



GREGORY SHOLETTE

DELIRIUM AND RESISTANCE

ACTIVIST ART AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

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ART, DEBT, OVERSUPPLY, PANIC!:

(On the contradictions of a 21st Century Art Education)

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Figure 10. Debtfair Installation at the Art League Houston, 2015 Debtfair is an ongoing artistic campaign seeking to expose the relationship between economic inequality in the art market and artists' growing debt burdens, exploring the idea that the most active layer of artistic practice is not what we see on the wall, but the "economic reality" which lies below the surface. Debtfair is a project of Occupy Museums, (Photo: courtesy ALH).

“To play at life one must win over the economy.”

Randy Martin 1

Debt, Oversupply, Panic

Much has been written regarding the irrepressible rise of student financial debt, especially in the United States where by June of 2016 a record 1.3 trillion dollars in higher-educational loans has accumulated.² Alarm bells ring louder still when the students in question are studying fine art, and for good reasons. Two years of tuition at a top ten US MFA program leaves behind

a debt burden of some \$76,000. This sum does not factor in such essentials as the cost of living and art supplies, which in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago, the cities where most of these programs are located, is far from a minor expense. 3 Critics point out, correctly, that the average art graduate is less likely to find regular, well-paid employment when compared to other, similarly educated professionals, thus diminishing the likelihood loans will be repaid or economic solvency attained.4 “Nearly one-third of borrowers in repayment were in default,” cites Andrew Ross on total student US debt, with overleveraged artists undoubtedly making up an even higher percentage. 5 This explains why most artists operate in a constant state of financial deficit: the ability to borrow capital requires a steady income and maintaining a good credit score, a challenge not just in the US or UK, as a Warsaw-based study found artists “Do not have borrowing capacity enabling them to purchase property or credit, which puts them in a worse situation than the average Polish employee.”6 And yet the number of individuals choosing art as a career path has been growing steadily, sometimes rapidly, starting in the late 1980s, and may only now be leveling off in the past couple of years. 7 With artistic labor apparently at an all-time record high, a chorus of anxious voices contends that these numbers are simply unsustainable. That may be so, but my argument would step back to insist most artists have never been sustained by the actual art world economy. This chapter therefore examines the veracity of these claims about the oversupply of artists, proposing an alternative reading that argues there are exactly as many artists as the system requires for reproducing itself, just as there always are in a market-driven artistic economy. What has changed is the capacity to conceal this fact as the privileged status of art, its autonomy, and the exception it represents to capitalist markets is subsumed by post-Fordist enterprise culture. What remains might best be described as a bare art world.

Panic

Figures from the US National Center for Education Statistics in 2012 indicate that Master's degrees granted in the visual and performing arts have “been rising every year in the last decade,” and the Center for an Urban Future reported in 2015 that “while traditional economic drivers like finance and legal services have stagnated in recent years, several creative industries have been among the fastest growing segments of (New York City's) economy,” with twenty-four percent of this growth attributed to visual artists.⁸ Similar statistics show a simultaneous expansion of the artistic labor force in other developed nations such as Australia where one-fifth of the nation's entire population is engaged in the arts and the number of visual artists rose by a third between 1987 and 2011 before leveling off. ⁹ A 2011 Canadian study indicates there has been “higher growth in artists than the overall labor force,” twice the farm worker population, two and a half times larger than real estate employment with visual artists, artisans and craftspeople making up some 22 per cent of the 136,600 artists surveyed.¹⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff states that a German “opinion poll found that 24 percent of young people expressed the desire to become an artist.”¹¹ And British artist Derek Harris flatly states that there are “more fine art courses per capita in UK than anywhere else in the world.” (Perhaps this is an exaggeration but the statement also parallels American anxieties about an oversupply of artistic labor.)¹² Europe's already large population of artists has grown as well, but less rapidly between 2011 and 2014. ¹³ What to make of these facts? It would seem that one of the world's most precarious professions, poet and philosopher aside, suddenly became alluring, even irresistible, to a generation growing up as their economic prospects and presumable class mobility rapidly declined.

This ever-expanding, always precarious glut of creative labor also destabilizes the urban environment as discussed in the next section of this book on gentrification, inadvertently leading to rising rents, small business closures and the expulsion of long-term, low-income residents. As sociologist Sharon Zukin explained in her classic study *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, “cities with the highest percentage of artists in the labor force also have the highest rates of downtown gentrification and condominium conversion.”¹⁴ Placing the blame on speculators first and cultural workers second, artist Martha Rosler insists that real estate speculators are eager to offer concessions to “artists and small nonprofits in the hopes of improving the attractiveness of ‘up-and-coming’ neighborhoods and bringing them back onto the high-end rent rolls.”¹⁵

Whatever the exact mechanism and whoever is really to blame, the belief that artists cause or significantly accelerate the process of gentrification has become a truism. The greater the number of artists emerging out of MFA and other certificate education programs, the more this axiom solidifies, and becomes part of a knot of panic that extends beyond issues of housing and displacement, to encompass changing perceptions about the stability of the cultural economy in general. One result has been for commentators to apply financial paradigms such as “supply to demand” to the problem, a terminology once anathema in proper fine art circles. Even the noted artist and commentator Coco Fusco exclaimed that the situation is simply “unsustainable” at a public discussion on the topic of gentrification:

... [its cause is the] expansion of MFA programs that produces an impossibly large demographic of artists, there are many many more artists than there ever have been...the pool [of artists] has expanded to an absolutely untenable degree and without means of controlling access it would be impossible for the market to contend with the numbers.¹⁶

Among responses to this issue, we find an unexpected convergence as bewildered policy wonks, conservative and liberal art critics, including some on the Left, confront with alarm a deluge of newly-minted art professionals poised to inundate a field where there are already too many players and too few resources. One outcome of this state of approaching terror is a surprising degree of soul-searching and honesty regarding the political economy of art. It turns out that many now see the cultural economy as nothing special. Art is just another commodity, and the iron law of supply and demand rules over the art world just as it does over everything else. A small but influential group of commentators either raise or actually advocate curbing the apparent oversupply of artistic labor:

At a time of flattening demand there is increasing supply, as noted above, in terms of both the sheer number of organizations and the supply of product. Neither the audience nor the public or philanthropic sector can support this level of oversupply. 17

The Australian arts sector is grossly “oversupplied.” In the first decade of the century, Australian participation in creative arts work increased dramatically – in some arts activities it more than doubled or tripled! At the same time, artists’ relative incomes have declined...Australia’s cultural policies predominantly work on stimulating supply, and so are likely to have made matters worse.18

Neither the audiences nor the public or philanthropic sector can support this level of oversupply [in cultural products].19

Demand is not going to increase, so it is time to think about decreasing supply.²⁰

We have an overstocked arts pond.²¹

Stripped of all romance or peculiarity, a demystified art world emerges into view, one in which pragmatic notions of supply and demand economics seem suddenly applicable. Today, art's allegedly exceptional economy has been permeated by the grammar of finance, forcing its integration with the new normal of ultra-deregulated enterprise culture about which Randy Martin observed, "if money was, even in the recent past, what people were thought to be more defensive about than any other subject, the veil has, in many ways, been lifted."²² It is as if everyone suddenly woke up to discover they had been speaking capitalist prose all along. In other words, we have arrived at the condition of bare art, whose peculiarities I will explore in this chapter.

The Contradictions of Enterprise Culture

Not so long ago, the art world was largely the province of the wealthy upper classes. Their guardianship of art might be chalked up to nostalgia for aristocratic values, or simply a practical means of sheltering rentier incomes from taxes, not to ignore the cultural prestige that an association with art provides for elites. Regardless, the stewardship of art remained within the purview of high society and a small circle of trained connoisseurs drawn from elite universities. Though serving the public interest may have been officially stated as their mission, any real effort at democratizing art collections, opening museum doors to the masses, or funding academic scholarships probably had more to do with limited government support than any act of *noblesse oblige*. Art was not a populist project and certainly not a consumer-oriented affair; rather it needed to be protected from the multitude. Challenges came in response the great

depression, and then with the GI Bill after WWII, which was itself a kind of concession to the socialist critique of capitalism. Even then, a tendency towards custodianship of high culture was prevalent in post-war art theory, most obviously in the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the two pillars of formalist art criticism. Nevertheless, things were already shifting thanks in part to the growth of artistic graduate degrees during the period of the Cold War.

Howard Singerman observes that some 320 candidates received diplomas from 32 institutions between 1950 and 1951, five times as many a decade earlier.²³ From the perspective of the post-war state broadening access to high culture harmonized with the West's ideological campaign against the Soviet Union, even if that meant funding dissident works of art and granting working class people limited access to high culture's inner sanctum. The number of MFAs has only grown since. But once the Cold War ended a new paradigm for cultural funding was required. Art was reborn as a creative instrument for sparking broader economic development, just as a generation raised on popular art unseated some of the established privileged associated with high culture, its form and its content. Art under neoliberal ideology was enterprising and creative. As a 2010 United Nations sponsored report summarizes, along with technology and business, culture helps to "circulate intellectual capital" thus providing part of a powerful engine "driving economic growth and promoting development in a globalizing world."²⁴

According to Chin-Tao Wu, key indicators of this paradigm shift can already be glimpsed in certain high-level museum appointments right before the onset of neoliberalism, such as that of Thomas Hoving who served as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1966 and 1977. With his big business background and training in medieval art, Hoving, Wu observes,

“deliberately ventured into costly undertakings –new wings, blockbuster exhibitions and expensive acquisitions –thus forcing the museum into a desperate search for new sources of income.”²⁵ Decades later we see this tendency playing-out with massive real-estate ventures by such institutions as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and The Cooper Union, forcing the latter to impose tuition for the first time in its one hundred and fifty year history, and leading to protests by faculty and occupations by students. But if Hoving embodied the emerging spirit of enterprise culture, then former Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, who held the position from 1988 to 2008, represents its fully developed archetype, signaling once and for all that capital had unapologetically come to dominate the art world. Wu cites a New York Times profile of the Guggenheim director written shortly after his appointment in which Michael Kimmelman notes that despite the discomfort brought about by the “Globe Straddler of the Art World” within certain elite art circles (including, despite Hoving, the less overtly entrepreneurial Metropolitan Museum), Krens is “pursuing the American cultural system to its inevitable conclusion.”²⁶

Substitute “capitalist” for “American” and a great deal falls into place. Because it’s not just the art fairs and auction houses or the fact that the majority of museum trustees now come from the corporate sector, what we see is the hegemonic effect of capital across the board, even if we focus solely on the non-commercial, not-for-profit art sector. Consider the overtly entrepreneurial approach of both the NEA and British Arts Council’s creative economy models that intentionally dovetail with the broader economic emphasis on flexible, knowledge based work and the development of private-public culture industries. Take note of the unabashed application of finance management tools useful for meeting consumer demand as proposed by a prominent not-for-profit arts foundation, “if society demands and deserves more relevant, accessible, and

dynamic art, we emphasize capitalization as the means to that end.”²⁷ Often the language of these programs and policy forums borrows directly from the world of technology start-ups. What we find is the promotion of incubator spaces, pop-up shows, experimental labs and clusters, and yet the underlying gambit aims to extend state-supported cultural endeavors globally by financing collaborative projects in developing countries such as Vietnam, Nigeria, Kenya, Brazil and Egypt. Parallels with corporate models of globalization are impossible to avoid. By now, all this creative economy and corporate-culture-speak may be rather obvious to many close observers of the art world; however, what is necessary to underscore here is that not-for-profit administrators and policy makers are obliged to join with their art market counterparts in asserting, often indirectly, a constant-growth economic model, identical with that of capital. This is so, even as commentators call for moderating the supply of artists to better match the “demand” that exists in the form of art careers.

Regulation

However well-meaning it may be, the call to limit the supply of artists –even if this were somehow possible –is at the same time a coded call for a return to a position of superintendence with regard culture, one that raises uncomfortable questions about who is to decide which aspiring artists, or art schools, will make the cut. In other words, art’s alleged “oversupply crisis” looks very different depending on which end of the art economy you inhabit. For artists positioned somewhere along the narrow central peak of visibility, the pressure in the system may seem like a threat; for others – most artists– extreme competition to gain some measure of visibility is already part and parcel of a place at or near the bottom of the art world pyramid. Here, among the artistic dark matter, what will additional artists really do to fundamentally alter that situation?

It may be, however, that it is not possible to stem the tide of artists. When it comes to the arts, “disequilibrium seems to be a sort of permanent critical situation,” affirms French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger.²⁸ Art’s economic dementia reaches back at least to the 17th Century Dutch painting market, which allegedly produced “between five and ten million works of art” of which “perhaps less than 1%, have survived.”²⁹ However, Menger’s disequilibrium condition really kicks-in with the formal subsumption of artistic production under 19th Century capitalism in France. It was then that the exhausted academic art system fell into disarray, opening up space the free market came to dominate. What came next was a wave of innovative artists and movements operating on a:

more flexible and also much riskier basis of open competition involving dealers, critics, painters, and buyers. Supply was no more to be regulated, so that oversupply was known to become a permanent feature of that market...periodic panics about the glut and the high rate of unemployment didn't deter students from entering art schools in growing numbers.³⁰

Art education is integral to this chaotic system, where established producers may begin to feel “trapped in a disintegrating market while new aspirants continue to flood in,” as Menger cautions, adding, “the training system may play an unintended role in the self-congesting spiral of oversupply.”³¹ Elaborating on the role higher education plays producing an art supply glut, Fusco also maintains that the “proliferation of degrees does not translate into more jobs for graduates; it is just another way to lure more people into assuming debt.”³² This is, of course, true, but it is not only art that experiences this problem. Across the Humanities and Social

Sciences, there are more highly qualified post-graduates than can possibly find long-term academic employment. Without doubt, in the US, the marketing and monetization of higher education programs is a pernicious trend where falling government education spending forces schools and universities to scramble for every tuition dollar increasingly generated by private lenders. Still, the argument that the development of more art programs, sexier programs, more cleverly advertised programs, is the primary reason for the oversupply of artists is not entirely convincing, or at least it is only a part of the story. The sheer intensity and pace of change within the art system makes other diagnoses of the problem of an “oversupply” of artists implausible. For artists and economist Hans Abbing, ideology is to blame. In the minds of the majority, he claims, art remains a near- spiritual endeavor, not a commodity-oriented business as is in other types of work. In his view, it is state funding that encourages the glut of artists, feeding their delusions by allowing them to just about scrape a living, resulting in the ascetic mindset of artists whose unremunerated devotion to their field “looks a lot like a ritual sacrifice.”³³

Abbing lays out his solution to this problem in his book *Why Artists are Poor*:

If governments were to interfere less in the arts and offer fewer subsidies, the economy of the arts would become less exceptional and, as a result, artists would not be nearly as poor. Nevertheless, for the time being this remains an unlikely scenario because governments are just as locked into the present mythology of the arts as the other participants are.³⁴

Whether or not government subsidy really is to blame for the delusions of artists, it has become increasingly difficult to argue, outside of a few European countries, that art is clearly separated from the rest of the economy any longer. Record-breaking sales for individual artworks (including works by younger, living artists), the increasing capitalization of the art world by financial

speculators, as well as the explosion of museum building seem to show an art system that is integrated into the expansionist tendencies of capitalism. Influential Professor of Creative Industries Ruth Towse tells us that it is “risk taking behavior” in which “artists overestimate their (average) chances of success prior to entering the labor market.”³⁵ For Towse, like Abbing, the solution to oversupply is more and more being viewed as a matter of regulating production. This takes such forms as allowing “market forces to bring the supply of artistic labor down,” as Dave Beech skeptically summarizes Towse’s advice to the British Arts Council, or in more socialized European economies, the answer proposed is to “reduce overall [cultural] subsidization..”³⁷

It is curious that for Abbing and Towse it state-intervention that is identified as the cause of excessive risk-taking behavior, rather than those aspects of neoliberal culture that openly advocate the embrace of risk. For many wannabe artists there is an irrefutable attraction to a highly unregulated market whose overall value in 2013 was pegged at 35 billion dollars, which is about half the size of Microsoft Corporation’s sales revenues two years earlier. ³⁸ Most likely it is this same barely supervised economy that attracts hedge fund operators, though the stakes and consequences of failure hugely different. Still, in a capitalist society, where one’s very livelihood is contingent on taking risks, placing an \$80,000 wager on a MFA degree, or on a painting by a 20-something artist, may not be as irrational as it first seems.³⁹ The student gains entry into what appears to be a growing economic sector that some claim outpaces the stock market, while the capitalist gambler might be the first to discover a “flappable” new art star at a discount price. ⁴⁰

As Randy Martin put it, as if he was anticipating the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, today one must firmly believe that the system can effectively be gamed. ⁴¹ In truth, neither the so-called economic exceptionalism of art, nor the neoliberal economy in general, operates consistently through rational decision-making, [To Be Included only if Donald Trump is elected President:] though watching such incoherent behavioral phenomena occupy the very seat of

presidential authority within a nuclear superpower like the United States is a disarming and unforeseeable turn of circumstances even for an era rife with capitalist delirium.

Art, Class Conflict & Capitalism 4.0 42

As with all things in our ultra-high-risk society, individual rates of financial solvency and professional success are skewed towards those with pre-existing access to capital, or towards those who have a good working knowledge of money management, two elements that often converge in one and the same privileged person. Recent studies have shown that the overall student loan default is actually less common amongst those attending expensive, Ivy League type schools when compared with low-income and low-earning students who are attending far less costly State Community Colleges.⁴³ One likely reason for this is that elite institutions provide their students with significant stockpiles of accumulated social capital with which to successfully launch oneself into well-paying job, including a successful art career, upon graduation. ⁴⁴ By contrast, even a modest tuition hike represents an onerous expense for those from less affluent backgrounds, as those of us who teach in the public school system know so well. Add to this the fact that peer networks at less prestigious schools are likely to offer lower social capital value. Certainly the job market for artists is weak or non-existent regardless of your class background.

Inevitably, those with more resources remain a few steps ahead of others. Graduating students with prosperous upbringings also come pre-bundled with financial resources and social skills, as well as pre-existing family networks, all of which help them make up for the job deficit, while low-income students scramble to learn what others take for granted in a kind of DIY fashion.

While the art world's class differentiation seems to start here, stratification was already in development during art school. Not only does higher education do little to prepare students for the

economic realities of the art world, but as art historian Katy Siegal points out the “real class divide in the art world [is] between the art workers and the art thinkers,” because “places like Ohio State versus, say, the Whitney program still teach manual labor skills...as opposed to...conceptual problem solving and networking.”⁴⁵ One need hardly guess which art school graduate will be fabricating the other one’s projects in due time. At the same time, the lending of public capital for education in the Post-War, Post-Sputnik era helped to open-up the field of arts and humanities to a broader composition of participants in terms of class and race, ironically priming the pump, at least in theory, for potential resistance or rebellion, a point to which I will return shortly. With the shrinking of government support for academia and increased private, debt-lending together with rising tuition fees that diversity is in jeopardy.

Class, then, is not really so difficult to see at work in the art world. One need only follow the money, and for many that begins with the extreme indebtedness of so many art students. Which is why the absence of debt as a topic related to class in Ben Davis’s influential essay “9.5 Theses on Art and Class” seems like such a remarkable oversight.⁴⁶ In some 90 concisely worded segments, Davis explains that being middle class means “having an individual, self-directed relationship to production,” as opposed to being working class and possessing but one thing with which to leverage the system, labor power that one sells as a commodity in the marketplace. All of which feels solid enough if we are speaking of economic conditions in the 19th or early 20th Century, or perhaps in underdeveloped nations today. However, in a fully developed neoliberal economy, Davis’s schema is upended by two seemingly obvious factors. First, except for the most precarious and homeless segment of the population (who would not classically be considered part of the proletariat) most modern workers have more resources at their disposal than only their commodified labor power. In fact, it is precisely the aggregate consumer capacity of the working

classes that capitalism has transformed into a means of bolstering its flagging rate of profit in recent decades. And second, the composition of this consumer power is increasingly derived not from a salaries or wages, but from financial lending institutions as leveraged credit.⁴⁷

And therein lies the rub.

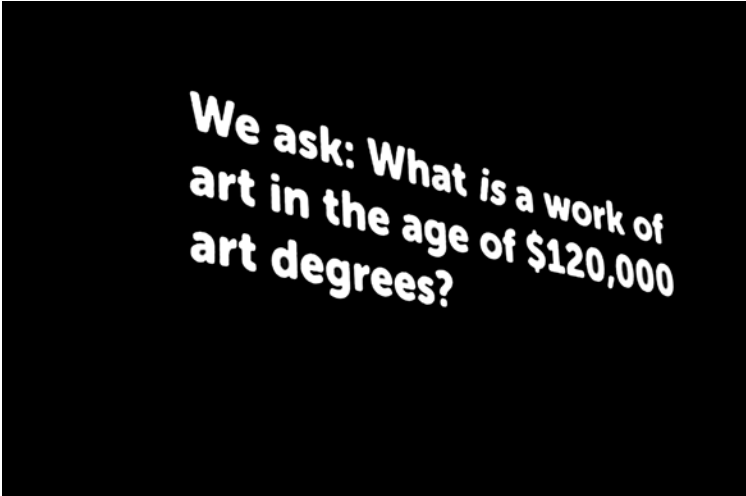


Figure 11. & 12. Top graphic by bfamfaphd; bottom by Andrew Persoff / Caroline Woolard, illustration for *SolidarityNYC*, updating Ethan Miller / JED collective diagram from 2008, new vector graphic, 2010. (Used with permission of C. Woolard.)

Rather than only focus on student debt, consider home ownership. In the US and UK this hovers around 65% with a good portion of this segment undoubtedly consisting of “blue collar,” unionized workers. If we then overlay onto these numbers the 80% average debt carried by US

and UK households, and factor in the 4.4 million US home foreclosures since 2008, then Davis's very concept of the "Middle Class" begins to take on water.^{48 49} In reality, the so-called middle-class consists of working people who aspire to be in control of their own means of production, who want to become property owners, even perhaps stockholders, and yet who frequently fail, or have been failed, by the system, never quite reaching escape velocity other than in name or in their own imagination (or apparently in the mind of some art critics). This is not to suggest those who self-identify as painters, sculptors, performers or other types of artist are workers in the way nurses, dishwashers, truckdrivers, or even programmers are when they are engaged in the type of labor that pays their wages (or that pays off their credit card debt). But many of these same artists, most of them, will be doing some other kind of labor, often several other types of work, in order to support themselves.⁵⁰ So while Davis asserts that, "the sphere of the visual arts has weak relations with the working class," it requires only the slightest nick at its surface to expose the class differentials manifest within it. Such disparities produce divergent effects, both before and after graduation, not unlike an unspoken caste system, where, for example, the state-school MFA graduate builds the art star's projects for the next biennale or art fair.

The real question therefore is not whether artists are or are not middle class – an inquiry made especially ambiguous given the extensive redrawing of social rank including the economic immiseration of the working class and lower middle classes within the population as a whole – but why do the majority of professionally trained artists continue to reproduce the system and its hierarchies when the actual distribution of aggregate benefits is skewed towards the top tier of the art world? This is a question Davis cannot address and not only because of his oversimplified concept of class composition. Ultimately, the critic's outlook is underpinned by an unreflective conservative viewpoint that, as Kim Charnley notes, presumes that "it is the job of the artist to

make art, of the audience to look at it, and of the critic to let the audience know whether it is good.”⁵¹ Even though Davis embraces a Marxist analysis of class, his attitude to culture recalls an attitude toward the custodianship of culture that was last seen at the height of Modernism. Since the beginning of the twentieth century avant-garde artists and other cultural workers have labored to blur or even upend this hierarchical and categorically segregated arrangement. That is not to say this destabilization of categories has been consistently successful or even always sincere, however, this internal critical process –as well as the contradictions it generates– should not be overlooked by art critics who are concerned with the politics of culture, as is Ben Davis, genuinely I believe.

Looking back over the period since the end of World War II, and especially since the 1960s, the transfer of power from an older patrician class to that of enterprise culture has undeniably improved entry into the art world for a more diverse population of participants and audiences. The neoliberal spirit of entrepreneurship has lowered barriers of entry into high art, perhaps just enough to allow museums and other elite cultural institutions to claim, not always incorrectly, that they are unique havens for an otherwise missing democratic public sphere. And yet, for many, including women and people of color, the art world, especially at its highest levels of institutional governance, remains still a privileged territory for wealthy, male, white gentry, even if the formerly aristocratic makeup of this or that board of directors, for instance, is now infiltrated by financiers, real-estate moguls and media barons. Recent struggles by marginalized artists over issues of cultural representation sometimes referred to as “decolonization,” also continue to erode these barriers. However, it is important to acknowledge that under enterprise culture the world of high art has come to be dominated by something else, something lacking

either taste or social consciousness, and that is capital itself, capital as a thing-agency.

Alongside capital's intensive domination of the art world via neoliberal entrepreneurialism, a different sort of patrician class arises, with arguably less attachment to bourgeois values of tradition and stability, but whose ethos is grounded instead in the "financialisation" of life.

This makes for some rather obvious paradoxes. On one hand, a condition of bare art emerges in which art's mystique and romance has boiled away, where laws of supply and demand can be invoked without irony. The conditions of bare art also blatantly transform culture into a new, secure investment category. A senior manager of the global financial consulting firm Deloitte goes so far as to insist the complete monetization of art will actually serve the public interest because 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. 52

Welcome to the obligatory platitudes of the new art patron class; though unwilling to give up art's mystique, they cynically work at minimizing the difference between art and capital. Once fully accomplished, today's art flippers will be tomorrow's oligarchs, managing talent like stocks and bonds. Perhaps as a result we find an attempt to wrap art's nakedness with a new critical task, derived from notions of autonomy and economic exceptionalism. Theoretically, a demystified bare art may set the stage for a return of artistic autonomy as critique. Jeroen Boomgaard has suggested that "the artist's symbolic act can consequently propagate the idea of freedom even more strongly than it could in the days when autonomy was still the hallmark of art – if only

because that autonomy no longer has an ideological background.” 53 Is art somehow still exceptional within the capitalist economy even as it is being colonized by it?

Reorganizing the Exceptional Economy of Art ?

Artist and theorist Dave Beech rejects both Hans Abbing’s mythologizing explanation for the apparently exceptional economy of artistic production, as well as Ruth Towse’s rationalistic approach, each of which ultimately lead he argues to the normalizing of artistic production through mechanisms of market correction, including managing supply and demand. Beech instead reaches back to Marx’s *Capital* and to classical economics in general in order to assert that an artist’s practice is *essentially* anti-market regardless of what anyone thinks art is about, whether it is or is not mystified, or how a painting or sculpture is priced or circulated later on after it leave’s the artist’s studio. This makes artistic labor fundamentally alien to capital’s means of production as Marx proposed when he wrote that “Milton produced *Paradise Lost* in the way a silkworm produces silk, as the expression of his own nature.” 54 Although Milton’s book ultimately became a commodity, distributed through a capitalist market, it did so only after the author completed his epic poem, doing so to his own standards.

Perhaps, had Milton been in desperate financial need, he might have been forced to sell his talent directly to capital as artistic labor, thus tethering his freedom to its system of production. As it is however, both silkworm and Milton produce things naturally, and would presumably continue to do so regardless if their creations were useful or interesting to anyone, including to capital, always in search of profit. In this sense both artist and silkworm are “unproductive workers,” to use Marx’s terms, because only living labor harnessed as labor power can add value to the capitalist’s initial monetary investment, producing more capital than was there to

begin with. This type of labor, Beech argues, is not that of the artist.

Once purchased from the labor market, (non-artistic) living human labor is fully enclosed within capital's apparatus of production where it is put to work alongside objectified dead labor (machinery) in order to generate "a commodity greater in value than the sum of the values used to produce it."⁵⁵ Thus, the mystery of capital is theft, the taking away of a worker's time and labor in either mental and/or physical form without full compensation when compared with the return on the sale of a commodity. Extrapolating from this premise, Beech argues that "no capitalist makes a profit merely from the existence of potential wage laborers, but only, as Marx says, by putting them to work."⁵⁶

Unproductive work, like art, is *not* incorporated, or not fully incorporated, into that system of exploitation, and cannot be because, first, unlike exploited wage workers, artists take the necessary time to generate a final product, and second, just as with the *Bombyx mori* caterpillar's automatic silk-spinning, the artist freely deploys his or her mental and physical energy autonomously, just as they please, regardless of pressure from capitalist regimentation. Personal time and labor are at the artist's command, which is why Beech understands the politics of art to be located here at the very basic level of cultural production, and not necessarily in any specific content or activist engagement. Beech's concept of artistic production also shares qualities with Walter Benjamin's interest in childhood play. As Ester Leslie interprets, "in play, and in learning, children animate objects [bringing] to life past energies now slumbering in objects. The reification of commodities is to be dissipated in the process."⁵⁷ Thus art is doubly anti-capitalist, first because of how it is made, and second because of the way it appears to release ossified social labor out of inanimate things and materials.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into all of the argumentation Beech brings to his engaging thesis, but a couple of tentative challenges to his proposition may shed light on issues related to the current oversupply panic, as well as artistic resistance, more broadly. The first question has to do with history, because it is necessary to ask along with Sven Lutticken, at what “dialectical tipping point does an exception become the norm?”⁵⁸ In other words, art exceptionality from the market may need to be rethought at a time of sustained capitalist crisis and falling profits, and not because Marx did not see it coming, but because he did.

Plausibly, capitalism has continuously evolved, reacting to its own economic contradictions as well as to those of labor’s resistance, by replacing more and more living workers with machinery in response to intra-capitalist competition, but also to working class opposition. This has generated an increasing surplus of workers who are not employed, or who are only barely employed. Just as Marx predicted these developments have also brought about rising productivity, along with falling rates of profit, and also a spreading immiseration or precariousness for much of the population. Such conditions now appear to be a chronic feature of modern capitalism. With no viable socialist or other alternative, this incongruity takes on an almost farcical quality, as capital scrambles to “normalize” its contradictions. Responding to its own shrinking surpluses capital tests out financialization schemes, negative interest rates, credit default swaps, technology bubbles, and other alleged fixes, that sooner or later always fail, sending catastrophic ripples across the global economy

Inventing new ways of managing the tremendous surpluses of labor is another attribute of 21st

Century capital. Low wage jobs in the service sector only soak up a portion of this excess, and even at that it does so inadequately. A recent study shows that \$153 billion in annual government welfare payments is being spent to subsidize employees of corporations with multi-billion dollar assets such as Walmart and McDonalds. 59 Demands for better pay gave rise to the Fight for \$15 movement that eventually forced pay hikes by some fast-food chains. At the same time the increasing *precarity* of the workforce has led to previously unthinkable calls for socializing the economy as shown by the popularity of presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' Left leaning anti-Wall Street message. In the UK, former Prime Minister David Cameron was essentially forced to commit to a rise in the minimum wage (though many insist it is not a "living wage"), and arising across Europe is a growing call for a Basic Income Guarantee or Guaranteed Minimum Income, another response to the chronic nature of capitalist crisis. In other industries, flexibilizing the means of production into post-Fordist systems of fragmented just-in-time manufacturing helps capital decentralize labor, thus making unionization and other forms of organized resistance much more difficult to bring about. But by becoming dependent on distributed forms of outsourced labor capitalists risk exposure to politically repressive regimes and unstable "failed" states where resistance can break out in outright rebellion as we have seen in Syria.

The refugees fleeing conflict in Syria into Europe, as well as into, other parts of the Middle East is a highly visible symptom of the instability that has been caused by neoliberal capitalism, which in turn feeds xenophobic far right narratives in Europe despite the staggering 5,000 deaths amongst asylum seekers in 2015 with predictions that double that figure for 2016. While capital thrives on such instabilities at the margins, their spillover into the economic center is entirely unwelcome. One reason so many refugees aim to live in London, to take the example of just one "global city," is the same reason some polls show one in six people worldwide wish to move there: it harbors a

creative economy with multi-cultural diversity, precisely as the city promotes itself via the global mediascape. The stability at the centre draws the effects of disorder toward it. The very same communication technology that allows cities to compete with one another and for capital to disseminate production over greater distances, compressing space and time as Harvey and Virilio contend, also generates an informal capacity for resistance. Spreading post-Fordist global networks aid or actually give birth to collective practices such as Tactical Media, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and other forms of activist culture. As John Roberts and I have claimed, this broadening of access to technologies, resources, and distributed labor effectively provides tools for building a parallel cultural sphere where, as Roberts writes, “energies and strategies pulled in from a range of skills, competences and interests, across the divisions of professional and non-professional, artist and non-artist, artistic practices and non-art practices” that operate without recourse to the hierarchies of the official art world allowing as I have put it a “formerly invisible sphere of imaginative productivity [to come] spilling out of the archive” brimming over with all manner of past and present resistance from below.⁶⁰

For Beech on the other hand, modern production technologies and collective networking assets remain outside art’s true sphere of activity, not necessarily always in practical terms perhaps, but at the deepest level of artistic production: “Insofar as the economics of artistic production have not changed significantly since the Renaissance in some respects and since the eighteenth century in others, post-Fordism appears to coincide with the pre-industrial.”⁶¹ Beech rejects assumptions about the convergence of capital with artistic production, arguing that art’s potential anti-market resistance does not pivot on collective forms, conceptual strategies, and activist practices, but instead arise from the nature of its essentially unaltered production model. Activist art is of incidental political value in this regard.

That said, his claim for art's inherent anti-capitalist attributes is based more on ontological than on tactical grounds: art as non-productive labor remains a kernel of opposition, regardless of how buried it becomes under capitalist offal. This is Beech's aesthetic of resistance, one that inevitably raises the danger of romanticizing art's revolutionary promise, but an assertion that is not without merit. Still, his understandable desire to repossess art's singularity in this manner runs the risk of wistful futility. As Kerstin Stakemeier cautions:

The modernist figure of a somewhat prior autonomy of the arts fulfills a solemnly affirmative function within catastrophic financialized capitalism. It reiterates a nostalgic figure than can linger on only at the price of its social remoteness and conservative discursive function.⁶²

While Stakemeier doubtless underestimates the potential value something like *tactical nostalgia* might play in countering the psychological damages prevalent in our high-risk society, the gambit Beech proposes would nevertheless be available only to those privileged enough to be able to withdraw into autonomous productivity in the first place. Given the state of the art world, the window of opportunity for artists to carve out a space of autonomy, while accruing enormous debts, is very brief. This is not in itself an invalidation of Beech's thesis, but it is a reason to hit the pause button when it comes to art's oppositional potential. Beech himself does not entirely avoid addressing this problem, though after first dismissing the potential critical effect of recognizing a counter-productive sphere of non-professional dark matter creativity on the established art world, he concludes by admitting that only when culture becomes common property and general "philistine" creativity (perhaps akin to general intellect?) is manifest in the fullest sense will art

fulfill its capacity for universal liberation “both through the extension of collective decision-making about the consumption of art and collective participation in artistic production.”⁶³

It is difficult to see how art defined as a truly autonomous practice, and not merely a tactic of resistance, could accomplish this goal, or how it can even survive modern day circumstances. As neoliberalism in its desperation to salvage falling profits seeks out ever more intrusive means of monetizing the totality of life it seems to increasingly generate what Mario Tronti called a “social factory”: a world in which capitalist markets enclose social relations previously located outside the factory or workplace proper.⁶⁴ Does this mean that art has become wholly subsumed within capital as well? And if so, does that spell the end of its oppositional power? With art education, cultural institutions, foundations and urban centers simultaneously more diverse than in the past, but also more like a financial marketplace than ever before, the wellspring of resistance originating from within artistic labor production per se seems less and less tenable, not without radical change.

However, reification and the blockage of desire have differing outcomes depending on the level of one's political awareness. "Objectification is an unavoidable aspect of all signifying systems, all abstract thought, and all art forms" writes Andrew Hemingway with regard to György Lukács classic 1923 study *History and Class Consciousness*, adding, "the point is that reification comes in beneficial and harmful forms." 65 Being subjected to the illusion that capitalism is an ahistorical inevitability is a negative deformation caused by reification, for example, but confronting head on the condition that I call bare art sans illusions would be a potentially positive utilization of objectification. Let me sketch out an alternative scenario to art's adversarial ontology, one that is not entirely at variance with what Beech proposes.

The Growth/Oversupply Paradox

What if the essential uniqueness of artistic labor is not its anti-market form, but its ability to mimic productive modes of work without being "productive"? As artists, Beech and I both know that making art is both pleasurable and a task, except that our taskmaster is internalized. More than that however, artists commonly describe what they do as work. And though people with nine to five jobs may find this description infuriating, such working at *not-working* is both real and dissimulating at once. It could even be described as art's subsumption of capitalist modes of production: capturing, reflecting, and ultimately mocking the absurdity of being forced to generate surplus value for private appropriation, a sort of reverse theft in other words. As philosopher Jacques Rancière has written with regards to Plato's ban on imitative artists, the shoemaker, carpenter, baker, blacksmith all must remain tied to their stations in life because these:

artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do not have the time to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be somewhere else because work will not wait. 66

However, the “office” of the artist, is ambiguous with regard to time, space, communal duties and so forth. Art is like a phantom profession, one that permits the artist to simultaneously work and not work, to have a “real” job, and to have a fictional job. And nothing is more subversive than showing other workers the pleasure of not engaging in productive labor. Furthermore, artists have always been able to slide between social barriers; sometimes even “passing” for members of another class. More to the point, the offices of contemporary art are now filled with imitative projects that are not replicas of objects, but of the administrative, affective, and institutions of neoliberal enterprise culture. One need only think of the many institutes, centers, bureaus, offices, and schools whose reality has been forged by contemporary artists. Sometimes these mock-institutions even overtake and substitute the actual institution they imitate. Therefore, unlike the silkworm, which by the way has been genetically modified in recent years to increase its output, artistic work exists as a natural counterfeit, or conversely, a counterfeit nature. And once art’s mimetic non- productivity is subsumed within capital its real threat appears once a bare art world arrives: art becomes the single most conspicuous demonstration of capital’s delirious con game.

Still, it's what the art world needs from this counterfeit, unproductive artistic labor that leads to the multiplication of MFAs and the so-called oversupply of credentialed artists. Before addressing that let us consider one other part of the system, how the growth maxim is communicated to art world participants. In truth, the signaling mechanisms are as ubiquitous as they are easily overlooked. They are aimed at cultural administrators, municipal policy makers, but also individual artists, adding up to a pervasive, though implicit law driving the art economy towards a constant state of expansion. To illustrate this, I have selected three of many excerpted statements drawn here from (1) "Creative New York" report, (2) the British Arts Council, and (3) a program director of the Andy Warhol Foundation respectively:

The economic impact of all this innovation and growth is enormous. As creative workers multiply and experiment and their companies grow, they spend more on support services and suppliers. This benefits thousands of ancillary businesses across the city, including lumber, equipment and catering companies, as well as manufacturers producing everything from clothing to furniture... They're building institutions. They're building an incubator for themselves, and they're working across mediums.⁶⁷

If investment in the arts is to positively impact upon the growth and competitiveness of the creative economy, which in turn will re-invest in and exchange other types of value with the arts, then 'innovation and growth' are the investment imperatives for the Arts Council and its co-investors.⁶⁸

Our general principle is that if a project moved an artist's practice forward, allowed him or her or a group to experiment, try something more ambitious, less familiar, in collaboration or conversation with someone or something new, then it is a success.⁶⁹

Taking these expansionist directives at face value their aim is clear enough: generate more and bigger cultural projects, creative place-making programs, ever-larger organizations, budgets, staff, and of course art careers. Compounded growth is, in other words, institutionalized within the art world. It is present through investment in the administrative apparatuses of art, including not only a continual proliferation of arts organizations, but also significantly through indirect systems of re-granting, educational programming, student lending and other capital services to the arts community, that appear to be taking place robotically, regardless of any corresponding rise or fall in the demand for artistic labor or its products. But now we are faced with an obvious inconsistency, if not a contradiction. How to square the imperative for growth with the kind of statements found at the start of this chapter whereby another group of panicked policy makers advocate tightening the alleged oversupply of artists, art institutions, staffing and so forth. What drives this blatant growth/oversupply paradox?

One answer is the exceptional nature of the art economy, its very strangeness generating inevitable contradictions. We might add to this the possibility that given its exceptional

nature art generates an allure drawing individuals to it precisely because it is not completely subsumed within capitalist markets. This attraction operates regardless of the limited chance for success. For Abbing this allure leads to the growth/oversupply paradox, it stems from art's historically venerated social position; we always want more culture, but until we bring culture into better alignment with capitalism most artists will remain poor. For Beech, following Marx, the inherent autonomy of artistic practice means there will likely always be more artists than there are available resources to support them in a market-based economy. Why? Because at bottom, there is no economic discipline regulating the making of an art work, the market only becomes important after production is complete. If art making were to be more rational it only has one negative outcome: heteronomous art is no longer art. We can add to these problems Fusco's criticism regarding the unethical overselling of art education to young people. All of these may indeed be involved in the growth/oversupply paradox, however there is another, arguably more dominant mechanism generating this paradox, bringing us back to the reality of bare art in a post-Fordist economy.

In the book *Dark Matter*, I address the fascination the arts hold for neoliberal enterprise culture, arguing that this attraction is not entirely based on the "imaginative out-of-the-box thinking or restless flexibility" of cultural workers, but involves:

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.⁷⁰

If we seem to have too many artists today, that is because what was once exceptional to artistic economies in relation to capitalist markets has, under conditions of post-Fordism and bare art, become increasingly less extraordinary. The extraction of value from a large surplus population is what drew neoliberalism towards artistic production in the first place, at least as much as Boltanski and Chiapello's "artistic critique" argument, in which capital appears to assimilate aspects of its own Bohemian-inspired refutation.⁷¹ The integration of art and capitalism also explains the necessity for a constant expansion of creative labor, a process analogous to the unfettered compounding growth inherent to all capitalist forms of economic organization. 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."⁷² What we are witnessing under conditions of bare art, just as with capitalist crises more broadly, is this aggregating compulsion in overdrive. It has become an accelerating demand machine seeking to extricate ever more marginal and dispersed gains from an expanding pool of widely distributed participants of indebted art students, underpaid cultural workers, unpaid artists and interns, as well as the innumerable networked contributors, with or without credentials, who assist in reproducing an increasingly bare art world.

And it is here that we glimpse the danger an imagined oversupply of artistic labor generates. It is twofold. If the aggregating process continues to speed up, thus contributing to the demystification of the art world economy, it may lead to the solution sought by panicked

oversupply advocates: the diminishment of artists entering the system. Some studies, as well as the highly publicized walkout of students from MFA programs in the US, suggest this possibility.⁷³ Assuming my thesis is correct and that art in an age of enterprise culture requires a prodigious excess of unremunerated participants, the contemporary art world as we know it will simply cease to be under these circumstances. But there is another set of reasons that may underlie this oversupply anxiety. What if this surfeit of invisible producers demanded economic justice? This appears to be the tact of W.A.G.E. and others seeking exhibition fees for artists. Or, contrarily, what if the majority of artists simply decided not to participate in the art world, perhaps following Stephen Wright's sardonic suggestion that that contemporary art is seeking to break away from itself, a process that even generates a new area of study he calls escapology.⁷⁴

Who would be left in that case to teach art, fabricate projects, subsidize museums and conferences and industry journals? Where would the art world's hierarchies and value production be in that situation? Even more terrifying, what if the majority of those whose creative potential has never even tapped by the system as Carol Duncan inquired some three decades ago, were to suddenly be illuminated within it as a bare art world sweeps into view that vast surplus army of dark matter creativity? What was previously (and perhaps thankfully) hidden from sight now becomes painfully manifest in the bare art world.



Figure 13. Decolonize This Place action at the Brooklyn Museum of Art protesting neighborhood gentrification and marking both native peoples and Palestinian rights, May 7, 2016 (Image G. Sholette.)

Bare Art World: Conclusions

Rather than approach the crisis of artistic “overproduction” as if we were dealing with an inelastic, Malthusian closed system of supply and demand, we can now see that there are today, just as there were in the past, exactly as many artists as the system requires to reproduce itself.⁷⁵ Too many artists is a steady and central feature of the art world’s means of valorization and propagation and the mechanism of exclusion does not operate outside of, but rather from within the very center of the system. ⁷⁶ This makes gaining an MFA more like a subscription to an online service that one signs up for, and only later realizes the charges never stop piling up, plus interest. Why is this current state of oversupply, or perhaps better described as plentiful *pre-supply*, different and potentially calamitous for the

status quo (including myself as a disloyal opposition figure)? The answer is again found in the emergence of a bare art world where freedom is just another word for nothing left to buy (leaving only subscription plans purchased on credit). Thus the one difference between oversupply panic today and in the past is that in a bare art world the situation is impossible to ignore.

If the extraordinary accumulated debt incurred by an ever-expanding population of individuals prepared to gamble away a great deal of their resources in order to join the art world is not an actual constraint on the growth of total artistic production, if it is instead a kind of delirious stimulus, then as argued here it is time to look elsewhere for the culprit behind this crisis of so-called oversupply. And that would almost certainly be the total aggregate demand for cultural consumables, a category that art now finds itself in along with such bizarre commodities as financial derivatives, risk management instruments and highly-leveraged mega-real-estate developments, thanks to the dubious celebration of “innovative” creative and cognitive labor power as a highly distributed, abstract economic force. It is a strange situation in so far as this reality has perhaps never been more apparent, while at the same time capital, as we will see in Section Two “Cities without Souls,” is developing new ways to attach artistic prestige to its endeavors. This means any attempt at developing non-capitalist models of sustainability must begin with an analysis of this new cultural algorithm and its “set of bureaucratic and linguistic instructions and their effects” as theorist Marco Baravalle points out with regard to “Creative Europe.” 77

What then actually makes this historical oversupply of artists different from those of the

past? Two things stand out. First, the intense matter-of-factness of this precarious majority who now perceive one another through the eyes of a bare art world: so many interchangeable elements making up an over-arching art system. It is also this state of nakedness that has given rise to self-organized instances of militancy as this no-longer dark matter pushes back hard against the norms and rules of the art establishment's political economy.⁷⁸ For 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 the delirious irrationality of the typical oversupply crisis argument in a nutshell sits, point number two. Any attempt at "normalizing" the situation, especially through austerity-style economic constraints, will also almost certainly destabilize everything that the status quo wishes to preserve about its art world.

**Notes for 1.4: Bare Art, Debt, Oversupply, Panic!
(On the contradictions of a 21st Century Art Education):**

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 78. See discussions about W.A.G.E., Debtfair, Occupy Museums, Gulf Labor Coalition, and similar groups in the Introduction to Part One: “Welcome To Our Art World.” **[Please include page reference once book is typeset.]**
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