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Art and capitalism in Berlin

[Raluca Bejan \(/category/bios/raluca-bejan\)](#) November 12, 2016

ARTS & CULTURE (/ISSUES/ARTS-CULTURE)





Charité Mitte. The Campus hosts the Charité -Universitätsmedizin Berlin -- the largest hospital in Europe, the Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology, and the Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité. I walked this route at some point in July. After leaving the grounds of the Charité Campus, it takes about a minute to cross the river on Invalidenstraße and turn right towards Hamburger Bahnhof.

A hub for contemporary art, the Hamburger Bahnhof hosted, over the summer, the *capital, debt, territory, utopia* exhibit. It opened on July 2nd and closed last week, on November 6th. Curated by Eugen Blume and Catherine Nichols, the exhibit contained over 130 works that engaged with the theme of *capital* in a variety of forms: video installations (Martin Heidegger in conversation with Thai monk Bhikku Maha Mani and Hannah Arendt tête-à-tête with journalist Günter Gaus); photo and magazines montages (i.e. a critique of Rihanna's hit 'Bitch Better Have My Money'); post-modern works (two Andy Warhol's canvases - The Advertisement, a 1960s montage of newspapers and magazines ads; and his 1973 portrait of Mao); and some classic, former century paintings (i.e. *Asta su Abuelo* from Francisco de Goya y Lucientes; the *Giant Mountains* from Caspar David Friedrich; and Paul Klee's *Departure of the Ships*). I am unsure, however, why these latest works were included in a *capital* exhibit. For instance, at the beginning of the 18th century, Caspar David Friedrich's painting style seemed to counteract the rationality-based values of enlightenment. Friedrich was quite pushing the boundaries of its time, counter to European Renaissance as a point of reference for modernity, yet (Marxist) critiques of capital tend to be closely tied with enlightenment, modernity and rationality, in fusing capital, power and workers' material conditions (although the exhibit was not necessarily curated from a Marxist standpoint).

A video installation from Haroun Farocki was also included. Titled *The Creators of the Shopping Worlds*, it filmed managers, investors and marketing specialists in discussing the design and architectural development of contemporary shopping malls.

The highlight of the exhibit was Joseph Beuys's *Das Kapital Raum*, an installation the artist created in 1980 for Venice Biennale. The room contained a combination of objects -- a piano, projectors and several text-filled (with patterns of monetary flows) blackboards. Beuys did not consider capital as locked in economic determinacy, but rather closely related to human ability, capability and creativity (which is why the piano was included among economic equations). Makes one think of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who tied in the ideas of economic and cultural determinacy and their subsequent forms of capital distribution(s).

In Beuys's view, art equals capital and every human is an artist. To escape the ideas of private capitalism and the statist Eastern Bloc communism, Beuys insisted on a new extended concept of *art*, starting with human creativity and one's capacity to work, to create, as the grounds for agency and sovereignty. For



human dignity, in Beuys's view, since it exchanges creativity for wage dependency. Alongside private property and profit, paid labour is additionally destroying human capability. Economic activity should have the purpose of creating dignified working conditions, hence the focus should not be on materiality per se but on the needs of the people. By selling her skills, the worker should be guaranteed an income on behalf of rights and not on behalf of economics.

Beuys's ideas seem placed on a level above ordinary critiques in evaluating capitalist relations of production. It is unclear, however, if de-centering money is the appropriate approach for subverting the logic of capital distribution. It is not simply a question of replacing the means of monetary circulation (i.e. wage) with its absence (i.e. guaranteed income) since money is relatively a symptom of an economical give and take system (i.e. capitalism) and not the actual cause of this system. Rather, the process of receiving and distributing the exchange object (money) needs to be scrutinized. In taking money as the symptom of determinacy, we should perhaps query what determines the determinacy. What would then condition one's capacity, if we only eliminate the symptom and not the system (which could simply use other distributive means) that created the symptom?

Creative capacity does not independently vary from economics, as Pierre Bourdieu has for long showed. The logic of cultural capital distribution is nowadays conditioned by economics (i.e. the ability to pay the 12 Euros ticket at the Hamburger Bahnhof), as material considerations do determine actors' sense of (creative) possibility and impossibility. More so, it is not only about the development of one's capacity but also about the disposition to develop such capacity (or the disposition to appreciate a Caspar David Friedrich for that matter). And disposition would continue to be materially conditioned (i.e. by class) with or without a state supported guaranteed minimum income.

Yet regardless of one's (dis)agreement with Beuys's views on (cultural) capital, art and the human creative capacity or artistic emancipatory potentialities, *capital, debt, territory, utopia* was definitely an intellectually and creatively stimulating display.

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