

## **THE CALIFORNIAN SUBJECT 1: Pictures**

### **Temples & UN-SdA**

This exhibition takes up the thesis that there is a new form of accumulation emerging around an alternative concept of living labor. In the process, new material infrastructures of standardization and assessment are coming up, and new imaginaries and hopes are growing among people. The central value of this new capitalism is no longer machine and physical labor, although it continues to exist; it is the labor of feeling and sudden affect, of creativity, intelligence, and knowledge. Competing for them, lurking for their appropriation, and speculating on their transformation into capital, we struggle without knowing exactly where our interests might lie. Whether or not we want to know, we would certainly be excluded from our ability to act if we did not find an entrance into this new social subject, which is said to have been invented in California. Alongside the subject of our ability to act, a changing world awaits new descriptions and representations.

### **Method**

The different phases of capitalism are distinguished historically, although the demarcations between the phases and the effects of the transformation on the terms are disputed. A historical phase has a relative unity through a type of accumulation, a mode of production, an organization of labor, the certain political and juridical measures of its establishment, and, finally, through the penetration of the hearts and brains of the people – so that the respective phase becomes a world and a common consciousness, wherein different inventions and imaginations, sciences, and arts have their common roots. The totality of possibilities provided by this current version of capitalism makes it an automatic subject that mediates and distributes agency while standing outside the planning and intent of those acting within it.

Various hypotheses are circulating that attempt to describe the new form of capitalism that is currently emerging: communicative capitalism, cognitive capitalism, surveillance capitalism, and neofeudalism. They make the different aspects of something whose totality is not yet representable recognizable.

In this exhibition, theoretical concepts and artistic works are understood as models that can make visible a shared reality that is both physically palpable and abstract, both material and semiotic. Yet texts and concepts on the one hand, and artworks and artistic methods on the other, as part of functionally differentiated societies, always establish their respective path dependencies. They repeat themselves in retrospect of the history and theory of their discipline and in anticipation of success. However, the fact that

they are part of the reality to be described and not autonomous both enables cognition and simultaneously limits it. For a more differentiated view, in this exhibition, the respective methods and concepts of art and science will be linked to enable an examination of their usefulness in the real abstract realism of the current version of the world.

## **The Picture as a Model of Communication, and the Concepts of Representation and Defragmentation**

One thesis repeated again and again to describe the new subject of capitalism is that of the fragmentation of time, of space, and of meaning through the digital applications of the Internet and especially via social media. Fragments of meaning, affect-laden and affecting, circulate at constant acceleration in the Internet's "circuits of drive," eroding all previously stable institutions and institutional truths and undermining the traceability of information related to real objects. They both disrupted communities and created new and unstable collectives. Fake news, deep fake, and decontextualized fragments of information made real knowledge and communication impossible and obscured a real, recognizable, and objective world.

Without wanting to deny the phenomenon described completely, its analysis should be rejected here because it only offers false alternatives, namely the bourgeois variants of optimism and pessimism – two attitudes toward a phenomenon that people who have nothing to lose cannot afford. They want to know: What is to be done?

The modern concept of a political public ties the voice of a person to an authentic body. One can freely express one's opinions, and the body does not become an object of inquisition. The voice has weight by being connected to a person who cannot be in different places at the same time and who does not represent two opinions at the same time. A person, moreover, who speaks in the same space of time in which the others listen. This unity of time, space, and meaning characterizes the forum, the market, and the voting booth. It still appears to be evident as part of a liberal idea, but it is a construction – a framework of thinking. Through technical media, radio, recording devices, and especially the Internet, this model of democratic universality is endangered, but, of course, it never was universal but very exclusive. Voices, identities, bodies, and a common reality are no longer traceable to one another on digital networks, which makes certain new types of freedom and manipulation possible. Seamless identification and compulsory authentication on the Internet would be anything but a rescue of bourgeois democracy by the benevolent

biopolitical state. The diagnosis of a fragmentation of time, space, and meaning describes the erosion of a democratic political model; it is the lamentation of a loss (or the jubilation of the anti-democrats). We now see what is no longer working, but if we want to intervene for change, we must recognize what *is* working.

Instead of the identifying linkages of voice, person, and place that characterized bourgeois drama, parliament, and the concept of the market, I would like to propose thinking about pictures as a model of a mediating structure. Before modernity, pictures always fragmented and recomposed time, space, and meaning. Pictures have an author, one who stands in certain temporal and spatial contexts with social reputation and status, which also determines the reception of the pictures. The images represent something, for example, recognizable people, places, or events with certain meanings, which can be constructed and recombined. These representations in the image can be constructed in certain ways: glorifying or sloppy; meticulous or disrespectful; insulting, entrancing, persuasive, or frustrating. The picture as a material and technical object has a context: it makes a difference whether it hangs in a museum or is painted on a street wall, whether it is for sale in a private gallery or sent to my smartphone. And there is another very subtle aspect: the index of intentionality of images, their inner directionality towards something, their arrow of “how it is,” which the attentive recipient can trace back to the conditions of its origin... Between the audience, the authors, the techniques of representation, and the technical object called a “picture,” there is always a kind of agreement on how it is meant and how it feels – as a kind of affective communication – how the picture is to be understood psychologically as a medial constellation and process.

Pictures, understood in this way, are complex intermediate processes that defragment time, space, and meaning. Pictures do not represent an original reality, nor are they invented by an autonomous mind, but neither are they that “double void”: emptied of antecedent reality and empty of authorship, referring only to other pictures (as they were once described). Rather, pictures are defragmenting medial processes whose methods make the abstractness of our reality analyzable and whose representations do have the capability to produce a common reality. Pictures are structures of interconnected meaning production, communication, and evaluation. As such, the pictures in this exhibition are discussed here as realistic models.

**Albert Oehlen**’s painting forms a system of marks, gestures, and signs that are doubly coded: on the one hand, the marks are historically referential, and on the other, they are charged with an index of intentionality. The elements and methods of painting, understood as marks, invoke memories of contexts from the history of painting and everyday visual culture. No color is natural; each has its conjuncture, its time stamp. How a line is formed, whether it refers to the painter’s arm, whether it is subject to

gravitation, how many sides it has, and, thus, how many dimensions it opens to within the picture, and which directions are operating within it – all of this has its own historicity *and* physically comprehensible effect. If, when in front of the painting, the viewer must think of terms like “smear,” “clarity,” “gradient,” “relaxed,” “’60s,” “clouds with humps,” “spatial,” “flat,” “cubist,” “allegro,” “dull,” “cheerful,” and etcetera, then these buttons from the history of painting hold memories of their contexts and are simultaneously physically afflicting and comprehensible gestures, which one could also describe as sound. Or: smell. Differently strong, differently combined and differently pleasant. The systematic of historically coded signs and methods, which are subject to both a taste of the time of its origin, of which we are aware, *and* a taste of today, which is evaluative of that historical taste, is endowed in the montage of the elements of this painting with an intentionality – a new common direction of the various elements and self-reflexive verdicts of taste. It turns the painted image into a quasi-subject into which the viewer can place herself with that human ability that Adam Smith declared fundamental in his 1761 volume *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: the ability to sympathize. At the same time, this ability is always clothed in convention, responsive to the tastes of a specific time, place, and class. Like a common currency, social agreement on appropriate and inappropriate combinations binds social groups together and endows them with a system of values, or an economy of feelings.

To put oneself in the place of the quasi-subject of the picture, to see how it *feels* to follow the directions and motivations backwards, has nothing to do with identifying with a supposed author. It also has nothing to do with immediacy; on the contrary, everything is coded, explicated, reflective, and anti-mythological. Following the comic or elegant connections and reading the index of intentionality, the viewer observes how affects and historicities are played off against each other; sometimes they are doubled up, sometimes they run up, and sometimes they are transformed. In this sense, Oehlen’s painting is neither abstract nor representational; this alternative has always been naïve. Since reality has never been an objective representation, a semiotic and corporeal painting is abstractly realistic. A visual culture, as the dynamic structure of a knowledge of methods and forms of shared imagery, needs no reference to real objects and original identities but does require constant exchange and reciprocal conversation about desirable and pleasing combinations of signs and meanings.

**Sayre Gomez** presents California as a world of images. In his paintings, California is a concept. Images that refer to images that are hyperreal and distant but by no means “emptied” of reality, as was the diagnosis in Douglas Crimp’s and Jack Goldstein’s day. Like Goldstein, Gomez makes manual work in the picture invisible. Found and Photoshopped images are transferred using airbrush techniques, appearing as if they have been removed from physical reality. Goldstein was concerned with a disembodiment of the picture as a material process and its spiritualization as a self-referential sign: a double void – free from the

myth of the author, with his ingenious hands and inventions on the one side and free from the real-reference to antecedent reality on the other – the pictures stood in the consciousness like shocks. Without a trace of fabrication, incommensurable, like hallucinations. Forty neoliberal years later, Gomez’s images are still about “dematerialization,” but have a decisively different impact: distance turns into immersion, the images do not trigger a derealizing effect on the individual, but rather their co-optation by collective desires, and no longer do we experience the loss of a physically tangible reality, but we are now in the midst of the spiritualization of the world on a new meta-level.

The difference is that, since the seminal *Pictures* exhibition in 1977, there is no longer any “real” reality missing; the world has become virtual; it is a world of constructed and interrelated images; it is intangible; and it is real. Now, the connection of images to the world no longer needs to be sought in a medium that precedes representation. Pictures establish the reality into which they enter as anticipatory repetitions. Images long for the world. Longing images of a presence – “life” – that is never there. What is there: being out of oneself in longing, being separated from oneself in desire, being traversed by others. Desire in a perverse world is labor. While Donna Haraway once proposed understanding oneself as a cyborg in inner difference as an alternative to the deadly illusion of identity, in the current circuits of production and consumption of feelings, the compulsion of being outside oneself is revealed as a trap for skimming surplus value. United in desire, fear, and paranoia rather than in solidarity, the unwaged wagedworkers of affect drive an eccentric system that cuts them off from any external agency. Fear and desire are living labor.

When Sayre Gomez turns his images into trompe-l’oeil windows and doors, they are illusions; these images are not windows to a world but reflections of the collective consciousness.

**Nette Pieters**, whose artistic work focuses on research and visualization of the shadow banking system, shows a portrait of Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock: an elusive man-of-influence over a global investment management corporation, whose power over people’s lives is as great as it is unquantifiable. In financial crises, it is shown that the living bodies cover the money, not gold and not states, nor the mythical “confidence of the markets,” and that this money corresponds to the debts, which are irredeemable so long as there are credit balances. The credits, on the one hand, correspond to the debts on the other, and both only indirectly have to do with the real value, which corresponds to the labor. As mysterious as the relations between the value of labor and its measurement and the increase of money are, just as difficult to justify is the influence of a single actor within a system whose automatism makes everybody replaceable. Lack of knowledge on the one side and immeasurable influence on the other – from this disproportion arise bad dreams of bloodsucking vampires. Against obscuring metaphors, study, research, and

visualization of knowledge help. But against the disembodied, overpowering imaginations of persons, whose influence grotesquely exceeds their corporeality, the concretion of a successful portrait also helps.

The portrait as a genre of painting always carries glorification within itself; the portrait of the ruler, the head on the coin – its very image-worthiness mythically increases the value of the person portrayed, and for that same reason, people protest against the portraits or statues of people who are considered not to be image-worthy. At the same time, the glorification already inherent in the genre easily tips over into the ridiculous when it is doubled, forced even by the artist whose glorifying attempts are too exaggerated. The glorification of a *person* tips easily over into contemptuousness when their real-world persona becomes confusingly parodic of their own image. And a person who is omnipresent through their influence but physically intangible and ghostly evokes hatred through their self-glorification. A criminal whom a community fails to apprehend must be brought to justice *in effigy* – by having their image or a doll-like figure subjected to punishment in their place to stop their virtual, haunting presence. The study of the genre of portraiture is the exploration of the magical connections of absences and presences in the relationship between person and body.

**Jana Euler** created the Morecorn. In the development of semiotics as a science, Umberto Eco strove to prove the conventionality of all signs. Signs refer to cultural entities – to other signs – owing to learned knowledge, and thus semiosis proceeds as a proliferating, unstoppable process of meaning production, without a sign “really” ever referring to a reality – to a “real object.” What would be, Eco asked, the real reference to the word “unicorn”? Unicorns are what the financial industry calls private start-ups valued at over one billion US dollars because of their rarity. The term was coined by venture capitalist Aileen Lee. In June 2022, 1,170 unicorns were identified worldwide. Unicorns with over \$10 billion in valuation are named decacorns. For private companies valued over \$100 billion, the term centicorn has been created. In view of the inflationary increase in the money supply, which devalues real work, and the speculative valuation of business ideas and their mythical self-description, it was an act of conceptual self-defense when Jana Euler invented the “Morecorns” in a series of pictures two years ago.

**Anne Haack**’s abstract painting uses expressive bodily means reminiscent of the paintings by Eva Hesse and Cy Twombly, without denying the historical distance – in deliberate repetition but not imitation. This distance inscribes itself in the pictures as the historicity of bodily feeling and becomes reflectable in the pictorial formulation. Walter Benjamin called this “swirls in time,” which do not flow continuously and linearly. This gives Anne Haack’s abstract painting an allegorical component underlying the presence of her expression with a historical median-ness. Equidistant from pathos and irony, she uses the expressive

apparatus of her body, augmented by painterly means, for a self-reflection that, in some respects, knows itself connected to the long shadows of the 1950s.

**Sara Gernsbacher**'s pictures, which consist of paint and silicone, do not have anything like an image carrier distinguishable in painting. In this way, they escape the tradition and ideology of Western panel painting and the central perspective that comes with it. As painted lobes of silicone, soft and iridescent, these paintings have a very physical effect and a tactile quality that joins with the visual sense. This gives the colors and ornamental forms a different homily than the brushstroke on canvas; they are caught in a very self-consciously chosen introversion; their painterly means do not appear self-commensurate on the stage of the painting.

The relationship between painting and image carrier of the classical panel painting still carries a memory of the Renaissance painting's ontology, of epistemological optimism and imperialism, the philosophical expression of which is the separation of mind and body, subject and object, going back to René Descartes. To put it more pointedly, one could say that the classical panel painting unfolded the objectively available world as prey before the monocular and disembodied unsituated view of the Western subject. This view from nowhere, hovering above everything, is still inherent in the perspective of video games, even if, in cybernetic feedback loops, every illusion of an external standpoint should have disappeared. Gernsbacher's images are embodied visions. Their materiality, silicone, and their ornaments and floral patterns laconically absorb essential elements of Californian symbolism without mimicry or escapism.

**Chase Wilson**'s painting seeks incidental motifs. Images of images from other media have a restrained subjectivity, tending towards abstraction, and thus perceiving the depicted images ever so much more finely, as they speak advertently of themselves. The persuasive self-duplication of the goods penetrates the abstraction in the painting. Between the representations of things and their use, their repetition in different media, and their painted image, a space of skepticism emerges. There is a painting of a photograph taken by a smartphone of electric scooters offered for rent in every city; after parking the scooter, the user takes a photo for control and personal assurance. Stockpiles of such photos accumulate in albums, like tangled smartphone cables in drawers and tickets in jacket pockets. Visible remnants of controlled mobility on identifiable smartphones are the residue.

**Cameron Spratley** uses the material of everyday visual culture, assembling it into dense images heavily charged with meaning. These images are not windows; they are tightly nailed and bolted with branding and emblems. They stare out at screws, candles, weapons, and signs. These images are barricades, or masks. The collaged material preserves the recognizable context of its origin. The place, the time, the

milieu, and the instrumentality of the image clippings and slogans within the hegemonic image culture remain recognizable. But this brought meaning, which Spratley lays over with difference, repetition, and commentary, is just looking through the net of the new organization of meaning. The images become legible like diagrams of semiotic strategy and communicative guerrilla techniques, like war games of signs and symbols. The subjective forcefulness of the images alone is not what testifies to this being about real life rather than abstract gimmickery. The appropriation and re-evaluation of symbols that circulate as instruments of a certain version of the world function like a common currency. The use value of these images, which is increased, condensed, and strengthened through their living use in solidary exchange instead of being unilaterally appropriated, forms an economy of feelings and meanings.

The picture *Made His Eyes Gleam* (2022) shows surveillance camera footage of the riots in Chicago after the murder of George Floyd. A young man can be seen. The eye of the camera has captured him, and someone must have searched and selected the images; the person is a target for the police and a motif for the artist. The glorification of the criminal and the rebel in popular culture is juxtaposed with the production of delinquency as a method of governance and a militarized police force, both producing mutually enriching visual worlds. But the real rebels, the spontaneous agents, and their allies also produce images, not only as objects of the culture industry and state surveillance but also as subjects and producers of images and messages. All participants use each other's images and try to interpret them. The intelligence of the street, the intelligence of the services, the intelligence of the people, and the intelligence of the police – shame and glorification tip into each other. The evaluative concatenation and condensation of images into code systems of one's own inner cohesion and the rapidity of the ability to adapt and transform are decisive, for nothing escapes re-appropriation; nothing can be possessed or immobilized once and for all, as much as images seem to report claims of ownership. In learning and interpreting, everything is always re-appropriated, devalued, and re-evaluated. Solid and durable meaning does not emanate from the relationship of the images to their subjects but from the relationships, created through transformation and exchange, of the real people who use the images to live meaningful lives. The superiority of the top-down operating-image machines is not guaranteed when the bottom-up organizing-meaning producers build the harder currency.