

## **On Special Occasions And The Time of the Objects**

By Jack Halberstam, Los Angeles

On special occasions we used to open champagne bottles and toast the unexpected, the fortunate, the well deserved, the truly awesome. On special occasions, we threw confetti, we dressed up, cast caution to the wind. On special occasions, we did things we don't usually do and all bets were off and it was so much fun, and we looked forward as we slid back into the mundane and the quotidian to the next special occasion. And the next one and the one after that, and we lived lives punctuated by odd eruptions of celebration, chance encounters with glamor and temporary immersions in utopian experiments with the unlikely, the possible and the still to come.

But, the logic of capitalism does not allow us to cordon off the special from the mundane – the goal of capitalism is to squeeze every last drop out of every opportunity and so the special becomes a daily occurrence, and the special occasion becomes a “special offer,” as we bounce from one holiday to the next, from one market produced occasion for celebration to the next. Slowly, the *special* sinks into the scheduled: every night a party, every party a winner, every day a new case for celebration. And instead of a world mired in the ordinary and punctuated by the unusual, we became a society of celebration, a community with endless good news to tell, so many amazing things to toast. And now the confetti flows like wine, the party never ends and there is always somewhere else, somewhere more special to be. As we fling ourselves around in the increasingly evacuated realm of the social looking for stimulation, events, pleasure, we are more and more pre-occupied with a growing sense of missing out – is it here? Are we in the right place? Is this party the one? Or am I missing the real event that, like an altered-through-the-looking-glass reality, exists just outside of my purview, and remains a fantasy of the better, the more awesome, the place to be.

There are no longer places to be; nothing remains of the cool; hipsters are just captains of capital staying one step ahead of the future and two steps behind redundancy. And as the economic crisis generated by a fantasy of unending wealth and undergirded by a series of

bad promises allows a few winners to take all the goodies, everyone else is left holding nothing but empty glasses. In the aftermath of this banker's holiday, there is little for the financial sector to say to the dispirited, abandoned and destitute public but: thank you, thank you all for your cooperation.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation* is the title of this new show by Turkish art duo :mentalKLINIK. As in other work of theirs, the themes here are the rapaciousness of capital, the enhanced and elevated nature of reality, the seduction of objects and, ultimately, the “hypercomplexity,” as Franco Berardi calls it in *The Uprising*, of the realm of communication in an age of mediatized control and financial capitalism. :mentalKLINIK, as their name suggests, do not seek to return us to the regular, the normal, the sane or the rational, rather their work immerses us completely in the messaging systems of this new order and seeks out places where the messages reverse direction and signify wildly and anew.

If you spend time with their work, you are buffeted by the quotations of the culture of celebration but you are also knocked into new arrangements of pleasure and perception. You will find, as you go, to quote Berardi again, moments of wisdom and “sensuous meaning” amid the buzz of the new.

And this is not a moralizing body of work. Not a massive push back against the media or celebrity or glamour. The work does not romanticize the true and the real while railing against the inauthentic and the mediated. Instead, :mentalKLINIK explore new languages and alternative textures of pleasure and dynamism and they play with colorful reflective surfaces, billboard type signs and rhetorical operations. They try to hijack the never ending celebration that stands in for finance capitalism's greed and exclusivity and they do so in order to reflect upon the meaning of glitter and glamour in the aftermath of economic collapse. In their previous show ‘That's Fucking Awesome’ a work titled *Moet* featured large-scale twist off tops from champagne bottles that lay strewn on the gallery floor like remnants from a party hosted by giants. The giants here are not simply celebrities or the famous, the giants are the mammoth banks that are “too big to fail,” and

that turn their success into our catastrophic loss. In another :mentalKLINIK piece, “Double Cherry,” a black lacquered sculpture elevates the garnish of an alcoholic beverage into a shiny signifier of excess and a twisted monument to the end of art and the arrival of the art market.

Candy colored reflective spheres abound in this show, and the spectator is captured by a soundscape of ring tones and communicative alerts. The sounds in FOMO, a layered, subcutaneous noise sculpture, are designed to trigger the spectator into that stand by mode of attention that we all maintain now in relation to our gadgets – at any moment, we may be called – not by a person but by the machine itself telling us that is it time...time for a meeting, time to prepare for an event, time to take a pill, to leave the house, to exercise, time to set another alert. We may be called from one event to another by the buzz of FOMO or the “fear of missing out” that lends its name to this buzzing landscape of sound without fury. And as the event to which we have been alerted begins to transform from “the place to be” to the place from which you are missing another more relevant event, we start to lose the sense of ecstatic celebration and enter into another state that these installations frame and name as disappointment, disappearance, disorientation and disassociation.

If disorientation, as Jameson suggested way back at the dawn of postmodernism, is the inability to cognitively map space and time in a new era of full-time consumption, then nowadays in what some are calling post-postmodernism, disorientation is simply a way of being in the world. We no longer seek to understand, to know, to explain, we just try to stay upright, stay above water, stay afloat. And part of what has disoriented the human subject in this era of collapse and crisis, is an increasingly confused sense of what we should be fighting for and who we should be fighting with. In addition to the scrambling of political options, we are also surrounded by new relations between subjects and objects. These objects, which transform before our eyes through the magic of commodity fetishism, make star appearances in :mentalKLINIK’s work as mannequins, words, sounds and mirrored surfaces.

And as the objects become more real, more dynamically connected with the ebbs and flows of a haptic real, the subject, in turn, becomes a stew of random markers that are circulated to try to distinguish one subject from another. The much hallowed uniqueness of the human subject, under the pressure of endless publicity, has been transformed into lists of adjectives, profiles, one word signifiers expected to introduce lost and lonely souls to one another. mentalKLINIK delve deep into the culture of self-advertising with their glitzy personal ads in their work PROFILE. These works, compilations of subjects transformed now into subject headings, run supposedly distinct qualities (“tolerant,” “kissable,” “bitchy,”) into one another so that characteristics take on the quality of advertisements, carefully crafted blurbs and bylines designed to introduce one to the other with as little fuss as possible. And as the human becomes a profile among many other profiles, it is not simply that we lose sight of the distinct, the located self, rather we simply become a society of salesmen and products to be marketed all at once. The magic of commodity fetishism that Marx described so well has been lost in the process by which the alternative is on sale, the ordinary is in crisis, and the personal has ceased to be political and has become an ad.

As Lauren Berlant explains in her latest book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), we hold out hope for alternatives even though we see the limitations of our own fantasies; she calls this contradictory set of desires “cruel optimism.” After showing us its forms in our congested present—fantasies that sustain our attachments to objects and things that are the obstacle to getting what we want—Berlant, remarkably, turns to anarchy by way of conclusion and argues that anarchists enact “repair” by recommitting to politics without believing either in “good life fantasies” or in “the transformative effectiveness of one’s actions” (260). Instead, the anarchist “does politics” she says, “to be in the political with others.” In other words, when we engage in political action of any kind, we do not simply seek evidence of impact in order to feel that it was worthwhile; we engage in fantasies of living otherwise with groups of other people because the embrace of a common cause leads to alternative modes of satisfaction and even happiness whether or not the political outcome is successful. The desperation that produces “cruel optimism” according to Berlant is born of a “crisis of ordinariness” (117), a mode of living within which we

experience life more as “desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon” (117). “Desperate doggy paddling” describes a wild methodology within which we are less preoccupied with form and aesthetics (the “magnificent swim”), less worried about a destination (the horizon) and more involved in the struggle to stay afloat and perhaps even reach the shore, any shore.

And while we are destined to remain floating, paddling, barely cutting through the current, let us reimagine the horizon toward which we make imperceptible progress. While for other generations the horizon was a brand new world of collective passions and new forms of work and play, our horizon, diminishing with every stroke cannot represent the grand hopes and dreams of future any more. When cooperation has lost its anarchist sensibility and become a code word for selling out, it is time to dream small, make tiny adjustments and inch towards the next dream. :mentalKLINIK’s work offers us a laboratory for making, marking and inhabiting the next dream of a somewhere, an anywhere, a new place to be.

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