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PSYCHO CAPITAL

CALUM CRAIK

Psycho Capital

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text by
Tausif Noor



Hard to Trace

Tausif Noor

*“With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. And the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely—ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosism, scholasticism and spiritualism.”*¹

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty* (1933)

*“It is the peculiarity of technological forms of production (as opposed to art forms) that their progress and their success are proportionate to the transparency of their social content. (Hence glass architecture.)”*²

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1927-40) [N4,6] (pg. 465 in *Arcades Project* PDF)

One could be forgiven for initially overlooking the padded silicone yoga mat that occupies the far-left corner of Calum Craik’s installation *Psycho Capital*, camouflaged as it is against the matching turquoise wall and floor that serves as its stage. Rolled into a neat cylinder and affixed with strings for maximum portability, its inert objecthood as a sculpture is more than ironic. A practical accessory for extending and physical mobility becomes a proxy, a rude symbol: of the spiritual reprieve that yoga promises from the day-to-day grind of capitalism; of the commercialisation of said spirituality by the warlords of commerce and technology; for the aspirational lifestyle that these industries have dangled before the masses as they continue to pilfer, extract and churn capital.

Easy to miss, too, the turquoise shirt splayed nearby, emblazoned with the logo of a delivery service that allows consumers to satiate themselves with minimal contact at inflated cost.



Silicon Valley’s term for this phenomenon of alienation and consumption—one among many of its hideous neologisms that have maimed the English language—is the “frictionless user experience”; to wit, one such service is known as “Seamless.” Like all technologies, these app-based delivery services are rife with contradiction: a boon in our recent times of communicable disease where contact becomes dangerous, these services have also kneecapped local brick-and-mortar restaurants and have relied on underpaid labour to operate. This labour and these workers have been deemed essential, but simultaneously undermined, disappearing in the fracas of capital’s machinery.

The sculptures and installations produced by Calum Craik rebut this disappearance, standing as testaments to the very ironies and fissures of life under late capitalism. If, since the late 1970s, the globalized flows of investment capital have ushered in the neoliberal era—in which market discipline has seeped into every aspect of human interaction, shrinking social life and public space in its relentless drive toward the commodification of social relations—then the twin industries of technology and finance capital have only hastened these changes, producing decay in their wake. As the philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues, since the 1990s these industries have expanded their surveillance and disciplinary reach via a sinister mode of seduction and coercion that Han terms “smartpolitics”.³ Rather than beat us into compliance, capitalism has made us do its bidding, dulling us into compliance by monetizing our personal data, hindering social alliances and making us believe that we still are in control—all of which has led to a “crisis of freedom”.

³ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler. London: Verso, 2017.

In Craik’s installation, such psychic transformations find their physical manifestations in fragments from the urban industrial landscape that have been selected, morphed and rearranged by the artist’s hand. An HVAC duct punctuates a piece of rolling luggage; a reflective jacket hangs limply upon a row of spiked anti-homeless architecture; breeze blocks position a rebar



Psycho Capital

Installation view.

Rebar, breeze block, dog leashes, lanyard, bike chains, wallet chains, digital print on organza, pool cue, key holder, iron cast cap, glass ashtrays, Deliveroo t-shirt, shells, suitcase, aluminium, wood, paint, dimensions variable, 2022





grid outfitted with dog collars to stand sentinel to the rapid gentrification that Craik has observed, both in his decade of living in San Francisco and in his native Scotland. In his sculptural demarcations of how the financial machinations of the 1% appear and directly impact the material worlds of just about everyone else, Craik is oblique, but does not hold back his critique: What has been gained in terms of speed, efficiency, sheer consumption is no match for what has been lost in the realm of the social.

The prevalence of glass—most notably the plate-glass which separates viewers from Craik’s sculptural arrangement—is a crucial component that helps make sense of this loss. Here, Craik’s panoply appears much like a window display at a department store, albeit warped through the looking glass: they are delirious emblems of hyperconsumption rather than commodities for display. Writing of the transformation of Paris in the latter years of the nineteenth century in his unfinished magnum opus *The Arcades Project*, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin remarked on how glass architecture, particularly in department stores, allowed for masses of shoppers to experience public space as totalised space.

For Benjamin, the modernists’ embrace of glass was an embrace, on the one hand, of a material absent of secrets and, on the other, a means for reinserting an aura, a veneer of enchantment, upon the objects.⁴ In his 1933 essay *Experience and Poverty*, Benjamin wrote of the novelist Paul Scheerbart’s expositions on the “culture of glass”, his fantastic depictions of people who lived in mobile glass homes, “rooms in which it is hard to leave traces”.⁵ Where once the effects of the bourgeois domicile were laden everywhere with their fingerprints, Benjamin notes, what ruled in Weimar Germany on the eve of World War II was “poverty of experience”. That poverty had been exacerbated, he thought, by technologies that make everyday life uncomplicated, at such pace that “mankind is preparing to outlive culture”.⁶

⁴ Janet Ward Lungstrum, “The Display Window: Designs and Desires of Weimar Consumerism”, *New German Critique*, No. 76, Special Issue on Weimar Visual Culture (Winter 1999), pp. 115-160.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*

⁶ *Ibid*



Craik's installations are hewn to this very warning, the rapid pace of life under late capital that even Benjamin could not have foreseen. But is there room for experience in a world where "experiences" are sold by tech magnates as a commodity? A tower of stacked ridged-glass ashtrays and the lone pool cue leaning behind them both harken back to public social spaces—like the pubs in which these items can be typically found—that may very well erode and slip past us. Craik catalogues these changes and takes stock of their many iterations, but it would be inaccurate to claim that his perspective is nihilistic. His survey of the various guises that capitalism takes is not a defeatist acceptance, but urges us to consider more carefully our modes of consumption—what we take in and what we sacrifice instead. It is a nudge toward being attentive to the seductive language of the commodity. Under the lights of the window display and behind the glass, what sparkles and glitters is a temporary monument to forms of life that once were and could yet still be.

Tausif Noor 2022.

Calum Craik is an interdisciplinary artist and curator who lives and works in Scotland and the United States. Craik has exhibited nationally and internationally, including The Royal Standard in Liverpool, Nurture Art in Brooklyn, NY, and the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries. He has given talks at Real Time and Space in Oakland, CA, and has been interviewed by the Berkeley Art Center. Craik has recently completed residencies at the Headlands Center for the Arts, CA, and Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop. Recent work has also been written about by critic and historian Tausif Noor for Foundwork.art. Craik has taught Sculpture at San Francisco State University and recently conducted workshops with Edinburgh College's Contemporary Art Practice course. Craik's current practice is centered on the effects of neoliberal capitalism on labour and the environment.

Tausif Noor is a critic, curator, and graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studies global modern and contemporary art. His criticism and essays can be found in Artforum, Frieze, The New York Times, The Nation, and various other periodicals, as well as in artist catalogues and collected volumes. He has worked at the Imperial War Museum in London, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, and has organized various exhibitions and events in Philadelphia and Berkeley.

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