



Capitalist Realism: Then and Now?

In the current post-Occupy disillusionment, where the art world is dominated by commercial interests, could the term “Capitalist Realism” offer new strategy for change? Alma Mikulinsky reviews ARTMargins’s special issue on Capitalist Realism.

Review / Alma Mikulinsky March 3, 2016

At a moment when Post-war and contemporary art auctions are achieving incomprehensible prices comes the latest issue of the academic journal ARTMargins, dedicated to the term Capitalist Realism (ARTMargins Volume 4: Issue 3, October 2015). Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, and Manfred Kuttner coined this term in Düsseldorf, in 1963. Around the same time, on the other side of the world, the Japanese artist Genpei Akasegawa used the same term to explicate his own artwork. The term Capitalist Realism describes an artistic production that uses the forms, the means of production and distribution, and the ideology of capitalism to create artwork. If this definition brings to mind the way in which Pop Art is often described, it is not coincidental; Capitalist Realism is often placed under the wide umbrella of International Pop, a global view of the movement commonly associated with British and American art. One trait that distinguishes Capitalist Realism from, say, the Brazilian Concretism or the French Nouveau Réalisme – other mini-movements included in the 2015 Walker Art Center mega show “International Pop” – is that the former directly echoes Social Realism, that is to say, the Communist representational system dominant in Soviet Russia and Mao’s China, as well as briefly in Zionist images around the 1948 War. The implications of this analogy are explicitly stated in the introduction to the special issue: “If Socialist Realist murals and statues feature joyful communal harvests and heroic factory workers, might a comparable Capitalist Realism show advertisements featuring new consumer products and satisfied customers?”¹ The answer is yes and no.

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The most well-known example of an artwork of this type is probably Gerhard Richter's and Konrad Lueg's 1963 action *Leben mit Pop. Eine Demonstration für den Kapitalistischen Realismus* (Living with Pop: a Demonstration of Capitalist Realism). The action took place at a department store, where the artists positioned furniture – a sofa, a table, a lamp – on pedestals and then lounged in this setting, becoming themselves a part of a “demonstration of capitalist realism,” as the piece's title suggests. Under the auspices of the store, with its merchandise as artistic props, the artists functioned as both salespersons of the commodity and critics of the system that sold it. This recent interest in the historical moment appears as a reaction, albeit nostalgic, to the current hyperbolic state of the art market.

The art brought forward by the array of texts in this ARTmargins issue shares the same ambivalence towards the economic system which inspires them – it “strategic[ally] deflects... the power of branding,” and at the same time presents “sincere efforts to participate in the commercial success of Neo Dada, Nouveau Realisme and Pop.”² Therefore, the manner in which the Japanese artist [Genpei](#) [2] [Akasegawa](#) [2] uses 1,000-Yen banknotes, or the Swede Öyvind Fahlström borrows images and clips from popular TV shows, seem to walk the fine line between celebrating the products of the capitalist system as well as taking a critical stance towards these very products. For example, Akasegawa's excessive reproductions and the artistic context of their dissemination and exhibition enabled them to “undermine the legitimacy of the government's currency.”³

This special issue claims to be more than a simple historical revision of a past artistic trend, or a rewriting of Pop as a global art movement. Again and again, the past is evoked in the special issue to highlight contemporary attempts to criticize the current state of capitalism and its incredible hold on our lives. In the introduction, art historian Jaimey Hamilton Faris claims that contemporary artists today, as were their precedent in the 1960s, “are still motivated to create or open up tensions within [capitalism's] now even-more-extensive-system.”⁴ Or, in NYU-Steinhardt professor Andrew Stefan Weiner's review of the exhibition “Living with Pop: A Reproduction of Capitalist Realism” (in the summer of 2014, at Artists Space, New York), the writer explicitly claims that this renewed interest in the movement results from a desire to “repurpose Capitalist Realism as a critical concept for theorizing contemporary political ideology and cultural production.”⁵

[Ornament and Crime](#) [3] from [Stephanie Syjuco](#) [4] on [Vimeo](#) [5].

This hypothesis is materialized in Stephanie Syjuco's artistic project entitled “[Speculative Propositions: A Visual Pattern Sampler](#) [6],” where the artist borrowed the technique of “dazzle camouflage”: a WWI alternative to traditional military camouflage that, instead of hiding from the enemy, seeks to overwhelm it visually. Syjuco applies the same concept of disruptive patterning to a wide range of objects, from IKEA furniture to container ships, the “modern day battleships of commerce and capitalism.”⁶ This form of kneading (to use Fahlström's term, which is analyzed in the issue) functions “as a means for cross-pollination and hybridization across cultures and continents,” which raises awareness to the real cost of the cheap, disposable goods we consume.⁷

In the piece *Ornament and Crime* Syjuco uses the same technique used for the redecoration of Le Corbusier's *La Villa Savoye* (built between 1928 and 1931 in Poissy, France) in patterns of textiles from former French colonies, in the hope of flooding this modernist monument with “trauma and



migration.”⁸ The choice to evoke and disrupt Modernism’s legacy brings to light the affinity between the utopian aspirations of the, (failed) historical avant-garde and the role assigned in this reinterpretation of Capitalist Realism. The movement’s ambivalent position, it being critical of the capitalist system while aiming for market success, is used to challenge the boundless powers of capitalism and offer some sort of salvation.

Danish curator and critic Maibritt Borgen contributes an article on Fahlström’s 1966 performance *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, which was part of “9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering.” Her essay concludes with a statement regarding the emancipatory potential of art, claiming that the artist “presented the discontinuous and fluctuating space of global media as a space from which the potential for change happens through the affective responses of the spectator.”⁹ In the current reality of post-Occupy disillusionment, when the art world is dominated by commercial interests through diverse vehicles (art fairs, biennales, and blockbuster shows), it seems to me naive, if not hopeless, to argue for such a possibility in the guise of historical reinterpretation.

- ¹. Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Introduction” ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 3.
- ². Ibid., 5.
- ³. Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Rooms in Alibi: How Genpei Akasegawa Framed Capitalist Reality,” ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 41.
- ⁴. Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Introduction” ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 16.
- ⁵. Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Stoffbilder: On Capitalist Realisms” ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 83.
- ⁶. Stephanie Syjuco, “[Speculative Propositions: A Visual Pattern Sampler](#)” [6] ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 60.
- ⁷. Ibid.
- ⁸. Ibid., 67.
- ⁹. Maibritt Borgen, “Fundamental Feedback: Övyvind Fahlström’s *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*” ARTMargins: Special Issue on Capitalist Realism 4:3 (October 2015): 64.

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