warsaw. In his most recent book ABC of Projectariat, Szreder scrutinizes economic and governmental aspects of project-making and their impact on an ‘independent’ curatorial and artistic practice.

Noah Fischer works at the crossroads between the political road of economic and social inequity and poetic pathways of art practice. His sculpture, drawing, performance, writing, and organizing practice fluctuate between object making and direct action as well as an ongoing theatrical collaboration with Berlin-based and company&Co. Fischer has a particular focus on art institutions; he is the initiating member of Occupy Museums and a member of GULF/ Gulf Labor; his collaborative work has been seen (with and without invitation) at MoMA, Guggenheim, Brooklyn Museum, ZKM, and Venice, Athens, and Berlin Biennales among other venues.

References:

1 Sholette, Dark Matter, 134.
2 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, The New Spirit of Capitalism, Verso, 2007. However, not all observers agree. For example, Art historian Karen Van Den Berg stresses post-Fordism misappropriates the concept of artistic labor production by denying any difference between autonomous art practices and capitalist labor, an argument she and Ursula Pasero explore in Art Production Beyond the Art Market? California: Ram Publications, 2014.
3 David Harvey, Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism, Oxford University Press, 2014, 232.
5 The term used by some scientists to describe the solution dark matter and dark energy brings to the standard model of cosmic formation. See “The Mystery Of The Missing Mass,” National Aeronautics and Space Administration website, USA: http://history.nasa.gov/SP-466/ch22.htm