

## RISE UP YOU LOVELY CHILDREN OF SATURN

Gregory Sholette, June 2005

With the exception of escalating government harassment against political artists, the most turbulent zone of cultural activity these days is found not in museums or galleries, nor even in auction houses where deals in contemporary art resemble the dot.com era. Instead, the true measure of artistic fervor is found within the seemingly wistful corridors of academia. Here the pursuit of a fine arts degree is like entering a parallel universe in which the discipline itself, in both its professional and ontological sense, is splitting apart as the demand for new products consumes unformed talent much like Saturn devoured his children. Even art industry stalwart Michael Kimmelman concedes that something is amiss. After visiting the *Greater New York* exhibition at MoMA's PS1 a few weeks ago he publicly ruminated in the New York Times that,

“...earnest and cunning students, not even yet graduated, are emerging already branded with signature styles. There's something rather depressing about such youthful professionalism, even while it is undeniably impressive.”<sup>1</sup>

Primarily associated with gatekeeper programs at Yale, Columbia and UCLA, the grinding of tectonic plates inside the art academy nonetheless affects all art students, faculty and administrators. Students already flock to classes offering practical methods for building an art career. Networking, marketing, financial management, development, curricula previously found in MBA programs are turning up in BFA, and even MFA programs. Today the only question that remains is whether or not to adapt or rebel, to join the game, or to turn one's back on the art industry's increasing intrusion into academic life and face the possibility of student attrition or even obsolescence.

Still, there is more to it. A growing reaction is also taking place in which some younger artists are searching for creative practices that operate “outside of,” or are inherently antithetical to the art world and its rapacious market. This rebellion includes producing work that is physically ephemeral, constructing gift economies in which art is dispersed and given away, working collaboratively or collectively, creating public interventions with political or social content not linked directly to the art world, and establishing a long-term commitment to community interaction. In different ways, each approach seeks its own degree of critical autonomy from the institutional mainstream. And it is here, inside the engine that feeds the field, the modern MFA program, where the growing unease regarding the entire ontological framework of fine art is so evident, so conflicted.

For something has happened in the past ten years or even less, whereby a significant number of graduate students refuse to obey the rule which ordains they choose one style and one medium as their signature brand of creative expression. They do not sheepishly refuse, but in fact flagrantly reject specialization in ways very different from the conceptual art of the 1970s, which did indeed cross disciplinary boundaries, yet remained focused on a particular set of art-centered problems. Today's BFA and MFA will shoot video, produce installations, publish zines, write computer programs with the best of the geeks, and in general disregard every conceivable boundary once raised between high and low culture, amateur and professional, art and life

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Youth and the Market: Love at First Sight,” March 18<sup>th</sup> 2005, The New York Times.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/18/arts/design/18KIMM.html?ex=1268802000&en=4c62d9028f6d87c1&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland>

including the adoption of crafts that were once excluded from the realm of the “high” or “fine” arts.

But there is a catch. The act of rejecting one’s identity as object maker in favor of service provider also reflects an awareness that creative labor is today, in this flexible, post-Fordist economy, something of a unique commodity in itself. Today’s MFA for example is uniquely capable of satisfying that most sacred of entrepreneurial requirements: “think outside the box.” It comes as no surprise therefore, 2004 Whitney Biennial artist Glenn Kaino is also the CCO or Chief Creative Officer for Napster Inc. That is not all. The art world is no slouch. New tendencies become hot trends very quickly. Witness the way even blue-chip artists have begun to reflect what curator Nicolas Bourriaud has cunningly coined, “relational aesthetics.” Transitory installations, social gatherings, piles of “give-away” items on museum floors —an aesthetic of apparent informality and generosity has recently garnered a share of market credibility. Nevertheless, it has done so thanks in large part to a myriad of unseen practitioners who make up what I call the “dark matter” of the art world.

Astrophysicists describe *dark matter* as an invisible mass predicted by the *big bang* theory. Despite its unknown constitution however it makes up about ninety six percent of the known universe. Like its astronomical cousin, *creative dark matter* also makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society and is likewise invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture - the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators, arts administrators and of course university programs. Dark matter creativity includes informal practices such as home-crafts, makeshift memorials, Internet art galleries, amateur photography and pornography, Sunday-painters, self-published newsletters and fan-zines. But just as the physical universe is dependent on cosmic dark matter, so too is the art world dependent on its shadow creativity. This dependency includes access to the labor of the several million estimated graduates who have been turned-out by MFA programs since over the past sixty years.

Setting aside the small percentage of graduates from fine art programs that achieve some visibility within the art market, it falls to this multitude of shadow-practitioners to actually maintain the workings of the institutional art world. Not only does this dark matter army provide teachers for subsequent generations of artists, but they also work as arts administrators and art fabricators: two increasingly valuable skill-sets for managing contemporary, global art as well as other forms of visual culture. Furthermore, by purchasing journals and books, visiting museums, purchasing art supplies and joining professional organizations these “invisibles” help to finance the edifice of fine art. More than that however, without an army of allegedly lesser talents to serve as ballast, the privileging of a small number of successful artists would be impossible to justify. The question this raises is what would become of the economic and ideological foundations of the art world if this larger mass of excluded practices and practitioners were awarded equal consideration and how would this *inversion of values* affect the education of younger artists?

Recently I was invited to see the end of year MFA exhibition by students of the School of Art and Design, University of Illinois, Champaign Urbana (UIUC). This commissioned text is the result of that visit. I found the students I met with and the program at UIUC already responding to many of the issues raised above. They were for instance largely detached from the dilemma raised by the PS1 exhibition, a fact partly accounted for by the actual distance the program has

from Los Angeles and from New York City. It allows for a space where students and faculty can work through these issues with less duress. That is not to say in a global world there is any stable outpost where one can hide for very long, or that any one artistic practice will emerge untainted by the economies of art-world identification, fashion, and promotion. Nor do I mean to imply that the complex problems involving artistic identity, the art market, and the social value or culture are simply being resolved by UIUC. What is hopeful however is seeing students armed with a self-awareness about these predicaments and still eager to resist the cynicism that Kimmelman begrudgingly admires in spite of himself. This appears to generate a degree of critical distance from the current, cultural landscape.

One signifier of this detachment was the use of websites by students not merely as online art galleries for their wares, but instead as an information hub that includes critical readings, links to other sites, even blogs for ongoing discussion and feedback. The generosity exhibited by this approach complimented the diversity of practices employed by students and encouraged by at least some of the faculty. Meredith Warner is one of several UIUC graduates who exemplify this tendency. She pointed out that the Champaign Urbana program encouraged a non-instrumentalized approach by offering a smorgasbord of ideas where,

Material and technical expertise were downplayed. I was expected to develop ideas from a conceptual base and build materially upon that as necessary. This was a huge leap from the way I worked prior to graduate school. My undergraduate education was materially driven and relied, in the end, on a purely commercial economy.

Laurie Hogin, Chair of the Painting and Sculpture Program underscored Warner's observation commenting that the UIUC curriculum values,

Diverse practices and intentions and encourages the open analysis and discussion of the position of a given studio practice... We are also utterly unconcerned with the material strategies of our students; from paint to immaterial gesture to writing.

Or as faculty member Melissa Pokorny pointed out to me,

We are in a fairly unique situation here in that the people who come here are not generally hipsters who want to mimic the current fads, and plan on skyrocketing to success. They have been much more interested in setting up alternative communities of artist-citizens committed to an ethical involvement of practice and inclusivity.

Ostensibly Warner's chosen medium is textiles and her favored technique knitting. Normally demoted as a "home craft," knitting has taken on an aura of critical allure recently thanks to the work of Forcefield, a "collective" that momentarily, yet conspicuously came together and then disappeared soon after the Whitney Biennial of 2002. But knitting is also attracting less art world oriented interests such as Glampyre Knits, Church of Craft and the Querknit Webring, all of which might be described as forms of "slow" activism. As far back as the 1970s Lucy R. Lippard championed home crafts, needlework as well as amateur or hobby art as overlooked forms of unrecognized creativity that subverted "the intimidation process that takes place when the male domain of "high" art is approached." Lippard stressed that women in particular can

make “hobby art in a relaxed manner, isolated from the “real” world of commerce and the pressures of professional aestheticism.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless what Warner actually displayed for her MFA was not stitched wool, but a video piece entitled “Found Knitting” made up of dozens of tightly edited cinematic excerpts showing scenes from popular movies in which an actor are knitting on camera. What is revealed in Warner’s montage is more than the use of an incidental prop or a device for marking the passage of cinematic time. Knit one, drop two, the busy hands of screen divas including Betty Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and Kate Winslet among others reveal character construction, plot and motivations as well as something more sinister than spinsterish. Melancholy becomes anger; anger turns to hatred and in some cases revenge follows as feminine implement transforms into a lethal stiletto. Meanwhile, over and over, the very rhythmic plasticity of cinema is exposed and recapitulated invoking such experimental movies as the 1968 “flicker film” *S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED* by Paul Sharits and all of a sudden I wished Warner’s video was itself a strip of film: a montage literally stitched together from lengths of grainy emulsion and celluloid “yarn.”

In the same installation Warner displayed a series of job notices she ran in local papers advertising unpaid, community-volunteer positions as a commentary on the dysfunctional rapport between the University, the town and the transient student population who pass through Champaign Urbana often unaware of their surroundings. Meanwhile, at [www.knittingcommunity.org](http://www.knittingcommunity.org) she has set up an on-line tribute to what she call’s her “obsession.” It simultaneously presents her varied art projects while promoting the social role knitting plays in terms of community understood as a “stitching together of people and place.” The site also links to a range of “post-studio” activities from revamping empty neighborhood lots to collaborations with other artists to an art student organization Warner helped establish and a local art space she and several other people founded known as *OpenSource* (<http://opensource.boxwith.com/>) that is described as an alternative space “accommodating a variety of non-traditional, community-oriented art projects.”

From montage-maker, to critical commentator, to arts administrator, Warner is also a designer and maker of clothing as I discovered when visiting *OpenSource* where the artist’s hand-felted dress was on display as part of an exhibition entitled, *Skinless Capital: Neoliberalism and Resistance*. The show was thematically linked by its critical reading of neo-liberalism and hosted participants from local, UIUC students to artists from Argentina, California and Amsterdam. One of these was "Don't Mourn," a short-range radio station built into a suitcase that Sarah E. Kanouse, a recent graduate of the program now living in Chicago, carries to various sites of major labor strikes including the infamous Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 on the city’s South Side. Kanouse set up her equipment and broadcast a sonically distorted version of the *Internationale* from each location with more still to come.

Nicholas Brown’s ambitious MFA project *Walking as Knowing as Making: A Peripatetic Investigation of Place*, was no less transitory in approach. Its central component consisted of five

---

<sup>2</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s “Hobby Art”),” first published in *Heresies* #4, Winter 1978, and cited here from Lippard’s book, *Get The Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, (E.P. Dutton Inc.: NY, 1984), pp 97-105..

symposia focused on the aesthetic and epistemological importance of walking. Brown states that when, “Conceived of as a conversation between the body and the world, walking becomes a reciprocal and simultaneous act of both interpretation and manipulation.” Once again, the form and the conceptual thrust behind this work are exceptionally multi-disciplinary and multi-faceted. Together with a group of scholars, activists, and “pedestrians” Brown invited to speak, including Trevor Paglen, Hamish Fulton and Gary Snyder, he also screened films, spun off a reading group, and initiated a course on the connection of knowledge to ephemeral, bodily experience. So out of the ordinary was Brown’s project however, that none of it actually took place within the MFA exhibition at the museum. It was held instead on and around the campus at other locations over the course of several months. [walkinginplace.org](http://walkinginplace.org)

Rose Marshack “hacked” into the world of professional music promotion for her MFA project, setting up a series of sunset watching events that are purchasable, for three dollars, along with t-shirts, buttons and other concert-industry paraphernalia via Ticketmaster. The artist assures concert goers there is a “Money back guarantee if the sun does not set.” Marshack’s events are spread out across the continental United States and take place on different days, but always coinciding with the local time when the earth rotates and twilight begins. For example in Santa Fe, New Mexico at the coordinates 35N and 105W on Saturday, May 21 at 8:07 she advertises that, “The Sunset will be located in the Western Sky. If it is raining or cloudy, the Sun may not be visible, however the sky color will still change to a darker hue.” Marshack openly acknowledges a debt to the Situationists, but the promise of a soon to be released CD upon which the sound of a sunset is recorded also invokes the Zen-like interventions of composer John Cage. Carrying absurd encounters into real life was also the motivation behind Marshack’s project *Coin Slot* that consisted of a small billboard inviting people to drop change into the ground as if the earth were an enormous arcade game. Once again the range of activity is impressive and unhindered by the straightjacket expectations of the art-collecting establishment. Besides the projects mentioned above Marshack also manages a recording studio with her partner Rick Valentin, hosts a talk show available as a podcast (although she and her colleagues were creating downloadable audio programs long before the term came into use), and plays guitar with several bands including the electronic group *Salaryman*, and the punk band *Poster Children* founded in 1987. In true, Post-Situationist style the group’s web site insists on a “strong DIY [do it yourself] ethic.” <http://ticketstothet sunset.com/>

Kermit Gilbert sought to link the MFA gallery space to his actual life through multiple video documentation of himself recorded sitting on a mounted bicycle while made up as a self-mocking clownish figure. While cycling in place Gilbert is overheard spouting strange, motivational aphorisms somewhat like a demented EST delegate. During the exhibition’s public hours the artist sat on his stationary bike, no longer dressed as a clown, but peddling away, hoping for interaction with whomever was willing to speak with him. Curiously, very few visitors actually chose to do so he admitted, thus re-confirming the challenge artists face when they seek to overcome the divide between life and artifice. By contrast, Gilbert’s website *Free Soiler: Cycling Towards the Revolution* barely indicates its author’s “artistic” credentials. It does provide however, extensive commentary on such things as the exploitation of non-resident, agricultural workers along with regular updates on Gilbert’s bicycle training routine. <http://freesoiler.com/>

Even several MFA projects that outwardly resembled traditional media in fact harbored an anti-formalist agenda that extended the meaning of the work into social, perceptual, or political space.

Christina Marsh constructed a smaller exhibition space of her own within the larger gallery. Resembling a solemn vestibule from Rothko Chapel, but drained of all color, her white on white room offered viewers enough room to sit and meditate while staring at what appeared to be an empty, horizontal picture frame hung about ten feet away. After a time, reflected colors were faintly visible inside the edge where the painting would have been. What initially seemed to be making a reference to the phenomenological art of Robert Irwin, was in fact aimed at sociological critique. This became more clear after Marsh presented a portfolio of past projects in which “whiteness” —including a wall carpeted with sugar covered donuts— played a key role not only as a formal element, but as a social signifier. For example her work entitled *One Drop* played on the dubious, legal defense of miscegenation using plain and chocolate milk. White food, white walls, white meditative spaces filled with white pictures, Marsh’s monochromatic production seeks to produce a sly commentary on identity and class not unlike the occasionally flamboyant projects of William Pope L whom Marsh admires.

Charles Roderick’s slide projections of inexplicable color photographs endeavored to investigate the limits of visual recognition itself. What we see is a series of round shapes that are otherwise barely identifiable as objects. Roderick aims to push our ability to turn the relatively raw perception of color, size, and shape into a means of classification. While the artist’s methodical approach will require more elaboration in future presentations, his ambition reminded me of art from the 1970s such as the seldom seen Michael Snow piece “A Shelving Shelved,” in which the artist-filmmaker’s recorded voice attempts to identify the items on a studio shelf using a single, not especially good slide taken from some distance. The gap between memory and the graininess of the image are played out like a cognitive psychology test. Roderick similarly seeks the margins of recognition. As photographs, his work might be said to resemble outwardly a certain color aesthetic in much the same way that Atget’s indexical images of empty Paris streets resonated for the Surrealists. <http://thelack.blogspot.com/>

Jonas Downey explored the concept of translation, in both human and machine intelligence, as a means of illuminating the inherent limitations found in systems of representation. His programming apparatus had a stunning visual interface, yet in ways similar to Roderick’s work, its aesthetics were essentially a “happy” accident, a byproduct of insubstantial computations. I understand Downey’s art to be structured somewhat like a fungal body, with 90 percent of the whole out of sight, below ground, and but a small portion of the total unit accessible through video projectors, websites and so forth. In Downey’s case the real “work” is the software. And in true mycological fashion this feeds off material found in the social sphere. *Terror Alert Clock* for example, endlessly samples USA Today’s website. It searches for the word “terror.” Whenever the popular infotainment source uses that term, Downey’s “clock” changes shape and color, thus signaling the shifting “threat level” as it is represented by the histrionics of the mass media. *BreakingNews* also searches live feeds from both Yahoo.com and the BBC’s website looking for any word that is synonymous with “aggression.” Every match is translated into bouncing, capsule-shape of color which then interact and collide so that as the program’s “hits” increase in number a state of near-psychedelic, visual frenzy is produced. <http://half-a-world-away.com/>

Katerie Gladdys also works with the concept of translating between different orders of experience. In her case the gap negotiated is between the calm of the art gallery and her own demanding experience traveling to the UIUC campus by canoe. Gladdys’ installation *Sequence 1* selectively renders details of this atypical routine, including navigating through small drainage ditches, irrigation canals and plenty of portage over dry land. It recreates a virtual memory of her

trip in the form of a shimmering grid of projections on the floor accompanied by an audio narration. Visually arresting, the work's spatial displacement sits at the intersection of cinematic and sculptural space. Its non-linear approach also draws together issues of ecology, landscape and interpretation. "Technology," she writes, "permits me to immerse the viewer in the moment of the story in my installations."

<http://www.art.uiuc.edu/courses/nm/workspace/html/people/katerie/portfolio/start.html>

Several UIUC students whose work was more conventional in approach nonetheless added to the overall multidisciplinary and eclectic impression of the program.

Tirzah Rose presented three, color photographic renderings of unidentified interior spaces whose torn carpets, stained walls and minimal lighting indicate the offhand neglect caused by recent abandonment. Rose gleans a surprising lustrous glow from these cast-off dwellings, which, despite their emptiness are made to appear Vemeer-like thanks to the use of found, geometric structures and deftly rendered passages of understated illumination.

Jihyeon Lee's acerbic commentaries on the perverse imaginary of tourism transform the fantasy of exotic locals into a culturally vacant activity on par with home decorating. In *Tropical Dreaming* a series of paintings render deserts, beaches, forests and sea into a world of hyper-reality so concentrated as to be claustrophobic, yet all the while remaining alluring, seductive. Most amusing is Lee's wall installation of one hundred, post-card sized paintings arranged like a large, paint-chip grid in a hardware store. Upon inspection however, each small painting reveals a larger-than-life version of some well-known tourist destination, but with its color saturation turned up full volume.

The exhibition also included examples of industrial design by Summer Hill, graphic design by Daniel Goscha and David Bock, as well as several projects that involved hand-crafts including Natalya Pinchuk's necklaces, collars, brooches and accessories made reference to alien microbial structures and fragments of various biological appendages, orifices and organs. But her use of materials—felt, enamel, copper, and plastic—contrasted in a highly tactile manner with this soft, slippery allusion. Damon MacNaught invigorated two adjacent rooms with eerie red and icy blue light that emanated from a pair of sculpted heating radiators made of tubular glass and filled with neon plasma.

All of this varied work seemed to be a logical outgrowth of interdisciplinary investigation that the UIUC School of Art and Design has effectively managed to establish through a self-conscious effort directed against the commercialization of student work. Still, what happens after graduation? How does one sustain this effort in light of the increasingly privatized world of art?

One possible way to maintain this critical detachment from the institutionalized art world is of course to push the performative nature of being an artist so far that it moves beyond the opportunistic and into the radically tactical as exemplified by many of the artists in the *Interventionists* exhibition that Nato Thompson recently organized for MASS MoCA. Another approach is to dig-in by operating locally in collaboration with other artists and non-artists and to produce public programs that help establish a center of support with some degree of autonomy from the market. This seems to have been the spirit behind the founding of the OpenSource space in downtown Champaign Urbana. However, several of its founders have moved on after graduating, which underscores the challenges to developing deeply rooted community-based art practices in today's highly mobile economy. In general however, I suggest lowering one's

expectations about “art,” about what it can do to save the world, and yet to continue to challenge the orthodoxy of art stardom and if possible to write critically about what one does, its success and failure, and to publish this for others to read and learn from. Finally, I recommend looking towards the already existing, loosely-networked sphere of revisionist institutions that circulate so-called “dark matter” creativity including for starters, CUP or *Center for Urban Pedagogy*, *Community Arts Network*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, and *Subsol*. Still, when all is said and done, a new and different artistic practice will only be possible once an alternate infrastructure exists to support it. That project remains to be tackled.

*Portions of this text were first presented at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia for the panel Masters and Servants: The MFA in Contemporary Art Practice held on June 17, 2005*

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Youth and the Market: Love at First Sight,” March 18<sup>th</sup> 2005, The New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/18/arts/design/18KIMM.html?ex=1268802000&en=4c62d9028f6d87c1&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland>

<sup>1</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s “Hobby Art”),” first published in *Heresies* #4, Winter 1978, and cited here from Lippard’s book, *Get The Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, (E.P. Dutton Inc.: NY, 1984), pp 97-105..

**Gregory Sholette** is an artist, writer, activist and founding member of Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D), and REPOhistory. He is currently co-editing the book *Collectivism After Modernism* with Blake Stimson for University of Minnesota Press (2006), and is the co-editor of the *Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* with Nato Thompson (MASS MoCA & MIT 2004)