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Sebastjan Leban

Conditioned Contemporaneity (Reartikulacija, Part 1 of 3)



NLB (Nova Ljubljanska Banka) Prishtina, 80.39% property of the NLB d.d., Slovenia. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.

e-flux journal #0 — november 2008 Sebastjan Leban
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If we pause for a moment to examine strategies of the contemporary market economy, we discover that in a large variety of social fields a common pattern applies, namely the production of profit and passivity. Due to its expansionist logic, capital is constantly forced to upgrade and change its strategies in order to hypercommodify discourse. Neoliberal logic has further employed the market to transform goods from commodity to hypercommodity, rendering useless goods irreplaceable in our daily lives. Hypercommodification has become the basic means through which the system exercises control over all social structures.

Marx wrote that the fetishism of commodities originates in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them.¹ According to Marx, articles of utility become commodities only as products of the labor of private individuals or groups working independently of each other. In the contemporary world, however, the transformation described by Marx is no longer possible. Today, articles of utility already function as commodities in the very initial stages of their production. Along with processes of selling and distribution, the very existence of goods is determined by the logic of the market rather than a particular social character.

This logic uses commercials, slogans, political and party speeches, elections, and so on to constantly upgrade and propagate realities which coerce society into a general state of passivity. Passivity here does not only imply a passive role with regard to global events, but a non-reaction to anything falling outside a sphere of individual subjectivity. What we now face is a condition of collective non-reaction that allows



A billboard advertisement for Ipko mediates Western capitalist values and produces passivity throughout Prishtina. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.



Billboard advertisement for Ipko in Prishtina. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.

for the hegemony of capital to continue without regard for the dramatic escalation of social discrimination on the basis of race and class, xenophobia, and the marginalization of different gender and ethnic groups that accompanies it. It is also important, when speaking about passivity, to be keenly aware of the fact that the system has developed a parallel strategy through which processes of de-politicization, de-theorization, and de-radicalization are introduced through apparently political, theoretical, and radical discourses. As a result, not only are borders between real criticism and its mere illustration blurred, but so also is the subversive power of radical and critical analysis gradually abolished. The question that arises from this situation concerns how to initiate a process of re-activation that can engage the collective (society) as well as the subject (individual) in a fight against the hegemony of capital.

Fame, glory and luxury appear to be the most important values within the contemporary sphere of life. Propagated and branded on a daily basis by the media, these values have totally replaced the so-proclaimed democratic values of freedom and equality. It is interesting to see here how neoliberal ideology attempts to convince us that the market economy is the best possible

system at the moment, to which there is no alternative, and to which we should be devoted in order to find fulfillment. Such mediation aims to convince the viewer/consumer that if one stands at the threshold of survival, without social security or prospects, that it is one's own fault for not taking sufficient risks to improve one's life. What is the reality hidden behind this false mediation, and what is the real purpose of it? Its intention is no doubt to intensify the dependence of the lower classes on the workings of the system in such a way as to benefit those in power. As described by Richard Keiser in an article entitled "Stadiums Put Corporate Guests First....," there has lately been a significant increase in class discrimination.² He argues that the elites have begun to build new sports arenas with restricted VIP lodges specifically in order to provide spaces for the wealthy to distinguish themselves from the lower class. This is, by all means, a sign of pure class segregation and discrimination – something that becomes ever more present in other social spheres.

If we compare the above with Anibal Quijano's analysis of how racial classification became the main criterion for placing people into hierarchies, it appears that the pattern used throughout the centuries to establish the



A city bus advertising Raiffeisen bank in Prishtina. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.

dominant position of the white race over others applies to the establishment of class hierarchies as well. Quijano states that "racial classification has been the most effective and long-lasting instrument of universal social domination since the sixteenth century, because the much older principle – gender or intersexual domination – was encroached upon by the inferior/superior racial classifications."³

The politics of classification, discrimination, and segregation are the cornerstone of the contemporary world and will remain so unless the collective (society) and the subject (individual) do away with passivity and engage in the fight against the hegemony of capital and the contemporary valorization structure.

And what has art to do with all this? Art has forever been a commodity, produced to please as an object of fascination and value, having forever gone hand-in-hand with systems of power and expansionism. David Harvey's analysis of monopoly rent, in which he compares the wine market to the art market, clearly shows how both markets exploit concepts of authenticity, originality, and uniqueness. Through the symbolic value of these concepts, the market system implements "the continuing monopoly privileges of private property" that serve to maintain the fictitious commodity values that allow vast profits to be gained from a product (or work of art).⁴



Subsidiary of Raiffeisen International Bank-Holding AG. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.

With the valorization of contemporary art today so closely tied to the circulation of capital and private property, it joins an industry of artificially produced needs, behind which lies the influence of multinational corporations and the elite class. Given the pretense of globalization

and the unification of the art market and scenes under joint ventures such as that of the *Grand Tour 2007*, *Tres Bienn* and now *Art Compass*, a fictive process of democratization within the art system comes about with its sole purpose being to increase the value of investments and recreate a field for the elite class in the service of the disproportionate accumulation of capital, power, and control.

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TEB (Türk Ekonomi Bankası), a joint venture with BNP Paribas. Image: Sebastjan Leban, Staš Kleindienst, *Contemporary Structures of Colonization*, work in progress (detail), 2008.

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→ Continued in issue #1: *Between Resistance and Commodity (Reartikulacija, Part 2 of 3)*, by Staš Kleindienst

"Reartikulacija" is an art project by a group consisting of Marina Gržinić, Staš Kleindienst, Sebastjan Leban, and Tanja Passoni. The group also publishes *Reartikulacija*, a journal for politics, art, and theory, edited by Gržinić and Leban.

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Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 3
<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/MODERN/FETISH.HTM>

2

Richard A Keiser, "Stadiums Put Corporate Guests First," *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2008
<http://mondediplo.com/2008/07/12stadiums>

3

Anibal Quijano. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 533-580.
<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~tochtli/AnibalQuijano.doc>

4

See David Harvey, "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture," in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *A World of Contradictions: Socialist Register 2002* (November 2001).
<http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001966.php>