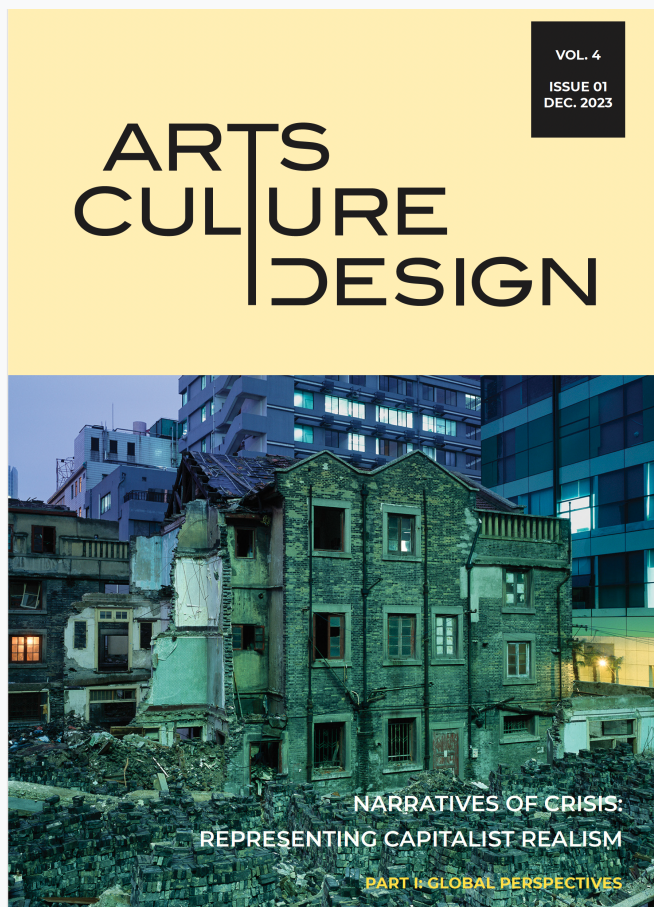


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Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



### Contemporary Realisms of The Self And Classless Representation.

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# CONTEMPORARY REALISMS OF THE SELF AND CLASSLESS REPRESENTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on perspectives for selfhood representations in contemporary era, whether autobiographical or not and is situated in the widened field of visual arts from the point of view of art as a practiced discourse. Therefore, the subsequent questioning of trends and traits that characterize contemporary realisms of the self aims in discerning possible fruitful representational tendencies within the interests of contemporary visual art debates. The idea of Mark Fisher, that class is omitted from almost all current academic discourses so that a classless understanding of self is the predominant understanding in sociopolitical selfhood representations is central in this review which discusses both high and low categories of such visualizations. For the former, the work of Richard Billingham *Ray's a Laugh* from 1996 is examined in comparison to his film *Ray and Liz*, made in 2018, in terms of the sociopolitical debates they have fostered. This conversation is extended to encompass *Cleaning Shows* that spin-off from *Reality TV*, a case which introduces into the conversation, apart from the obvious class debate the present competitive encounters of the real against its visualized representations. In order to review the understanding of realisms in the contemporary era, I also look in pertinent definitions from literary theory, employ current sociopolitical positionings and probe the circulation of class-asserting representations in the art field. In this multifold albeit brief examination of dead ends and opportunities I aspire to bring forth a live field of possible exits for the realisms of the self, where contemporary representations can lead to new, emancipatory understanding beyond the stale, stagnant dreads of late capitalism political fatalism.



**NINA KOTAMANIDOU** is a work focuses on everyday life and the representation of socially instigated, informal circumstances drenched in the feel-good indulgence of common culture. Within this context she looks for associations that give vent to privately nurtured emotions and autobiographical narratives, as DIY manifestations of contemporary selfhood. Accordingly, her academic research explores the field of informal, quotidian uses of visual culture and its meaning-making procedures. She works on a variety of media, such as painting, video and installation. She has participated in many exhibitions and has curated collective shows in Greece. Initially she studied painting in Aristotle University, Greece and then earned a PhD in Art (Wimbledon College of Art// UAL) specializing in video as a mode of self-presentation within pop culture. She works as an Academic Fellow in the department of Interior Architecture, IHU and the department of Interior Architecture, UniWA.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Capitalism Realism came recently into the spotlight as a term that refers to a sociopolitical status quo by Mark Fisher and it denotes a systemic and pragmatic orchestration for the continuation of things as they are in an interminable present, an impossible stance all things considered. Under the same turn of phrase the “lapsed socialists” (Weiner, 2017:91) Richter, Polke and Kuttner instigated a movement which gets mentioned in many art-history orientated articles as the German Pop Art, “a commonly used rubric that reduces the movement to something like the local franchise of a global corporation” (Weiner, 2017:89). In many instances though Capitalism Realism has defied that labeling for it proved to be aesthetically more diversified than the other Pop Art branches but also it has thrustured cynicism towards both capitalist and socialist regimes of power, an attitude which sets it one step ahead from the happy rejoinders of the rest of the Pop Art movements. Yet, although the said Capitalist Realism was a moniker which admittedly was chosen as “another form of provocation” (Richter in Van Brugger, 1985: 84), it marked the place and the time of Western Germany sociopolitical negotiation of post war skepticism, rapid economic recovery and cold war politics. As Richter admitted in 1985 “Capitalist Realism was not intended to be taken seriously [...] This term somehow attacked both sides: it made Socialist Realism look ridiculous, and did the same to the possibility of Capitalist Realism.” (Cras, 2014:9). The position of Richter at the time, a state of loneliness, expectation and confusion, as a cultural tourist who explored the western freedom (Smythe, 2014) also combined his experience of eastern bloc politics as a fleeing but trained cultural connoisseur. His circumstances highlight a twofold positioning for the interpretation of the-then socio-political juncture, in which he had intimate affinity to two things: the personal testimony of the sociocultural circumstances that he came from, which also demarcated his ideological past in the form of living conditions and training and his intimate involvement in the western environment which opened up a passage to pursue his future. The point of this discussion is to bring into attention that Richter’s double-entry to a sociopolitical environment at that time was in truth an advantageous positioning that he lived up to its core. The possibility for reviewing

the present circumstances from within but also from a distance appears at least challenging because we already reside to a perennial bracketing of an incessant present to which “there is no alternative”, there is no outside. The continuation of things as they are is fostered as the only possible way. This improbable position, similar to the incessant wheel treading of a hamster, punctuates the efforts of the volatile contemporary selves to place themselves positively within the claustrophobia of late capitalist reality. Politically speaking, it looks as if there is no footing on centrifugal forces which might be able to dismantle the discordances of late capitalist societies and lead us someplace else. As Fisher observes, the disappearance of class from any discourse might be a reason for stalling the formation of a united consciousness (2021: 13), while Srnec & Williams (2015: 160) suggest “populism”[1] as a fragile alternative to class solidifications. Moreover, the proliferation of contemporary selfhoods oscillates between a “heightened sense that self-construction is now beyond self-control” and an “ever expanding, ever emancipating, horizon of possibilities” (Gumbrium & Holstein, 2000: 111-112). Accordingly, the circulating realisms for representing contemporary subjecthood are entangled into discourses that reflect on such multifarious readings.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND AIMS

The production of empowering selfhood imagery which can reflect on everyday life conditions without succumbing to either nihilism or complacency is a pressing contemporary question. What sort of realism today can amount to that? In this paper the realisms under discussion are visually orientated, professional outcomes of high or low culture, artworks in the form of photographic series and film on the one hand and TV shows, keeping an eye also to the various digitized streams on social media platforms on the other. In particular, realism is interrogated and inferred into this discussion in order to comprehend the actual world as negotiated by a medium (including an apparatus and the technicalities involved) and with a view to its capacity to envelop a multilayered situation which materializes in a sociocultural context, verified by the presence of a community. By the same token, realism in art practice advocates a way to relate to the world aided by the manipulation

of formal, aesthetic and sensorial elements in order to invent new passages and reframe our experiences. As such conditioning defies the naturalized mirroring of an action as it happens, to overcome such connotations, realism is treated in this paper as “a method” (Roberts in Esanu, 2018: 61, Lye in Nilges[2], 2020: 88), a mechanism which defies its subordination to pictorial appearances, styles or aestheticism in order to disengage it from mimesis and use positively its formal limitations. In addition, realism is accepted as the “unstable, processual and transitive site of an indeterminate process of formal resolution” (Roberts in Esanu, 2018: 75). In accordance with this framework this paper examines realistic representations where class issues - in their presence or absence - have generated exemplary or characteristic selfhood imagery. The point of view for this exploration comes from the field of art practice, focusing on the ways the chosen examples choose to connect to what is there, situated opposite an capturing apparatus. Nevertheless, this paper does not aspire to be an art-historical or socio-cultural analysis, or a political essay but remains in the field of art as a practice.

In order to discuss the ramifications of class politics in art practices the works of Richard Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh* (1996) and *Ray and Liz* (2018), are seen against the background of their reception within and outside the perimeter of official art institutionalism. The case of these artworks, executed with a time span of almost 20 years and in a different medium each time, a series of photographs and a book in 1996 and a tripartite film aired also on TV in 2018 is unique. Both artworks handle the same controversial topic, the negotiation of selfhood portrayal in a state of precariousness, in a perennial lived-in crisis sustained in Billingham's family grim circumstances and supported in the stern sociocultural milieu of 'Thatcherite England.' In particular, the early work, due to the medium of choice – photography - together with Billingham's intention to capture real life as it happened questioned the resilience of contemporary realism to contain an otherwise unarticulated, reality. The kind of realism exercised both in the photographic series and the film of 2018 is seen parallelly to *Cleaning Shows* on Reality TV which touch on the poverty porn genre and similarly question the resilience of contemporary realism. In this case though, realism is tried for its willingness to encompass a series of selfhood representations within the dominant popular culture in conjunction with classless selfhood realisms. The juxtaposition is used in order to bring about a set of dynamic

confrontations within predominant realisms under late capitalist. In this exploration Mark Fisher claims, that contemporary societies have become classless and for that unable to deal with the mounting challenges ahead of them (Fisher, 2021: 13), is central to this analysis of selfhood representations within the practiced visual arts field. I also utilize the ideas of Thomas Hirschhorn and Jacques Rancière about art and politics.

### 3. BILLINGHAM'S SENSATION

In 1985 (only four years prior to 1989 and while postmodernity was at its hype) Hal Foster advocated for an “art with a politic” which he understood to be a contextual endeavor that should seek “to produce a concept of the political relevant to our present” (Foster, 1985:155). Postmodernism, characterized by an amnesiac spell and a timeless historicity, was established rather as a cultural mode than a concrete materiality (Esanu, 2012) and its melancholy expressed the disenchantment from the avant-gard utopias of the past (Groys, 2015: 6). In this light the transformation of the political happened as a turn to socio-cultural narratives in ways that privileged the ethereal storytelling of a malleable, provisional “I”. This process acquired meaning by being contextualized within a circumstantial present, both recognized and positioned within the existing socio-political status-quo and within the official art-system. Endowed with evanescence expressed in postmodern eclectic remembrance, haphazard appropriation and self-negating parody it is no wonder that the political agency of the postmodern subject was invariably an erratic, hit-or-miss performance, supported in various forms of autobiographical narrative in some sort or other of idiosyncratic “political expressionism” (Foster et al, 1993: 10, 23).

The early work of Richard Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh* makes an interesting case for inspection due to the controversial positioning it held within the established sociopolitical arrangement but also because of its strategic placement within mainstream postmodernist debates. This work is a palpable example where personal narrative is exulted over all other issues so it is partially treated as autobiographical whereas Billingham is never placed within the pictures shown. Moreover, the content of the pictures, the everyday whereabouts of Billingham's family, is described almost unanimously as marginal and impoverished – let alone shocking[3].

Class issues continue to be present regardless the positive or negative take on the imagery, fueling a variety of approaches but they are usually sidetracked by the successful – sensational, to make justice to the exhibition that-

brought this work into the spotlight - impact of the images. One might consider that it is this controversy, inherent in the imagery, still active 25 years and going that has contributed to its unrelenting catch. Another entry to this debate is that in the subsequent critical writings about this work any political implication is flattened out as it is appreciated through the lenses of middle-class normality (Hatherley, 2017:106) while a leftist approach looks down on the work as an opportunistic exposure of unprivileged privacy (Molyneux, 1998). Both readings are based on an exacerbation of the initial shock element of the content because the reality impact of the represented material fused the aesthetics of the images with the aesthetics of everydayness of the people involved. This notion is also present in the repositioning of the overall validity of the images - their rightful claims to be exhibited - to Billingham's proximity to this subject (Lewis, 1997: 67), favoring a narrative where art is produced as part of an autobiographical art-therapy session. This claim, which was in tune with such autobiographical exposures of trauma during postmodernity[4] was partly adapted by Billingham himself in later interviews. Still in 1997 Billingham expressed his bafflement (Lewis, 1997) about the general disregard to the formal attributes of the images due to the audience's engagement with the reality - or better the unreality - of what was shown in them, a position he kept on to it in 2007[ ]. Yet in another understanding of the work, Smith claimed that lack of empathy "provides some critics and audiences with an opportunity to reinforce social stereotypes and denigrate the lower classes" (Smith, 2014: 10). Smith claimed that Ray's a Laugh illustrates "how class may condition the production of empathy in viewers" a position which partly explains the negative commentaries the work received, as voyeuristic, "class-porn", artless, poverty-porn (Hatherley, 2017, Smith, 2014). So even while the impoverishment of Billingham's family was attributed to the neo-liberal politics of Thatcherism the images remained dependent to a personalized appreciation of authenticity or became prone to rude criticism because the unrelenting facingness of the represented subject was received as "obscene"[ ] or at best tragicomic (Adams, 2019). In any case the work was professed to promote an outworldish imagery for the art-elite, gallery-going spectator, whether this was received positively as an astounding autobiographical revelation (which we were

not ready or pleased to see nevertheless) or in a negative manner as a faux-pas, an incomprehensible topic of filial exploitation (which betrayed its class and it should not be meant for us to see it anyway).

In 2016, while a friendlier article on Observer promoted the preparation of a tripartite film[7] inspired from the aforementioned series of photos, Billingham's oeuvre was heralded as "squalid realism" (Adams, 2016:1). Such characterizations, although delivered with the pleasant tone of a Sunday paper, ushered notions for the dissemination of realism into categories that merge degrees of cleanliness or repulsiveness and poverty as a representational methodology that avoids to mention class but insinuates it metonymically. This narrative is not new but it continues to play on repeat. The British TV show *How Clean is Your House*, which premiered in 2003 and spanned seven seasons provides many cases to ponder. According to Wikipedia it is an "entertainment/lifestyle television programme in which expert cleaners Kim Woodburn and Aggie MacKenzie visit dirty houses and clean them up" (Wikipedia, 2023). What could be a more straightforward description of a Reality TV show? Between the two female presenters - one of which was actually working as a professional cleaner for wealthy houses at the time the show premiered in 2003 (Bell, 2022) while the other had been working as a journalist in "Good Housekeeping" magazine - none had appeared on screen prior to the show. This added an extra dash of reality to their performance, which was mostly unscripted as Aggie MacKenzie has admitted in an interview (Devereux-Evans, 2023). The duo has donned the part of unquestionable authorities as cleaners of the show appeared in spotless, even formal attire, a string of pearls and high heels semi-comically worn by Kim Woodburn in every episode.

The spirit of the show was light and non-chalant, focusing on the outrageousness of the portrayed cases while the presenters posed simplified questions with no further probing of how things ever came to this. Since each case was mockingly blamed on the residents' laziness and unwillingness to clean, this almost childlike quirkiness set aside and thus depoliticized any other facet of their lives. Following this line, the presenters held a humorous approach - more comical than severe but there was no space left for airing politics. In this case, as commended in an online feature, Kim Woodburn "had a strategy from day one. Go-



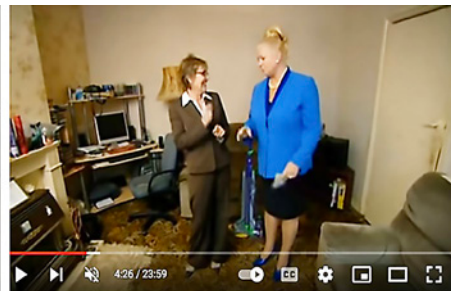
ing into filthy houses dressed in high heels and pearls created a contrast that wasn't lost on the viewers" (Bell, 2022). This decision aligned with the common policy for the production of Reality TV and post-Reality documentary TV shows, to hide any direct sign of class distancing while pointing indirectly exactly to an unbridgeable gap (Fisher, 2014). The fact that participants in the show lack bourgeois standards or aesthet-

icted within their environment. In such 'realistic' representations subjects become simply gross, styleless personalities, the awkward participants in a show of "miserabilism"[9] which shapes "despair and protest" as artistic expressionism (Tyree, 2019: 34). In a further clarification, miserabilism is seen as a "clumsy rush" to contain those "who have been 'left behind' or simply left out, as if they are abandoned deni-



**Figure 1:**

Screenshots from the S05 E01 episode of the British TV programme *How Clean Is Your House* as seen on Youtube. Presenter Kim Woodburn in her usual attire or pearls, high heels and hairdo, the first visit in a messy household and Aggie MacKenzie in a confrontation to a participant (left to right). This episode was called "David & Angela, Cornwall". It was originally aired on Channel 4, on May 17, 2007 at 23:00.



**Figure 2:** Screenshots from the S05 E04 episode of *How Clean Is Your House* as seen on Youtube. The participant in is messy household and the duo in their introductory visit to the house (left to right). This episode was called "Steve Jones". It was originally screened on Channel on 4 June 7, 2007.

ic (this is usually noted in furniture or clothing for example) is served mildly but steadily as a defect, an inability to just cope efficiently. This tactic blurs the 'real' representation of such selfhoods for the viewer at the same time that all the action happens in front of us, admittedly "unscripted" and indisputably real. Who can dispute the reality of such set-up? Besides, whose side do you want to be? These are untold but ever-present questions.

Another much disputed classless narrative of popular TV was the documentary *Benefit Street*[8], Channel 4, broadcasted in 2014-2015 for 2 Seasons - which provoked Mark Fisher to write an article about it (Fisher, 2014). There the images, vested with objectivity, are posed as an unmediated registering but it is not possible to withstand the not so flattering connotations of the unwittingly sordid poor (all the more un-class-y because they appear unable to understand the much coveted middleclass grace).

While class related issues turn from transparent to invisible, Reality TV's realism extracts the portrayed subjects from the actuality of their conditions at the same time that they are de-

zens of a remote island shipwreck" (Tyree, 2019: 38). In this, Billingham's film, *Ray and Liz* (2018) brings about the similarities between the era of Billingham's photos, the British 90s and the current upsurge in Brexit poverty. In acknowledging the film's realism, ideas of a cultural as much as a financial isolation are present again. Billingham's film, which expands the autobiographical experiences of the initial images with more incidents is appreciated as avoiding sentimentalism or didacticism in order to remain "truer to the life it records" (Tyree, 2018: 34). In another feature, the film is highlighted as "offering a sense of reality to the effect poverty, lack of choice and lack of help has on the individual and on the family" (Carrier, 2019). Although the protagonists are locked in a dead-end no solutions are suggested and there remains empathy, aesthetics or humor to guide us through the representation.

A review of the film in LA Times, epitomizes this by saying that the film is a "personal filmmaking with a diarist's sense of detail and an artist's generosity" (Chang, 2019). Tyree concludes that the film "is more disturbing and complex" (Tyree, 2018:41) exactly because it takes no posi-

tion or it makes no effort to “better” the poor, a position held in different undertones by many reviewers, stating either a lack of solutions or the film’s open-endedness. Billingham himself insistently refuses any political intention extending from the making to the original pictures to the film’s rendition (Tyree, 2019; O’Callaghan, 2019). “For me, it’s about lived ex-

imagery. In contrast, the initial works forced viewers to an endless bewildered crisscrossing of their surface without the possibility to acknowledge any conscious point to get to or depart from. Viewers were condemned to aimless gloating, since there was neither a gateway nor further resolution, a condition which Cashell referred to as “the repulsive attitude of cultural

**Figure 3:** *Benefit Street*, Channel 4, S01, E04 (left) Still from the official Season 2 trailer (right), (Screenshots).



perience” he has stated elsewhere (Fullerton, 2016).

#### 4. CONTEMPORARY NEGOTIATIONS

The photographic imagery of 1996 which comprised Ray’s *a Laugh* was a legitimate art product intended for the gallery walls or the intimate reading of the ensuing book and as such its nakedness was justified, protected and promoted. Ray and Liz, in 2018, happened after countless Reality TV shows had intervened in our reception of the real. Initially produced as a tripartite fictional enterprise on TV, Ray and Liz conditions the matter-of-fact notions of poverty it presents. From the beginning the production was set to remain truthful to the original surrounding so the film was shot in a similar flat in the same floor of the same tower block where Billingham’s family lived. The casting was also a trial, which lasted many scrutinizing auditions in order to reach the desired close resemblance to the members of the family[10]. As a result, all reviews agree that the film provides an upsetting recreation of social abandonment that feels true to the era and remains faithful to the original images. Although the ensuing personal deadlocks and poverty are conveyed forcefully, there can’t be any of the denounced embarrassment that trailed the viewing of the Ray’s *a Laugh* photos (Cashell, 2009). The on-screen mediated reality is tailor-made for broadcasting so regardless its being “horribly true” (Carrier, 2019) to the imagery that shape it and the interrelated “Thatcherite misery” (ibid: n.p.) it addresses an audience already accustomed to watching gleefully poverty-porn

tourist” (Cashell, 2009:27). I consider this as one of the best merits of the work, to “implicate” the viewer (to paraphrase Hirschorn in Gardner, 2012: 39) by forcing them to trespass - however they can - their “predetermined frames of reference” (Gardner, 2012: 59). Such positioning frees political or ideological nuances from any given or accepted conventions and introduces political thinking in any possible way that is “idiosyncratic” (ibid) to the work.

In this point I will recourse to an autoethnographic analysis: when I had been faced with Billingham’s work back in the 90s I had no idea what to make of it. It was stunning and I was stupefied because I could not tell, for the life of me, if it was staged or not. Even more, I could not fathom the indifference - sometimes even the gusto - that these people exhibited in living their lives, and as my provincial, petit-bourgeois self had no handles for such realism, it looked to me rather surrealistic. This fact, that Billingham himself had always declared, the nonchalance of his parents to his taking pictures of them (Fullerton, 2016; Adams, 2016) is exactly I think what shocked everybody the most - myself included. The pictures fashioned a sense of going-about-my-business, living-my-life-as-best-as-can stance, which oozed a pure indifference to the propriety standards so cherished by the widened middle-class[11] rationale we all one way or another have squeezed ourselves into. In this sense Billingham’s work was never political, as himself insists but it was also only political, advocating a condition outside the system’s periphery but - since there is no alternative - at the same time a casualty within its flawless surface.



**Figure 4:** Patric Romer as older Ray in *Ray and Liz* (2018). Director: Richard Billingham (screenshot from the official trailer).

In the current discussion of classless realisms it is intriguing to ponder that Billingham's early work was both controversial and resonant through the 90s till now because it disregarded class propriety. Bypassing middle-class taboos, the produced dislocated representations reminded everyone of their class and their inhibitions. Billingham left politics out of the way in order to catch the experience and thus enhanced every other connection, "focusing to the possibilities of life and art, specific to this situation of misery" to use a description from Rancière's that fits accurately here (Rancière, 2008:14). As a result, the photographs - of the snapshot variety no less, were laden with the political messages they carried as their legitimate right to "cultural definition" (Sekula, 84:1982). To this end, their presentation as a series or in a book helped to reinforce their meaning while retaining their fluidity.

While *Ray's Laugh* force us to face our socio-cultural placing as we understand it to be, the various instances of poverty porn on TV obstruct the fostering of a healthy social positioning, let alone class awareness. Through camouflaged spin-offs such as Cleaning Reality Shows[12] where sordid, squalid households get purged - if only for a while, a fabricated on-screen light-heartedness points covertly to modest socio-economic backgrounds. Other versions are preoccupied openly with the lives of fringe income citizens[13] while home makeover shows such as the pioneering Reality Show Extreme Makeover: Home Edition[14] offer stylistic advice to benefit the lucky disadvantaged few. In these

shows, reality is based on superficial truthfulness to surroundings while real life circumstances are buried under the intricacies of a representation policy where class is an unwanted burden. While people are seen within their environment, they are framed in ways filtered through a socio-economic partition of an affluent normality versus its ungainly aberration. Thus, they end up pictured as poverty-stricken, ill-advised or irresponsible[15]. Consequently, on representing the lives of the non - privileged, working-class poor, this realism is most often derisive, condescending and disempowering (Beswick, 2020).

This proliferation of TV realisms, which nowadays is reverberated in social media platform stories involves "people playing themselves outside traditional theatrical and media institutions" (Grindstaff, 2012: 35). In such forms of self-presentation "the concept of "authenticity" becomes both more important and more contested" (ibid). Realism is thus translated as a transparent pictorial evidence, a document that mirrors the world naturally. The connection of realism and realistic representations to mimesis seems convenient for the perseverance of late capitalist fables. In current literature approaches it has been argued that such "conservative" definition of realism in effect "ratifies" existing power relationships "insofar as the work derives its authority from the world" (Smith-Brechesein 2020: i). In view of the daily blurring that happens on visual representations between reality and veiled political fictions and borrowing from Sekula's claims that "the mean-



ing of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined" (Sekula, 1982: 85) as well as Warburg's notion of iconology<sup>[16]</sup> a subsequent line of inquiry should be to focus on the connections each image builds between itself and the world, regardless its authenticity claims or its manipulations. This will amount to an uncovering of the power relations involved in each visualization. Another critical question could be whether the circulating representations are capable to inform a narrative of the self which has the potential to disrupt the predominant middle-class ideas and thus make them visible for what they are. This line of thinking assumes the suggestion of a model inhabitant for each representation but simultaneously produces a proud negation. If the former idea presents us with the irony that this idealized someone is a fictional, artificial construction the latter is haunted by repercussions of failure. Moreover, whether the exposed "I" or the receiving "I" of a discursive exchange, the one in charge sets the rules and delineates any normalization processes, welding veracity and validity to the circumstances presented. This riddle leaves no room for an easy answer. It is no wonder thus that we are torn between fantasies of complacency and political entrapment. The newly expanded, classless middleclass ideology prompts us to enjoy the professed late capitalism well-beingism and blame everything that derails from it on pure misfortune and "a deficit on will and effort" (Fisher, 2014:4). In a similar way, feelings of 'naïveté' or 'futility' continue to get prioritized over any political insinuation for change or any political message at all, now as strong as in 1985 (Foster, 1985: 154).

In response to these impasses, Thomas Hirschhorn, an artist whose work opens up to the possibility of new ways to counterbalance the power/weakness opposition has claimed that "Naïveté doesn't interest me, utopianism does; nostalgia doesn't interest me, stupidity<sup>[17]</sup> does." (Estep, 2009: 83). In his view, categorizations such as "political art" and "making art politically"<sup>[18]</sup> "have long since been obsolete" (Timofejev, 2022: n.p.). What instead Hirschhorn suggests is that "[art] confronts reality" (Gingeras, 2004: n.p.) In a relevant approach but from a different point of view to the Hirschhorn's relational aesthetics, Jacques Rancière suggests a turn to "processes of dis-sociation: the break in a relation between sense and sense - between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt. Such breaks can happen anywhere at any time. But they can never be calculated" (Rancière, 2008: 12). In a way, both Hirschhorn and Rancière ask for artistic representations to confront that which they are supposed to naturalize by producing "disjunctions" or "des-identifications"

(Rancière, 2008). According to Rancière, "disjunctions" carry the possibility of political effect and are born from disturbances concerning the ways "in which bodies fit their functions and destinations" (Rancière, 2008: 11). "Des-identification" connects this procedure to the artistic practices as it characterizes the "aesthetic effect" which is "first an effect of des-identification" (ibid). Both Hirschhorn and Rancière remain obscure about further determining the form or the functions of the political effect in visual arts. This attitude reflects on the rupture between the smooth surface of the world as we -are supposed?- to know it and artistic interpretation. The unexpected encounter with the world remains equally surprising for the viewer and the artist. Such outcomes might touch on the class debates in various angles but should not be seen as set against it or in a position of either/or mutual exclusiveness. Moreover, this is not a question about a medium, or a qualification endowed to a tradition of representation. In fact, the proclaimed pointlessness of Communist Realism as a meticulously instructed method for the representations of the real (Khatib in Esanu, 2018, Groys, 2015) as well other 'toxic' topics such as Nazism is the only proven limitation to incorporate old-fashioned class discourses as political guidelines for the representation of reality. A departure from such positioning is expressed by the Irwin group, which comes from an ex-communist country art production. These artists suggest that we can treat all signs as inherently ideological instead of celebrating their emptiness. In this way "we become much freer in our choice of artistic forms and means" (Groys, 2015:6).

The hyper-productivity of mediated real in contemporary societies continues unwaveringly to create many free-floating hybridizations where the self is narrated in an unbroken circulation of de-classized imagery. The sociocultural preoccupation with temporality in the notion of co-presence or simultaneous image-sharing, leads to an endless publishing of televised narratives, mediated realities and social media users' content branded by the technical arrangements that support it. This real-time, Live streaming allows identities to be exposed in their innate fluidity and challenge the content and the scope of realism as an endeavor, since aesthetics and reality blend in a cultural experience. With class divisions obliterated as a "breach of decorum" (Fisher, 2021) from all discourses, such self-fashioning happens haphazardly according to fluid ideas of 'cool' and the ever-present notion of 'well-being' in collaboration with the tight clench of omnipresent 'work-ethics'. This kind of classless individualized everydayness gets streamed daily in mediated snippets which profess social

recognition for a self that is caught “actively involved in the creation and the production of culture” (Grindstaff, 2012: 36). Such mediation has been schooled from early Reality TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor* in order to produce a kind of globalized DIY[19] realism that -in its universality- squeezes everything out context. Such points of entrance for contemporary Realism are rather confusing but while they fail to produce a succinct message, they indicate an arena where reality jostles ceaselessly with its representations. In view to this confrontation, while a part of postmodern selfhoods was unmindful of class divisions, absorbed mostly by trauma and a psychological framing in “oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion” (Foster, 2015: 20), contemporary selves practice voluntary distribution as social media mediated texts. They seem eager to spread one installment at a time on varied screens and multiple filtered pictures with performative abandon. It might be a time to accept that realism, in order to match the visual exposure of contemporary reality should overcome any illustrative, formative, aesthetic or descriptive imagery and reach for the inclusion of experience.

## 5. EPILOGUE OR NEW BEGINNINGS

As it might already have emerged, the fortification of class consciousness alone cannot solve the complicated issues of contemporary subjecthood (Srninec & Williams, 2015: 156-160). One might also suppose that the reduction of selfhood along lines that might have worked in the past will not lead to feasible solutions in the present situation, where actually a new all-encompassing utopianism is direly needed (ibid: 138-141). Aligned to this line of thinking is the suggestion that we should explore realism as a fluctuating, volatile concept which has to review any pre-existent notions in order to claim equivalence to the era that fosters it (Nilges, 2020). Fisher agrees that only if we accept the contemporary multiplicity of desires there is the possibility to define a meaningful point of departure (Fisher, 2021). This disposition, to “unveil the space to create new modes of being” (Srninec & Williams, 2015:180) has no guideline than openness and intuitive imagination. Another point of entry, common both to Fisher and Srninec & Williams, advocates that we have to embrace the sociocultural juncture that we live in and understand class within its multiple fragmentation without evading or excluding any states of being or mediation processes. Therefore, on leaving behind the superficiality of fanciful escapism it is important to realize we are not safeguarded in an aloof elsewhere. We are part of this, firmly embedded in this messy situation. Therefore, it is important to appreci-

ate where we stand – where classless representations hinder us to stand- in order to produce an eloquent realism that will speak a message of escape from this perennial “pseudo-present” (Fisher, 2016: 21).

In this regard the question posed by Mathias Nilges that “if we are interested in realism today we should ask what happens to realism in a present without a future” (Nilges, 2020:86) exposes an equation where a purposely stagnant, dominant realism tries to impose itself over the fluidity of extant, disorientated selfhoods. This interpretation calls for an acute readdressing of existing representations in order to discern those which purposely frame us within an inescapable condition and are probably the reason we perceive ourselves in “a frenzied stasis” (Fisher, 2021). There arises the possibility to exchange them with novel selfhood presentations that do not take anything for granted and as such are capable to convey a will or a need for change (Leger, 2014: 134). Moreover, it is not a flight from late capitalism technology and a return to a former purer primitive selfhood that we have to figure out. This misunderstanding inhibits the visualization of a feasible new future and delays the liberation from contrived substitutes that obscure the realization of our true desires. It should be challenging to attempt a meaningful address on a Realism that confronts contemporary late capitalist reality from within the systemic façade of normalized selfhood personifications. Class obliteration and its popular substitutes, thoughtless consumerism and selfhood commodification, spread everywhere as the predominant reality. The continuous bracketing of selfhoods within middle-class is a fiction which efficiently obscures any view beyond the foreshortened horizon of political despair. Whether we choose to dream emancipating new modes of personhoods in utopias or expose the uncertainties in our dystopian presents, everything is open and urgently important. The answers are locked in our un-middle-classy everydayness, away from the homogenizing grip of late capitalism. This bewildering area calls both practicing artists and theorists for further investigation. There, art might generate surprising encounters, which will re-establish a pure desire and reflect on emancipating selfhood representations.

## NOTES

- [1] Populism demarcates a horizon where political movements appeal and mobilize “cross section” parts of society, which thus unite different people under a “political logic” rather than class identities in order to solve inequalities or claim unmet demands. (Snrinec & Williams, 2015: 160)
- [2] The former author examines realism in visual art, the latter in the field of literary studies.
- [3] To see images visit [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/richard\\_billingham](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/richard_billingham) and <https://www.martinparrfoundation.org/bookdummies/richard-billingham-rays-a-laugh/> <https://britishphotography.org/artists/132-richard-billingham/works/2448-richard-billingham-untitled-from-rays-a-laugh-1995/>
- [4] Tracey Emin's *All The People I Slept With*, Georgina Starr's *Crying*, Hanna Wilke's *Intravenus*, all realized during the 90s exemplify the diversification of this particular art discourse at that time.
- [5] “After I did the family pictures, I soon realised that people liked the family pictures for reason that I never intended ... there are very few people, I think, that get beyond the subject matter and can identify the artist's intention ... They just like to look at my mum's tattoos or the stains on the wallpaper or the dirty floor.” (Billingham quoted in Outi Remes, 2007: 16).
- [6] Hatherley discusses in a paragraph Kirsten Mey's opinion about *Ray's a Laugh* pictures as “the relationship between documentary tradition and notions of obscenity that derive from the obscene, that is from placing into public view what should have remained hidden from it” (italics on Hatherley, 2017: 127)
- [7] In 2019 the film has been shortlisted as an outstanding debut by Bafta and won the same category at the British independent film awards.
- [8] Thankfully there are Youtube channels that make it possible to view the episodes of the show. I provide a selection of links in the references section.
- [9] Miserabilism is connected with notions of dark representations of a social-self who might indulge to nihilism “as a reaction to official picturesqueness or religious sentimentalism or as a disturbing identification with the infamies of hardship and ‘degeneracy’”. Modernism(s): Bohemia, Miserabilism and Black Painting.
- [10] This was divulged by Billingham in an interview in *Express & Star*, in 2019
- [11] As Fisher asks “How can everyone belong to the middle? Its impossible!” and then “well, if everyone's middle-class now, what are they in the middle of? But it seems to make sense -this pitch – as a form of direct suppression of class consciousness” (Fisher, 2021: 41).
- [12] *How Clean is Your House*, (2003). Talkback Thames, UK (Production). 7 Seasons 21/5/2003 to 21/9/2009. Channel 4. Duration 30 min. <https://www.gtech.co.uk/blog/what-are-the-best-cleaning-shows-ever/>
- [13] *Benefits Street* (2014). Turner Phil, Reid Ben Directors.. Love Productions, *Rebel Uncut* (Series 1) Channel 4. Every Monday, 21:00, from 6/1/2014 till 17/2/2014 (season1) and 11/5/2015 to 1/6/2015 (season2) Duration: 60 min including advertisements. The series documented the lives of several residents of James Turner Street, Winson Green, Birmingham, England, United Kingdom, where newspapers reported that 90% of the residents claim benefits. Later, one of the main characters that emerged from that show, Dee Kelly, played Billingham's mother, Liz at an older age in *Ray and Liz*.
- [14] According to Wikipedia “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition (EM:HE; sometimes informally referred to as Extreme Home Makeover[3][4]) is an American reality television series that aired from February 15, 2004 to January 13, 2012 on ABC”. The show received a lot of criticism because more or less ignored people's realistic budgets which created to people involved more problems that the one it solved. A local branch of the show was broadcasted also in Greece in 2007-08. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme\\_Makeover:\\_Home\\_Edition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme_Makeover:_Home_Edition)
- [15] Citizen responsibility has become a favoured notion in late capitalism as it connects with individualism. In Greece it was heard recently in the context of a political conservatism which is still being projected in political speech in many directions. Its key characteristic is the implicit notion that poverty, unemployment, or inability to benefit from the opportunities of the system happens from a stance of irresponsibility, lack of care or ignorance.
- [16] “Iconology is a branch of art history that investigates the meaning of artworks in relation to their social and cultural background. The field, initiated by Aby Warburg's studies, evolved into a multidisciplinary approach leveraging sociology and the history of culture to read artworks as witnesses of a social memory” (Baroncini, S, Daquino, M. & Tomasi F, 2021: n.p).
- [17] For Hirschhorn the *bête* is also a mode of seeing and reading. One way not to look away, he suggests, is to ‘look dumb’, that is, to allow that we are often ‘dumbstruck’ by the outrageous events of the world, such as the mass murder of innocent citizens during the Iraq war, gruesome images of which Hirschhorn presents in his *Ur- Collages* (2008) (Foster, 2015: 107).
- [18] Thomas Hirschhorn has claimed that he aims to make “art politically” and he denies any implication with “political art” or “political graphic art” (Hirschhorn in Estep, 2009: 83) This ramification is all the more important coming from an artist who does make art with socio-political messages that aims to forgo any naturalization of the existing power structures (Gardner, 2012: 43).
- [19] “The social media is more conducive to a DIY mode of person production. Reality TV, on the other hand, is better characterized by what I call a DI(t)Y aesthetic or mode and that stands for Do It to Yourself” (Grindfall, 2012: 36).

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