

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2025 EDITION OF DARK MATTER

The archive of dark matter has split open. We are its dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead.

These three sentences conclude my 2010 book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, which built on a concept I first introduced in 2001, and which you are now about to read. The final statement above was intended as both playfully ominous and ironically upbeat. It meant to reflect the ambivalent nature of the concept I had been developing for almost a decade—a concept aimed at addressing a previously shadowed sphere—or spheres—of largely invisible creative laborers, who were systemically unrecognized by mainstream high culture and its institutions, and yet, this same agency nevertheless was essential to maintaining and reproducing the very same art world system. Significantly, this agency was also becoming inexorably brighter. So much so that it would soon be impossible to ignore. Thus, the metaphor of the resurrected zombie army emerging from the darkness. But what I did not fully anticipate then was the coming of a still-darker form of resurrected dark matter which would, decades later, prove my prophecy true in ways that no longer invoked any hint of morbid satire, but instead genuine dread. Let me backup to explain how we arrived at this point almost a quarter century after I first formulated my hypothesis about the missing mass or dark matter of the art world.

As early as 1984, American art historian Carol Duncan pinpointed a fundamental, though typically overlooked feature of high culture: that the majority of professionally trained artists actually make up a vast surplus of producers whose redundancy is *the normal condition of the art market*. Duncan added that beyond the recognized boundaries of the established art world lay an even larger pool of individuals whose talents never had a chance to develop. Riffing on her observation I wondered if these many, allegedly superfluous cultural producers actually played a necessary role in upholding the same institution of art which excluded them, or cast them into the shadows. My provocation to the mainstream art world in 2001 therefore was this: is it possible that the majority of creative activity in our post-industrial society was actually invisible to the institutions and discourses—the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators, and arts administrators—who manage and interpret contemporary culture? In truth of course, this inconspicuous multitude was most often “invisible in plain sight” as we shall see. But how to describe this perverse relationship between light and dark as well as success and failure? Moreover, if I was correct in my hunch that the small but bright and glittering world of fine art was actually dependent on its larger missing mass, I would have to have a concise, clear way to represent this paradox.

The terminology I came to appropriate for this phenomenon -artistic dark matter- derives from astronomy, and it is itself a cosmic puzzle. How is it that an allegedly massive gravitational force makes up most of the universe, yet remains invisible to detection? This is the problem astrophysicists ask as their theories tell them that some 27 % of the entire universe is made up of an unseen and unknown type of invisible matter, while as much as 70% consists of a similarly inscrutable form of dark energy. Why does this matter? Because without the combined gravity of both these unseen forces the universe would have already expanded to a point where all of its energy dissipated to leave behind a cold, inactive, and lifeless cosmos. It also became clear to me

that one crucial difference between scientific investigators searching for their missing cosmic mass, and their art world counterparts, is that the former actually want to discover what dark matter consists of, whereas the latter would prefer not to know. For my purposes, what I was calling the dark matter of the art world also had different elements within it, and was, in fact, quite heterogeneous. I had detected three primary groupings or subcategories of artistic dark matter, all grounded in a different type of creative productive labor. These include: 1.) non-professional informal and amateur artists; 2.) the vast majority of art-school trained professionals, and 3.) a relatively smaller group of artists who already grasped their own marginality sometimes leading to political consequences. Allow me to drill-down into these three categories in more detail.

Group One includes the numerous informal amateurs who pursue creative activities outside of professional contexts, and yet who are still adding value to the world of high culture in two ways: first in material terms by purchasing art supplies, museum memberships, taking art classes, and second they do so figuratively by serving as that dark backdrop upon which professional, credentialed artists are most explicitly contrasted. Group Two is made up of the many "pre-failed" BFA, MFA or PhD credentialed art school and university graduates who will provide the art world with its army of interns, art fabricators, museum staff, and yet whose careers will never actually launch into visibility. Many will eventually give up being artists while continuing to be employed in this or that ancillary artistic capacity. Some will continue making art whenever possible, and thus structurally come to resemble ironically, or perhaps tragically, Group One. Very few in Group Two will succeed to become art stars, or even self-sufficient as art makers, and not infrequently this achievement is short-lived. Group Three is by far the least numerous cluster of dark matter producers. It consists of artists who have withdrawn from the art world often for political reasons as they essentially embrace their own redundancy as surplus cultural labor. Their response is generally to self-organize into "art gangs" as Alan W. Moore has proposed, or into more ideologically structured collectives that downplay or suppress individual identity. Sometimes these groups engage in explicitly political activism, even as they operate within their own para-economic networks as I will elaborate upon in a moment. Furthermore, it is Group Three that is the primary focus of this book, as you shall see.

Summarizing this dark matter taxonomy we can say that what brings these three categories into alignment is not so much their mutual darkness and marginalization from the mainstream art world, for there are indeed other forms of gatekeeping and exclusion that operate within that sphere. Instead, it is primarily their peculiar and paradoxical relationship to the political economy of high culture which binds them together. For this three-fold missing mass is simultaneously essential for sustaining the status quo of fine art, even as it is treated dismissively because of its status as an excess army of semi or unemployed artistic laborers. Bringing us to another important theme of *Dark Matter*: the tendency for this missing mass to develop its own alternative economic networks, semi-autonomously from the world of mainstream art, including its established museums, galleries, collectors, dealers, auction houses, and so forth. This other, shadow economy is in fact a rather commonplace phenomenon that appears whenever populations are faced with precarious living conditions. These invisible commoning spaces are rife with informal modes of production, cooperative networks of gift exchange, as well as systems of information gathering, time-sharing, gossip, and what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have termed the fugitivity of the *undercommons*.

Put differently, and specifically in relation to art, consider theorist John Roberts formulation of my dark matter thesis in his 2015 study, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-garde*, that these networks of mutual aid form a type of “secondary economy.” In any case, it is also true that these consciously redundant and self-organized cultural forces have at times sought to hinder, or even block the mainstream market and the politics that support it. Think here of the recent waves of unionization amongst museum staff in the United States, or such past events as Occupy Wall Street, the Movement of Squares, and the so-called Arab Spring that involved large contingents of precarious artists and cultural workers. As theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, one of the book's early reviewers put it "almost as soon as Dark Matter was published, the current revolutionary wave began spreading...a refusal by youth to maintain the precariousness of neocolonial labor under dictatorial regimes, making use of networked tools and defiant street performance." (Mirzoeff xxx) Leading directly to another major contention found in the pages ahead, which is that this dark matter creativity was in the process of becoming *brighter*.

Certainly, this brightening was due in part to a certain self-organized agency as just described. However, far more crucially I argue, this illumination is due to capitalism in its ultra-free market and digitally networked neoliberal modality as it attempts to squeeze every drop of socially produced bio-value from every corner of life. Mario Tronti famously described this shift from factory-enclosed production to what he termed capitalism's social factory as early as the 1960s. Indeed, capital's digital communications and computational technologies were rapidly expanding in the 1990s as this book was being written. These networks invariably opened-up the very means for dark matter to become brighter, even as they exposed every corner of social existence to non-stop extraction, including formerly obscure pockets of creative labor, resistance, and resentment as I will come to momentarily. In this process, most of this formerly shadowed missing mass is inertly mobilized by the system. However, sometimes it also rides upon these networks in the fashion of partisans and pirates. The dark matter hypothesis was my attempt at recognizing and confirming the potential of this buccaneering resistance as part of the *Longue durée* towards a future emancipation rising from below.

In the decades since the dark matter proposition was first raised, much has happened and much has changed. The growing illumination of all three dark matter would eventually overrun the institutions of art's contemporary mainstream. I would never have predicted in 2010 that a decade later the activist group Black Lives Matter (BLM) would be selected to top the annual ranking of 100 art world influencers by a leading industry journal, with ruangrupa, a socially-engaged art collective from Indonesian tasked with curating that year's Documenta 15 holding firm at second place, and with the #MeToo movement in fourth ranking. I could think of no better proof that a formerly missing creative mass had emerged into the light. Unfortunately, this victory was doomed to be transient as a very different type of illuminating dark matter was soon to take center stage. Allow me to explain what had personally motivated me to develop the dark matter hypothesis, as a starting point to explain its most recent, and disturbing manifestation.

DARK MATTER RISING

The initial aim of the artistic dark matter hypothesis was to better comprehend why the type of progressive and Leftist activist art collectives I had been part of in the 1980s and 1990s remained invisible to the mainstream art world. What was it about this type of work which had so greatly marginalized it? Was it a commitment to political change? Or for producing art about society rather than as art-for-arts-sake? Or was it that collective organizing amongst artists is apostate that of the singular visionary genius, a concept long held sacred to art historians over the centuries? By focusing on the structural inequalities baked-into the institutional art world economy, the dark matter hypothesis came at these questions from a different angle. Each of these problems: marginalization, political orientation towards committed art, and collectivized identity could be read as less troublesome to the mainstream of high culture than a direct challenge to its function as the gatekeeper of that culture. Recognizing the glut of artistic production as an essential component of established art values, that was nonetheless structurally excluded, immediately struck a chord with precisely the many dark matter producers who came across my arguments.

A small sample of these responses over the intervening years includes an online Museum of Dark Matter or MoDM created by Elisabetta Andrea Carlotta del Ponte; the Dark Matter Accelerator Games event organized by Marco Baravalle and SaLe Docs cultural space in Venice Italy (with assistance from me); an attempt to “harness” dark matter in relationship to the invisibility of disabled persons in Birmingham UK; a sociological study produced Kuba Szreder and other members of the Free/Slow University of Warsaw; a “Dark Energy” protoplasmic feminist organizing group in Vienna; and an entire “VersionFest” of Dark Matter in Chicago. In addition, we find Kathrin Böhm’s “compost heap” installation in Gothenburg, Sweden where the dark matter theorem served as a fermentation idea-enzyme, and also in Swedish artist Helen Hildur. W. recently announced that “Today, I proudly declare myself an Elementary Particle of the Dark Matter.” Soon there will also be a Dark Matter wing of the online Museum of Unrest being prepared by curators John Phillips and Georgia Perkins out of the UK and France. And the list goes on and continues to grow.

[The MoDM \(Museum of Dark Matter\) elisabetta del ponte](#)

[Dark Matter Games, Venice2017 \(Artforum best exhibition of year pick\)](#)

[Interrogating Invisibility: George Vasey – Harnessing the dark matter of the artworld - Disability](#)

[The Art Factory: an excerpt from a report by the Free/Slow University of Warsaw](#)

[DARK ENERGY. Feminist Organizing, Working Collectively | Nina Höchtl](#)

[Kathrin Böhm Exhibition as \(Compost\) Pile](#)

[“Today, I proudly declare myself an Elementary Particle of the Dark Matter” Helen Hildur. W.](#)

[Museum of UnRest harnessing art and design to address social and environmental injustices](#)

For a while it seemed as if my starting point regarding the mobilization of art missing mass as a force of liberatory and inclusive social or even political transformation was unstoppable. It seemed as if dark matter had not only brightened, it had conquered. And then on January 6, 2021, a far

darker thread of this no-longer-dark matter made itself known to a startled nation if not world. To be sure, those events, and the Make America Great Again or MAGA movement behind it, were becoming brighter for some time, and not only in the United States. Over the past decades we have witnessed a wave of far-Right, ethno-nationalist and xenophobic cultural practitioners gaining electoral strength from Hungary, Serbia, Italy and Austria, to Brazil, Argentina, El Salvador, and many places in-between. And with this increasing visibility has risen a form of cultural dark matter that I do include in this book, but only as an all-too-brief caveat to my main hypothesis as it turns out in hindsight. As you will read towards the conclusion of Chapter One, “Art, Politics, Dark Matter: Nine Prologues”:

Nothing assures us that this increasingly visible social productivity, this materializing missing mass, will be a force of liberty. What is described in these pages as “dark matter” therefore, is not intrinsically progressive, not in the typical liberal or radical senses of that term. Instead, it possesses at best a potential for progressive resistance, as well as for reactionary anger."

DARK MATTER AT THE CROSSROADS

Like other ultra-conservative and Alt-Right movements, MAGA, and especially MAGA 2.0 which has ascended into even greater illumination since the return of Donald J. Trump to office, sits at the intersection of long-festering class resentments, political manipulation by oligarchs, and a fantasy involving the restoration of a long-vanished American greatness. The latter sometimes focuses on the Nation’s post-War era in the 1950s, at other times it involves Ronald Reagan’s 1980s, but the basic default for MAGA 2.0 is 1776, as rallies, marches, and the insurrection of 1/6/2021 revealed in flags, costumes, and chants with that revolutionary year rendered in Disneyesque cartoonish detail. Nevertheless, MAGA culture and its counterparts in other parts of the world are now visible everywhere as online memes, blogs, racist and misogynist content-sharing platforms, as well as images of extreme violence and AI generated political conspiracies.

This illumination of culturally reactionary dark matter is especially relevant to readers in Argentina, where similar movements have gained significant traction under President Javier Milei blending nostalgic nationalism with religious fundamentalism into a bellicose counter-cultural (counter liberal culture) aesthetic that combines libertarian symbols with aggressive anti-establishment rhetoric, all while advocating for a return to an imagined golden age of Argentine prosperity. Like their MAGA counterparts, these movements harness the creative energies of formerly invisible cultural producers who feel marginalized by globalized cosmopolitan elites, channeling their resentments into politically potent cultural expressions. And it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that what we are witnessing now is a new (retro) avant-garde movement that paradoxically rushes backwards into the past, even as it is a strictly contemporary and technologically enabled phenomenon in the present, or what I now refer to as the *unpresent*, the current state of seemingly futureless and uncanny presentness, like Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism mutated into capitalist unrealism. Still, what if any difference exists between reactionary, populist,

ultra-nationalist, or other extreme-Right species of dark matter compared with those who hold a progressive, socially inclusive cultural outlook? Truly, this is a question that has haunted my hypothesis from its start, and it is now far more urgent to address. That stated, I do not have a definitive answer. What I can hope for is that others will continue to explore and develop this question, while making a few possibly useful observations.

Allow me out of convenience to use MAGA 2.0 in the U.S. as my general representative of these movements, even though it is both similar and different from other extreme-Right formations elsewhere that include of course La Libertad Avanza in Argentina, Partido Liberal in Brazil, and Fidesz (Hungary), Lega (Italy), Front National (France), BJP (India), Law and Justice or PiS (Poland). While varying in their hostility to globalization and ultra-free market capitalism (neoliberalism), even if both of these positions are present to one or another degree throughout, they all do converge around a common belief that they represent an authentic and embattled cultural opposition to what they believe is a secular and elitist liberal hegemony. Thus they share an extreme hostility to internationalists, Marxists, socialists, de-colonialists, and all those supporting trans and pro-gender fluid perspectives. And of course they are violently opposed to “other” ethnic and religious groups including above all refugees, immigrants, and quite frequently Muslims. MAGA sees itself as a counter-hegemonic force whose objective is to restore a past that in fact never actually existed, at least not in the way its follower’s imagine it. As anthropologist David Scott puts this in a different context involving slavery, we once lived with the idea that suffering would someday be left behind us. There would come an enlightened and just future that in the meantime we are always tilting towards in “anticipation of emancipated possibilities promised in new tomorrows.” Nowadays, Scott adds bleakly, “it is the past that animates, or better ferments, breeds our temporal preoccupations.”¹ MAGA embraces this latter, backwards-facing temporality.

If we apply this interpretation to MAGA 2.0 and their ilk around the world, then this type of no-longer dark matter productivity is indeed a new cultural phenomenon that only appears to be rooted in the past, when in fact it is a truly modern movement espousing a truly Nietzschean resentment and an open hostility towards the very concept of futurity as the arrival of justice for everyone. I would go so far as to suggest they are anti-historical in the Enlightenment sense of history, and this of course includes Historical Materialism, which admittedly has a very problematic record. Nevertheless, what I propose in opposition is for cultural forces still seeking inclusivity and justice and a belief in futurity itself, they might consider engaging with the past through acts of conspicuous repurposing and repair, of specifically what I call the phantom archive overflowing with previous efforts at emancipation, experimentation, intervention, sometimes successful, although more often not. This type of time-travel whereby the gaps and breaks and scars of reuse become apparent, not covered-up, and it stands against the desire by MAGA to restore an alleged past “as it actually was,” when of course they will do no such thing. I take up these ideas in my next book tentatively entitled *Time Against Itself: Art and Politics in the Age of the unpresent*. As you

¹ Scott, David. "Black Futurities Past and Present." Colonial Repercussions, YouTube Lecture, Akademie der Kunste, June 23, 2018. <https://anthropology.columbia.edu/content/david-scotts-media-page>

can see, it is meant to be a book-end to *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, from 2010 some fifteen years later.

As readers engage with the dark matter hypothesis, past and present, I hope they will find it useful now as a means of analyzing how these dynamics of visibility and invisibility, redundancy and mobilization, continue to operate within their own cultural and political landscapes, for better, and for worse. The question of who speaks and who remains silent, who is seen and who remains unseen in our cultural institutions—but also within our political economies—remains as urgent as ever and I believe some of the tools for developing opposition to the growing hegemony of the right are also found within the dark matter of the art world.

The archive of dark matter has split open. We are its dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead.

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Glossary of Terms

Dark Matter: Original concept from 2010 describing the invisible majority of cultural producers excluded from mainstream art world visibility but essential to its functioning. Like cosmic dark matter comprising 85% of the universe, these overlooked producers anchor contemporary art's operation. Professionally trained artists often survive precarious circumstances by serving as assistants, fabricators, and educators for more successful artists. Others develop informal networks of mutual assistance and covert micro-economies. Digital networks now provide self-representation for even the most obscure practitioners, leading this dark matter to travel from marginal invisibility to increasing visibility and potential political agency.

Dark Matter (Brightening): Process by which previously invisible dark matter becomes visible in contemporary culture. Digital networks now provide self-representation for even the most obscure practitioners and communities, causing art world's dark matter to travel from marginal invisibility to increasing visibility and potential political agency. The 2008-09 economic crisis accelerated this illumination as precarious producers fell into deeper uncertainty. Following the Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street, artists self-organized to demand fair payment and called for the resignation of suspected "toxic" museum board members. This emerging networked dark matter has infiltrated institutions, public spaces, local politics, and social media across the political spectrum.

Capitalist Unrealism (AKA the unpresent): Extension of Fisher's concept describing the current condition where capitalist realism has inverted into something uncanny and dreamlike. Unlike capitalist realism, capitalist unrealism erases even the false promise of an end to catastrophe and return to business as usual, eclipsing the very memory of a better, more just economic and political system in past, present, or future. The near-impossibility of interpreting this strange uncanny present makes it intellectually and politically debilitating. It offers an unmappable, endlessly repeating "now time" that insists it is the only possible reality, creating a pathological condition that is both all-encompassing and indifferent.

MAGA 2.0: Term for the post-2025 manifestation of the Make America Great Again movement. Representing a significant manifestation of dark matter becoming visible, MAGA emerged from populations who felt excluded from mainstream cultural and political representation. Unlike artistic dark

matter, MAGA's illumination has manifested as a powerful right-wing political and cultural force asserting itself with unexpected potency. MAGA 2.0 continues the movement's retro-vanguardism, functioning like an avant-garde but pointing backward toward imagined pasts rather than forward. As ethno-nationalism and cultural conservatism increasingly dominate institutional power structures, MAGA 2.0 represents a consolidation of this reactionary form of previously invisible cultural dark matter.

Phantom Archive: Concept describing alternative temporal possibilities that exist as traces or remnants. Operating not as a static collection but as a dark temporality, it permits past and future radical energies to interfere constructively with present struggles. Drawing promiscuously upon previously enacted cultural forms, it creates temporal disruptions challenging both the frozen repetition of the "unpresent" and reactionary attempts to restore an imagined past. This spectral archive diffuses within collective cultural memories as a cursory glance or foretaste of what does not or will not remain unpresent. It forms what David Scott calls a "problem-space" where "a horizon of identifiable stakes" becomes visible.

Retro-vanguard: Term for movements like MAGA that function like avant-gardes but point backward toward imagined pasts rather than forward. Unlike progressive activist art that engages the phantom archive to create temporal disruptions generating new possibilities, retro-vanguardism attempts to restore an imagined past. Both represent attempts to escape the frozen time of the Unpresent, but with fundamentally different orientations. Retro-vanguardism rejects institutional frameworks in favor of nostalgic restoration, sealing off alternatives in favor of a mythologized historical narrative. This approach responds to the temporal disorientation of the Unpresent by retreating to simpler, imagined historical periods.

The *unpresent*: A temporal condition where everything appears simultaneously the same yet completely transformed, without sense of affirmative past or future. Characterized by dislocation of time, sensory overload, and the feeling of inescapability, it emerged after Brexit and Trump's election in 2016. Unlike Freud's spatial uncanniness, this is temporal uncanniness—an unmappable, endlessly repeating "now time" so crisis-ridden that cultural notions appear as dwindling archipelagos in a vast, indifferent ocean. Mass media increasingly describes our era as "surreal," "unreal," and "uncanny," signaling this collective temporal disorientation.