Capital Feels: Affect and Allegory

Eli Diner on the proleptic videos of Melanie Gilligan

I thought the Spirit oversees the way
we relate to the material world.
It does.
So why are you so concerned with our
feelings and our bodies?
Because you are the material world.

We are midway through the third episode of Melanie Gilligan's speculative thriller *Popular Unrest* (2010). Although the characters involved in the above back-and-forth do have names, it seems like a pointless formality to attach them here. Both are mouthpieces for a larger idea or collectivity. The questioner is part of a group of people whose individual identities have been fused into a kind of superorganism, a composite mind, while the answerer is an explicator of a great controlling abstraction, the Spirit. The exchange, though, could almost have been plucked from any one of four videos by Gilligan, beginning with *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008) and continuing through *Self-Capital* (2009) and *The Common Sense* (2015), each of which, from different angles, concerns the materiality of *our feelings and bodies*, tossed about in a whirlwind of abstractions — conceptual and real. Witty and knowing, frequently disturbing and at times hilarious, this quartet gives form to, animates and narrates the operations of capital in the period of the crisis and its aftermath, examining the affective and cognitive consequences of these forces for the subjects of advanced capitalist economies. The works assimilate corporate infomercials, soap operas, educational films, reality TV and police procedurals. Portioned into brief webisodic segments, they are imbued with a sense of disjunction, moving through elliptical processions of scenes. So even as identifiable stories do unfold, the effect is something closer to fugue-like thematic permutation, as if we could rearrange any number of segments in a given video without fundamentally changing it. We might take this as a formal mirroring of commodification — the making of things commensurable through money — glimpsed as well in a kind of fungibility in the dialogue, the sense that any line could just as easily have come out of someone else's mouth. In general Gilligan shoots and edits these works with impassiveness and efficiency, neither disguising nor dwelling upon the banality of her locations — offices, schools, museums and apartments — deploying the tone of a kind of TV realism as an almost blank backdrop for her allegorical and satirical inventions, a quiet in which to unleash emotional turbulence.

Crisis in the Credit System treats the world of finance amid the then still ongoing seizures in the global economy. It opens on a retreat for a half dozen financial professionals. They engage in a variety of role-playing games and free association exercises, which function at once as group therapy, thought experiments and strategizing sessions, as the analysts and investment bankers attempt to come to grips with the arcana of the titular crisis. The video cuts back and forth between the leafy colonnaded exteriors of the retreat and the office spaces of a collaboratively imagined narrative about two competing firms — Evergain and Babel — each trying to capitalize on the paroxysms of economic instability. Babel develops a "secret weapon" dubbed the *everyone trade*, "a complex derivative for speculating on investor sentiment... the most powerful gauge of market feeling ever invented," playing on the anthropomorphizing rhetoric of the market frequently heard during the downturn. Amid the machinations, the *feelings* of the

Previous page:
Parts-Wholes *(2016) Installation view at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco (2016) Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf Photography by Johana Arnold*

The Common Sense *(2014) Installation view at De Hallen Haarlem (2014) Courtesy of the Artist and De Hallen Haarlem Photography by Gert Jan van Rooij*

speculators appear equally volatile: a Babel executive broods to his therapist over the fate other financial professionals who lost their minds; an analyst flails to the rhythms of the economy, calling out in a dark room for austerity, wage controls, inflation suppression — embodiments of the market and its ideologies. As it turns out, both Evergain and Babel manage to cash in, while in the frame narrative, the conclusions drawn from the series of exercises are the common-sense liberal truisms bandied about at the height of the crisis — a little more oversight and a bit of regulation. Then they're all fired. Whatever they think they've understood about capitalism pales in comparison to what it has on them.

The bodily-affective manifestations of the market glimpsed in *Crisis in the Credit System* are turned on their head in *Self-Capital*, where a feeling personification of capitalism takes center stage:

> "Sir, name?" asks a receptionist at a therapist's office.
> "Global Economy," answers the patient, though we don't see her say it.

We follow the patient, "undergoing severe post-traumatic stress after suffering a complete meltdown," through her sessions with a therapist specializing in "unorthodox body-oriented techniques." The piece was filmed at the ICA London, not at all concealed. It's 2010, and her "condition has been acute for two years," though "her problems may be much deeper, dating back much, much further." The patient goes through movement exercises, channeling the depths of her suffering. "The mind may think it knows the answers," admonishes the therapist, "but it is too concerned with knowing. On the other hand, the body will know and explain exactly what is happening without having to think at all." We hear echoes of the practices of somatic experiencing and body psychotherapy but also, importantly, affect theory and other post-Foucauldian disciplines in which "the body" has become a primary category of analysis. But where the latter typically minimizes ideological critique as secondary, we see that the pathologies of Global Economy are intimately tied up with her ideas about herself — that her disorder, more than just a visceral embodiment of capitalist crisis, hinges on the discordance between *knowing* and *feeling*. "There were no limits," she groans in agony, "but we found limits." In an exercise conjuring "how it was when things were good," she chews on delectable terms, excitedly savoring the flavors of "chamber of commerce" and "emerging markets." As she recollects the crisis, she gags on "contract workers" and "wages." All of the characters in *Self-Capital* are played by the same actress, a conceit that crests in a brilliant scene in the ICA bookshop, with the patient and a clerk quickly trading lines, a frantic montage of buying and selling, of scanning merchandise and paying, in the middle of which the two swap places. We are all, of course, the makers and material of the global economy.

More than merely embodying ideas, as in a Leopardian dialogue, the figures in Gilligan's videos typically seem to function as conduits for conceptual, affective and linguistic flows. Characters careen between numbness and hysteria. Sometimes they succumb to a kind of glossolalia. A market analyst in a trance in *Crisis in the Credit System* intones: "77.37 XD, 1.3779 euro XD, hitting the bid at 8.5, down 17% by beginning of third quarter, atrophy in the land of efficiency, the derivative of friends, and a short shrift for enemies, the loser of the shell game will spread the plague of indices…" If, according to the old semiotic formulation, all thought and human activity is structured according to language, it seems here we are meant to understand that language is only ever the language of capital. It's what we talk about when we talk about anything. This dovetails with the ideas of Jodi Dean who argues that the subsumption of communication under exchange has depoliticizing effect and forecloses the possibility of opposition.[1] We watch in *Popular Unrest* as people — darkly — without understanding why, attempt to resist these totalizing forces that have hijacked all human interaction.

The story is set under the reign of a vast abstraction, an unspecified technological innovation called the World Spirit. Characterized and rhapsodized in a number of

[1] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

ways over the course of the video, the Spirit is, of course, a stand-in for capitalism itself. "To the World Spirit, everything needs to be compared and exchanged," explains a behavioral economist at one point. "A push-up bra, a shovel, a deck of cards. The work of a nurse, a miner, an assembly-line worker are all made comparable through the World Spirit. You're no use to the Spirit unless it can compare you with everything else." But in this world, the ability to compare — the abstraction of exchange value — has been vastly expanded. "It's everywhere, everyone, everything," declares a white-haired woman in a video game animation, watched, or played, by a somnambulant channel surfer, suffering from his own private unrest. "No one controls it. It doesn't control you. It's merely the sum total of all interactions between everyone on earth doing exactly what they please, every day. All the Spirit does is count." This counting takes the form of a pervasive monitoring and predicting of people's health and economic productivity indicators. But the Spirit of late has been behaving a little strangely. It seems to be behind two inexplicable phenomena: a series of random murders in which the victims are stabbed from above by no one in particular, and what's being called "groupings" — strangers drawn together, uncomprehendingly and with an intense desire to spend all of their time with each other. The groupings turn out to be the flipside of the murders: the Spirit's analysis of the members' emotions helps it "find new ways to intensify work… giving it adaptive algorithms for managing workers," but this ceaseless intensification of productivity has led to a contradiction whereby the Spirit "maximizes and expels life at the same time." While the members of the grouping express an urge to escape their bodies, so meticulously measured by the Spirit, and meld with each other, they end up fusing with the Spirit itself, becoming abstract. Meanwhile, the world is thrown into turmoil, as the rich are able to live within a firewall protecting them from murder; the excluded masses riot.

The technological penetration of behaviors and bodies is treated again in *The Common Sense*, Gilligan's video located most explicitly in the future. But as in the earlier works, she doesn't dress it up, eschewing the set pieces of dystopian sci-fi for a kind of proleptic treatment of networked life. Students, service workers, executives and even fetuses are all connected through something called the Patch. Placed in the mouth, the device allows people to send and receive thoughts and sensations. It's a time of intense precarity — students are consumed with "tuition repayment work," while their studies as well as their work seem only to revolve around this ubiquitous determinate technology. We watch an educational film about the development of the current "two-way" model, which has become so thoroughly integrated into life that students struggle to imagine what things were like before. When the Patch goes haywire, individuals start to ask questions, to seek new forms of community, and to protest. In the end, as in the end of really all of these films, things go back to how they were — the system recuperates.

Openings appear and quickly shut; emancipatory desire inevitably ends up mere velleity. In part, this systemic recuperation is a picture of the history of the past decade, of capitalism triumphant despite — or even because of — its strains, resilient in the face of

This page:
Film still from The Common Sense *(2014)*
Courtesy of the Artist

Page 26, from top:
Film stills from Popular Unrest *(2010)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf

Film still from Crisis in the Credit System *(2008)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf

Film still from Self-Capital *(2009)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf

Page 27:
"The Common Sense Substitution," installation view at Künstlerhaus, Graz (2016)
Courtesy of the Artist and Künstlerhaus, Graz
Photography by MK

revolt and structural infirmity. It is also a picture of the individual's deep internalization of these conditions, the forging of subjectivities by unstable yet increasingly totalizing socioeconomic forces. Here we see an important dimension of how affect works for Gilligan. Emotion is perhaps the primary site where characters try to comprehend their circumstances: they constantly talk about *how they're feeling* while subject to the coursing of uncontrollable intensities. There can only ever be partial understanding of immense unrepresentable abstractions. But this picture, in another sense, is symptomatic of much late Marxist thought — exuberantly drawn upon by Gilligan — which offers incisive tools for the analysis of capitalism often to the exclusion of that previously fundamental category, revolution.

Gilligan's latest work, *Parts-Whole* (2017), marks a departure: the artist swaps allegory for documentary, deduction for induction. It consists of intimate, fragmentary videos following two women at their jobs — one drives a taxi in Newburgh, New York, the other works in publishing in San Francisco. The videos are incorporated into a sculpture composed of a pair of cubes with two LED screens on each side, held in an angular structure of black steel tubing. These are pictures of working lives contained within a larger system, a close-up on specificities, textures and moments inside of the totality. It's a quiet work — in fact silent: bits of dialogue popping up in speech bubbles, an informational text here or there. And then this appears on the screen: "What are the limits of what visual art can address?" A question posed equally to Gilligan's previous efforts. Allegory, of course, is one solution to the problem of representing the unrepresentable, but it is a solution that contains within itself a critique of its own limits, as it mutates and syncopates with that which it describes. *Parts-Whole* asks us to begin again with the perhaps unremarkable fragments of lived experience under capitalism. More than merely reversing the orientation of a socio-hermeneutic circle, substituting the part for the whole, this work, and the question it poses, suggests the need and impossibility of holding both in place at once. Lives are not lived in isolation, and even a single life — a body, an emotion — can never be adequately addressed.

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