

Call for Papers

Artistic Realism and Social Abstraction: Constructing Reality in Contemporary Art and Theory
(Fribourg, CH, 23.–24. November 2023)

In capitalist modernity, reality is permeated by abstractions. These abstractions take various forms, including the economic logic of monetary exchange relations and abstract labor, the universalizing legal form of the modern subject abstracted from gendered, racialized and class domination, as well as the increasing technological mediation of social life. In these examples, abstraction is not to be understood as a conceptual detachment from reality, but as a social practice operative within it.

Our workshop aims to explore the consequences of this social abstraction for the discourse on critical artistic realism. How does art engage with forms of abstraction that shape our reality? We invite scholars from disciplines such as art history, philosophy, sociology, gender studies, media studies and others to reflect on these questions from theoretical as well as historical perspectives.

In 20th century critical realism (especially since the interwar period), society as an object of artistic representation and critique was perceived to be more and more abstract and intangible, its structures located beyond the empirically sensible. This prompted calls for a realism which sought to critically construct, rather than merely represent or document, social reality. Montage, factography and other non-mimetic procedures were championed as critical tools for coping with the real abstractions of capitalism. Bertolt Brecht's famous objection against photographic realism, that "something must in fact be built up" where reality has "slipped into the functional" or Siegfried Kracauer's statement that "reality is a construction", directed similarly against the documentary mode of representation, are cases in point.

Recently, constructivist epistemologies have been challenged by a 'speculative' turn and new ontologies in philosophical thought. However, many proponents of critical realism in contemporary art (from Hito Steyerl to Chto Delat, Forensic Architecture and others) explicitly reiterate constructivist tropes and methods originating in prewar realism. Our workshop questions are: How do artists critically reassess and adapt constructivist realism to the exigencies of the present? Can we conceive of a productive notion of realism beyond modernist or postmodernist versions of constructing the real? Can the concept of social abstraction open new paths for understanding the condition of contemporary realism?

Proposals submitted may choose to address, but are not limited to, one of the following topics:

- Theories of social abstraction and their relation to aesthetics and the arts
- Discussions of artistic realisms that engage with the social abstractions of capitalism
- Artistic procedures of construction in photography, film, installation, performance, etc.

This workshop is part of the SNSF-funded research project "Real Abstractions: Reconsidering Realism's Role for the Present", Principal Investigators: Wolfgang Brückle, Julia Gelshorn.

Organisation: Tobias Ertl

Please send an abstract (max. 400 words) and a short CV to Tobias Ertl: tobias.ertl@unifr.ch.

Deadline: 30 June 2023