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Review: "Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism" at Max Hetzler Gallery

BY NATALIA MASEWICZ | MARCH 17, 2015



Josh Kline "Seven to Three" Courtesy of Max Hetzler

The joint exhibition "Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism," on display at Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin and Paris, evokes the feeling of an era coming to an end. The curators, Lisa Schiff, Leslie Fritz and Eugenio Re Rebaudengo, assembled an impressive array of works by contemporary artists dealing with economic, social, and cultural issues connected to capitalism and its discontents. In their press release, the curators cited as the source of inspiration an influential American economist and social theorist, Jeremy Rifkin, author of the bestselling novel *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: the Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (2014).

Rifkin's utopian vision of the future is dominated by the idea of the 'Third Industrial Revolution,' (TIR) supported by a global network modeled on the Internet as we know it in its present form, allowing countries to exchange a surplus of renewable energy with each other. In contrast to Rifkin's optimism, however, there is not much joy in the proclamation of an 'eclipse of capitalism,' which the artworks at the exhibition are meant to be showcasing.

Rifkin's vision of the future is characterized by trust placed in humanity's drive towards 'democratization of information, energy, manufacturing, marketing, and logistics.' In contrast to this utopian image, artists such as Kelsey Walker, John Kelsey, and Josh Kline take as their topics racial and social injustice, as well as persisting restrictions put on personal freedom and freedom of expression in the contemporary society.

Walker's "Schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with Scope" (2003) uses an archival photograph representing an act of racial violence bearing a painful resemblance to the recent upheavals in the United States in Ferguson and New York. The act of spraying toothpaste all over the digital print is representative of the everyday banality with which society perceives images of violence. Kelsey's watercolors representing Google's and Facebook's Data Centers (2013) based all over the world are an ironic observation on the inevitable place that data mining has in the 'landscapes' of our everyday existence. Kline, on the other hand, uses 3D-printing (one of the techniques hailed by Rifkin as the beacons of the TIR), to comment on the situation of the manual laborers in a series of works titled "Nine to Five, Eight to Four and Seven to Three" (2015). Janitors' heads are placed on the trolleys among cleaning products, with the whole artwork painted in shades of blue and purple, making the heads almost indistinguishable from the rest. The workers' individuality is thus obliterated to the point where they are being transformed into a dehumanized tool in the machine of social injustice.

The emphasis placed in Rifkin's essay on technology and renewable sources is visible in many artworks at the show which draw attention to the materials used by artists. Ajay Kurian's "King's Dominion (Guilt)" (2015), is composed of, among else, propane, copper piping, steel, as well as pearl, Lapis Lazuli and 24k gold. In an ironic statement, the artist chose this wealth of materials to represent a squalid-looking rubbish bin. Thus, Kurian comments on the irrevocable damage done to the environment by centuries of exploitation of natural resources.

Judging by the artworks, the eclipse of capitalism does not seem to be imminent but is instead an overdue and painful process. The visitor cannot find any relief from the images of decay and disastrous effects of capitalism on the environment, even in the engrossing virtual reality of Ian Cheng's "ewCloud (Fatima & Zahara)" (2013) which uses the latest gaming technology known as Oculus Rift. The rain of plants, shapes, animals and furniture which attacks the viewer's vision from all possible directions is perhaps the most powerful metaphor of the escapist position of the capitalistic society, obsessed with the present and forgetful of the future.

"Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism," through April 18, 2015, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Paris.