

Real Abstraction – The Californian Subject 3

The guiding hypothesis of the exhibition series is that of a new subject of collective imagination and agency, here called “Californian,” which is mediated by new capitalist modes of production that are no longer structured around industrial labor, but around affect, creativity, and intelligence in order to exploit it. In this way, the associated concepts are examined for their coherence without completely abandoning the counter-thesis that the alleged new exchange value is a phantasm of the inflationary credit system and that the values generated in this way are fictions. For the decisive point of this alternative must be formulated differently than in terms of reality and fiction. The phantasm of a subject is also realized and materialized; the exchange value that is detached from the commodities themselves and exists alongside them as a commodity is money. Money forms a system of social relations. It is not a mere reflection of value, but an effective and reality-distorting, even productive force, even if it is not completely disconnected from labor and value. Spontaneity lies in the representation of value through money: the intention of representation, production, imagination, and agency. The question at stake, therefore, is whether the real changes that we perceive are rooted in the automatism of economic circulation – in which case they are determined by the logic of the economic system as a whole, which changes of its own accord and independently of our ability to recognize and act. Or whether these changes are decoupled from economic logic, because it is precisely the inner logic of the system’s self-decomposition that causes the automatism to disappear and creates the need for political and consciously controlling external intervention. In this case, the real changes in society would be necessary but spontaneously formulated. For example, in order to prevent the enormous amount of money without value from disappearing into thin air in a corrective crisis – and with it a difficult-to-estimate number of institutions that stabilize social relations – we could agree to give up a certain freedom of economic activity that created both a certain social subject and regular crises. Guiding ideas of freedom, equality, and individuality could be abandoned in favor of a social system with fixed hierarchical relationships, a centrally controlled allocation of values, and monitored standards. But we could also decide otherwise.

As a continuation of the first two exhibitions on representation and the mediating structures between material and value, *Real Abstraction – The Californian Subject 3* will take up the thesis of a new subject of capitalism in the form of a new authoritative exchange value and attempt to examine and test common central concepts in comparative modeling of theories of political economy and artistic works. Artistic works are understood as semiotic models in which a certain constellation of meaning production, communication, and evaluation is explicated, making them comparable with theoretical concepts. In a comparative examination of the concepts, the path

dependency of specific disciplines can be avoided and the terms for a common practice can be sharpened.

Abstraction

Abstraction is a process in which something manifold is abstracted to a universality, disregarding concrete particularities. In this way, several different entities become comparable under a certain characteristic, and a common pattern becomes recognizable that makes things comparable with each other. The pattern is only universal in relation to the specific process of abstraction. There are always other possible processes, patterns and sets of comparisons. Although recognizing a pattern through the process of abstraction creates a strong experience of evidence, it would be a mistake to believe that one has discovered an original pattern or a primary structure because the process of abstraction is circular and thus creates an irreducibility that must not be confused with originality. If the process of abstraction did not anticipate itself, how could it then recognize the attributes that different things have in common? The universal that would be gained through abstraction would already have to exist virtually as a pattern, or the concrete manifold would already have to be abstract. The universal would therefore not be derived from the concrete manifold but would always be presupposed. But then it would be arbitrary: it would be founded on its own realization. Or the foundation of abstraction, the justification of abstracting, would always already exist outside of itself, in a substance: "Reason." That would be an unfounded assertion, which as such would remain external to the possible thinking it induces – a divine trick to create identities that would be removed from the process of transformation itself but would guide it all the better operationally. These would be identities that endow persons who, in the measure of their exteriority and self-justification, instrumentally abstract what is different from them, their "other," in order to actualize themselves in a self-justifying way. This abstraction would be robbery.

So, if abstraction can neither be explained by itself – because it is circular – nor by an external substance – *deus ex machina* – then it would remain relative and without reason. There would be no distinguishing feature between good and bad abstractions. It would fail to achieve its purpose, which is to establish a viable relationship between the real and the conceivable and a distinction between true and false.

It was Alfred Sohn-Rethel's fundamental intuition that abstraction would not be a logically formal process related to an a priori existing world of the mind or of ideas, i.e., that the true or evident relationship of thought would be accomplished with a transcendental *res cogitans*. Nor would abstraction be a subjective process that mediated between the concept and an empirically experienced external world in a realistic relationship. Sohn-Rethel understood abstraction as a social process in

accordance with the real process of social organization.

Real Abstraction

The concepts with which the world becomes legible and, insofar as the concepts are appropriate, open it up to human cognition and action, are neither subjectively arbitrarily formed nor do they come from an ontological substance, but rather correspond to the organization of human labor and exchange in their respective historical formation. A world of “institutional facts”, as John Searle says: money, economy, the etiquette of barbecues, the rules of the game, officials, goods, works of art, etc. – Objective facts whose objectivity is not rooted in the natural sciences but in the organization of society. Whether I know about it, whether I believe in it, or what opinion I have about it, that green bill is \$5, and the Kansas City Chiefs won the Super Bowl. Real abstractions are processes that are simultaneously real and abstract. They produce real things that are things only because they are institutional, and they are institutions because they are grounded in social processes that abstract and realize at once.

Real abstractions or institutional facts can be understood according to the example of the commodity. The product, which is a commodity, acquires its form through the process that constitutes it. This is an abstract form. It is the form of social exchange as it is actually organized, but nowhere is it to be observed as a physical process. It is the program of exchange: a product is a commodity because it is there for exchange. For exchange to take place, there must be a difference and equivalence between the goods, because without any difference between them, exchange would be useless. However, we would not want to exchange what is not equivalent to each other. Exchange is therefore not an equation, but a functional mediation of difference and equivalence. Different is the use value and the concrete production. Equivalent is the exchange value. Due to the exchange value, the commodity is equivalent to every other, completely different commodity (it is not equal, but equivalent in the measure of money). Equivalence is an abstraction of what makes the product different. It is abstracted from the concrete use of the commodity when it serves, interchangeably, with every other commodity on the market, to realize surplus value. Furthermore, there is abstraction from the concrete labor that was performed in the production of the commodity by placing it in relation to the measure of abstract labor, i.e., the labor that is socially necessary for the production of certain commodities according to the respective state of production. Living labor – in the cycle of use, production, and consumption – is thus related to the social measurement of abstract labor. The conditions of concrete labor arise from it as an effect of the overall process.

The form of the commodity is the cycle of valorization: something concrete is abstracted. Abstraction, on the one hand, is a splitting off of the concrete, while on the other, it is socialization and generalization. The generalized and abstracted is realized; it becomes concrete and reified. In a process of constant transformation, abstraction, and socialization, generalization and reification take place. The abstract is the universal, split off from the concrete. The general and common is the measure of the realization of the concrete. The concrete becomes universal in its realization as the abstract. Reified, the general is appropriated unilaterally. This cycle does not stop; we can observe and describe sequences of it in isolation, but in reality, it remains a continuous cycle. In this automatic social process, material and value are conditionally bound to each other. The real form of things consists in the abstraction of their social constitution – the cycles of exchange and transformation that constantly update social relations. Commodities are the ghostly forms – real-abstract – of the relationship between concrete and socially abstract labor.

What is abstracted, then, is something that is already abstract: social organization as a constantly actualizing circulatory process (understood not as the sum of individual processes but as the average and effective scale). And because abstraction of an individual process refers to abstraction overall, which is social, it can be simultaneously socializing and generalizing in the transformation and reifying and separating in the concrete exchange.

Realization

What can the concept of real abstraction, which I use in a modified form from Sohn-Rethel, do? It describes objects and facts not in terms of substance but in terms of process. It describes objects as products of cycles that connect the particular and individual with the social and universal in such a way that the concrete always presupposes the general level, and the general is constantly updated by the concrete. This creates an inner standard that is abstract, has not been instituted by individual participants, and, while hardly influenced by them, can be observed by them. It therefore makes no sense to search for an “origin” with the concept of real abstraction, i.e., to deduce money and abstract concepts from concrete exchange. The process of abstraction, generalization, realization, and reification is irreducible as a dynamic process and emergent phenomenon. It is precisely the achievement of the concept to be a medium for the dynamics between methodological individualism and the system level, between the material and the virtual, between matter/object and value/form.

The term therefore carries within it an inner difference and equivalence as well as a direction – it is a medium. It is suitable for comparison, not in the sense of a

mathematical equation but as a function. The comparison processes asymmetrically and enables the observation of the reversal of difference and equivalence. When real abstractions are compared, medial chains of comparability arise that are not merely metaphorical or formally abstract but real: They are each metonymically linked to what they describe, and they are homologous to each other in that they each exist as real comparable models in the same real abstract world. Sohn-Rethel's comparison was that of money with the concepts of scientific knowledge. Comparable for *The Californian Subject* are money, commodities, art, a collective subject, but also inconspicuous phenomena – institutional facts – when they create the emergent order of the community of a public, which is structured by a regular dispersion of particular positions, the formation of a collective, and a scale mediated between them, which enables the observability of the mediation of the particular and the collective. The term makes institutional phenomena and models comparable in their relation to the process of abstraction and socialization, reification and appropriation that take place within them. A new exchange value and a new value regime should be equally observable in them. This concerns the *equivalence* of the observed models and is methodologically interesting. However, particular attention should be paid to a *difference* that ought become apparent: the form and formulation of the respective mediation of the inner difference of a model. How determined, how automatic, or spontaneous is it? How much contingency, room for maneuver, possible intention, or pure deterministic necessity is there in the circulation of the formation and evaluation of matter and object? Models can function blindly or be reflexive to the dynamics taking place within them, but without being able to change them. Or, they cannot control the dynamics, but they can formulate and sanction the program that unfolds within them.

In the 1990s, **Klaus Merkel** (born 1953) began a series of paintings in which he repeated his entire oeuvre to date on a reduced scale of 1:10 on several large canvases. In this way, he opened up a virtual field of available signs for painting, which could recur in themselves in an infinite combinatorics of orders. The exhibition will show five paintings from a series that immediately followed: the *Unpainted Paintings*. Pictures that were not painted, but could have been. Pictures that were virtually possible – six on each canvas.

In the 1980s, Merkel developed a painting consisting of isolated, simple combinations of painterly effects that could be read as visual signs, which were repeated from picture to picture in a conjugating manner. These signs referred to nothing – not to any external world, no construction immanent to the picture. By repeating the images at a scale of 1:10, these combinations of signs were freed from their identifying integration in a picture carrier – their status as panel paintings. They became virtual. The painted (sign),

the “picture” as the context of these signs and the carrier of the picture, the panel painting, stepped apart and could be recombined... The entire previous œuvre on 10 panels; the pictures that were involved in a certain group exhibition on one painting; six possible, but not painted images, in one painting. The theoretical significance of this painterly model is far-reaching.

The internal and external relations, the coupling of which the institution of the panel painting establishes within the institution of art, seem to be quasi-natural. The coupling was conventional: the painted, the image and the carrier—one had always identified them with each other in the institution of “painting” and linked to their identification was a certain use of these images. A practical use in their exhibition, their illustration in catalogues, their trade. A symbolic use in the formation of the contemplating subject and the audience that forms a public, as well as in the consensus on a shared reality. It was a certain way of producing subjects of a bourgeois public sphere and objects of bourgeois markets. As new couplings emerge, the image that is detached from the carrier extends into the space of its exhibition and its functions—at a historical moment when the audience of this public sphere and the free competition of these markets are only partly and probably less and less determined.

While the isolated painterly effects can be described as having been released from the old representational function of the painted, the social convention of using the image is its *representation*. Everything that becomes picture-worthy is upvalued—automatically. There is no image without valuation. Images served to visualize the second body of the king: the glory of the state. It takes surgical precision to strip the painted of all meaning and affect to such an extent that its value *as a picture* loses its references and becomes nonrepresentational. When the image’s tendency to signify, to refer, and to glorify has been neutralized, when it is an empty formula, then the abstract *mechanisms* of evaluation of the symbolic orders surrounding it emerge and come to light. Instead of evaluating or devaluing concrete content (for example, painting within art or a particular painting within painting), valuation becomes abstract.

Value is freed from any concrete reference. Value as a silent potency, without reference, unbound, uncovered, but present as a systematics of value categories *prior to any* valuation—as a scale. As a program code of valuation. The complete senselessness of Merkel’s sequences of images is the precondition for the illustration of a systematics of the conventional valuation categories of art: painted, image, observer, carrier, exhibition, audience, catalogue, market, and society (along with imaginary and identity attributions just waiting to piggyback onto something). Merkel lines them up and shoves them into one another; he does not evaluate, he writes it down—by abstaining from all evaluations, he succeeds in developing his œuvre as a write-up of an evaluation system in abstraction.

I describe Klaus Merkel's painterly-semiotic work as the model of a real abstraction, a real abstraction that is "the arts," and as art it is comparable to other systems of institutional facts, such as money. A description of painterly operations in the concept of real abstraction:

– The process of abstraction: the picture-filling painterly signs and effects are empty, neutral, even devalued. Merkel does not strive for specification, originality, or the further development of solutions to problems immanent in the picture. They are ciphers, tokens, types, placeholders. They are interchangeable and repeatable. Instead of charging his painterly gestures with content, ego, and meaning, he devalues them – they are all the same, interchangeable. The painterly signs are abstracted – not by subtracting them from a naïve realism, but from meaning as such. Meaning as *different* meanings in a value system of meanings is neutralized. The signs become indifferent. Everything becomes equivalent.

– This abstraction is a separation of the concrete and the particular. The neutralized, repeatable, indifferent signs detach themselves from the painted presence. They become virtually available. They also free themselves from having to be present as a unique combination of effects in an organic panel painting presented as unique. They become recombinable. They can recur on different scales: Once as a painted sign = image. Then, as a painted sign, as a "picture" scaled down to 1:10 in another painting. Sometimes defragmented in new pictures. The identification of the image as a "painted color" and image carrier in the panel painting is abolished.

– The detachment from the concrete in abstraction is at the same time a generalization: The painterly signs, detached from their identification with certain pictures, become virtual. They become elements of a system that is not physically located and exist as a permanent possibility of their actualization. With the elements, the possible orders of their distribution are stored, or more precisely, the virtually possible and the conventional, institutionally realized possibilities become distinguishable. In the virtuality of generalization, the real abstract and the fictional/potential become distinguishable.

The disidentified individual painting loses its presence; likewise does the anticipated embodiment through the reception of the publication. But the emergent phenomenon of virtuality requires constant actualization, and this is embodied. As embodied, it is conditional and dependent on its material infrastructure. The virtual set of possible actualizations can, of course, change its own material infrastructure. In the making, in the practical repetition, in the physicality of virtualization, there is contingency: room for

maneuver. The model of Klaus Merkel's œuvre shows the conditions for the possibility of an alternative to conventional realization.

Milena Büsch paints advertisements directly on top of the ones in paper-printed brochures. She repeats the motif and makes its original disappear in the process. Of course, she also reproduces it: the oil paint applied wet-on-wet with medium-sized brushes coarsens the motif but renders it recognizably as the advertising design of cheap goods with their primitive signals. The painting is limited to depicting the vanishing model and does not allow itself any delicacy. The motifs that Milena Büsch chooses to paint over and duplicate are mass reproductions. Around 28 billion free advertising brochures are distributed in Germany every year.

What becomes reflexive in Milena Büsch's model is the representational reference of these images – the reference between the image and the real object. What is it that grants similarity between the real and the image? Meat products can be seen. Different types of meat, as advertised with a sample image. The objects depicted bear a resemblance to what the buyer can purchase in the market. Of course, it is not a naturalistic relationship; the depicted objects show the standard of a mass product – the type, a unit of measure, signs of freshness, possibly a serving suggestion. The conventions of advertising frame the objects. The graphic design is cheap, which corresponds to the economic necessity of the advertising brochure, but at the same time is also a persuasive message that signals to the customer that he will find a large selection with low prices in the present offer. The layout thus becomes a symbol of the anticipated consumer's social status. The most important thing about the advertising brochure is, of course, the prices quoted in relation to the quantity and type of meat. Since this is the topicality of the message, the prices make the brochure a real index. According to the labor theory of value, what is real about prices is the labor time required by society to produce the product.

Compared to other commodities, every commodity is measured by the time required to produce it, which is expressed in money. However, this is not the private time of specific individuals necessary for their production, but the socially necessary time. The division of labor distributes production separately from consumption, so that those who live and work participate in the production of certain goods, while they must also acquire all other goods necessary for life in exchange. Their individual provision, therefore, is always mediated by a social relationship – the distribution and organization of labor. It follows from this, then, that it is possible to produce a commodity that one needs oneself with a great deal of effort without using the social division of labor, but this would miss the abstraction: because the socially necessary time for production is shorter. The self-made

product can be consumed for one's own use, but if the self-maker wanted to sell it, she would see that she would not get her money's worth. She would have to set an exchange value corresponding to a measure of time that would be so high that nobody could afford it, or she would have to lower the price to such an extent that the equivalent value in goods would no longer allow her to supply herself with other necessary goods.

The same applies to anyone who has a whole factory and many workers: if the production of the product she has made exceeds the social labor time required for it – for example because it is too expensive, too good, or too bad, or because of inefficient workers – then it will not sell in competition with other similar goods or will be sold below the production costs, and the producer will be bankrupt. The real value of prices lies in abstract labor – the level of socially necessary labor time for the production of a commodity in the overall organization characterized by the division of labor. This abstract level is formed by the living cycle of divided production and respective consumption. The worker has a naturally limited time in which she can work for money in order to acquire enough goods to sustain herself and reproduce her own labor power, which she sells. The measure of this exchange is abstract: the socially necessary average lies between production and consumption, which in turn is necessary for production. This is the abstraction from the concrete that determines the re-input. The same applies to those who are not interested in reproducing their own labor power for sale but are interested in expanding their means of production and increasing their capital instead, for example, me as the owner of the supermarket chain. If I offer goods whose production costs are higher than the abstract average of the social reproduction of labor, I cannot realize the capital I have invested and the surplus value that I have gained in production. The goods are then not bought because the workers, who have to buy back their own labor in a transformed form, cannot afford to do so without perishing. This mechanism is then executed in real terms in the competition between suppliers: whoever exceeds the socially abstract level can no longer participate in the next round. As a result, in the constant cycle of the reproduction of labor and capital, the amount of socially necessary time and, thus, also the amount that can be distributed is constantly decreasing.

So, what is the status of the advertising brochure in this cycle? It is cheap to produce but free for customers, so it increases the cost of producing the goods and reduces the potential profit. There is a certain amount of intentional leeway in the competition between supermarket chain owners to realize the surplus value from production, although this is also a cycle with a high degree of automatism.

The substance of the value that I want to realize as “more money” is what is reproduced: the living labor power, the time that the workers work for me. I always have to pay them

a little less than the actual equivalent value of their working time in goods; that is my profit. Of course, it is only profit if someone buys the goods produced. Otherwise, it would be enough to pay fifteen personal assistants to steal their time 24/7. If nobody buys the result, I'm broke. Nevertheless, the value of this profit does not lie in the use of the goods sold, but in the preceding labor time – because we do not recognize here an isolated exchange that ends somewhere, but an economic cycle of necessary reproduction. And only the commodity of labor reproduces itself. This is why I can only monetize the value of my workers' labor time in competition with other employers. So, although the value of meat products consists in the labor time necessary for their production, which is the abstraction of the necessary reproduction of living labor (production/consumption), in order to turn it into money, I have to sell it on the market in competition with other suppliers. This is the realization of abstraction, which is at the same time the reification that I acquire! And therefore I need to advertise.

Thus, I pay photographers, graphic designers, copywriters, printers, and transporters to produce my advertising brochures, even though this doesn't create value but reduces it. But it increases the potential realization. If I understood that value and realized profit are two different things, I could come up with the idea of wearing out the workers and the means of production in such a way that if everyone did that, the social cycle of reproduction would collapse. That's why I invest in advertising to gain a wider reach. In this way, I would produce very little real value, but in competition with other employers, I would appropriate the value they produce and make a higher profit. Then the company that has produced products of too high quality or paid its workers too well will go bankrupt. And if everyone does the same, there is less and less value to distribute.

In the cycle of the reproduction of commodities, the advertising brochure marks precisely the position of the gap between the past and the future of the formation of value substance. This gap becomes visible in the inflation of newly created money, in credit, and in advertising. The gap is getting bigger and bigger because there is less and less value to distribute. What is thrown into the gap to bridge it is getting wider and wider: fiction, paranoia, and public relations. A new subject: how do feelings, affects, intelligence become abstract? How are they realized?

What, then, can be seen in Büsch's painting? What object relationships become recognizable? Representational on the level of the image: the advertising brochure represents an index of price relations. The abstraction is real; i.e., the prices in relation to the goods are the real abstract relations of people. Representational on a metonymic level is the advertising brochure as an indexical object; it marks the position of advertising as speculation on the realization of a value detached from its prior production. Representationally, on the level of Milena Büsch's painting, the overpainting

represents an unforeseen concretion, a particular appropriation and consumption of the free advertising brochure through painting. Painting that does not abstract and generalize something but rather concretizes and reappropriates something general and abstract. For what purpose – for what new cycle? This remains in the balance.

JPW3's painting, conceived as a theoretical model, stands in orienting contrast to the classical pictorial program, comparable in this respect to Milena Büsch but, unlike her, less interested in the reference to objects in the external world than in the internal organization of the panel painting. His pictures are assembled from disparate parts, and yet with this, they gain great coherence and density.

Peter Bürger described montage by placing it as a method of the avant-garde image in a demarcating relationship with the organic image. The organic image of the classical artist is an entirety shaped in all its parts by the subjectivity of its creator, which at the same time provides a representation of reality that the artistic subject succeeds in reproducing. This creates a meaningful continuum between the inner coherence of the image and the outer world, which “reconciles” both: the reconciliation of man and nature in the artist’s subject as a meaningful world, contemplatively re-experienced in front of the image. In contrast, the principle of montage, which incorporates fragments of reality into the work of art without subordinating them to a formative subjectivity, points to a fragmented reality, a denial of meaning, and to the questionability of life praxis. This description, which effectively coarsened the subtle, subjective melancholy of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s concepts in 1974, is that of an experience of loss that fails to grasp the meaning of what was lost with the organic work, and which therefore knows no more what to do with the new possibilities other than to describe them negatively—as a loss. That makes it typical of the time; it is the masculine, bourgeois, and critical conservative view that could not recognize itself as such because it still considered itself universal in spite of everything. In comparison to that, I claim that the organic image of ancient painting was an organization that did not represent reality but rather produced it in the first place. It was the visible form of a disembodied and placeless subject, which made its overview possible, separated from things. The reconciliation is the exclusive *crossing* of that boundary between subject and object, interior and exterior, nature and culture, which was drawn prior to the process.

Separation is one side of the abstraction – the separation and splitting off of characteristics and relations that are considered insignificant; the other side is generalization and universalization. The universal becomes reified and accessible to one-sided appropriation. The classical painter generalizes from the accidental, the manifold, and the merely subjective, and splits them off in order to give meaning to what

he paints. A higher unity of reconciled opposites emerges in the painted picture. The thing depicted becomes art, part of something universal. But where or what is this intangible universal “art?” Well, it is – as a reference – in the respective image, which as a commodity and object connects the individual and the universal, which can be appropriated and contemplated, and which refers to an imaginary universal.

Reconciliation, organic unity, identity – of matter and form, of inner and outer vision, of the individual and an imagined audience of individuals, mediated by the universal. It is the process of real abstraction in classical art: bourgeois identity production. Identity is not found; nothing is simply identical; where this is asserted, it serves to render invisible the process of identity production, i.e., its mythification, which means depoliticization, dehistoricization, and naturalization. Only those who are socially privileged by the seemingly natural production process of identity are interested in it.

The subject-object relation is a method of accessing the world by dividing it. By moving in the world, recognizing it, and acting in it, the subject permanently gains access to new areas—objects of its recognition—and simultaneously constitutes itself as a unit of its objectifying recognition, the products of which again appear as objects. A subjective activity that objectifies itself, strangely externalizes itself, and in turn appropriates this externalization. The other is what is to be appropriated; the foreign is the own; the appropriated own becomes foreign. A process of secession *and* appropriation, of constituting a self as being independent *and* of transcendence toward another, whose dispositive access establishes one’s own identity. It is a paradoxical process and a productive dynamic for the creation of a definite, controllable world. The autonomy of the subject is illusory, for its constitution entirely depends on that of the object. The objectivity, made accessible by the subject, constitutes itself. The separation is a mediation. But it has a tendency; it is perspectival; as a constitutive transgression, the subject repeats the separating mediation as a form of domination and ascribes the moment of appropriation to itself, that of detachment to the object. It ideologizes its method; the method becomes a form. The subject, within itself, invents subjective freedom of action. The subject’s way of self-doubling is its ideology: freedom and creativity in self-creation.

The imagined identity and organic unity of the bourgeois were always based on a process of one-sided transgression of a dichotomy. The art public was a privileged field of such transformations into identities, and the work of art and its contemplative reception was a model of identification – the reconciliation of the dichotomous opposites of body and soul, subject and object, matter and form as well as the mediation of privileged individuals with an abstract collective, a universal humanity. A mediation with which the concrete common, the masses, could be bypassed and the own class of bourgeois private owners could become the model of the universal. By transcending his

subjectivity to participate in the (restricted) audience of equals, the individual realizes the abstract universal that represents the concrete audience. He becomes the model of a realized unity of the universal and the particular and recognizes himself in the work of art.

JPW3 finds already as a fact the separation and dissection of the process by which the organic unity in the work of art was formerly produced. The separation of painting and picture carrier on the one hand, of color as a material and as a means of representation on the other, as well as the coexistence of different apparatuses for the production of imagery, no longer need to be analyzed; predecessors have done this. However, the parts can now be sent into drifting orbits in order to circle around each other. In the process, their unbroken forces of attraction and magical leaps become visible.

For JPW3, painting is a process in which the pictures as objects accumulate material and grow, while the planning and designing and composing hand merely accompanies the process, walking a tightrope between controlled and random processes. As objects, they then depict nothing, represent nothing, like deposits of a process of objectification. Nevertheless, they acquire a strange intentionality. These images are combined with reproductions or with symbolic signs (the American flag), or with advertising images (a Ferrari). In this way, the color material and the depiction and the image carrier are separated. A sign is a speech act that enters the body of the recipient like an affective command, whether as a flag, a stop sign, or a dollar sign. For this, the sign must appear disembodied, ready to embody itself in the recipient. Real abstractions are connected with speech acts. They are their quasi-natural faces – motivating interfaces. The appealing, persuasive, and affective signs refer to social rules that are abstract but at the same time have a very real effect, like money. But a symbol that can have an immediate effect like a speech act, that is, a social institution – objective and non-physical – should not blow bubbles, hang in tatters, or be in an indeterminate intermediate state of formation and disintegration. It should not have a body of its own. And this is exactly how the visual appeals occur in JPW3's images. That which has such a body and blows bubbles, which is motivated but is not a sign, seems uncanny. A dog barks at the waves. In JPW3's pictures, these specters come together and tumble over each other: the self-motivated, proliferating material with its strange intentionality and the disembodied, afflicting sign that commands embodiment.

Color as material, image carrier, and representation have no common origin here and no common reference in the outside, so they are not media between the inner and outer world, subject and object, body and mind, sign and thing. But while most artists, when the old organic unity disintegrated, reacted by choosing one side of the opposition – either sign or thing, pop or minimal, subjective inner world or objectivism, pictures or

paintings – JPW3 chose both opposites. The pictures evoke the old dichotomies, but put them together differently, not reconciled. And yet, unlike collages, which emphasize what is cut apart and recombined with a unified creative will, they have a unity and density that seems anthropomorphic without seeming to be animated by a unified will. The reproduction and what it depicts have an intentionality that points in a different direction than the proliferating color material, which has a different intentionality of its own that contradicts it. The painting becomes an uncanny counterpart in which contradictory forces are at work – is it the mirror image of the bourgeois private owner who universalizes himself as man in the audience of private owners? Or is it the transgressed “other”, the severed, the capped relation that becomes independent and returns ghost-like? Both are in it: animated and congealed, conflicting links, inseparable. JPW3 enjoys the broken affect in the sober knowledge of its production. But certain effects simply work, even if you know how they are produced. The great authorities are fetishes, ghosts, and we must be careful not to think of them as easily refutable. They are *real* ghosts. JPW3’s images are enthusiastic drifts of embodiment in the communicative civil war of signs. They are carriers possessed by images. Their power of affectation, incarnation, and excarnation invites us to ride along.

Katja Aufleger’s video *What goes around comes around* shows a ball rolling uphill. In successive shots of a fixed camera, the ball always rolls through the shot in such a manner that a continuous line is created in the cut. Although it is easy to decipher that individual shots must have been taken here, in which the ball was rolled down the hill and these shots were then cut together in reverse, the illusion succeeds effortlessly: the ball is perceived as animated; it seems to be alive. You follow it as it rolls up the mountain, sometimes laboriously, sometimes amusingly. Combined with the folk wisdom of the title, this makes the ball an actor in a symbol.

The saying “What goes around comes around” can be understood as a warning of just punishment for bad behavior that harms others, as well as an expression of confidence that good deeds will be rewarded. Since soft skills and self-optimization have become more important in the control society because the regulation of members of involuntary communities is increasingly exercised (and also demanded) by themselves before the rules are enforced from the outside in a disciplinary manner, the sentence could also be understood as a career tip. For it implies an idea of the social as a circulatory system of communication and actions and their corresponding evaluation, in which everything eventually finds its fair mediation, its just exchange, its balance. Performance is rewarded; the good prevails; society is a social credit system in which money actually expresses value and does not distort or destroy it. Money as a means of exchange and valuation could disappear completely, leaving money as a superordinate structure that

only assigns and distributes good deeds. Ultimately, we would all be unintentional (i.e., automatic) just intermediaries in the representation of eternal positivist values.

The video redeems this general belief – and there are probably few beliefs in capitalism that are more widespread than the meritocratic belief. Gravity pulls the ball down the mountain, and the film running backwards propels it upwards in a loop. Passive object here, intentional subject there; of course, an artifice redeems the belief in the idiom. Or, to put it another way, the observer's point of view of the camera as the mediator of the ball determines how it rolls. The animation arises from visualization, not from its own dynamics. Manipulation enables the wisdom of the proverb to be redeemed. The decisive factor remains the mastery of the medium in the question of whether something is a subject or an object.

Lisa Rave approaches money, the prime example of a real abstraction, from the physical quality of its bearer – a perspective that was rarely adopted after the complete abolition of the gold standard, which ushered in the new era of flexible exchange rates between currencies since the 1970s and correlates with financialization and the technological revolution of microchips and the Internet. It seems to be linked to a traditional theory of money that identifies its value with the intrinsic value of the product that lends its body to the monetary commodity. But Lisa Rave has something else in mind. In her film *Europium*, money can be recognized as a socially abstract system of measurement and evaluation, as described in this essay, whose materiality expresses a real material relationship between people. What interests her now are the taboos that conceal the real functioning, keeping society in illusions of identity, separation, and possession. It is about the self-deceptive but not innocent distortion within real abstraction.

I have described the automatic process of mediation between the individual and the universal, the material and the abstract, with which the system constantly updates itself, as real abstraction: As *abstraction*, it functions as a splitting off and separation of relations on the one hand and as generalization on the other; as *realization*, it is the objective functioning of the abstract process on a social level – whether I believe that money has value does not matter, and even if *every* individual did not believe it for their self, it would not matter as long as all individuals believed that *everyone else* believed it. That is the appeal of the imaginary universal. This is the objectifying effect of abstraction. But realization also has two sides; the other one is reification: on a particular level, the abstracted and generalized can now be embodied again as a commodity; the generalized and then realized again can be unilaterally skimmed off as surplus value; it can be unilaterally appropriated as social status. Real abstraction means the automatic

process of socialization and reification through splitting off and generalization. Although this process is constitutive of almost everything that makes up the social world, the world prefers to be described in terms of the subjective and the objective, as if this would allow a clear distinction to be made between facts and opinions, science and ideology, culture and nature.

But large parts of the social world are neither subjective, in the sense of individual-relative; they do not depend on my opinion of them, nor are they objective-scientific. Rather, they are based on collectively institutionalized opinions; they are objective and real, yet abstract and not physically measurable. But the unwritten laws of the social are unwillingly spoken. It is not too much to say that a society systematically deceives itself about its constitutive functions. Taboos surround the constitutive boundaries whose privileged one-sided transgression in the process of real abstraction produces “man” and his “other”. In this way, the status of being human becomes universal, abstract, and reified, and one-sidedly distributable. The material process of the production and constant actualization of this real abstraction is systematically concealed – the class and production relations, the overexploitation of “nature”, the dehumanization of racism. People become things, and things become signs, and the signs enter human bodies and move them.

Let us think of the speech acts we described above: A sign has an immediate effect when its call enters the receiving body like a spirit. It itself is disembodied – a signal: get up and walk! And miraculously, the person stands up and walks in the intended direction. In her twenty-minute film, Lisa Rave builds up a constellation of metonymic references dedicated to the phosphorescent material “Europium”. The rare earth is essential for digital monitors. It is also used for the authenticity marks on euro bank notes. The exploitation of the resource and technical application shows the continuity in the self-deceptive talk of “animism” with which the South Sea peoples were described by the colonizing European nations with today’s continued imperialism. The monstrous phantasmagoria of the real commodity, alongside the instrumental reason of exploitation and the dialectic of critique, which remains dependent on the imaging processes it criticizes, is summarized by Lisa Rave in this delightful film.

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Parts of this text refer to Fabian Ginsberg’s books *Quallenkopf* (2015), *Scripted Reality* (2020), and *The Evaluation of Art* (2023).