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Art Populism and the Alter- Institutional Turn

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In 1965 the Operaist stance enters the Italian literary debate thanks to critic Alberto Asor Rosa's *The Writer and the People*. The book's main targets, besides well-known literary critics of the time, encompass writers like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino, Vasco Pratolini, Cesare Pavese, and Elio Vittorini, whose works embodied the Communist Party's hegemony over literary production – a hegemony based on the legacy of the Resistance on one hand, and on a populist political and cultural vision on the other. Asor Rosa's main thesis, which he frames as an urgent political matter of his time, is a harsh critique of Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "national-popular."

From the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century to the post-World War II period, Italian literature exhibited pronounced populist tendencies. This tendency steadily grew stronger throughout the pre-fascist and fascist periods, and finally became completely dominant in the wake of the wartime Italian resistance movement, in compliance with Communist Party's cultural directives. In the 1960s, as Asor Rosa was writing his book, the populist literary genre was going into decline.

Now that populism is once again at the center of public debate, how can *The Writer and the People* be useful to us today?¹

Since Asor Rosa's book was first published, the globe has changed radically, from the fall of the Soviet Union and globalization to the financialization of the economy and major shifts in the geopolitical balance of power. Furthermore, *The Writer and the People* was so deeply rooted in the author's time that it got stuck; in order to be absolutely coherent, accurate, and polemically rigorous, Asor Rosa refused to write things that had a simplistically universal or trans-historical significance. But if outdatedness is the cornerstone of contemporaneity, then *The Writer and the People* may still have something important to teach the readers of today.

Of course, some preliminary considerations are necessary: we should look beyond the limits of the historical debate that Asor Rosa's work took part in; at the same time, we need to shift his concepts from the literary context to art criticism. Nevertheless, if we treat the word "people" as an empty signifier, the essay can provide us with an interpretational diagram, a starting point for addressing issues that are critical to today's debate on the relationship between art and populism. Furthermore, the Operaist matrix of the book clarifies the terms of another crucial debate that is far from being concluded, between what we could call heretical Marxism on one side, and leftist populism on the other.



Installation view of the exhibition "Dark Matter Super Collider, Dark Matter Games," S.a.L.E. Docks, 2017. Photo: Veronica Badolin.

According to Asor Rosa, a work can be describe as “populist” “whenever the literary discourse contains a positive evaluation of the people, in ideological, historical, social, or ethical terms. Populism implies that the people is presented as a model.”²

In view of this argument, we can define as populist those literary works that choose “the people” as their narrative object and aim to represent them. It is not a merely formal matter; that is to say, a plot taking place in a bourgeois environment doesn’t qualify as populist literature. However, independently from the political stance of the author (liberal, progressive, anarchist, communist, or fascist), in Italy this peculiar literary genre presents some recurring features: first, a certain hostility towards cosmopolitanism and a preference for the national space; second, an adherence to traditional formal models and an aversion to avant-garde experimentation; and third, sociological realism and a hint of “bourgeois intellectualism.”

This tendency gained traction between the end of World War II and the 1960s, largely due to the Communist Party’s hegemonic position and its application of lessons from Gramsci (sometimes in a misleading way, according to Asor Rosa). Built around the idea of revolution as a “revolution of the people,” populist literature was supposed to mobilize, through the love of country, different sectors of the population far beyond the proletariat. A national and popular culture that was supposed to include even bourgeois and progressive positions was an essential instrument for this purpose.

Here Asor Rosa’s critique reveals its core: the writer claims that the construction of “the people” as a *dispositif*, imposed pervasively even through literature, is a substantial obstacle to the revolution of the working class, the only subject that is inherently political, according to Marx. What is at stake here is the dispute between *the people* and *the class*, i.e., between the party’s structures and aligned intellectuals, who try to shape the former, on one hand; and on the other, the dissident intellectuals, who try to organize the latter towards radical social transformation, including the self-organization of production and an end to any nationalist temptation.

Now that Asor Rosa’s arguments have been laid out, we can use his interpretative framework to determine if a tension similar to that found in the literary populism influenced by Gramsci can be detected in the contemporary visual arts. Considering the abovementioned historical shift, there won’t be many cases that exactly meet the criteria outlined by Asor Rosa, but some approximate examples arise.

One of these takes the form of three documentaries by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini on the Bolivarian Revolution in Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela: *Venezuela from Below* (2004), *5 Factories: Worker Control in Venezuela* (2006), and *Comuna Under Construction* (2010). The films focus mostly on the subaltern strata of the population and, in Ernesto Laclau’s terms, on their transformation from *plebs* to *populous*.³ As envisaged by the Bolivarian apparatus, the lower levels of the population cease representing only a part of society and become a totality: the socialist people of Venezuela. The intent here is neither to judge these documentaries on a political level, nor oversimplify Azzellini and Ressler’s work, which deals with crucial issues encompassing democratic participation, political organization, and workers’ self-management. The point is rather to outline particular aspects of the films that refer to the idea of cultural populism as presented above: 1) They abstain from using the meta-documentary format, which tends to question the documented narration as an objective narration of the facts, a legitimate representation of reality, and the recovery of a stable and permanent memory. On the contrary, Azzellini and Ressler’s documentaries are presented quite openly as means for diffusing and affirming the Bolivarian discourse without any effort to deconstruct it, although they never succumb to propaganda. The authors live-filmed an historical process without any *a posteriori* analysis, so that it’s not possible to use the prefix “post-” to describe the documentaries’ aesthetic features. 2) This tendency affects the formal choices made by the directors, who prefer linear narration and who have a pedagogical intent, eschewing any ostentatious experimentation. 3) The documentaries deal with a national revolution, limited to the space of the nation-state. 4) As Ressler recently wrote to me in an email conversation, even if *Comuna Under Construction* “shows an increasing split between the basis (activists, workers, students) and the government of the Bolivarian Process,” generally in this series of films the connection between cultural products and the Bolivarian political apparatus is crystal clear. This connection doesn’t pertain exclusively to populist governments, and it can emerge in different forms, either positive or negative, but it is for sure a prerogative of any populist *program*, as the documentaries in question clarify.

But we should delve deeper into the question: Is populist art limited to artworks that depict populism? In her well-known critique of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop thinks not.⁴ Bishop criticizes the idea that all artworks that fall under the category of relational aesthetics are immediately political and emancipatory

thanks to their proclivity for intersubjectivity rather than contemplation and objectivity (I have already written on this topic in the past, so I won't elaborate further in this context⁵). She points to other artists who in her view realize a more effective relational model in political terms. In this context, Bishop refers to the concept of antagonism as used by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where they combine Gramsci's discourse on hegemony with Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity, aiming to suggest new paths towards radically democratic social models. Laclau and Mouffe take Lacan's theory of subjectivity – which frames the subject as an incomplete, decentralized entity – and attempt to raise it to the political level. Why incomplete? Because the presence of the other (the antagonist) will always prevent me from being totally myself. As a consequence, my relationship to the other is not one that involves settled entities; rather, it entails the impossibility of any settlement. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the political and social body work in the same way: antagonism and conflict don't indicate weakness in a democratic system. On the contrary, they are indispensable, and even prevent the rise of authoritarianism and the fossilization of the

status quo. In contrast to this notion of antagonism stands the theory of deliberative democracy, which relies on the weakening of passions in order to reach rational consensus. Borrowing Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism⁶ and translating it to the art field, Bishop criticizes relational practices for excluding antagonism from the social relationships they aim to build and for deceptively depicting the social sphere as an "immanent togetherness."

Bishop goes on to argue that some artists, like Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra, follow an opposite logic. Concerning Sierra, Bishop writes that in his well-known works the artist uses an antagonistic strategy to bring to light the presence of the other in a self-centered art system. This provokes discomfort in the audience, who should then be able to question their certainty and identity. Sierra makes injustice visible through art, without trying to bring about an impossible reconciliation between opposing parties.

It would be ridiculous to accuse Santiago Sierra of nationalism. However, in my opinion his work presents what could be called a "populist differential," calling to mind the definition of populism employed by Asor Rosa as well as



Cover of the Italian edition of Alberto Asor Rosa's book *Scrittori e popolo*.



Gregory Sholette, *Decolonize This Place, AMNH*, 2016. Drawing. Courtesy of the artist

Laclau and Mouffe. Sierra hires performers from the working classes to complete his works. These popular figures (the poor, the marginalized, prostitutes, drug addicts) recall characters from the work of Pasolini. It must be said that fortunately, Sierra's work resembles Pasolini's brutality, as displayed in the movie *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom*, more than his edifying examples, as found in a novel like *A Violent Life*. The staging of impoverished people and global proletarians who sell their labor to the artist (often at minimum wage) gives rise to an almost mystical vision, fed by violent corporality, ascetic cruelty, and inexplicable sacrifice. This aspect of Sierra's work is enhanced by the black-and-white photos that document the performances and that hint at 1970s conceptualism. "The people" embody redemption: as brutalized victims of capital, they have no ability to cooperate, nor impulse for rebellion or organization. Art becomes the liturgy for their suffering. Like Pasolini and Asor Rosa before him, Sierra is an interpreter of a long-term crisis of populism, where the people are represented as a defective model, nonetheless taking center stage.

Obviously, these two examples – Asor Rosa and Santiago Sierra – don't provide us with an exhaustive definition of populist art. However, if we compare them to relational practices, a polarity stands out. Quoting Laclau:

In order to have the people of populism we need something more: we need a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus* – that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community ... In the case of an institutionalist discourse, we have seen that differentiality claims to be the only legitimate equivalent: all differences are considered equally valid within a wider totality. In the case of populism, this symmetry is broken: there is a part which identifies itself with the whole.⁷

Within the framework of this definition, we can say that relational practices correspond to the institutionalist pole, while antagonistic practices correspond to the populist pole. Like institutionalist discourse, relational aesthetics accepts the idea that differentiality is "the only legitimate equivalent," so relationships involve sharing, acceptance, and inclusion. We should spotlight the social model that such relations allude to. A society in which relationships are necessarily harmonious will be characterized by a structural lack of conflict – in other words, an acceptance of established social powers, which is only illusorily interrupted in the protected space of the artwork. If relational aesthetics really aimed to transform reality, then it would tell us to "live in" the artwork rather than "dissolve" art into life. In this light, relational art

practices look like a perfect product of what Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism."

The second pole, corresponding to populist art, should be addressed with a certain caution, bearing in mind that we are reasoning at a structural level. It is evidently not possible to claim that every artwork that disregards theories of relational aesthetics is therefore populist. However, it is true that individual artworks are commonly regarded as a synecdoche – a partiality that takes on the role of a totality.

We previously considered Ressler and Azzellini's documentaries as useful tools for understanding certain overlooked aspects of the Bolivarian revolution. These documentaries employ formal techniques that can be defined as populist. When art is embedded in populism, however, it risks sacrificing a lot for the sake of affirmation. Documentary is a useful instrument for questioning people's memory rather than for celebrating the rebirth of "the people" in a nationalistic way, progressive intentions notwithstanding.

I am not an expert on the subject, so I won't superficially debate the experiences that made the development of twenty-first century socialism possible in Latin America. However, I am among those who are worried about the possibility of the rise of a new left-wing populism to oppose reactionary populists, since this would also be based on nationalism, sovereignty, identitarian rhetoric, and the autonomy of the political. After all, it is pointless to reduce the terms of the debate to binary oppositions: horizontality or verticality, globalization or the nation, multitude or the people. Any fitting answer for the difficult times we are going through must be found in a "secular" interpretation of the above-mentioned elements. Institutionalism on one hand, populism on the other.

Where can we find artistic practices that break this dichotomy? Practices that envisage intersubjectivity as a terrain for necessary conflict and, at the same time, for the creation of new social bonds? Such art must be different in substantial ways from the examples discussed above: 1) It must express a different idea of sociality than the immanent togetherness affirmed by relational aesthetics, which can be seen as an artistic *dispositif* in service to neoliberal capture. 2) It must have a different stance on the autonomy of the artwork, opposing the idea of an defined artwork that brings to light the undefined nature of subjectivity, but without trying to intervene at the social level. 3) Its attitude must be different from populist affirmation, which risks succumbing to the adulation of power and the narration of reality as it should be, a typical characteristic of socialist

realism.

These kinds of artistic practices invest in the creation of social relationships that are on the side of the commons and against neoliberal dictates and reactionary populism (which are only apparently in opposition). When art chooses this side, it doesn't adhere to an ideology; rather, it questions emerging ideological tendencies and operates according to a materialistic logic in order to realize the *common* through the free distribution of knowledge and means of production, as well as through the creation of new algorithms and the reinvention of institutional infrastructures. Beyond neoliberal capture and against populist recruitment.

At the end of 2015, the magazine *Afterall* published two articles on a rapidly spreading artistic phenomenon that we could define as the "alter-institutional turn." Authors Sven Lütticken and Ekaterina Degot detected a growing trend that identifies artistic practice with the establishment of new para-institutions, alter-institutions, and institutions of the common, which work in opposition to "monster institutions," to use Gerald Raunig's term. The articles focused on projects such as *The Silent University* by Ahmet Öğüt, *The New World Summit* and *Artist Organisations International* by Jonas Staal; and *The Immigrant Movement International* by Tania Bruguera.⁸

Two key elements emerge from Degot's report on a meeting of the *Artist Organisations International* in Berlin, which brought together twenty organizations founded by artists, all characterized by a progressive social and political agenda. Firstly, there was a disenchantment about the potential results of the project – a disenchantment that appears to have been legitimate considering the lack of any follow-up to the 2015 meeting. Secondly, the meeting exhibited an emerging tendency among artists to act like "directors." The title of Degot's article, "The Artist As Director," was a provocative turning-of-the-page after the time of "the artist as curator." What is at stake here is a sort of *détournement* of the art manager's role. On one hand, artists are increasingly appropriating this role, in a literal interpretation of management as art; on the other, they are pushing it towards experimentation with non-liberal models. Lütticken, in his article, argues that these practices highlight an evolution of institutional critique, where the center of attention shifts from the critique of existing institutions to the invention of new ones. These projects, although different, share certain characteristics: 1) A pedagogical intent responding to the urgency of providing access to knowledge; for instance, Öğüt's *The Silent University* is organized as a platform for

knowledge exchange, where migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are both students and teachers. 2) These alter-institutions often prioritize the visibility of people who have been rendered socially invisible, such as migrants without residency permits – people excluded from systems of social welfare and silenced in the sphere of public debate. 3) These projects often employ new communication technologies in a consciously critical fashion, seeking to end the divide between humanistic and digital approaches.

The alter-institutional turn goes beyond a certain impasse typical of relational aesthetics, as it grasps the imbalance in power relationships within society. It also addresses the problem of rebalancing these relationship, without embracing populist ideology. However, these new institutions are limited by the fact that they are often conceived as artworks by a single artist, and their autonomy depends on the artist's capacity to economically sustain the work and devote considerable time to its development. In this sense, these institutions can't create or take part in any real process of organization, and are unlikely put down roots after their initial realization.

Would it be possible to make them grow? I believe so, if they can be connected to movements, activist groups, and solidarity networks practicing constituent forms of conflict, such as anti-gentrification occupations, the provision of shelter and hospitality for migrants, opposition to the rise of neofascism, and experiments with institutional models based on the commons and mutualism.

It isn't surprising that Lütticken compares these artistic projects to the 2015 occupation at Amsterdam University, which protested cuts to public education and the planned conversion of a key university building into a luxury hotel. Lütticken writes that on the night before the occupation was evicted, a group of students sent a request to the Van Abbemuseum to use Ahmet Öğüt's *Bakunin's Barricade* (2014) for self-defense. *Bakunin's Barricade* is a reconstruction of a barricade decorated with artworks from the museum collection. A clause in Öğüt's contract with the museum, inserted by the artist, requires the artwork to be loaned to activists whenever they ask for it. Eventually, the eviction of the protesters made the loan impossible. Still, this story is useful for introducing some fundamental aspects of the alter-institutional turn.

Firstly, alter-institutional practices should produce a deterritorialization within existing art institutions. Pushing museums to look beyond the mere conservation and valorization of "national treasures," alter-institutional practices compel museums to reimagine themselves as

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spaces for critical social debate and the support of activist movements and independent cultural producers. Of course, this is not an easy or linear process; it involves negotiation and conflict with entrenched financial and cultural interests. Still, there are, at least in Europe, well-known examples of established art institutions opening themselves up to alter-institutional practices. L'Internationale network is one. Six major museums (Reina Sofía, Van Abbemuseum, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Moderna Galerija, MACBA, and SALT) have for years now been critically reflecting on their social and political role, and have been developing relationships with social movements that go beyond simply representing their stances. This proves that protagonists of the alter-institutional turn can be found not only among artists, but also among museum and gallery directors and managers.

Secondly, alter-institutions should invent new institutional architectures in response to the urgent need to radically democratize the basic structures of social life. This leads to a crucial question: How does an alter-institution work? What qualifies it as “alter-”? I will try to answer this question by exploring three examples: *The Cooperativist Society*, *Debtfair*, and S.a.L.E. Docks.

The Cooperativist Society is a largely unrealized project that was part of the public program of the controversial Documenta 14. One of the members of the collective that organized the project told me that he looks at this project as “an interesting failure.” Originally, *The Cooperativist Society* was formed because Documenta called on a group of people working with alternative currencies to suggest ways to critically examine and reform the financial infrastructure of the exhibition. All the initial proposals were rejected and the project, excluded from the main exhibition, finally found a home in the public program curated by Paul Preciado. However, apart from a lecture delivered in Athens, the project was ultimately cancelled, mainly due to budget shortfalls.

The story of the problematic relationship between this work and Documenta clearly shows how large-scale exhibitions need to mobilize progressive content, but are ultimately resistant to being modified by this content. The affair of the alleged bankruptcy and public bailout of Documenta, and its seeming transformation from a space for experimentation to a more corporate event, only represent the worsening of a series of preexisting structural problems. Why did the exhibition staff wait until after the emergence of negative news coverage and the involvement of local politicians to raise questions about the scale of biennials, their role

in the global economy, and the “exploitative working conditions” endured by many biennial workers?⁹ These are not the results of a “state of exception”; they are rather the basic premises, the default conditions faced by anyone curating this type of exhibition. The fate of *The Cooperativist Society*, its differential inclusion, proves that neoliberal governance has more subtle ways to perpetuate itself through art and cultural industries than staging a theatrical “political takeover” of the most influential biennial in the world.

The working group composed of hackers, artists, and activists that organized *The Cooperativist Society* aimed to use the visibility of Documenta to redirect some of the economic activity generated by the show towards solidarity networks and cooperative economies in Greece. At the same time, they aimed to build a laboratory in Athens for the design of new artistic models characterized by horizontality and sharing. The idea was that Documenta visitors could buy a prepaid card at the exhibition gates, which could be topped up with Fair Coins, a cryptocurrency designed to meet certain environmental, social, and democratic standards and to support cooperative and ethical production practices. Visitors could then use the card loaded with Fair Coins at a network of independent, self-organized shops.

Other projects similar to *The Cooperativist Society* include Dyne.org, Robin Hood Coop, Freedom Coop, and many others, all characterized by a mixing of disciplines (artists, hackers, and researchers) in activist spaces. (In Italy, a good example of a similar project is Macao in Milan, an independent space for artistic production born out of an occupation). While these projects certainly haven't transformed the field of finance, they are trying to invent new, more cooperative financial instruments. They all aim to create new means of production and new institutional models oriented toward the commons instead of capitalist accumulation. And they largely avoid the pitfalls of “network culture,” so fashionable a few decades ago, since they are keenly aware capital's ability to capture horizontal practices. They understand that automation is not the enemy, but insist that it must incorporate human relationships to be effective for something beyond capitalist valorization. Consciously operating in a space defined by existing power structures, these projects attempt to create new social bonds founded on irreducible multiplicity. In this respect, they eschew both populist reductionism and the institutionalism of relational aesthetics.

Debtfair is a project of Occupy Museums, a collective born during the Zuccotti Park

occupation in New York. An installation version of *Debtfair* was part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. One aspect of *Debtfair* is an online survey that collects information from artists and aims to make visible the effects of personal debt on American cultural producers. *Debtfair* exposes a hidden part of the American economy – such as the debt accrued by art students – that is nonetheless structurally necessary for the sustainability of the American art sector, often to the detriment of the most vulnerable art producers. *Debtfair* analyzes the economics of debt, along with its racial, gender, and colonial aspects, in order to map the institutions at the heart of the credit economy. The project also catalogues and exhibits work by indebted artists. For example, a 2015 exhibition at Art League Houston featured holes in the gallery walls where artworks could be inserted. The artworks were never displayed individually; instead, they were grouped according to the financial institutions that held the debt of the artists. Some of the works, for example, were grouped by a particular relationship to the Puerto Rican debt crisis.

Debtfair and *The Cooperativist Society* wrestle with the dialectic between visible and invisible. *Debtfair* aims to unveil invisible debt and overturn its subjugating aspects, while *The Cooperativist Society* seeks to uncover the abstract algorithms that control our financial lives. But what are the limits of this alter-institutional turn?

The fact is that these kinds of alter-institutional practices are largely encouraged by many art institutions and mostly developed through traditional roles like the artist, the curator, and the audience. They employ traditional devices like the large-scale exhibition, the museum, and the art festival. This means that they often end up adhering to the function that the neoliberal apparatus assigns to art, namely, the economic valorization of critical and subversive thought and imagery.

How, then, can we free this alter-institutional potential from the established art apparatus? Or, to put it in Gregory Sholette's terms, how can we autonomously organize the socially creative "dark matter" of art?¹⁰ Artists seem to face two unsavory alternatives: being condemned to invisibility, or being a pillar of the mainstream art world, with no possibility of interfering with its relationships of money and power. How can we avoid both fates?

Answers to these questions can be found by experimenting with assemblages that connect artists and art workers to social movements, grassroots organizations, and radical cooperatives. This is the most effective way to realize new subjective possibilities for artists,

curators, and cultural workers in general – subjectivities not shaped by the model of the entrepreneur of the self, not chained to a mobility that forces alter-institutions to fade out too quickly, not indebted and precarious for life, not wedded to the idea of creation as a private act in an era when it is instead the result of structural cooperation, not fueled by the adrenaline of market competition, and at the same time, not domesticated by the increasingly rare privilege of welfare-state benefits. In short, we need to associate the word "art" with different forms of life.

Seen in this light, the construction of alter-institutions cannot be reduced to the latest trend in the contemporary art-event economy. Instead, it must become a way to structurally empower different "art worlds." A new infrastructure is needed – a new physical, digital, linguistic, and economic infrastructure – in order for art to face the challenge of continuing financialization, rising reactionary politics, and the ongoing transformation of the art world into an event economy.

These are some of the concerns that, eleven years ago, led a group of Venice-based cultural workers, artists, and activists (including myself) to occupy S.a.L.E. Docks, originally an ancient salt-storage warehouse.

We opened S.a.L.E. Docks in 2007 as a kind of action/exhibition/research center. Our idea was, and still is, to experiment with a type of art institution that functions as a concrete critique of the neoliberal art *dispositif*. We have investigated how the Venice Biennale and the events associated with it work as a engine of gentrification in an already hyper-gentrified environment like the historical city of Venice. We organize actions against the precarity of cultural work and the massive use of unpaid labor, both in Venice and around the global (I'm referring here to our collaboration with the Gulf Labor campaign). We also host well-known artists, curators, and museum directors, but we always try to make our space and resources available to local artists and cultural producers. Our collective takes active part in social struggles in the city; for example, in September 2017 we hosted an assembly organized by the Committee Against Big Cruise Ships, welcoming more than two hundred environmental activists from all over Europe. For a few years we developed a peculiar exhibition format in which the production process was completely open; titled *Open*, this project involved hundreds of artists, students, and cultural workers, and pushed the boundaries of the exhibition format. In May 2017 we organized a three-day program of roundtables and interventions throughout Venice, titled *Dark Matter Games* in homage to Gregory Sholette's

book *Dark Matter*. Sholette uses the astrophysics concept of “dark matter” as a metaphor for the vast and variegated creative social intellect that sustains the comparatively small world of art professionals. This dark matter includes very different types of people: indebted students, aspiring professional artists, amateurs, and museumgoers, but also those (often collective) experiences in between art and activism that sometimes opt for invisibility as a form of refusal to play by the rules. Today, new technological and cultural conditions are making this dark matter much more visible than in the past. The question is, what should we do with this visibility?

Dark Matter Games aimed to be a model of a possible autonomous organization for creative dark matter, where the word “autonomous” points to a need for the arts (especially those concerned with social engagement) to work according to different productive, social, and economic logics than those of ruling neoliberal institutions. But it must be made clear that these alter-institutions do not occupy a nonexistent “outside” of the capitalist world. Neoliberal capture involves valorization through the continuous expropriation of social creation. Christian Marazzi has even argued that under present capitalist conditions, innovation (classically described by Joseph Schumpeter as the “destructive creation” unleashed when entrepreneurs recombine preexisting productive elements) has become deeply entwined with invention.¹¹ This is to say that innovation as an driving economic force works by *necessarily* annexing the (big and small) inventions that are created within the social field, outside the space of the economy.

If, then, alter-institutions as exceptions to neoliberal rule are more than ever endangered by annexation, they have to find ways to effectively work against the continuous pressure of the official art world, an art world eager to colonize those ever narrowing spaces in our cities not already taken over by privatization and gentrification, and those collective subjects that, in one way or another, occupy subaltern positions – collective subjects like “the community,” “the neighborhood,” “the camp,” “locals,” “migrants,” “grassroots activists,” “the poor,” “workers,” “women,” “indigenous people,” “queer people,” etc.

If we broaden our horizon to the general situation of today’s world, there are few reasons to be optimistic: the rise of neofascism and reactionary politics seems to suggest that the new visibility granted by technology mostly contributes to a feeling of widespread anger and helps realize our worst backwards drives. We shouldn’t delude ourselves. But we also need to

understand the importance of artistic practices that, in different ways, give visibility to the dark matter trying to create new autonomous forms, beyond the neoliberal model and in opposition to identity-based populism.

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1
In 2015, to celebrate *The Writer and the People*'s fiftieth anniversary, the publishing house Einaudi printed a new edition of the book, which included the late unreleased essay "Scrittori e Masse" (The Writer and the Masses). I mention this for the sake of completeness, since Asor Rosa's late writings are not of much interest for this article. In "Scrittori e Masse" he declares, perhaps too hastily, the disappearance of "the people," instead of undertaking a cultural and political investigation into what he calls "the masses." With this latter term he seems to indicate a growing lack of cohesion within "the people" – a crumbling of the unity that paradoxically emerged from different regionalisms and localisms.

2
Alberto Asor Rosa, *The Writer and The People* (Seagull Books, 2016).

3
Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

4
Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004).

5
Marco Baravalle, "Curare e Governare. Bourriaud e Obrist, la svolta relazionale della curatela," *Opera Viva*, December 19, 2016 operaviva.info/curare-e-governare.

6
After 1985 Chantal Mouffe specified that the core of politics has to be found in the transformation of antagonism (a clash between enemies that could resolve itself in a hopeless clash of identities) into agonism, i.e. "struggle between adversaries." Mouffe explains that "an adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality" Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Reihe Politikwissenschaft* (Political Science Series), Christine Neuhold and Gertrud Hafner, eds., (Vienna: Department of Political Science, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), 2000)

7
Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 81–82.

8
Sven Lütticken, "Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art," *Afterall* 40 (Autumn–Winter 2015); Ekaterina Degot, "The Artist As Director: Artist Organisation International and its Contradictions," *ibid*.

9

See "Statement by the Artistic Director and curatorial team of documenta 14," *e-flux conversations*, September 2017 <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/statement-by-the-artistic-director-and-curatorial-team-of-documenta-14/7013>.

10
Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2006).

11
Christian Marazzi, "La dislessia del manager," in *Il Comunismo del Capitale. Finanziarizzazione, biopolitiche del lavoro e crisi globale* (Ombre Corte, 2010).

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