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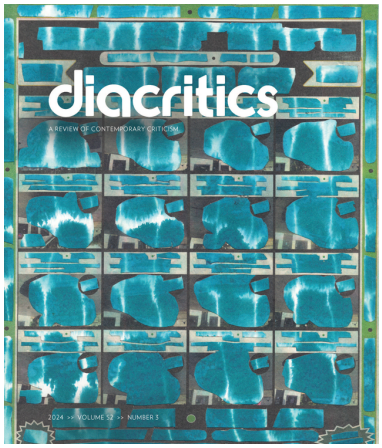
Matters of Abstraction: Brechtian Realism, Contemporary Art, and the Critique of Capital

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Diacritics, Volume 52, Number 3, 2024, pp. 88-118 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2024.a970373



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MATTERS OF ABSTRACTION: BRECHTIAN REALISM, CONTEMPORARY ART, AND THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITAL

TOBIAS ERTL

Abstract: This essay evaluates Bertolt Brecht's conception of realism and its resonances in contemporary visual art practice. I argue that in his poetological writings from the late 1920s and the 1930s, Brecht developed an understanding of social—as opposed to formal—abstraction, which crucially informed his notions of social reality and critical realism. This aspect of Brecht's thinking, which I link to both structuralist and value-critical accounts of Marxism, is emphasized in what could be called a realism of social abstraction in the current conjuncture of capital's crisis. Within this theoretical framework, I examine artworks with direct or indirect connections to Brecht's work. Stephen Willat's sociological diagrams, Andreas Siekmann's visualizations of global economic processes, Chto Delat's restaging of the Soviet avant-garde, as well as Blaise Kirschner and David Panos's filmic fiction of capitalist primitive accumulation are all premised on the idea that processes of abstraction shape the very materiality of contemporary life.

The art of abstracting must be applied by *realists*.
—Bertolt Brecht, "Kennzeichen und Symbole"[1]

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>> Theatrical Archeology

In a sequence of fast-paced cuts, fragments from distant times are juxtaposed together and edited to the sound of breaking stones. We observe naked bodies carrying baskets deep in an archaic mine, images that are juxtaposed with a gang of motocross riders in full gear navigating the same territory above ground. Fragmented bodily movements lit by fire capture the primitive manual labor of breaking and melting ore in the mine. In the next shots, the washing of dishes in a modern kitchen is rendered in the same fragmented manner. Bare feet on the kitchen's terrazzo floor are metonymically linked to the naked laborers surrounding a pile of stone in the previous shot—the shot sequence is a progression of civilizing refinement as much as a repetition of unfree labor. In what follows, more temporal and spatial layers are added: a cut-out image of a coin layered onto a visible green screen follows the depiction of a display case in a numismatic museum. Accompanied by a piercing electronic sound, an animated line evolves into three-dimensional models of geometrical figures. In a rhythmic crescendo toward the film's conclusion, convulsing bodies flash in the darkness while various floating objects—coins, stones, fire—are layered over each other in the same frame via green-screen technology. The montage is punctuated with intermittent black screens—breathing pauses which add to the audiovisual experience of a rhythmically structured whole. Fragmented images of human bodies and raw matter, and even more so the soundtrack—composed of the acute and discordant sounds of breaking stones, which are at times asynchronous from the image—convey a sense of physical concreteness, while at the same time the digital editing style and the automated geometrical drawings instantiate an aesthetic of abstraction.

Ultimate Substance was shot in Greece in 2012, when the European debt crisis was at its peak and the devastating effects of the Troika austerity measures on the Greek population were most visible. Although the authors and directors of the film, artists Blaise Kirschner and David Panos, are committed to a critical analysis of the contemporary crisis of global capitalism, they did not depict any of the events happening in Greece at that time directly in their film.[2] Instead, they chose the detour of what one might call a theatrical archeology. For the production of *Ultimate Substance*, they invited a group of dancers to Lavreotiki in Attica to perform the gestures of enslaved people who, around 2,500 years earlier, had materially sustained the Greek city states through the exploitation of their labor power. Lavreotiki was the site of one of the first silver mines and an important site of coin production in 600 BC.

Beyond the expressive reenactments of mining labor routines by the naked dancers illuminated through artificial chiaroscuro lighting, the footage further includes more documentary-style impressions of the contemporary landscape of Lavreotiki. It also incorporates the voice recording of an archeologist commenting on the ancient history

of the site as well as footage recorded during a school trip to the Mineralogical Museum of Lavrion. The "actual" or "real" character of the Greek debt crisis is removed in a double way: archeologically, through its presentation from the vantage point of a faraway past that appears as the fictive "origin" of the real event (the first coins as the origin of the money economy), and theatrically, through the staging of this origin as performance. Slave labor is expressed through the artificial choreography of bodily gestures rather than through naturalist drama. The depiction of manual labor clearly situates the film within the history of social realism (one might think of Gustave Courbet's iconic *Stonebreakers*), but in terms of image composition, the film evokes the stylized archaic *tableaux vivants* of Pierre Paolo Pasolini and his passion for the artificiality of mannerist figuration (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Blaise Kirschner and David Panos, *Ultimate Substance* 2012, HD, 34min, sound. Filmstill. Courtesy of the artists.

The effects of the digital montage happen on multiple levels of the work: fast, rhythmic editing (temporal); the dematerialization of the image through superposition of semi-transparent layers (spatial); and the disconnection of image and sound (audiovisual). The post-production process and the video installation add further important layers to the work's structure and meaning. The animated drawings of Euclidean figures, on the one hand, connect the theme of coinage to the invention of formal mathematics and to measuring techniques, as well as to a general historical process of rationalization. The computer-generated 3D image of a free-floating lump of silver ore, on the other hand, presents us with matter in a state of (digital) suspension. Both elements (the geometric figure and the stone) reappear as central components of the exhibition of the work at the Secession in Vienna, where the artists presented the video amidst a minimalist, but aesthetically effective arrangement of objects. An installation shot of the work shows rough stones, a three-dimensional model of a platonic solid (a tetrahedron), and a silver coin minted with the Athenian owl in the center of an otherwise green projection screen. The surrounding space is dark—a cinematic black box—but the stones and the tetrahedron are illuminated in chiaroscuro style, which invokes a sense of illusion and mysticism, somewhere between an auratic museum display and a magic show (see Figure 2). The staged spatial arrangement takes on the supernatural quality of a phantasmagoria, an illusionistic projection device popular in early nineteenth-century horror theaters, which Karl Marx famously used as a metaphor to describe the "fetish character" of commodities.[3]

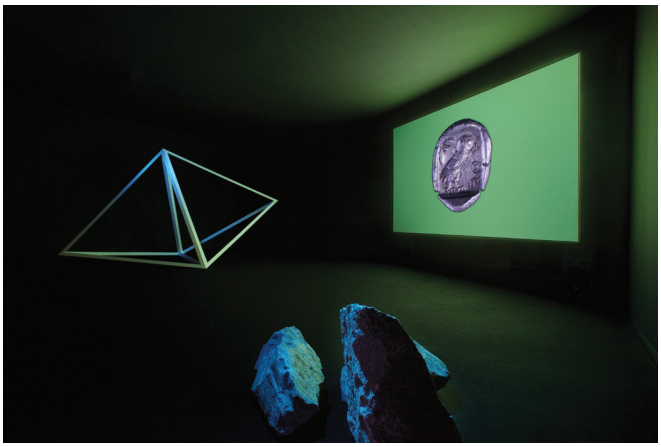


Figure 2: Blaise Kirschner and David Panos, *Ultimate Substance* Secession Vienna, 2012, installation view. Photographer: Wolfgang Thaler. Courtesy of the artists.

>> Real Abstraction and the Legacy of Brechtian Realism

Kirschner and Panos's work is symptomatic of post-conceptual art practice, in which moving image and spatial installation, historical research and contemporary politics, documentary and fiction, media experimentation, narrative storytelling, and theoretical discourse are blended, mostly via the use of digital media. Drawing on John Roberts's characterization of the contemporary avant-garde, we can speak of a "transmaterial," "post-disciplinary," and "open-ended research program"[4] when referring to the operational mode of these works as forms of contemporary critical realism. According to Roberts, today's post-conceptual art practice can be seen as a continuation of the avant-garde project which has a "totalizing critique of capitalist relations"[5] as its normative horizon. Especially since the so-called financial crisis of 2007/2008, Marxist conceptions of realism linked to questions of the social totality of capitalism have reappeared on artists' agendas. As I argue in the following, if the horizon of contemporary realism is the "totalizing critique of capitalist relations," this critique is essentially articulated in terms of a reflection on contemporary forms of social abstraction. It is this reference to social abstractions, I propose, from which contemporary critical realism takes its main conceptual cues.[6] Kirschner and Panos's work makes this reference explicit: its title, *Ultimate Substance*, refers to Marx's understanding of money and value as *real abstractions*, that is, as abstractions which are not the result of an intellectual activity of the mind, but brought about by a historical social practice made manifest in empirical reality. According to Marxist philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel, it is the abstract mediation of social being itself which is materialized in money: "The abstractified (*abstraktifizierte*) unity of the world circulates as money between people and enables their non-conscious relation as *one* society."[7] In Sohn-Rethel's view, the real abstraction of monetary exchange—the quantitative equalization of different material qualities—can be regarded as the historical cause for the emergence of abstract thought.[8]

If the horizon of contemporary realism is the "totalizing critique of capitalist relations," this critique is essentially articulated in terms of a reflection on contemporary forms of social abstraction.

In the installation shot of Kirschner and Panos's work at Secession in Vienna, the speculative proposition of real abstraction is articulated in a single image. The image, with its juxtaposition of the signifiers "raw stone," "minted coin," and "platonic solid," can be read as follows: form (platonic solid) is separated from matter (raw stone), and this conceptual abstraction is linked to the real abstraction of money (minted coin). But abstraction is not only the subject matter of the work, but also a key feature of its formal procedures; the video installation features geometrical figures, monochrome images, the gestural abstraction of bodily movements, and experimental digital montage, all of which can be traced back to a history of artistic abstraction. It is through

artistic techniques of abstraction (which determine the form of the work) that social practices of abstraction (which determine the content of the work) are staged.

The theatrical staging of an abstract reality points to the legacy of Brechtian realism, as a non-mimetic, anti-naturalist, constructivist version of twentieth-century critical realism. Kirschner and Panos make this reference explicit when they state in a commentary on *Ultimate Substance* that they intended to "create images that have a certain exposed artifice, a 'flatness' that draws on a Brechtian tradition of antinaturalism."[9] The contemporary reclaiming of Brechtian realism includes strategies and genres as diverse as dramatic performance, filmic and digital montage, the use of sociological diagrams and models, hybrid video works that straddle documentary, fiction, and essay, as well as participatory works, all of which also raise the question of the relationship between art, the public, and institutions. Such work[10] is often characterized by an attempt to expose the technical constructedness of the image, by replacing the illusionistic cinematic space with flatness and (digital) montage, as well as by blending tropes of radical leftist politics with exaggerated theatricality, didactical gestures, and parody.

In this essay, I argue that the historical significance of these contemporary artistic practices can be elucidated by reexamining the conceptual core of Brechtian realism. I will do so by highlighting the conceptual links between Brecht's theoretical writings of 1926–1939 and Marx's mature critique of political economy. In this re-reading, it becomes clear that only with a rigorous understanding of the hypothesis of real abstraction can we grasp the link between scientific modernity and the commodification of labor in capitalism. This undertaking allows for revisiting some of the assumptions which have been carried through the different phases of Brecht's reception—from modernist medium-reflexivity to postmodernist subversion and more recent engagements with Brechtian thought in Marxist cultural theory. It also provides room for an assessment of the peculiar function of critical realism in contemporary art, which increasingly tends to present itself as a realism of abstraction.

>> Social Abstraction after Marx

All Marxian accounts of abstraction share the principal assumption that abstraction is real. The concept refers to processes or structures which occur in (originate in and have an effect on) historical material reality and social practice. I qualify those abstractions, which exist in objective, not merely subjective reality, as "real" or "social" abstractions in order to distinguish them from the abstractions that occur in cognitive processes and structures. Apart from this common denominator, however, the definitions of social abstraction vary strongly within the Marxist tradition.

(a) Financial Abstraction vs. Real Economy: Abstraction as Dematerialization

For many Western Marxist thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of abstraction is used to describe the detachment of financial capital *from*

industrial labor. The abstractions of capital are represented as an increasing abstraction of capitalist markets from the "real economy" (national productive labor) set in motion by three interdependent historical developments: financialization, globalization, and the rise of information technologies. "Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis," writes Frederic Jameson, capital "separates itself from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight."[11] The metaphor of metamorphosis suggests a teleological movement in which financialization is seen as capital's final stage. By drawing on Ernest Mandel's periodization of capitalism and mapping forms of cultural expression onto different stages of capitalism, Jameson has established a framework which allows us to read modernity's history as a sequence of increasing dematerialization in society and culture; realism corresponds to classical industrial capitalism, modernism to imperialism, and postmodernism to financial capitalism or late capitalism. In its financial stage, capital is, according to Jameson, "free-floating," a "vast, worldwide, disembodied phantasmagoria."[12] Jameson describes financial capital (and postmodernism, as its cultural expression) essentially as a loss of reality, the crisis of a positive experiential totality that connects subjects to their social world.

Such an understanding of capital's abstraction as a flight from the real economy tends to not only underestimate the *productive* role that finance assumes for capital accumulation even in earlier stages, but also disconnect the current financialization from the crisis-dynamic of value-producing labor.[13] This also carries the risk of fostering a regressive critique of abstraction, especially when it is associated with rejecting the universalizing tendency of capital's global expansion in favor of localism or the uncritical and often nostalgic affirmation of "productive" labor.

(b) Re-Make/Re-Model: Abstraction as Second Nature

In contrast to positions which understand capital's abstractions as a detachment from production, Toni Negri, writing in the same historical moment of postmodernity, uses the term "abstraction" to denote the transformation of production, or more broadly, of material reality as such, within the movement of generalized capitalist markets. Negri lacks a systematic theory of abstraction, using the concept in a more subjective, allusive, and metaphorical way. In what sounds like a 1980s remix of postwar existentialism, Negri describes capitalist reality as "constructed, reconstructed, remodeled by collective labor, a factitious, abstract dimension, a general determination which has invaded everything, body and soul, life and death, and which, above all, has supplanted nature itself, through successive accumulations of abstract labor."[14] Two points can be highlighted here. One the one hand, Negri treats abstraction as ontological, in the sense that it denotes a transformation not only of forms of sociality but of existential being as such. In Negri's text, abstraction can therefore refer to qualities of subjective experience and social objectivity interchangeably, without the necessity to mediate between the two. Abstraction is a category which describes a *world* (in the phenomenological sense of the term). On the other hand, in contrast to

the notion of abstraction signifying the dematerialized realm of financial products or digital code, for Negri it is "collective labor" which causes abstraction. Abstraction is the transformation of the world through collective (industrial) labor.[15]

Negri's use of the concept of real abstraction betrays a view which was rather commonplace in postmodernist (also post-Frankfurt-School, post-Situationist) discourse: the notion of capitalism as a gigantic machine that swallows everything and leaves nothing untransformed. Reality has therefore become completely *synthetic*. "Abstract" can be translated here as non-natural, artificial, constructed, produced; by way of the expansion of capitalist markets and mass consumer culture, the industrial revolution replaces nature with a "second, abstract nature"[16] and transforms human life beyond the mere labor-capital relation. Real abstraction, for Negri, is synonymous with what he calls the real subsumption of life under capital.

>> The Value-Form: Abstraction as Social Relation

Jameson, and to a lesser degree also Negri, have contributed to the recent return of Brechtian poetics, and more specifically to an important shift in the reception of Brecht, from the preoccupation with modernist medium-reflexivity and a rather diluted notion of defamiliarization, which could easily be fitted into postmodernist tactics of subversion, to a more substantial engagement with the Brechtian version of Marxist social theory.[17] Negri alludes to a connection between Brechtian "alienation" and Marxian "abstraction" in his letters, without specifying their conceptual link.[18] Jameson speaks of the abstraction of money (a notion he takes from Georg Simmel rather than from Marx), but links the Brechtian problem of the representability of capital more to the "complexity" of capitalist reality as a totality comprising many contradictory elements.[19] The shortcomings of both Jameson's and Negri's readings of Brechtian realism lie in their respective understandings of the Marxian critique of political economy: Negri, in his somewhat subjectivist identification of artistic and political subjectivity in the construction of labor power as multitude; and Jameson, in his attempt to counter the (financial) abstractions of capitalism with a notion of concrete totality by trying to meet Brecht and Georg Lukács halfway.

Jameson's oscillation between Brecht and Lukács, and Negri's identification of art with the political subject of the multitude, both have their source in their respective readings of the Marxian link between abstraction and capitalist modernity. The theoretical tradition of value-form theory offers an interpretation of the Marxian notion of abstraction that differs from the idea of a progressive derealization of society enhanced through financialization, digitalization, and globalization, or the notion of a progressive industrial transformation of the material world. A value-theoretical interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy, which understands abstraction as a fundamental feature of the form of social relations in capitalism, can in turn provide a framework to reevaluate Brecht's use of the concept of abstraction, and better account for the links between Brechtian strategies and the critique of capital in contemporary art practice.

From the perspective of value-form theory, Moishe Postone has argued that capitalism's changing historical formations are only surface expressions of an underlying structural dynamic which can be analytically grasped as the abstraction of the commodity form.[20] It is thus, strictly speaking, erroneous to presume that real abstraction is a historical process enhanced by financialization or industrialization. Rather, it should be seen as a social form in which these historical processes can be grounded theoretically. This isn't to advocate for a static view of society—capital isn't a static social form. On the contrary, it is the most dynamic social form in the history of humanity so far. Postone's reading of Marx is elucidating in this respect; his point is that the extraordinary historical dynamism of capital, in terms of both the development of the productive forces and changing forms of subjectivity and social life, can be understood precisely by grounding it in the contradictory nature of the commodity form. It is crucial to note that from this perspective, abstraction takes place on the most fundamental level of the organization of social relations in capitalism.

In the context of Marx's use of the term, the meaning of abstraction can be further differentiated. Firstly, Marx refers to the "bad" conceptual abstraction of universal transhistorical categories like "man," "labor," "wealth," etc., borrowing this meaning of abstraction from G.W.F. Hegel; "abstract" here means what is perceived to be simple, one-sided evidence while in truth it is only the result of a processual mediation of a concrete totality. Marx's critique of political economy consists in revealing that the historical source of these "bad," idealist conceptual abstractions can be found in the real abstractions of the social forms of capital ("man" is in fact the *homo economicus* of bourgeois society, and so forth). Secondly, this usage of the term "abstraction" can be normatively distinguished from the "good" conceptual abstraction of Marx's scientific method of inquiry and presentation. It is in this sense that Marx, in the preface to the first edition of the first volume of *Capital*, speaks of the "power of abstraction,"[21] which is needed to grasp the structural laws of the capitalist mode of production by way of an analysis of the commodity, that is, the "economic cell form" of bourgeois society. To do this, the analysis of the capitalist mode of production must abstract from the empirical findings of the historical reality of capitalism, in order to consider the underlying structural dynamic of capitalist socialization.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Marx introduced a notion of abstraction which is ontologically different from conceptual abstraction, because it designates social and material processes. In this context, "abstract" can mean:

1. not sensually or empirically perceptible; removed from everyday experience;
2. determined quantitatively instead of qualitatively; a formalization independent from concrete, particular content;
3. universal, general; a form of objective validity;
4. impersonal and unconscious; a relation that is independent from the intention of the agents;
5. operative; a relation that exists not only as a representation of the mind, but is effective in the material world.

Points 1–3 are shared characteristics of conceptual and real abstractions, 4–5 only apply to real abstractions.

The notion of artistic abstraction, which I attempt to reconstruct from Brecht's writing, is situated at the dialectical link between "good" conceptual abstraction (scientific method) and the real abstraction of the form of capitalist labor. Before I return to Brecht, I shall therefore explain why labor should be seen as the conceptual core element of Marxian real abstraction. Within the Marxian framework, "abstract labor" doesn't mean that the physical labor process is abstracted through machines, deskilling, and fragmentation as a result of the industrial division of labor. These developments can be conditions and effects of abstract labor, but do not define the abstraction of labor itself. Rather, for Marx the value-form mediates social relations between private producers. Commodity production is simultaneously private production (it presupposes private property) and social production (it is production for others, since a commodity must have a use-value for others in order to be sold).[22] In capitalism, this social production is mediated by exchange and, more specifically, by the exchange of the commodity of labor power against wages. "In commodity-determined society," writes Postone, "the objectifications of one's labor are means by which goods produced by others are acquired; one labors in order to acquire other products."[23] But for their labors to become commensurable, that is, measurable by the general equivalent of money, the workers must abstract from their products as concrete use-values and thereby abstract from their activities as concrete, use-value producing labors. Abstract labor makes it so that *labor* (time) *as such* becomes the source of (the magnitude of) value, regardless of its concrete characteristics as a use-value-producing activity. Value as labor time is not measured empirically for each individual production unit, but on the macro-scale of "socially necessary labor time," that means, as a norm set by the most advanced production standards of a specific commodity. Abstract labor is thus not a specific type of individual labor, but the form of mediation of all concrete individual labors on the general level of society. Every individual production process in capitalism, insofar as it is initiated by a commodity-producing capitalist, has thus *a priori* a "double character": it participates, as concrete labor, in the production of material wealth (goods), and it participates, as abstract labor, in the production of value, and thus in the reproduction of value as a social relation.

If what Marx claims is true, and value is not a purely economic category but rather a social relation, it can be argued that the social relations instantiated by the value form are indeed abstract in the sense sketched out above. The value dimension of abstract labor is a sensually or empirically imperceptible and quantitative relation between commodity producers, which depends on socially objective and impersonal norms and mechanisms. The abstraction of labor as value doesn't only happen in the heads of economists, but effectively regulates the life and social relations of individuals in capitalist society.

Value's social and material effectiveness can be further elucidated. Following Postone's analysis, the universality of value as a social relation constituted through abstract

labor has two connected consequences: it results in a compulsory social norm and a dynamic historical temporality. Postone argues that the described social form of abstract labor produces an impersonal form of social power that is qualitatively new and distinguishes capitalism from previous systems of domination like feudalism. Under the influence of this new form of social power, individuals are formally free, and yet as workers they are forced to sell their labor-power to survive, and as capitalists they are compelled to exploit workers to remain competitive on the market. The capital-labor relation is thus simultaneously a relation of "abstract domination."

The specific social form of abstract labor is revealed to be a contradictory dynamic which necessarily produces economic crises. The reason for this is that capitalists—forced by the compulsory social norms described above—must raise productivity and keep costs low to keep pace with the social norm of production standards ("socially necessary labor time"). But through the reduction of socially necessary labor time, value decreases on a more general level (less workers are needed to produce the same commodity in the same amount of time). This process results in labor becoming increasingly superfluous to the production of material wealth while remaining necessary for the production of value. What follows from this is the need for capital to expand and conquer new markets to prevent a crisis of labor inherent in the social form of abstract labor. Capital thus establishes the universality of abstract labor as a dynamic form of temporality.

>> Artistic Abstraction after Brecht

In an oft-quoted passage, Brecht writes:

> The situation has become so complicated because the simple "reproduction of reality" says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional. The reification of human relations, the factory, for example, no longer discloses those relations. So there is indeed "something to construct," something "artificial," "posed" (*Gestelltes*). Hence, there is in fact a need for art. But the old concept of art, derived from experience, is obsolete. For those who show only the experiential aspect of reality do not reproduce reality itself. It is simply no longer experienced as a totality. Those who show the dark associations, the anonymous feelings that reality produces, do not depict reality, itself. You shall no longer recognize the fruits by their taste.[24]

This passage has been quoted many times, but it is only through the reference to Marxian real abstraction that we can grasp its meaning precisely. That the "fruits" of labor—commodities—are no longer recognizable "by their taste" speaks to the abstract qualities Marx attributes to capitalist labor. The "situation has become so complicated" not only because "nature" has been supplanted by a completely synthetic, man-made reality (as Negri suggests), but because this man-made reality is itself split, because the physical nature of commodities (use values) and the concrete commodity-producing labor ("the factory, for example") "no longer disclose" the *social* nature of this labor (value).

The "no longer" indicates that Brecht believes that in precapitalist social formations, the links between specific types of material labor and the social relations they represent were relatively transparent. It is only under capitalism, as a historically specific and universal form of social relations, that these links become obscured.

Brecht posits the problem of abstraction as an epistemological and aesthetic problem. Neither is reducible to the other. Social abstraction poses a problem for art because it sets up an epistemic obstacle of representation. But it also disqualifies an "old concept of art." The sense of taste, which "shall no longer recognize" the "fruits," refers to the subjective capacity of sensual apperception, but it also refers to the bourgeois culinary norms of aesthetic judgement. Often only the former meaning is considered. Understanding the latter is necessary to grasp the dialectical twist in Brecht's reasoning. Social abstraction is not only an obstacle to representation, but also a path to liquidating "old" (bourgeois) art. Situated within the context of the aesthetic debates within the German left and the Third International more broadly speaking, Brecht opposes not only the conservative *retour à l'ordre* in the cultural production of the Weimar Republic, but also the position defended by Marxist intellectuals like Franz Mehring or Lukács, namely that socialist art should "inherit" (*erben*) the revolutionary art forms of the bourgeoisie.[25] The forms of the bourgeois novel and drama are no longer suitable to represent a world shaped by reified economic abstractions and therefore lacking individual agency.[26] "If today's world no longer fits into the drama, then the drama no longer fits into today's world,"[27] Brecht's collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann summarizes an insight resulting from the playwright's attempt to dramatize the financial speculation at the Chicago wheat exchange in the mid-1920s.[28]

It would be nonsense to say "old" art is bad, unless the criteria for this normative distinction were themselves historicized. This is where the deeper justification for Brecht's modernism lies. Criticizing Lukács for grounding critical realism in the historical form of the bourgeois novel, Brecht writes that artists should build on the "bad new" instead of the "good old."[29] As simple as the statement sounds, it articulates the complex relationship of art's temporality with the dynamic temporality of capitalist social abstractions. The judgement of "good old" refers to an artistic form (the novel), but the judgement of "bad new" refers to a social form (capital). Not only does good new art (realism) position itself in opposition to bad new society (capital), it also admits its dependence on the latter. And this dependence is not spelled out in purely negative terms, but rather contains a positive speculative element. Realism aligns itself with the real abstraction of capital as a practical critique of bad (bourgeois) art.

What does Brecht mean by bourgeois art? The quote about the photography of the Krupp factory has often been read only as a critique of the positivist or empiricist ideology of naturalism. This is certainly true. Brecht claims that a photographic reproduction of sensually experienceable reality doesn't convey the social or functional meaning of this reality. But Brecht speaks of "experiential" still in a different sense when he says that "those who show the dark associations, the anonymous feelings that reality produces, do not depict reality, itself."[30] Brecht problematizes here the romantic idea of the

artwork as a medium for the transmission of inner subjective states. It is not only the claim to quasi-scientific objectivity that is problematic about bourgeois art (naturalism, new objectivity), but even more so the idealist category of subjective aesthetic experience, the claim that reality can be "experienced as a totality" in the artwork. In the early twentieth century, this tendency is exemplified by the avant-garde discourses of expressionism and metaphysical conceptions of abstract art. Rather than taking Brecht's quote about the Krupp factory merely as a dismissal of naturalism (or the positivism of certain discourses of photography, or the surface realism of new objectivity), we should read it as a critique of late bourgeois art's contradictory unity of empiricism and idealism, or positivism and romanticism.

Brecht considers the dynamic socialization of capital to be progressive because it dissolves this "totality" of individual "experience" (*Erlebnis*) and allows for collective and universal forms of culture and sociability. Brecht does not lament the fact that social reality is reified and therefore no longer graspable in a sensuous or empirical way. In his view, the task of realist art cannot be to compensate for the loss of more immediate forms of relating to the social world.[31] Rather, the "reification of human relations" is seen dialectically as an expression of unfreedom (the compulsory universal mediation of abstract labor) which at the same time constitutes the historical condition of possibility of social freedom.[32] Social abstraction not only points to the opacity of social forms which are constituted unconsciously "behind the backs" of individuals, but also to the higher degree of mediation and universality that these social forms imply, and which are to be appropriated by conscious human practice. Because Brecht's argument holds together an epistemological and aesthetic reflection, both of which are measured against a dialectical understanding of capitalist modernization (the dynamic form of social abstraction), any theoretical explanation of a realism of abstraction after Brecht must encompass and mediate these two dimensions. It is through a reflection of art's *ideological* function and through a transformation of its specific relation to *scientific rationality*—the "equivocal position it occupies between science and ideology,"[33] to put it in Althusserian terms—that Brecht posits aesthetic techniques of abstraction as an element of the realist project.

Because Brecht's argument holds together an epistemological and aesthetic reflection, both of which are measured against a dialectical understanding of capitalist modernization (the dynamic form of social abstraction), any theoretical explanation of a realism of abstraction after Brecht must encompass and mediate these two dimensions.

>> Scientific Rationality and "Imploitation"

The recourse to Brechtian realism requires recalling a simple proposition which many Marxist theories of culture regard as an "elementary precondition of materialist esthetics,"[34] but which has become extremely unpopular in contemporary leftist art discourse; namely that art is a form of societal superstructure. The popularity of Jacques Rancière's concept of aesthetics in discussions of contemporary realism is telling in this regard, for it allows artists and intellectuals to avoid the unpleasant acknowledgement of art's dependency on material social forms and to reconcile the wish to invest art with an emancipatory force with the idealism of bourgeois aesthetics (namely the Kantian and Schillerian ideal of autonomy). On a more general level, it is against the backdrop of such an idealism that claims about contemporary art's anti-capitalist forces are often made.

Brecht's conception of realism offers a compelling alternative to this model. Brecht dispenses with idealist notions of art as an autonomous societal force by grounding art's critical potential in its historical dependency on the dynamic temporality of capital. Art is neither an immediate productive force in society, nor an autonomous revolutionary force outside of society.[35] Its politicization is dependent on a productive crisis induced by its "contact" with scientific rationality as an embodiment of the capitalist logic of commodity production. There

> can be hardly any doubt that there are such things as crises of [artistic] production, which are somehow related to scientific efforts on the part of artists. In our day, some lyric poets forgot how to sing when they read *Kapital*. And even Schiller and Goethe had their scientific periods, when the artistic stream "flowed more thinly." It's just that contact with science produced crises only to the extent that, because of them, contact with reality ensued. Our lyric poets lost their voice, not so much because of the book *Kapital*, but because of capital itself. And a crisis shows, not how independent of reality art is, but how much art depends on reality.[36]

Brecht reiterates Marx's remarks about capitalism's hostility to artistic production,[37] but draws different conclusions than what the common interpretation of both humanist Marxism and socialist realism would suggest. In contradistinction to positions opposing the complex of capitalist commodification, intellectual abstraction, and scientific rationality for its alienating effects on human culture, Brecht welcomes it as a progressive element which "smashes bourgeois ideology"[38] and must be dialectically embraced by socialist politics.

Whereas humanist Marxism and socialist realism deplore (artistic and intellectual) abstraction as an expression of capitalism's "hostility to life and art,"[39] Brecht endorses capitalist (social) abstractions, because they dissolve the individualism of bourgeois aesthetic subjectivity and expose human "life" as a function of the vitalist production of appearance through the ideological cultural apparatuses. Where the former view defines the task of socialist art (painting and the novel) as recentering the subject and its "harmonious"[40] position in the social totality, the latter welcomes the "commodity form" of capitalist art (film) for its effective decentering of the subject that reveals its posi-

tionality as determined by the "causal complex" of capitalist socialization. The capitalist mode of production "dissolve[s] everything in processes" and abandons man "as the measure of all things."[41] Where the humanist Marxism is based on a concept of expressive totality, in which every particular element contains the whole, Brecht's conception points in the direction of what Althusser termed "structural causality," in which the universality of structure determines every particularity as absent cause.[42] In other words, it proposes an anti-humanist, anti-essentialist, and dialectical understanding of abstraction as the driving force of modernity. Appreciating Brechtian poetics only in terms of its anti-capitalist worldview would therefore oversimplify its relation to the revolutionary project. Rather, it must be grasped in the terms of a dialectics of abstraction.

Art's problem is therefore not its commodification, but rather that this commodification doesn't go far enough. What is ideological about art in capitalism is not that it becomes a commodity. The commodification of art paradoxically allows for the possibility of its universal socialization, since the "modificatory power of the commodity form . . . consists in leaving nothing without relation to something, but rather in linking everything, just as all people are linked to each other (in the form of commodities)." Entering this "communication" (*Verkehr*), says Brecht, could indeed be "beneficial" for the (realist) artwork,[43] in that it conditions the possibility of revealing the "deeper social causal complex" (*Kausalkomplexe*)[44] of modern society. For Brecht, the commodification of art only becomes problematic insofar as it is intrinsically linked to the ideological reproduction of bourgeois class relations, through the social functionality of cultural "apparatuses." In contrast to bourgeois *and* Marxist humanist cultural critique, Brecht does not believe that human essence gets lost through the commodification of art, but rather that the artistic representations of class-transcendent human life and fate play a fundamental role in the ideological "system for the reproduction of labour power," and thus in the shaping of subjectivity through cultural apparatuses. Brecht's neologism "imploitation" (*Einbeutung*) is meant to situate art's social function in capitalism at the flipside of production: "non-production in the interest of production."[45]

Realism after Brecht is thus situated within the very dialectics of capitalist socialization and bourgeois ideology. The "experiential aspect of reality" remains in the realm of subjective, that is, ideological perception, and is therefore not suited to reveal the structural and objective forces of social abstraction.[46] A procedure is needed that links the artwork to scientific rationality—a method of abstraction which can be described as realism's "model character."[47] Because art's functionality, in capitalism, is imbricated in the ideological apparatuses of reproduction, a realism of social abstraction must construct not only the reality of "subject matter" but also the reality of the "apparatus."[48]

>> Practical Abstraction

Abstraction as a critical method of artistic realism shares important characteristics with the critique of political economy insofar as both use scientific and conceptual abstractions to counter the epistemological limitations of empiricism and lay bare the

workings of ideological appearances. In fact, one could say that Brecht claimed realist art should take the same methodological standpoint as Marx's critique of political economy. This holds true not only for Marx's critique of ideology, which Brecht transposes from the field of liberal economics to the field of bourgeois aesthetics, but also, and more importantly, for Marx's non-empirical mode of presentation of capitalist social reality. In *Capital*, Marx abstracted from empirical reality to portray the capitalist mode of production in its "ideal average,"[49] accounting for the quasi-natural quality of economic laws of movement which are hidden from view. In Brecht's conception of epic theatre, this method of abstracting from empirical reality translates into the typical, the gestural, and the pedagogical, as well as various techniques of defamiliarization and montage. These techniques are put in the service of a quasi-scientific construction of social reality models. It is only logical that such a transposition of scientific principles into modes of aesthetic representation should result in "an art form that was far more abstract and analytic than the traditional theater."[50] Brecht's connected interests in the epistemology of modern natural science, notably quantum physics, and in the critique of political economy, has been repeatedly noted.[51] As Samo Tomšič has pointed out, Marx's critical project can be situated within the paradigm of modern natural science; the "non-empirical materiality of commodities" can be understood as logically homologous with the "dematerialization of matter" in quantum mechanics.[52] Like modern science, the critique of political economy constructs its object as non-empirical and "not centred on the 'human observer'."[53]

In his 1932 introduction to *Capital*, philosopher Karl Korsch—Brecht's mentor in Marxist thought—noted how Marx's dialectical mode of presentation "may be compared with the modern 'axiomatic' method of the mathematical sciences, in so far as this method uses an apparently logical-constructive procedure to deduce from certain simple principles the results already arrived at through detailed research."[54] The concrete totality of capital is presupposed, however, in the development of abstract categories, just as a real process of abstraction is detected in this concrete totality itself. Theoretical abstraction doesn't have the last word in Marxian critical theory. This would be tantamount to the closure of theory as consistent philosophical system, or a positive scientific method. Rather, Marx's dialectical mode of presentation reintroduces subjectivity as negativity through "aesthetic means": the "citation" or montage of historical and empirical material (especially the history of violent dispossession synonymous with capitalist accumulation) within the logical-systematic form of presentation.[55] Whether we agree or not with Korsch's characterization of *Capital* as a "scientific artwork,"[56] his insight into the dialectical mode of presentation reveals the peculiar scientism of Marx's method of abstraction and its relation to the practical truth of class struggle. Korsch's insistence that *Capital* is very much about the concrete "palpable realities"[57] of social experience (labor) should not be confounded with any positivism of the sensuous, but should rather be read in the light of a notion of "concrete reality," as Sami Khatib puts it, "'glued' or 'sewn' together out of abstract determinations already present and at work in reality."[58]

It is precisely such a notion of abstraction-as-concretion which determines Brecht's perspective on constructive realism as a method of literary writing and theatrical staging. "It is entirely possible," he speculates, "that writers will be more successful in stimulating the reader's ability to abstract—which is so important for grasping societal processes—if they do not stimulate the reader's sensory capacities."[59] In Brecht's epic theatre, the constructive task of concretion is entrusted to the practical sense of the collective public, a public that is supposed to be activated through the analytical and abstract method of presentation. In the context of his reflections on stage design, Brecht, opting for minimalist "signs" of social reality which evade both naturalist detail and symbolic meaning, explains that "working with abstractions burdens the viewers with the effort of concretization."[60] The artwork should construct social reality in its ideal average and prompt the realist imagination of the viewer—the "sharp eye of the workers"[61]—to piece together the elements in order to construct a "practicable" picture of concrete social reality which defines their own situation. Realism is "concrete and enabling abstraction" as a practical tool for producers and spectators to make sense of their contradictory social world.[62] The artwork or play should provide viewers with an operative scientific model of society. This should not apply to proletarian spectators only, because bourgeois spectators are not unified subjects either. They are "torn apart by their interests," and "class struggle has got inside them," as Brecht's *Philosoph* formulates it in the *Messingkauf* Dialogues.[63]

This practical approach to the reality of social abstractions is where Brechtian realism aligns with the negativity of class struggle. Rather than by "identifying" or "empathizing" with the characters on the scene, or by passively experiencing (*erleben*) the artwork as a totalizing "world," it is through abstractions that viewers can connect what they see in the theater back to their own social life and conditions. Theatrical anti-illusionism therefore replaces a synthetic experiential view of totality with an analytic view of totality that would allow viewers, Brecht hopes, "to thrust the causes of processes"—capital's abstractions—"into the ambit of (being manipulated by) society."[64]

>> Brechtian Conceptualism

The proliferation of Brechtian strategies in contemporary art has not passed unnoticed, especially in the context of a more general tendency to reconnect with the diverse legacy of artistic realism in the twenty-first century. The question is on what historical and theoretical grounds these actualizations are premised. Throughout postmodernity, we have become somewhat familiar with the concept of defamiliarization; so a reassessment is needed to defend the conceptual core of Brechtian realism against some of its gratuitous effects, which have become part of the standard repertoire of (vanguard and mainstream) cultural production.

As I have argued, such a reassessment could be formulated in terms of a theory of social abstraction with its link to the dialectical method of Marxian critique. In the present conjuncture (since the crisis of 2008), the sheer evidence of economic and politi-

cal violence perpetuated by capitalist accumulation renders Brechtian realism still (or again) persuasive today. Contemporary art's post-2008 reception of Brechtian strategies is mediated by at least three historical precursors: first, visual practices of the interwar avant-garde—contemporary to and often in close dialogue with Brecht's work itself—whose procedures include montage, material construction, defamiliarization, and semiotic disruption; second, the Brechtian cinema of filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge, Helke Sander, Yvonne Rainer, Hartmut Bitomsky, and Harun Farocki; and third, more obliquely, conceptual art's displacement of aesthetic experience as operational mode of the artwork.

It is to conceptual practices within the discursive framework of visual art more specifically that I shall now turn to discern some of the key features of a contemporary realism of abstraction. My claim here is not that conceptualism as an artistic movement was in important ways influenced by Marxist social theory or by Brechtian poetics. Rather, I argue that Brecht's insights into the aesthetic dimensions of social abstraction resonate with conceptual art's turn against sensuous immediacy and the "experiential aspect of reality"[65] that the traditional artwork was perceived to convey. Within the framework of a post-conceptual ontology of the artwork,[66] artistic production lends itself to what Brecht called sociological experimentation.[67] Conceptualism could then be framed as a realism of social abstraction—it allows us to address capitalist social relations beyond their empirical appearance on the level of their abstract concept. Through linguistic abstraction, deskilling, and the processual character of its "research programs,"[68] conceptualism aligns the artwork with scientific rationality and the progressive aspects of commodification, potentially opening paths toward practical political utility.

I argue that Brecht's insights into the aesthetic dimensions of social abstraction resonate with conceptual art's turn against sensuous immediacy and the "experiential aspect of reality" that the traditional artwork was perceived to convey.

Artists that draw on Brechtian strategies in the contemporary conjuncture often occupy an intermediary zone between art, science, and pedagogy. They employ diagrammatic visual representation, didactic modes of mediating between artwork and audience, as well as strategies of staging and fictionalization that serve to denaturalize the realm of empirical social appearances and capitalist history. The works I discuss in the following exemplify the resurgence of a Brechtian realism in a situation marked by the impact of conceptualism on visual art practices. These practices are inevitably faced with the problem of the specific historicity of the techniques and critical models they employ. Many of the examples of contemporary critical realism use strategies of referencing, reconstructing, and working through past models of critique. Thus, alongside the critique of capital, reflecting on the historicity of this critique emerges as a key feature of a contemporary realism of abstraction.

>> Diagrammatic Realism

A recurrent feature of a contemporary usage of Brechtian "social models" can be found in diagrammatic forms of representation. Diagrams are akin to social abstraction, insofar as they are used to visually represent non-visual forms of social relations. The diagrammatic is also one of the privileged strategies of what Jameson referred to as "cognitive mapping"—a way for subjects to eventually make sense of the world by determining their position in regard to capitalist totality with the aid of visual and cognitive tools of representation.[69] Diagrams border on scientific forms of visual representation, but when used in a visual art context, the diagram doesn't simply appear as a transparent medium of information.

The use of diagrams in contemporary art inevitably has to engage with the legacy of the semiotic self-referentiality of "classical" 1960s conceptualism, which ties the form of the diagram back further to modernist pictorial abstraction. The political conceptualism of British artist Stephen Willats is an interesting example in this regard. While not remotely Marxist in inspiration, his project of applying conceptual strategies to social analysis reveals compelling connections to the aesthetic of social abstraction and to Brecht's method of the artwork as a social model (see Figure 3).

Willats initially applied ideas of 1920s constructivism to forms of social representation influenced by cybernetics and eventually turned to a more participatory and research-based approach in the late 1970s, when he conducted a number of projects that were tied to local contexts (mainly social housing projects in Germany and the UK). He then developed an experimental method he called "speculative modelling with diagrams."[70] Together with the inhabitants of the housing projects, Willats developed assemblages of photographs, text, and diagrammatical drawings, which were then displayed for the participants as well as a larger audience. Tom Holert has compared these works to Brechtian theatre, since their aim was to "enable a different view of one's own situation."[71] Willats thinks of these models as "speculative" because they combine "descriptive" and "prescriptive" realities through complex and dynamic linear and perspectival graphics, projecting different temporal layers as conflicting spatial views into the representational, indexical space of the photographic image.

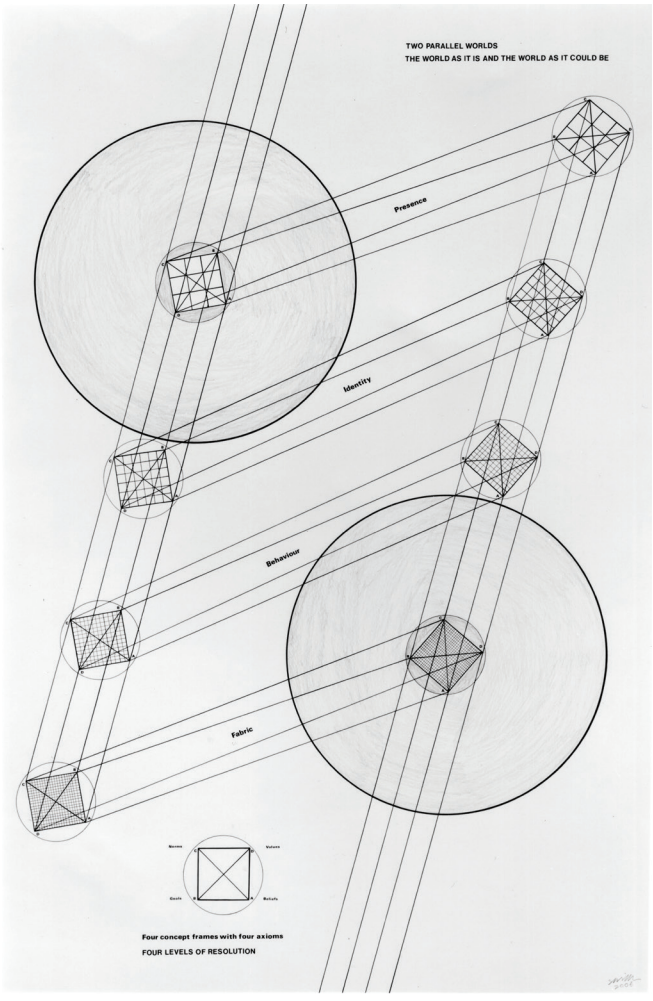


Figure 3: Stephen Willats, *The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be*, 2008, Ink, pencil, Letraset text on paper, 125 x 82 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The unified perspective of the image (its "experiential totality") is broken up into different conflicting perspectives that are aimed at visualizing the larger systemic social context in which these pictures are taken. The diagrammatic is used to highlight the relationality of the social instead of its experiential content. At the same time, the form of Willats's diagrammatic photo collages recalls the visual language of Soviet constructivism, especially El Lissitzky's—"Brechtian," according to art historian Yve-Alain Bois[72]—method of combining conflicting perspectives in a single pictorial space. Bois reads Lissitzky's multiperspectival geometric abstraction as diagrams or "abstract models," which destabilize the unified perspective of the bourgeois subject and activate the viewer, who has to make visual "decisions" in the face of this perspectival "ambiguity." Willats reapplies this constructivist method, socially and politically, as a critical pedagogy of seeing, engaging audiences—often outside the art world—to view their social situation as a diagram of conflicting realities and perspectives.

When it comes to the reality of contemporary capitalism, however, Willats's project remains highly ambiguous. Willats holds that "the construction of models is central to man's ability to represent the infinite variety of his world in tangible form," but the "complex structure"[73] of reality is essentially framed in cybernetic and behaviorist terms. While abstract means of representing social structures provide audiences with tools to individually and collectively relate to their social environments, Willats's systems theory approach falls short of confronting capitalist social abstraction—namely, the reality of the value form and class struggle.

>> Pedagogical Models

Andreas Siekmann's research and exhibition project "Faustpfand, Treuhand und die unsichtbare Hand" (2005–2008) similarly reveals the close connection between the diagram as visual form, the modelling of capitalist social reality, and a pedagogical approach to contemporary art. Siekmann employs the abstract pictorial language Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education), developed during the 1920s and 1930s by the socialist economist Otto Neurath and the artist Gerd Arntz, to depict the privatization of former GDR companies after 1990 and, through that example, the socioeconomic reality of Germany in globalized, post-cold-war capitalism. The understanding of the artwork as a model for abstract social processes is epitomized in Siekmann's installation as *theatrum mundi economicus*, a motorized model railway carrying cut-out pictograms (see Figure 4). As critic André Rottman has observed in his review of the exhibition, the excessive assemblage of pictograms, statistics, and signs in Siekmann's work hardly achieves what Neurath intended with the invention of a pictorial system of image statistics as a simplified, abstracted visual form of communication



Figure 4: Andreas Siekmann, *Verhandlungen unter Zeitdruck*. Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, 2008, installation view. Photographer: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy of the artist and Trautwein Herleth, Berlin.

to educate workers. Despite its straightforwardly didactic purpose, Siekmann's attempt to grapple with the socioeconomic complexities of the present by way of actualizing Neurath's image statistics yields, paradoxically, a "hermetic" referentialism, further intensified by the project's contextual framing as an exhibition of contemporary post-conceptual art.[74]

This referentialist aspect of contemporary realism is also present in Chto Delat's *Activist Club*, an adaptation of *Workers Club*, the architectural model of a multifunctional interior for workers' education and leisure that constructivist artist Alexander Rodchenko presented in the 1925 Soviet pavilion at the Paris World Fair. The central piece of Rodchenko's design is a movable wooden structure dubbed "the living newspaper," which could be converted into a lectern, a cinema screen, a book, or newspaper shelf, as well as a wall display for maps or other images. In Soviet constructivism during the 1920s, the propaganda kiosk—as an aesthetic and pedagogical device—epitomized the wish to overcome the traditional, experiential artwork in favor of a new functional and collective understanding of art as a relational and multimedia form of public presentation and communication. Rodchenko's or Gustav Klucis's (unrealized) designs of movable structures for multifunctional kiosks proposed a model for a new relation between artwork and public. The dynamic interplay between construction elements, image surfaces, the different perspectives of viewers, and, crucially, new media technologies, points to the utopian core of constructivism: that new forms of an essentially non-capitalist universality could be constructed through mass pedagogy, technology, and the conscious application of the productive forces of society (see Figure 5).

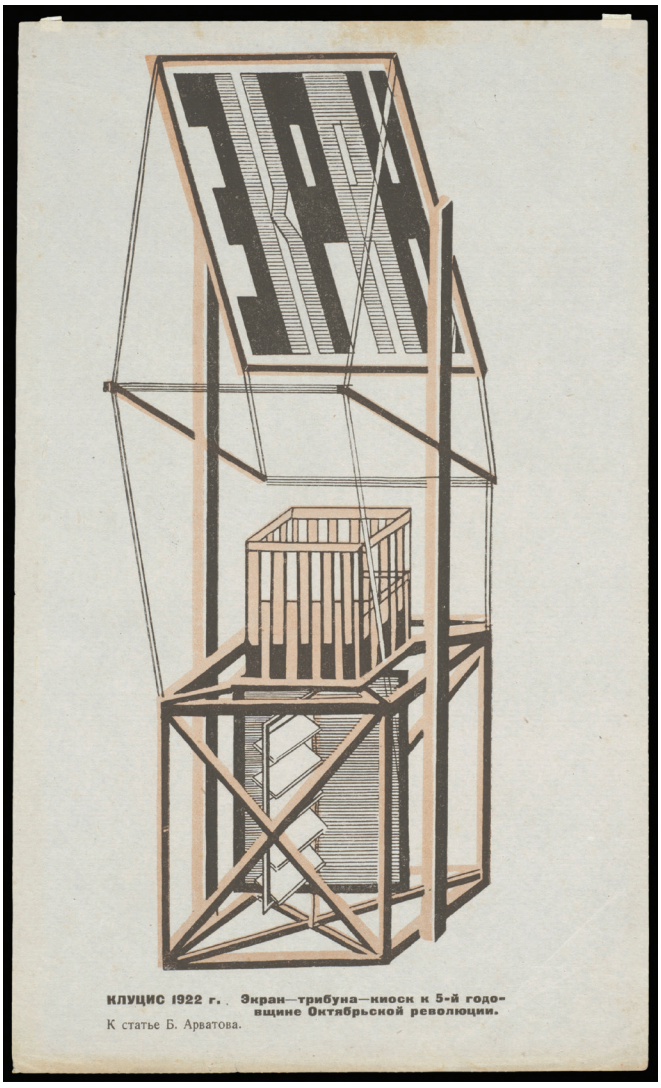


Figure 5: Gustac Klutsis, *Screen-Platform-Kiosk for the Fifth Anniversary of the Great October Revolution*, 1922. Color lithograph on cream laid paper, 25.9×15.7 cm, bpk. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Chto Delat reenact such a constructivist pedagogy in an entirely different historical context, that of post-soviet Russia and globalized neoliberal capitalism. Conceived as an interactive research project that contained the group's ongoing newspaper project as well as film screenings and public discussions, and materialized in varied mixed-media installations in museums in Pisa, Dresden, Eindhoven, and Madrid (between 2006 and 2015), *Activist Club* took up the unrealized project of Workers Cultural Houses in the early Soviet Union—for which Rodchenko proposed his 1925 design as a model—, implementing the idea in the Western European public art institutions. As founding member Dmitry Vilensk states, "We are not interested in reconstruction, however, but rather in a

process that I would call the 'actualization' of the general idea of what the concept of the workers' club is about—actualization in a Benjamin sense, as the process of reclaiming its missed chance today."[75]

In both Siekmann's and Chto Delat's actualization of interwar avant-garde models of a political and artistic mass pedagogy, confronting art audiences with failed historical utopias leads to ambivalent results. On the one hand, their works emphasize that the project of the avant-garde's revolutionary politicization is unfinished *and* can still be meaningful in the present; on the other hand, they also seem to suggest that the subjectivities and temporalities that once drove this project—in terms of the future-oriented universality of the revolutionary subject—are no longer available today, which manifests precisely in the need to reference historical positions and past utopias. This structural double-bind inherent in the project of actualizing past revolutionary potentials across different historical (and geographically and nationally specified) strata of counterrevolution and forgetting immediately confronts contemporary realism with the problem of self-historization. Dealing with it might result in a practice which is conscious of the non-linear temporalities of revolutionary struggles in the best case, or evoke nostalgia in the worst.

The more strictly Brechtian elements of the works are in fact directly linked to this problem of actualization, both in the sense that these elements themselves need to be historicized, and in the sense that they provide a method for such historization. Commenting on Chto Delat's adaptation of Brecht's *Lehrstück* techniques in their filmed musical performances *Partisan Songspiel: A Belgrade Story* (2009) and *Das Lehrstück vom Un-Einverständnis* (2011), Roberts describes their work in terms of a "realism as a critical-philosophical method—in the spirit of Bertolt Brecht—in which archival practices and forms of (postconceptual) cognitive mapping provide a space for *counter*-narrativization, *counter*-historicization and fictional re-enactment."[76] Techniques of fictionalization, construction, and distancing are thus key to the way the contemporary Brechtians mark the gap between the revolutionary but unrealized potential of art as pedagogy and its current (capitalist) forms of institutionalization.

>> Staging Social Abstraction

Fictionalizing history through Brechtian techniques of staging is also the central strategy of Kirschner's and Panos's works from the mid-2000s onward. In Kirschner's low-fi costume film dramas *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands* (2006) or *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* (with Panos, 2009), the overtly artificial elements of stereotypical genre cinema and television are put in the service of what could be described as a project of denaturalizing capitalism's history. The reference to Brecht—most explicitly in *The Empty Plan* (2010), a filmic reflection on his aesthetic theory in the guise of a melodramatic biopic—is not operationalized primarily in terms of a direct pedagogical, social, participatory or political function of art (as it is the case in the works of Willats, Siekmann, and Chto Delat), but rather foregrounds a different aspect of Brecht's practice:

the artificial staging of historical material as a means of constructing a critical perspective on history itself. It is here that Brecht's call for realist constructions as "artificial, posed"[77] seems to be echoed most effectively.

The turn to images and narratives characterized by a deliberate "exposed artifice" can also be seen as a counter-response to the tendencies of embracing (representational, social, and political) immediacy that emerged in critical art discourse since the 1990s: the documentary mode of contemporary realism and the discourse of participatory or relational art that claimed to immediately realize new concrete social relations. Against these trends, Kirschner's and Panos's narrative films use a method of remixing historical sources with genre typologies, literary references, popular subcultures, and antinaturalistic theatricality.

With *Ultimate Substance*, Kirschner and Panos depart from narrative storytelling and direct allusions to Brechtian theatre and genre cinema. While opting for a far more abstract and experimental editing style, they nevertheless pursue theatrical performance as a means of fictionalizing history as well as the political present. As I pointed out in the beginning of this essay, both the tableau-style, mannerist, gestural dance performance of slave labor, and the "flatness" and "exposed artifice" of the final edited video can be understood as an aesthetic reflection of social abstraction. In *Ultimate Substance*, Kirschner and Panos also refer to the strategies of diagrammatic representation and pedagogical mediation outlined above. The form of the diagram is paradigmatically referenced in the video when the theme of measurement, historically linked to the exchange abstraction of money, is introduced via (digital) geometric drawing. As these computer drawings are juxtaposed with shots of students learning about the histories of mining and coinage in the mineralogical museum in Lavrio, the film uses pedagogical tropes to reflect on the way social and cognitive abstractions are interlinked.

Kirschner and Panos are interested in the question "to what extent we have today internalized abstraction way beyond the domain of the economic and in how far does that render narrations which present themselves as genuinely material problematic or even ideological."[78] The (Sohn-Rethelian) hypothesis of cognitive abstractions being determined by social and economic ones leads them to assume that an emancipatory pedagogical project necessitates forms of unlearning. *Ultimate Substance* might be regarded as an exercise in unlearning abstraction: what often appears as natural to everyday consciousness—that things "have" a value and are exchanged by being reduced to the general equivalent of money—is in fact the result of historically contingent processes. Kirschner and Panos' video therefore employs techniques of abstraction (digital montage, audiovisual dissonances, theatricality) to denaturalize cognition and history. Filmic narratives or visual representations which "present themselves as genuinely material" would naturalize the social and historical origins of abstraction. A "fiction without illusion or mimesis,"[79] by contrast, seems apt to counter such naturalization. *Verfremdung* (alienation, making strange) is actualized not to expose the medial condition of the artwork (as the modernist Brechtians claimed), nor to argue that all reality has turned into signs and images (as the postmodern Brechtians did), but to denaturalize the narrative

construction of history itself. In *Ultimate Substance*, the non-linearity and asynchronicity of historical layers embedded in the landscape of Lavreotiki transform the site into an allegorical space of capitalist accumulation, presenting its history—from the ancient silver mines, through their industrial exploitation in nineteenth-century Greece, to the contemporary context of the European currency crisis—not as a continuum but rather as a disjunctive assemblage of fragments.



Figure 6: Blaise Kirschner and David Panos, *Ultimate Substance* 2012, HD, 34min, sound. Filmstill. Courtesy of the artists.

I want to suggest that this fictionalization of history can be interpreted as a staging of the material and temporal structure of capitalist social abstraction. The principle of "flat" montage applied in Kirschner and Panos's work constructs the filmic experience not as a totality, but as an analytical montage of perspectives which point to a contradictory multiplicity of temporalities as measured against the temporal unity of value (the present, or "contemporaneity"[80] of capital). The work presents something like an image of abstract matter (see Figure 6). The abrupt montage of audiovisual renderings of manual labor and abstract forms of representation emphasizes a rift in the cognitive and sensuous experience of materiality itself, a rift Peter Weiss described as a "rift between the classes" in a famous passage about the ancient slave holding society of the Pergamon kingdom:

> The rift between the classes was a rift (*Kluft*) between diverse epistemic realms (*verschiednen Bereichen der Einsicht*). The slave held the heavy chunk of ore in one hand and the light leaf in the other, he saw the veins and the glitter of grains and stripes, the thin tissue had been broken from the branch, the fragment had been removed from the split rock, the light, which the lord of the land also saw, played upon the ore, but he knew that matter was composed of infinitesimal particles, the atoms, which, in a wide variety of characteristics and attributes, gave every phenomenon its shape.[81]

Ultimate Substance can be read as a theatrical archeology of the social abstraction of capitalism. It edits together the contemporary crisis of capitalism with the fictionalized origins of class society in monetary exchange and the exploitation of slave labor. The historical separation of manual and intellectual labor, of matter and form, is staged as a kind of primal scene of capitalist accumulation. The different perspectives of bodily experience and abstract knowledge (the non-empirical abstract form symbolized by the platonic solid, the concrete matter of labor symbolized by the gestures of dance, the materialized abstraction of money as mediation of both, symbolized by the coin) as well as the different temporalities of the capitalist present and its historical, pre-capitalist origins are brought together in an analytical unity of abstract cinematic time.

The main theoretical argument of Kirscher and Panos's film is that labor is the source of social abstraction. Staging labor as the historical source of social abstraction depends on fictionalization. Every naturalistic depiction of labor would mistake concrete labor for

abstract labor, because abstract labor is the purely social form of concrete labor in capitalism. This is why Kirschner and Panos renounce not only the naturalistic depiction of labor, but even the representation of contemporary labor entirely. Representing contemporary capitalist labor as a source of social abstraction would produce the naturalistic effect of positivizing the negativity of abstraction, even without depicting this labor in a naturalistic way. The language of social documentary, prevalent in the 2000s, is a prime example of such an empiricist misunderstanding of social abstraction: for instance, from the overtly naturalistic images of global factory workers in the work of Edward Burtynsky to the far more constructed photographic and textual narratives of Allan Sekula.[82] Kirschner and Panos chose to depict precapitalist labor (slave labor) instead as the fictional origin of capitalist accumulation, and to extend it into the present. This fictional bracketing of the historical "origin" and the contemporary crisis of modern society reveals violent expropriation as the transcendental condition of the ongoing reproduction of capitalist accumulation. Kirschner and Panos do not contrast the concreteness of labor with the abstractness of capital; rather, by way of the formal procedures of the video work, they attempt to make the social origin of abstraction sensually experienceable as cognitive dissonance.

Burtynsky's and Sekula's documentary realism is dedicated to making the concrete, physical experience of contemporary labor visible behind the seemingly dematerialized appearance of global commodity circulation and automated logistics (see Figure 7). By contrast, the strategy of fictionalization in Kirschner and Panos's work demonstrates the non-empirical materiality of capitalist social relations by way of formal techniques of abstraction. Alongside the diagrammatic, pedagogical, and participatory artworks discussed in this essay, such a fictionalization of historical experience plays a pivotal role in what could be described as a contemporary realism of capital's social abstractions. The resurgence of such a realism might signal a heuristic for artistically making intelligible a world increasingly shaped by economic abstraction and the potential for its practical transformation. For Brecht, a realist attitude meant insisting that things could, in fact, be different. In the face of the ever more catastrophic effects of global capitalism, art's critical potential depends more than ever on its ability to embody the persisting dialectics of abstraction.



Figure 7: Allan Sekula, "Welders working in a privatized section of the former Lenin Shipyard. Gdansk, Poland. November 1990," from Allan Sekula's series *Fish Story*, 1989–1995. Courtesy Allan Sekula Studio.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the workshop "Artistic Realism and Social Abstraction" at the University of Fribourg in November 2023. I would like to thank Maureen Winter for her careful reading of the manuscript, her valuable feedback and her help in turning my text into proper English. Any remaining errors, however, are my own.

1 Brecht, "[Kennzeichen und Symbole]," 263.

2 Some of the footage for *Ultimate Substance* is used in a second film, in which the debt crisis and austerity politics are referenced by a voice-over text in combination with additional footage of demonstrations in the streets of Athens (see Kirschner and Panos, *An Exchange for Fire*).

3 The reference is omitted in Ben Fowkes's English translation, which renders the German "phantasmagorisch" as "fantastic" (see Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 165).

4 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 2 and 16.

5 Roberts, 37.

6 For accounts of the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the Marxian concept of social abstraction, see Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*; Khatib, "Sensuous Supra-Sensuous"; Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of Capital Formation*; Moreno, *In the Mind, But Not From There*; Lütticken, *Objections*, among others. In her contribution to a roundtable in 2018 on the relevance of contemporary realism, Marina Vishmidt explicitly calls for a "notion of social realism as a technique that deploys the aesthetic to convey elements of social abstraction," see Octavian Eşanu et. al., "Roundtable: Realism Today?," 65.

7 Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 240 (passage missing in the English translation).

8 A similar hypothesis is put forward by the Marxist classicists George Thomson and Richard Seaford, both of whom are cited in Kirschner and Panos's commentary on their work.

9 Kirschner and Panos, "Sell Everything, Buy Everything, Kill Everything," 201.

10 Examples of Brechtian strategies in the art of the 2000s which I won't discuss in this essay include, among many others, the works of Harun Farocki, Omer Fast, Melanie Gilligan, The Otolith Group, Rimini Protokoll, and Hito Steyerl.

11 Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 251.

12 Jameson, 254.

13 See for example Sotiropoulos et al., *Demystifying Finance*.

14 Negri, *Art and Multitude*, 34.

15 Negri uses the Marxian phrase "abstract labor" to describe the cooperative, fragmented type of large-scale factory labor characteristic for Fordist capitalism. As will become clear later, this completely misses the point of how Marx understands this term, namely as the abstraction of *value*. The use of the term "abstract" to qualify labor in Negri's writing in the late 1980s should also not be confounded with the term "immaterial labor," a term which is used to describe the cognitive and affective work-forms of postindustrial society, but wasn't yet on Negri's radar at the time (see "Metamorphoses: Art and Immaterial Labor," a text signed in 2008, in the same volume).

16 Negri, *Art and Multitude*, 48.

17 The most explicit engagements with Brechtian poetics can be found in Jameson's influential *Brecht and Method* and Negri's late dramatic work *Trilogy of Resistance*.

18 Negri, *Art and Multitude*, 7.

19 Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 154.

20 Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*.

21 "In the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 90).

22 From this perspective, it is nonsensical to say that the abstraction of value consists in the "supersession of concrete use" (Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 254) or that it constitutes a "world where there is no longer . . . use value" (Negri, *Art and Multitude*, 14). The production and exchange of use-value remains the very condition of a production based on value and abstract labor.

23 Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 149. The articulation of the relationship between abstract domination and class relations remains notoriously undertheorized in Postone's account. This is one of the major shortcomings of his book (the other is that he systematically understates the importance of market mediation for the social reproduction of the capital relation).

24 Brecht, "The Threepenny Lawsuit," 164–65 (translation modified by me). A similar reading of this quote is suggested by Khatib, "Aesthetic of the 'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous'."

25 On the cultural heritage debate, see Gaughan, *The German Left and Aesthetic Politics*.

26 See also Brecht's discussion of the "ruin" of "old art" (that is, traditional drama) as a result of its confrontation with the "new task" to "destroy people's preconceptions about how they live together in society" in the dramatized theory-fragments of his *Messingkauf* (Brecht, *Brecht on Performance*, 88).

27 Hauptmann, "Über Bertold Brecht," 146.

28 See Brecht, "Jae Fleischhacker in Chikago."

29 Brecht, "Die Essays von Georg Lukács," 457.

30 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 165.

31 As Christoph Menke has argued, such attempts fail to register the liberatory aspect of abstraction: "In trying to restore the lost 'concreteness' of social practice art becomes regressive; it squanders the liberating force that lies in abstraction" (Menke, "Art and the Reproduction of the Value-Form," 170).

32 For such a dialectical understanding of reification, see also Ray Brassier's reading of Hegel and Marx, "Strange Sameness: Hegel, Marx and the Logic of Estrangement."

33 Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, 97. For Althusser's discussion of Brechtian poetics, see Althusser, "Notes on a Materialist Theatre" and Balibar, "Althusser's Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology."

34 Holz, "Kunst Als Symptom," 42.

35 As Otto Karl Werckmeister has argued, it is the assumption of art's "independence" which undergirds the latent idealism of much of what has been presented as Marxist "aesthetics" in the twentieth century, both in the East and the West (Werckmeister, "Ideologie und Kunst bei Marx," 20.)

36 Brecht, "Notes on the Realist Mode of Writing," 245.

37 See Marx, "Results of the Immediate Production Process," in *Capital* Vol. 1, 1044.

38 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 195.

39 Durus, "Abstrakt, Abstrakter, Am Abstraktesten [1938]," 155.

40 See Lukács, "Das Ideal des harmonischen Menschen in der bürgerlichen Ästhetik."

41 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 171. One can see a direct response in this to Lukács's project of undoing reification by making "man . . . the measure of all (societal) things" (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 185). Brecht's opposition to Lukácian humanism was shaped not least by the Soviet avant-garde's attempt to decentralize and objectivize the subject position of literature and dismiss the "idealist" premises of the bourgeois novel and its dominant principle that "man is measure of all things" (Tretjakov, *Die Arbeit des Schriftstellers*, 81).

42 It is therefore no coincidence that the reception of Brechtian theory was highly influential for what became known as Apparatus Theory in the 1970s, which sought to combine (Althusserian) Marxism and, somewhat more problematically, (Lacanian) psychoanalysis in a critical theory of cinematic subjectivation (see issues 15 (1974) and 16 (1975) of *Screen*).

43 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 168–69.

44 Brecht, "Über den formalistischen Charakter der Realismustheorie," 440.

45 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 170.

46 To "reveal . . . conditions" instead of "develop[ing] actions" is Benjamin's description for the *modus operandi* of "epic theatre" (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 4.)

47 For the scientific experimental model as blueprint for a realistic "demonstration" of social relations, see Brecht, *Brecht on Performance*, 49.

48 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 164. Subtitled "A Sociological Experiment" and based on a (lost) lawsuit which Brecht had filed against the Nero Film Company for infringing on his authorial rights when adapting his *Dreigroschenoper* into a movie, Brecht's text not only formulates this task theoretically, but also enacts it practically, using the lawsuit as a model to reveal the ideological mechanisms of both the cultural industry and the legal system. For a detailed reading of the text see Giles, *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory*.

49 Marx, *Capital* Vol. 3, 970.

50 Fore, *Realism after Modernism*, 112.

51 See Knopf, "Marxistische Studien (1926–1939)" and Becker, "Zu Naturwissenschaft und Kritik in Marx' Theorie und Brechts Theater," 177–96.

52 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 28.

53 Tomšič, 9.

54 Korsch, "Introduction to Capital [1932]."

55 See Kuhne, *Begriff und Zitat bei Marx*, 101.

56 Korsch, "Introduction to Capital [1932]."

57 Korsch, 14. On Korsch's and Brecht's "pragmatist" version of Marxism, see also Chapter 4 of Giles, *Bertolt Brecht and Critical Theory*.

58 Khatib, "Marx, Real Abstraction and the Question of Form," 81.

59 Brecht, "Realist Mode," 259.

60 Brecht, "Über die Kargheit," 260 (translation is mine).

61 Brecht, "Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus." 412 (translation is mine).

62 Brecht, 409.

63 Brecht, *Brecht on Performance*, 116.

64 Brecht, "Realist Mode," 260 (translation modified by me).

65 Brecht, "The Threepenny Lawsuit," 165.

66 The claim that conceptualism provided art with a new, historically specific, ontology is advanced by Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, and Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*.

67 Brecht, "The Threepenny Lawsuit."

68 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 14.

69 See also Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, who draw on Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping for their discussion of a contemporary realism of abstraction.

70 Willats, *Speculative Modelling with Diagrams*.

71 Holert, "Capsules out of Control," 73.

72 Bois, "El Lissitzky."

73 Stephen Willats, quoted in Compton, "The Homeostatic Model in the Work of Stephen Willats," 57.

74 Rottmann, "Reflexive Bezugssysteme," 92.

75 Vilensky, "Activist Club or On the Concept of Cultural Houses, Social Centers & Museums." The Benjaminian idea of actualization was also at the heart of projects like Aktualisierungsraum Hamburg (founded in 2007) or Realism Working Group (founded in Frankfurt am Main in 2008). Kirschner and Panos similarly state that the concept "has been at the basis of our understanding of the relationship between the past and the present as the sites of ongoing contestations" (Kirschner and Panos, "Sell Everything, Buy Everything, Kill Everything," 196–97).

76 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 176.

77 Brecht, "Threepenny Lawsuit," 165.

78 Kirschner and Panos, "Sell Everything, Buy Everything, Kill Everything," 200.

79 Muhle, "Why It's Time for Realism, Again," 86. Muhle's analysis of Brechtian realism in the work of Gerard Byrne also applies to the work of Kirschner and Panos, as she emphasizes the contingency of historical reality as a central motif. However, her alignment of Brecht's political aesthetics with Rancière's notion of aesthetic indifference as a fiction of democratic equality does a disservice to Brecht's critique of capitalism.

80 For this notion of contemporaneity as disjunctive temporal unit of social abstraction, see Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*.

81 Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, 31 (translation modified by me).

82 T.J. Clark, as a favorable viewer of Burtynsky's work, mistakes the transformation of the material labor process for social abstraction by equating automatized alienation with value (see Clark, "From Menzel to Burtynsky," 204).

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