

ART MATERIAL: A Curatorial Note

“The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

– William Gibson

“If the sledgehammer of moral purity is to be the criteria for stone throwing, then the only people who qualify are those who have been silenced already. Those who live outside the system; the outlaws in the forests, or those whose protests are never covered by the press, or the well-behaved Dispossessed, who go from tribunal to tribunal, bearing witness, giving testimony.”

– Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), p. 20.



Chris Burden, stills from Full Financial Disclosure, 1977. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, © Chris Burden. Image source: <http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/do-you-believe-in-television-chris-burden-and-tv>

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The idea for “THE BANK SHOW, Vive Le Capital” took its embryotic form 3 years ago, when the world was embroiled in wide-spread financial crisis and an acute awareness of widening wealth gaps and failing political regimes. The real inspiration, however, was art’s spectacular failure at capitalizing on that reality as critical material. The 2012 New Museum Triennial, “Ungovernables,” aspired to rise to the occasion and embrace the urgencies of a generation, but delivered mostly innocuous “interventionist” gesturing and topical bearers of theoretical appendages that had already underscored the art world’s new orthodoxy. It marks the bankruptcy of a particular brand of politically-engaged art that’s plagued by reference-as-effect, safe radicalism, and an utter struggle to grasp with the complexity and contradictions immanent to the subjects of its critique.

If the techno-global turbo capitalism is to be deemed an enemy of unfathomable evil, it deserves a much worthier opponent. Or we should come to the consensus that contemporary art is “squarely placed in the neoliberal thick of things,” as artist Hito Steyerl puts it. In fact, it’s nearly impossible now to imagine a realism that’s not a capitalist one, particularly for art practitioners. Museum professionals run on fund raising treadmills to cover loans, insurance, art transportation, acquisitions, glamorous expansions; Exposé of Foxconn’s labor conditions are likely documented, edited, and disseminated on Apple products by artists who capitalize on the manufacturer-giant’s exploitative schemes; new money continue to put new art hubs and biennial/fair itinerary on the map, so we may all go to sleep feeling assured of better futures, or more likely, stand by 24/7 in case opportunities and skype calls arise from other time zones. “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere,” as Marx has predicted for us.

And yet, as our lives have been thoroughly transformed, time and again, by capital’s “constant revolutionizing of produc-

tion” and “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions,” art’s critical capacity to address it has remained stagnant, the relationship strained and schizophrenic. Artists as entrepreneurs with operations as opaque and as resistant to public scrutiny as multi-national corporations are celebrated; art historical narratives treating contemporary market mechanisms with due intellectual rigor (like Jane DeBevoise’s venture into no man’s land, quite literally, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era*, published 2014) remain scarce. There hasn’t been quite as candid a “full financial disclosure” since Chris Burden’s 1977 deadpan TV commercial, in which he televised an account of personal incomes and expenses in the previous year, breaching more than one industry taboo by broadcasting the advertising price-tags and an artist’s net-earnings as public information. It temporarily jolted a mass audience awake from the spell of TV’s endless content-feed. Nowadays the stakes are much higher: armies of highly-skilled unpaid interns and kickstarter campaigns star-ring Lady Gaga are required for us to enter starchitecture “labs” and have our existence transcended by the “Abramovic method.” As those who command resources and social capital grow increasingly complacent and the underprivileged increasingly uninformed—barely keeping up to weave neologism into grant applications, can art still be a viable site for contestation of politics? Or even aesthetics?

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Detail from Zhao Yao, *They Are All Smiling*, Multi-media installation with assorted banknotes, 2009.

When actor Leonard Nimoy recently passed away, Canadian fans rushed to honor him by “Spocking” the country’s \$5 bills, noting similar facial features between the Star Trek character he portrayed and the seventh Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier. This caused considerable distress to the authorities, who consider the bills a sacred territory of national pride. It seems that banknotes constitute one remaining arena where representation still signifies consensus authority and value, which, combined with a densely-wrought, ideologically-charged, and sometimes legally-protected visual schema, make acts of defacing, origami-ing, and counterfeiting particularly appealing and robust tools of disturbance.

From Genpei Akasegawa’s 1000-yen Note Incident in 1963 Tokyo to Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles’s ongoing series *Insertion into ideological circuits - Banknote Project* (1970–), banknotes are repurposed as moving battle grounds that test legal boundaries. Genpei was publicly indicted for printing counterfeits to promote exhibitions and wrapping sculptures, even though the bills were one-sided semblances (hence explicitly value-less), ironically achieving a wider impact for the “Anti-Art” objectives than the artist had imagined. Meireles stamped provocative slogans and questions on cruzeiro notes—Brazilian currency at the time—and US dollar bills before reentering them to normal circulation, tapping into their liquidity to mobilize grass-root activism. The project has indeed lived long, but (how) has it prospered?

While artists have often mined the histories and symbolism encoded into the layered designs of banknotes, Zhao Yao’s *They Are All Smiling* makes a simple yet uncanny discovery of the common denominator in the visual programming of money bills worldwide: all the portraits—royals, politicians, cultural luminaries, proletariat representatives—feature an expression of contentedness. Could this be a positive-association mass hypnotization? Does money make us happy?

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Facebook Meme screen-captured by author

Apparently capitalism is still sexy and potent, despite speculations of how it might soon die of cancer or collapse upon itself. It identifies new frontiers in the last idling moments of our fragmented attention, the precious minerals below the surface of the moon, or new entrepreneurship that transforms an entire continent by sustaining its own wealth (“Africapitalism”). It might find yet other territories—material and immaterial alike—that are incompatible with current, mostly Euro-American-centric terminologies, opening up a sea of alternative contexts to examine our values and morality. This means that the landscapes of capitalist realism have become simultaneously more challenging and exciting for art practitioners today.

It is rather curious that in Chris Burden’s televised expenditure chart, “television advertisings,” one of his most provocative platforms, weren’t categorized under “art materials.” They certainly qualify. With “THE BANK SHOW, Vive le Capital,” the hope is to sample a group of works that are as contradiction-riddled as the system in which their practices are embedded and operative. Through mockery, celebration, elegies, and cartographies, they delve deep into issues of immediacy or wander off to the furthest stretch of the semantics of money talk. At a moment when contemporary art’s claim to radicality remains questionable and vehemently contested, due not least to outmoded tools and knowledge-structure, we can always examine this small selection of works to derive new possibilities for art material, if not silly good fun. The bleak truth remains, however, that while we can talk symposiums of money talk, we may never touch it where it really matters. Because it’s impolite. Because it’s bad for business. We hop around the boxing ring but could only threaten a punch. We may never again get a “full disclosure”.

- Xin Wang