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# GESCHICHTE HISTORY

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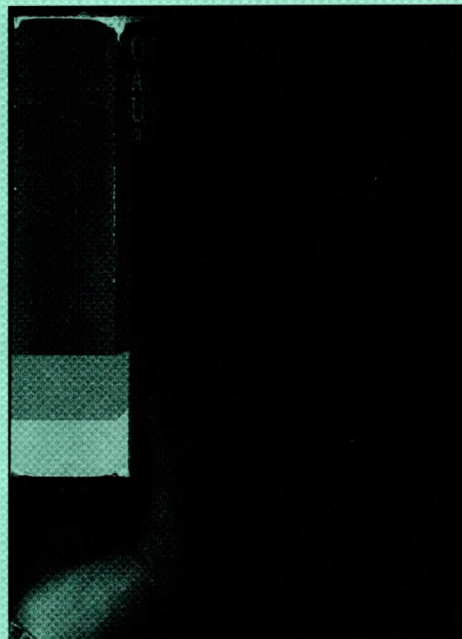
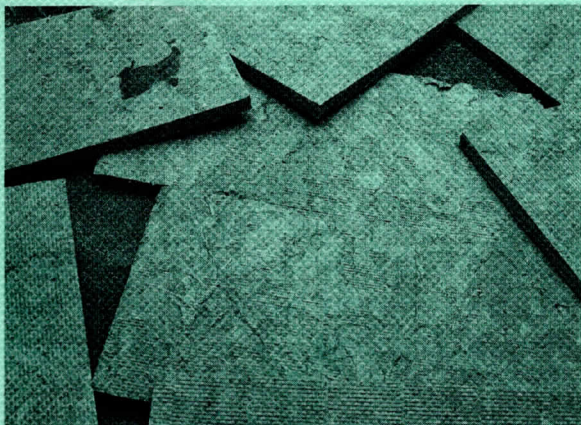
DANI GAL<sup>3</sup>

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*Entropology* (2009)<sup>1</sup>



*Hardy Boys and Gilmore Girls* (2007)<sup>2</sup>



*i. e.* (2008)<sup>3</sup>

# REALISM AND THE CONCEPTUAL ESCAPE

Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda interviewed by Jeronimo Voss

Jeronimo Voss: At a conference of artists in Antwerp in 1861 Gustave Courbet referred to his painting *A Burial at Ornans* (1849/50) as “the burial of romanticism.”<sup>1</sup> The painting portrays the villagers of Courbet’s hometown gathering for the funeral of one of his distant relatives. Although its large format alludes to the grand genre of history painting, the painting’s dark rendering of an arbitrary burial attended by ordinary villagers makes plain Courbet’s criticism of the heroic ideals of this genre. He stated, “The foundation of realism is the negation of the ideal,”<sup>2</sup> with the awareness that by taking this stance, he also determined his own ideological position. This oppositional stance was one focus in *Realism!*,<sup>3</sup> a magazine I collaborated on in the self-organized context of the artist association “Free Class FFM.” We wanted to discuss realism as a confrontation of reality—as an artistic strategy relating to the present social production of reality—while at the same time rejecting its naturalisation. Our motivation was to ask the question: how can one discuss art as realism in a setting that is increasingly centered on debates about New Romanticism or Romantic Conceptualism?

Q Takeki Maeda: One of the recurring themes that we find interesting in *Realism!* is the claim that the term realism is misconstrued when it is defined as only being

1 Cf. Gustave Courbet, “Realismus und Demokratie,” in Klaus Herding, *Realismus als Widerspruch. Die Wirklichkeit in Courbets Malerei* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), p. 8.

2 Ibid.

3 Realism Working Group, *Realism!*, (2008), <http://realismworking-group.wordpress.com/preface/> (accessed July 13, 2009).

relevant to a particular art-historical period. This problem is addressed, for example, when Klaus Herding attempts to clarify the misunderstanding; he writes in opposition to the common definition of realism as the mere reproduction of reality. According to Herding, when realism is mistaken for naturalism, it is stripped of its potential as a critical concept. For even as an image can tend towards an unmediated representation of reality, it can at the same time obscure the intention or interests behind its production or distribution.<sup>4</sup>

JV: This is also true for "political art," a term that suggests that today art and politics can simply be fused into an integrated practice. It's not that art doesn't have the potential to oppose the aesthetic order of the present. However, a challenge to these aesthetic orders also implies that one avoids creating new forms of police-like reproduction and representation. The discussion of realism in art opens the possibility to describe the potential of artistic solidarity with political collectivity, without conflating them. As far as your work *Nothing Is More Practical than Idealism* was hardly representable, was it concerned with escaping the representational orders of art? It consisted of a movie shot without film in the camera.



Jay Chung: *Nothing Is More Practical than Idealism* was an early work of mine. In this work I shot and filmed a 35 mm short without loading the camera with film. It wasn't advertised as an exercise; the people working on the film were never informed that there wouldn't be film in the camera. After the entire process, which included a casting call and all the other procedures of conventional film production, the work was documented with a single photograph of the cast and crew. In the background are the teal colored doors of the motel that was the setting for the film. It's a very diverse group of people in the photo, and you sense their enthusiasm for having taken part in something.

JV: So it's more about the photograph than the conceptual idea of the immaterial artwork.

JC: It's both, I guess. It's ambiguous. The purity of the dematerialized is sustained by the manipulation of real people, of concrete circumstances.

JV: Why do you refer to "idealism" in the title?

JC: The title is a pun. It's difficult to parse the uncertainties introduced by the ambiguities of representation. One can hardly separate romanticism and mythmaking from real agency, or utopias from real political claims. Today, artworks seem to depend on these kinds of ambiguities. Perhaps this is unfortunate; their reception relies on a kind of slippage.

JV: In your first gallery show in Berlin you dealt in a very literal way with the representation of artworks by turning the show's press release into visual material.

4 Klaus Herding, "Mimesis und Innovation: Überlegungen zum Begriff des Realismus in der bildenden Kunst," in Klaus Oehler, ed., *Zeichen und Realität: Akten des 3. Semiotischen Kolloquiums der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Semiotik e.V.*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1984), pp. 83–113, here p. 85.

QTM: In the exhibition at the Isabella Bortolozzi gallery, you saw seven offset prints with fine black lines dividing at nodes into stemmed sections. These tree-like forms were actually diagrams—the same used in linguistics to chart the syntactic relations in example sentences. Here it was the sentences of the press release that were being diagrammed. The display was therefore completely overdetermined: the figures' shapes were determined by the announcement's underlying grammar, and these, when framed, made up the entire exhibition. Conventionally, the press release has the function of legitimating the work it describes—it holds an ambivalent position between information and posturing. In this case, however, despite lacking meaningful content in its actual press release, the exhibition ironically makes a perfect coherence between the works on display and the announcement that accompanies them, albeit in such a way as to deny the text the role that it normally assumes.

JV: Do you see this piece as critical towards how press releases, or “public relations” in general, determine artistic work?

QTM: The press release is one of the first points of contact one's work has with a wider frame of institutional discourse. A moving analogy can be found in Foucault's *Lives of Infamous Men*. Foucault writes that he was compelled to collect a certain kind of document pertaining to minor criminals because he felt some kind of aesthetic attraction to the disparity between what he imagined as lives lived completely unnoticed or undistinguished and the heavily stylized letters used by ordinary people to try to indict or condemn these lives, the so-called “infamous”—and here the term is meant ironically. The point is that the letters intentionally tried to make monsters out of their subjects. He says that the style of these letters is an indication of the letters' function to attempt to solicit the power of an ultimate authority (in this case, the king), a power that could and had to be seduced and instrumentalized.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that's why you use the term “police-like” to describe the machinations of representation; in any case its obvious that press releases today are not simply journalistic.

JV: Your research for this project brought you to a branch of linguistics that was roughly contemporaneous with the conceptual art of the sixties and seventies. How do you see the relation between the two?

QTM: We were interested in a small group of papers which came out of a very particular, now outmoded branch of linguistics known as generative semantics. Although the papers propose abstract formal schemas to describe language, they also reflect the counter-cultural attitude of their authors: they were self-published and circulated, and they included profanity, references to drugs, sex, and political protest. They mocked both mainstream culture and their academic field. What's more, the papers' authors intentionally chose to focus on slang, profanity, and the absurd, because if a generative theory could be universal, one could test its viability by seeing if it could cope with these peripheral aspects of language. The papers at-

5 Foucault, Michel, “Lives of Infamous Men,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, edited by James D. Faubion (New York, 2000), pp. 157–75, here p. 158.

tempted to extend the theory by undermining it and vice-versa. The tension between the papers' logical, formal, and reductive aspects and their impertinent non sequiturs could hint at a more contextual reading of the conceptual art of the sixties and seventies.

JV: In *Hardy Boys and Gilmore Girls* at CUBITT Gallery you reference the brand name Louis Vuitton. What was the strategy behind this installation?

JC: Each part of *Hardy Boys and Gilmore Girls* varied as far as how much its appearance was either congruent or incongruent to the space. For instance, the element that was most sculpturally present was the grungy pile of yellow insulation slabs. They were simply spread over the ground and occupied the center of the room. Since the exhibition gallery is literally a garage that leaks during thunderstorms, these slabs corresponded naturally to the factual conditions of the show, like the gallery's eroding white paint and visible rust. At the other pole—almost completely relying on the viewer's willingness to accept the intention of the artists—there was a drawing hung on the back wall; this was a sketch that we had commissioned to illustrate the interior of a giant Louis Vuitton purse, enlarged to the dimensions of a chapel. The press release indicated that it was this chapel that was being presented, purportedly as fragments. Overhead, a pair of hi-fi speakers was hanging from the ceiling. They delivered an audio narrative recounting the life of the founder of the eponymous fashion brand Louis Vuitton. The text is recited in a brute and dry manner; we find the sheer bluntness of chronology here kind of funny. It's a very estranging situation. And its never made apparent why this particular founding story, why this context.



JV: When you refer to the installation as an estranging situation are you thinking of the "estrangement effect" with which Bertolt Brecht tried to develop a realist strategy in theater? According to his theory of epic theater and in the radical experiments of his *Lehrstücke* (teaching plays), actors are not to fulfill the ideal of identifying themselves with the role they play. It was about quoting a certain figure and appropriating and playing around with it, rather than becoming one with the enacted role. The estrangement effect reinforces this process by putting familiar situations in a different light, thus making contradictions visible. As a result, the actors and audience would be in a position to maintain a critical distance to production.<sup>6</sup> To what extent does *Hardy Boys and Gilmore Girls* involve a similar estrangement in its appropriation of Louis Vuitton and his production?

6 Cp. Bertolt Brecht, "Die Strassenszene: Grundmodell einer Szene des epischen Theaters" (1940), in *Bertolt Brecht: Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), p. 300.

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JC: The main aspect for us was the style in which the narrative was presented. It focuses one's attention on the bruteness of these kinds of narratives. So in that sense it definitely involves a sort of estrangement-effect.

JV: But how can we refer to historically realist strategies, such as the Brechtian estrangement-effect, when the present political conditions are so different? In his *Lehrstücke*, Brecht aimed to encourage the participation of workers as non-professional actors in order to appropriate the theater as a laboratory for political experimentation. His strategies were founded during the Weimar Republic, in the context of the possibilities he saw in the working-class mass movement. Today there is no such political movement to which one can relate.

QTM: The absence of a unified political movement is caused by a lack of coherence in how power makes itself felt. In our work, you can see elements that come directly out of negotiations with the structures in which we have been invited to perform—one is routinely asked to be a problem-solver. These problems can be, for example, the material circumstances, such as the budget or the color of the room, or the curatorial intent of a particular exhibition or the structural role your artwork is to perform within a given context. We have in the past allowed these preconditions to influence the appearance that the work takes, and therefore it is difficult to recognize in our work the boundary between what one would call our personal intent and the constrictions that allow the work to appear. What's more, in letting these symptoms appear we don't intend to present a transparent analysis. And we forgo the operation that is most common to try to disguise the symptoms with representation. We respond in the opposite way—to try to present the problems even more bluntly. What might have otherwise been barely palpable becomes concrete; the symptoms appear, but in an innocuous way.

JV: Maybe realist strategies need to be re-discussed in light of the present mechanisms that force criticality to regress into what it tried to confront—namely, the naturalization of the present. The proliferation of nationalist theme shows such as *Becoming Dutch* at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, *Italics* at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, or *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* in the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, (all in 2009) illustrates a very significant development. What is striking about these shows is how they turn even decidedly critical art practices into romantic nationalism merely by reducing the works and their authors to one of many subjectivist singularities that can be subsumed under a national identity. This cultural nationalism claims to utilize limitless dimensions of differences. And it illustrates this claim by means of artistic production. How do you see these developments with respect to your own production?

JC: Sure. There is a potential for reductiveness with respect to art in a cultural or national agenda.

JV: How does this affect a discussion about realism in art?

QTM: The capacity for neutralizing a work's intent or contextual meaning is without limit. Perhaps you are right that this would be a subject that artistic realism could address. That being said, all of the forms of validation that I can think of in today's art world are suffused with commodification or the kind of appropriation you are speaking of. The paradox is that over and over in conceptual art there is a portrayal of a longing-for-escape, but its very appearance is an expression of, and dependent on, an underlying current of power—and if it isn't yet, it can be made to be. Conceptual art, even at its most inclusive, has a support structure that is in blatant contradiction to its explicit claims. In this sense, and not in the tragic-romantic sense, it can be understood as a doomed narrative, somewhat reminiscent of the art historical trope "the end of painting."

JV: What does collectivity mean in the conceptual framework of your own production? How do you define your artistic cooperation in this context? And what role do you think collaborative practices play with respect to the question of realism?

JC: The term collaboration is often used to evoke a countercultural ethos, the spirit of cooperation and community. In fact it implies no such thing. Everyone works together, be it in an exploitative way or in a way where the results are mutually beneficial. The term is another truism; it can be applied to everything and everyone, especially in a post-Fordist society. So we don't consider our collaboration to be an optimization.

JV: But collectivity can mean more than just productive communication. Self-organized associations can be an important critical context, also for the discussion of realist art.

JC: In our case, it gives us the chance to maintain a critical distance to our own work. I think that until one is ready to accept the most cynical, self-legitimizing strategies, one must have another body as a buffer, an alternative to valuation. This body might be nothing more than a deliberate self-delusion, but it allows for an internal consistency that helps one to articulate a position that is aloof to what would otherwise be an impossible situation.