This special issue is devoted to Capitalist Realism—a term coined in West Germany in May 1963 by artists Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, and Manfred Kuttner, and also, independently, less than a year later by Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei in a manifesto entitled “Shihon-shugi riarizumu’ ron” (Thesis on “Capitalist Realism”). In both the German and Japanese contexts, the artists leveraged the term’s connotative association with Socialist Realism—the prescriptive aesthetic first introduced in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s—to make an implicit analogy between communist and capitalist representational systems. If Socialist Realist murals and statues feature joyful communal harvests and heroic factory workers, might a comparable Capitalist Realism show advertisements featuring new consumer products and satisfied costumers? To bring this question into focus, the artists placed exaggerated emphasis on certain aspects of commodification and consumerism: in West Germany, Polke made paintings of advertisements that were oddly cropped and splotted, and Richter and Lueg used over one hundred model furniture displays at a Düsseldorf department store in a single evening for their event Leben mit Pop—Eine Demonstration für den kapitalistischen Realismus. In Japan, Akasegawa created prints of the 1,000-yen note and then drew a tatami-sized ink reproduction
of the currency. At the same time, he began exhibiting household objects such as chairs, rugs, and fans, wrapped in brown paper packaging, a technique the artist would develop to great effect later.

The separate-yet-related emergence of Capitalist Realism in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and in Japan joined a growing international interest in critical “realisms” that were variously formulated by artists associated with Neo-Dada, Pop, Nouveau Réalisme, Fluxus, Situationism, happenings, and Anti-Art at the height of the Cold War. At that time, artists began to subversively appropriate and imitate advertising images, consumer goods, money, shopping displays, and more—all in pursuit of making visible the mechanisms by which capitalism represents, and thus appears to create, its own reality.

Capitalist Realism emerged in Germany as a pointed commentary on the proliferation of neo-avant-garde movements that were vying for international visibility at the time. For the press release of a May 1963 group show of paintings and events mounted in a vacant butcher’s shop at Kaiserstrasse 31A in Düsseldorf, Richter, Lueg, Polke, and Kuttner described their work as “Pop-Art, Junk-Culture, imperialistischer and kapitalistischer Realismus, neue Gegenständlichkeit, and Naturalismus.”

The invitation to the show featured the words imperialistischer Realismus within a matrix of even more terms, taken from a list that appeared on the opening page of critic Barbara Rose’s article “Dada Then and Now,” included in the January 1963 issue of Art International: The New Realists, Neo-Dada, Le nouveau réalisme, Pop Art, The New Vulgarians, Common Object Paining, Know-Nothing Genre. In the article, Rose described a new generation of American artists as having an overarching fascination with “the American Dream they see commercialized, exploited, and fading before their very eyes.” Rose alludes to the possibility that the emerging interest in commercial America came after “a depression, a world war, and the subsequent polarization of East and West.”

Lueg had a copy of the Art International issue and, as Richter later recounted, the artists’ neologism kapitalistischer Realismus derived from

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1 Tatami mats, used to cover the floors in Japanese homes, were considered standard units of measurement for interior household space. Akasegawa used the standard size of the tatami then used in Tokyo as the measurement of his enlarged yen note reproduction: roughly 90 cm × 180 cm.
3 Rose, 23.
Rose’s remark.⁴ Not only did Richter, Lueg, Polke, and Kuttner grasp the Cold War implications of Rose’s argument, they also directed these implications back at the commercialization of art itself, and at the atmosphere of cultural imperialism in which galleries and critics from New York to London and Paris were coining new monikers that could easily be translated and adjusted for audiences across national borders.

In his review of the 2014 exhibition Leben mit Pop: Eine Reproduktion des kapitalistischen Realismus (shown at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Artists Space New York) for this special issue of ARTMargins, Andrew Weiner views the moves made by Richter, Lueg, Polke, and Kuttner as ambivalently entrepreneurial—at once strategic deflections of the power of branding and sincere efforts to participate in the commercial success of Neo-Dada, Nouveau Réalisme, and Pop. Capitalist Realism grew from the artists’ (especially Lueg’s) capacious knowledge of the goings-on in the international avant-garde circa 1963. Not only did they mine news coming from elsewhere, as with the

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January 1963 *Art International* issue, they also avidly attended events in the Düsseldorf art scene, from happenings and Fluxus concerts to openings for new galleries.⁵

It is evident from Richter’s, Polke’s, and Kuttner’s paintings and actions of 1962–64 that their fascination with the “capitalist” language of lifestyle marketing ran deeper than a promotional ploy. Their work at the time was informed by the education that they had received in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) before meeting in Düsseldorf. Richter’s training in Socialist Realist painting at the Dresden academy, for instance, most likely entailed using photographs as the basis for archetypal images of the proletariat and its politics.⁶ Therefore, it is not impossible that Richter, once in the West, perceived its consumerism-driven mass media as a parallel propagandistic effort to create archetypal images of the bourgeoisie.

Richter and Lueg used the term *Capitalist Realism* to describe their event at the Berges department store in October 1962, when they literalized ads and showroom displays that modeled daily domestic living patterns, such as watching television, making beds, and looking in the refrigerator. The event highlighted the “capitalist” angle of West Germany’s “economic miracle” and did not mention the May invitation’s use of “imperialist realism.” This elegantly and strategically emphasized symmetrical deconstructions of cultural promotion on both sides of the Berlin Wall—as Richter retrospectively noted, “it made Socialist Realism appear ridiculous, and it did the same to the possibility of Capitalist Realism as well.”⁷

As was the case in Düsseldorf circa 1963, in Tokyo, the neo-avant-garde thrived under conditions of international artistic exchange. A number of key artists, critics, and curators were traveling between

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5 The artists had a famously coquettish relationship with their gallerists during this time. In March 1963, for instance, they went to Paris to introduce themselves to Ileana Sonnabend as German Pop artists and then almost immediately sought to distinguish and distance themselves from Pop. In 1964, Berlin gallerist René Block sought to represent the artists as “Capitalist Realists” (which he capitalized and turned into a bona fide “movement” by writing a manifesto). Gerhard Richter, despite having reservations about being labeled in this way, continued to show with Block. Richter, quoted in Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 77.

6 Eckhart Gillen, “Is Capitalist Realism in Fact a Socialist Realism?” in Evers et al., *Leben mit Pop*, 142.

the United States, Europe, and Japan; and contemporary European and American avant-garde movements were regularly featured in international and local magazines circulating among the Japanese artists. In the early 60s, the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo had become a hub for the international avant-garde, hosting John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, along with a number of Fluxus events and concerts that featured Japanese artists among its international roster. Though Tokyo lacked commercial galleries for avant-garde art, artists could show their work in two major “independent,” unjuried exhibitions.

The Nihon Independent tended to feature a Socialist Realist–inspired vein of “reportage painting” (ruporutāgu kaiga) focusing on the effects of the atomic bomb and social instability after World War II. Meanwhile, the Yomiuri Independent had become the stronghold of the Anti-Art movement, which was informed by new approaches to the Duchampian readymade and the Surrealist objet. Despite these stylistic differences, both Independents exhibited strong leftist sensibilities informed by the Japanese Communist Party. The work featured in their shows often critically addressed aspects of Japanese society as it transitioned from a war-torn and defeated imperialist nation to a democratic consumer state.

It was in this context that artist Akasegawa Genpei developed his “Thesis on ‘Capitalist Realism.’” Akasegawa had been trained in realist painting techniques, then influenced by the Nihon Independent. But after leaving art school and becoming more involved in the Anti-Art movement, his interest moved toward understanding everyday

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10 Chong et al., Postwar to Postmodern, 44–69.

11 Art historian Reiko Tomii has briefly noted the almost simultaneous coinages of Akasegawa’s and the German artists’ “Capitalist Realisms” in “International Contemporaneity’ in the 1960s: Discouraging on Art in Japan and Beyond,” Japan Review, no. 21 (2009): 123–47. She also spoke on Japanese Pop during the Tate Britain Global Pop symposium in 2012.
objects as representations of capitalist reality. He began thinking about the yen note as a surface image printed on paper, a representation like any other picture. Yet he was fascinated with the difference between currency and other pictures, in that it also held a certain value and could be exchanged for commodities. Upon further scrutiny, Akasegawa also realized that the currency’s officially authorized status depended on masking the fact that it was only a representation that could, as such, be copied. He developed single-sided, monochromatic “model” 1,000-yen notes, along with the proposal to produce so many of them that they would disrupt the authority of the state’s “real” copies. At the same time, Akasegawa also became interested in furniture and household objects that he saw as representations of a consumer’s status, and that, like currency, both depended on and disguised their nature as objects of mass production.12 To complement the model yen notes, Akasegawa began to wrap these household objects, and he proposed to also wrap all such objects, so as to demonstrate their ubiquity.

In their capacity as commodities, currencies such as the yen and “real” furniture and household objects constitute part of the system of representation and reproduction that undergirds capitalism. As Akasegawa put it summarily in his essay on Capitalist Realism: “Real things are not absolute things. Real things are the embodiments of a dictatorial system of coercion which maintains that they are real.”13 The artist then described his objects as “models”: that is, conceptual propositions that could potentially be replicated by others so as to disturb the system of “real things.”

Akasegawa’s “Thesis on ‘Capitalist Realism,’” as much as his model yen notes and model wrapped furniture, form parts of the artist’s decades-long critique of capitalism and communism as parallel systems requiring immense state bureaucratic control. Both ideologies needed reinforcement through the state’s legal, housing, and industry departments, its mints and banks, and much more. Running parallel

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to the experimental proto-conceptual scores, games, instructions, and demonstrations that were emerging at the time in Neo-Dada, Pop, Nouveau Réalisme, happenings, and Fluxus, his wrapped furnishings and yen notes responded to the Japanese government’s sponsorship of a “consumer republic.” And as was the case with the Düsseldorf artists who witnessed the economic miracle in their native Germany, Akasegawa’s first-hand experience of Japan’s own miracle resulted in similar circumspection regarding capitalism’s promotion of consumption as a democratic ideal.

Pedro Erber’s introduction and translation in this special issue of a slightly later essay by Akasegawa, his 1967 “The *Objet* after Stalin,” further explores the artist’s perspective. Erber analyzes the legal consequences of both the “Thesis on ‘Capitalist Realism’” and “The *Objet* after Stalin,” whereby the artist was accused of “imitating” state currency by making the model 1,000-yen notes. He also positions Akasegawa’s critical concept of the *objet* within the cosmopolitan history of Tokyo’s avant-garde community. These arguments, in turn, help illuminate Akasegawa’s inventive ways of articulating capitalism through its purported communist mirror, equal to Gerhard Richter’s statements regarding the false binarisms of the Cold War.

In both its German and Japanese incarnations, Capitalist Realism represented an effort to tackle the problems of “realism” and “reality” using the neo-avant-gardist vocabulary of the era. Throughout the interwar and into the postwar era, realism had been largely identified with Socialist Realism, both within the Communist Bloc and in affiliated Japanese and European art circles.

Critics on the left meanwhile advocated other types or modes of (revolutionary) realism, ranging from photographic mimesis to stylized and idealized figures and scenes. Efforts to reconceive realism from within Marxism were initiated as early as 1938 by Georg Lukács, who wrote “Realism in the...
Balance (1938),” and followed it up with *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* in 1955.\(^\text{15}\) Eschewing both the avant-gardist abstraction of the early revolutionary period and the idealism found in more doctrinaire Socialist Realist art, Lukács supported a notion of “critical” realism that returned to realist formulations from the mid-19th century (especially Balzac). Responding to debates in Marxist aesthetics in Western circles (via the Frankfurt school), as well as in the Soviet Union (via Mikhail Livshitz), Lukács argued that art should present a totality of “objective” meaning so as to press consciousness toward the exposure of capitalism’s processes of reification.

In France, the opposition between realism and avant-gardist modes of abstraction, collage, and found-object art was not as strong. Philosopher Henri Lefèbvre was key to bridging Marxism with renewed artistic interest in using everyday objects. Informed by his participation in the Surrealist circle during his early years as a scholar, Lefèbvre kept close ties with the art world throughout his career. In his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1958), he argues that the “potential way ahead for realism” is in paying more attention to those trivial habits of life under capitalism that make it appear natural.\(^\text{16}\) Lefèbvre ultimately points to the Surrealist use of the objet as a medium for demystifying modern life.\(^\text{17}\) His thinking had a substantial impact on a generation of philosophers and artists (including Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord), who put forth new Marxist interpretations of capitalism’s systemic efforts to sustain the illusion of its own reality by way of the mass media and object consumption.\(^\text{18}\)

From a staunchly de Gaullist and anti-Marxist standpoint, French art critic Pierre Restany tried to establish what he considered a more “objective” realism based on sociological description. He appropriated the moniker of his Nouveau Réalisme movement from French Communist Party circles, who had been using it to defend alternative


\(^\text{18}\) Jean Baudrillard studied under Lefèbvre for a brief period while writing *System of Objects* (1968). Debord’s close and intense friendship with the philosopher for a brief period greatly influenced the development of the Situationist International.
realisms within Socialist Realist orthodoxies. Tracing the lineage of Nouveau Réalisme back to Cubism, Restany claimed that his new movement was connected to Fernand Léger’s incorporation of new technology and commercial materials into art.

In New York, the gallerist Sidney Janis quickly responded to Restany’s efforts to promote the (seemingly) ideologically neutral work of his Parisian-based artists, asking Restany to collaborate on a show called The New Realists that would put the Parisians side by side with American Neo-Dada artists. Just before the show opened in October 1962, Janis discovered the work of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist, and used Restany’s framework to describe the work of these US artists. Incensed, Restany published an indictment of the exhibition in the January issue of *Art International*—the very same issue of the magazine used by the Düsseldorf artists to formulate their notion of *kapitalistischer Realismus*.

The basis for all these evolving claims to realism was a pervasive concern that any “realistic” rendering of commodity objects (whether Nouveau Réaliste, Neo-Dada, or Pop) had to contend with capitalism’s methods of mass-production and mass-mediation. While Restany adamantly defended Nouveau Réaliste “objectivity,” and while Janis generalized Pop as a “factualism” in which vernacular objects had not been embellished with “artistic pretension,” most artists and critics acknowledged the need for some sort of artistic intervention that would foster critical awareness of the consumer object’s status as the end product of a process of production.

For instance, Ellen Johnson’s extensive essay on Claes Oldenburg in the January 1963 issue of *Art International* described the artist’s work as “extreme realism” in which sloppy, fake plaster objects called attention to the fact that “everyday objects are created.” Indeed, Oldenburg’s “stores” for the sale of sloppy plaster pies—along with

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Jasper Johns’s cast bronze beer cans, Andy Warhol’s wooden renditions of cardboard Brillo boxes made in a foil-lined “factory,” and Arman’s window “vitrine” displays—rather than being typical trompe l’oeil affairs, functioned as doubles of real consumer commodities that flaunted their own artificiality and constructedness. As such, these objects evoked the uneasy realization that manmade objects were everywhere, even if there seemed to be no original or source for them.23 And as much as Warhol’s or Arman’s objects may have participated in an emerging atmosphere of dematerialized spectacle, there was always a resistant concreteness and palpability to them—“object strategies” of excessive repetition, dripped paint, and so forth—that put the spotlight on the difference between the artists’ productions and those of industrial manufacturing and marketing or mass-media.24

Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström, whose work is analyzed by Maibritt Borgen, is a case in point. Fahlström’s work of the early 60s synthesized an enormous amount of information, ranging from the latest semiotic theories to far-reaching accounts critical of US capitalist imperialism. Fahlström is best known for his early- to mid-60s paintings and installations inspired by games and comic books, which were included in the New Realists show at Janis Gallery and the Venice Biennale in 1964. The artist retrospectively discussed his games as “realistic models (not descriptions) of a lifespan, of the Cold War balance, of the double-code mechanism to push the bomb button”—an apt characterization for all of his work, including his experiments in multimedia as part of the Experiments in Art and Technology’s 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering, of 1966.25 Borgen analyzes Fahlström’s work for this festival, Kisses Sweeter than Wine, as a complex reformulation of the “double-code” mechanisms at play in media streams and other forms of global communication. She makes the argument that the intricately mediated sequences of Kisses, including the happening Mao-Hope March (recently shown in the Walker Art Center’s International Pop exhibition), were part of the artist’s considerable effort to develop an avant-gardist semiotics in

which image-signs were seen as a materiality that could be “kneaded” into radicalized disruptive forms.

Fahlström exemplifies the period’s engagement with realism through intensified appropriation, not only of common objects, but also through new forms of media and image culture. Though he is most often discussed as a European Pop artist, Fahlström’s interest in concrete poetry and the Lettrist avant-garde, as well as his close ties with Neo-Dada and “happeners” in New York, hint at the complex circulation of ideas among these neo-avant-garde movements during the early 60s. The fluidity with which the artists associated with these trends engaged with the internationalization of mass media and consumption, as well as their wide range of artistic approaches—from painting to found-object sculpture, to new conceptual modes and happenings—challenged more limited, traditional understandings of Pop, a term that eventually superseded all others, including Capitalist Realism itself, as the umbrella descriptor of the moment. New histories of Capitalist Realism emphasize the multiple connections and relays, based on a shared engagement with the commercial and popular cultures of their respective regions, between artists not only from Britain, the United States, and Europe, but also from Japan, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Eastern Europe.26

The heterogeneous practices that have been united under the banner of Pop appropriated both the “real” content and the equally “real” procedures of commercial business—its bureaucratic and manufacturing methods of reproduction, advertising, packaging, and distribution. In this regard, the projects of Akasegawa, Richter, Lueg, and Polke and their engagement with the commercial world of mass production must be considered an essential part of this trend. They could, in fact, open up further avenues of exploration into such Pop icons as Andy Warhol, who had early on called his art “Commonism,” another verbal play that, like Capitalist Realism, positioned itself between communism and the capitalist mass-market.27 With only indirect knowledge of the battle


waging between Nouveau Réalisme and Pop in 1963, and just before Pop came to dominate artistic discourse, the Germans and Akasegawa focused on imitating the procedures as much as the “content” of capitalism, that is, on the very means by which capitalism replicates and reproduces its material infrastructure on a worldwide scale.

If Capitalist Realism emerged during the Cold War as a means of creating visibility for capitalism’s emphasis on advertising, marketing, and stimulating consumption, what is its legacy for, or in, contemporary art? The question was taken up by the writers in the Leben mit Pop exhibition catalog, who see the continuation of the German Capitalist Realist project in paintings by Kai Althoff and Neo Rauch. But if Capitalist Realism is not necessarily bound by Germany’s postwar art history, and is to be understood as part of an international artistic response to capitalist expansion during the Cold War, then perhaps we need to see its continuation in contemporary art projects that expose global capitalism’s new frontiers and its innovative mechanisms for representation and reproduction.

The historical path from the Capitalist Realism of the 1960s to contemporary artists and projects that address the present-day convolutions of neoliberal capitalism traveled by way of Soviet Sots Art of the 1980s (Erik Bulatov, Alexander Kosolapov, Komar and Melamid) and Chinese Political Pop from the 1990s and 2000s. In the first case, the (seemingly affirmative) quotation of propaganda imagery from Soviet everyday reality created an equivalent to the flaunting of consumer culture by Capitalist Realist and Pop artists in the West. In the case of China, artists during the 90s began to appropriate images of Mao in the context of the country’s embrace of state-sponsored capitalism. More recently, Ai Weiwei and others have addressed the production of global art commodities in Chinese cities such as Jingdezhen. Since 2006, a collective named The Propeller Group, based in Ho Chi Minh City and Los Angeles, has made a number of projects addressing the complex ideological climate in Southeast Asia, where communist bureaucracies held over from previous regimes now coexist with neoliberal policies that cater to the region’s media and global tourist industries. For their recent TV Commercial for Communism (2012), the group commissioned a Vietnamese ad company to rebrand communism. This

strategy of hiring capitalists to imagine and promote communal life resulted in a strangely compelling advertisement.

In this special issue, we also present the work of Stephanie Syjuco as a way of connecting the Cold War moment of Capitalist Realism to neoliberalism’s battle with countless invisible enemies. Syjuco offers a speculative proposal featuring the new media technology of Google SketchUp to render a variety of capitalist objects—from Ikea bookcases to Philippine jeepneys to modernist homes—all wrapped in the dazzle camouflage patterns originally used on World War I ships. Her conflation of older camouflage war technology with potentially mass-producible objects and architectures speaks to the conditions of global capitalism as it operates in a diffuse field in which the promotion of war and consumerism merge.

As if formulated in some black-market design lab, Syjuco’s model objects exhibit a confusing, overdetermined semiotics designed to appeal to a wide array of global clients. Her work is aligned with a cohort of artists dealing with stranger-than-fiction elements in capitalism’s globalization. This includes not only the Propeller Group and Ai Weiwei, but also Thomas Hirschhorn, Minerva Cuevas, Omer Fast, and Goldin+Senneby. The camouflage signifiers in Syjuco’s project can be related, for example, to Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Utopia Utopia* (2005) installation, in which the artist speculates that the introduction of military street wear throughout the global fashion market will lead to an army of khaki-wearing consumers with no one to fight. This in turn is a fantastic update on Akasegawa’s proposal to flood the world with model yen notes, or Warhol’s tongue-in-cheek “commonist” proposals that everyone should be a machine or that Coca-Cola is a democratizing product because everyone from the president to the “bum on the corner” drinks it. The efficacy of Syjuco’s project and these others depends on a certain level of semiotic exaggeration and distortion also found in the “extreme” realisms of the 60s.

Artists today may not be living the same capitalism as the “Capitalist Realists” of the 60s, but they are still motivated to create or open up tensions within its now even-more-extensive system. At times, their provocations may appear too circumscribed by the neoliberal ideologies of “freedom of expression” and “entrepreneurial innovation.”

In fact, this is the argument made by Mark Fisher in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* With only a brief nod to its origin in the 60s art context, Fisher uses the term *capitalist realism* to describe what he sees as a post-1989, post-postmodernist ideological formation whereby art and the imagination have been subsumed by capitalism’s presentation of itself as the most viable and “realistic” system that “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.” But as this special issue’s historical revision of the concept attests, it was the very same pretense—of capitalism as the most comprehensive and realistic (in short: the inevitable) system—that provoked simultaneous responses by artists from distant places around the globe already in the 1960s.

Fisher’s criticism that contemporary art cannot withstand capitalist appropriation is not new and has long been part of the criticism leveled at the 60s neo-avant-garde. While the debate is ongoing, an extensive look at Capitalist Realism reveals the fissures within capitalism’s very own modes of (self-)representation. The subtlety of Capitalist Realist mimesis is what makes it such a relevant notion even for today’s practicing artists. In this context, the excessive production of commodities continues to be rich artistic material with which to show not only, as Richter had it, the “ridiculousness” of capitalism’s efforts to secure its own reality, but the often tragicomic conundrum caused by our own position within that system.


32 This criticism was already part of the first reviews, including those in the 1963 January *Art International* issue. See also the critiques of Pop in Runyon Mahsun, *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, and Madoff, *Pop Art: A Critical History*. Benjamin Buchloh’s critiques of neo-avant-garde artists’ pervasive ambivalence have also been influential. See Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1965 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).