	LAPDOGS OF THE BOURGEOISIE
	<i>Class Hegemony and False Consciousness in Contemporary Art</i>
	Exhibition Project Proposal Nav Haq/Tirdad Zolghadr

Introduction

Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie investigates the latent issue of **class** underlying the field of contemporary visual art. The project is an open question, an invitation to a discussion long overdue, and does not offer foregone conclusions or rigid hypotheses other than the relevance of the conversation itself. On the one hand, we wish to raise the question of whether a given socioeconomic background still helps define your artistic career – and to which point the said career might reflect or consolidate the hierarchies in question. On the other hand, we need to ask whether the traditional analytical tools at our disposal are helpful in such an examination of the artworld today.

Class raises its own set of queries, and is not identical to issues of elitism or conditions of production. The latter has been eagerly debated in recent discussions of post-fordism and the modernization of corporate ideology, thus sidestepping questions of class per se. Elitism, on the other hand, frames the question of hegemony as one of aesthetic snobbery or the trickle-down enlightenment of the avantgarde. And although *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie* will address both the vanguardism and the glamorized self-exploitation so typical of the arts, it shall focus on identifying dominant socioeconomic groups in their changing relationships with other strata, as well as pinpointing the precise nature of that dominance in and of itself.

Class does not offer the rhetorical escape hatch of abstraction. Rather, it inevitably raises awkward questions regarding the very participants, their backgrounds, patrons and ideological partialities. This is perhaps the reason why the role of class structure has been so easily overlooked in the production and presentation of contemporary art, especially so in an era where artists are coaxed into anthropological framings of their practice. What was it that made gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality eclipse the class issue with such ease? *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie* will present a collaborative project with a number of practitioners that scrutinise their own positions, bias and gaze within the hierarchy of cultural production. It will seek to identify the levels of affect class has in the field - from artists, through to curators, funders, institutions and even audiences – and will also look at the hidden anxieties involved, particularly in relation to the actual decision-makers in mainstream art.

Some of the questions the project will look to pose are:

- How exactly, and to what extent does the class locus play a role in production, direction, criticality and dissemination of contemporary art?
- What might the term "false consciousness" mean in an age of postauthenticity and kneejerk relativism?
- What are the class statistics in the history of art? How does this compare with today?
- What were the effects of recent developments in the social sciences?
- What is the role of cultural self-reflexivity? Is self-reflexivity the prerogative of the middle classes, or one of the exclusive pleasures of the creative industries? Is it they who dictate taste, who decide what the others should be seeing, who make decisions on such contemporary anomalies as 'what is critical and 'what is international'?
- What is the connection between global class-consciousness and political theories? Can class mean the same thing in different metropolises?
- *86% of those working in the visual arts have been privately educated.* How can the field of visual art look to become more class-reflexive?

The Form 1 – **research**

Alongside the exhibition, in fact commencing at a much earlier stage, a small selection of artists and academics will be invited to produce research around the class issue. This will help inform the critical mass developed around the exhibition, but will also itself be presented as information to be fed directly into it. A writer will be commissioned to look at how institutions and curators attempting to help artists that are considered to be from under-developed countries, could actually be aiding a class divide in certain regions. The edited results of this research will be compiled a publication to accompany the exhibition. A number of events will be held around the show, again looking to further scrutinise the issue, and will also be a means to allow an audience to become involved. A first platform for this research is a radio program to be broadcast on Radio Gallery in the Summer of 2006, a program which is currently being conceived and elaborated with artist Dirk Fleischmann.

The form 2 – **exhibition**

The project will be a decidedly self-reflexive initiative, forming a performative situation that will look to implicate all involved, including artists, curators, institutions and audience. It will be developed in close collaboration with a group of artists identified as working with issues directly relating to class structure, who will participate towards accumulating a body of research, and ultimately produce a series of commissioned works for presentation. The artists will look to use the various demographics involved as a source material for activating their own initiated works.

For example, an artist will be invited to work with the particular class demographic of the exhibition's specific audience. Whereas other artists will look to use the composition of certain international art scenes – whether 'established' or 'un-established' – in order to scrutinise whether their standing has been established around issues of class infrastructure.

The artists

None of these individuals have been selected along thematic premises. Their engagement with social class per se is not a criterion. Rather, they've been chosen for their methodologies and abilities to analyse the politics involved, for possessing a strong sense of humour – particularly as they will also be implicated – and for having the tact and finesse for treading a fine line between provocation and hard-hitting pertinence.

They will include:



Annika Eriksson is an artist that always looks to dissect hierarchical structure, particularly within the artworld, and is repeatedly engaged with class in her projects. The works offer a strong sense of performativity and self-reflexivity, implicating – and often presenting in equal terms – everyone involved in the processes of cultural presentation, from the auteurs/curators of the 'creative class' through to the cleaner.



Chris Evans is interested in the social relationships inherent in the production of artworks. Previous projects include the *UK Arts Board Agency*, which looked at the artist-institution relationship by asking whether funding application writing really is to be taken out of the equation of making art. His project *Coptalk* invited representatives from the national police force to give presentations in European art academies, encouraging alternative recruitment outside of art.



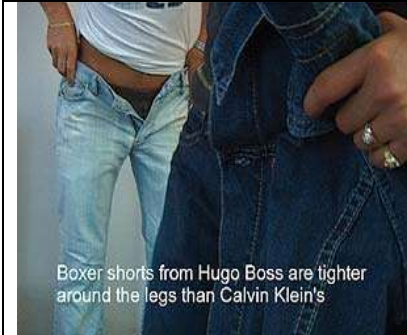
Dirk Fleischmann takes the achievement of the maximum profit margin – with a minimum of means – as subject matter and as a *modus operandi*. His work uses the game show, the kiosk, the lecture and even the chicken farm as its format, but always remains an unassuming, modest inquiry into what free market principles look like in practice. His artworks involve a diligent, long-term commitment to a given experiment or enterprise. This is important in a project such as ours, and explains our decision to engage with Fleischmann early on in the preparatory stages.



If the curatorial intention is to ensure self-reflexivity, break with established traditions of “politicized” exhibitions, and allow a genuine debate to emerge, we must engage with artists who are not the usual panoply of like-minded *compagnons de route*. **Sylvie Fleury** is an artist with a knack for fetishism-as-form, and who has dismantled the stereotype of the artist as self-styled bohemian. Instead, Fleury has not only embraced status icons and bourgeois aesthetics as material for her work, but loves to unmask the complicity of art history with those very visual traditions it loves to abhor.



Hassan Khan has worked in various media including documentary film, video and performance. Throughout his work, a distinctive feature is his finely-honed interest in tacit, socio-symbolic power relations. If his performance project *17 and in AUC* examined the American University of Cairo as a remarkable breeding ground of local elites, his more recent video installation *The Hidden Location* examines, among other things, the subtle workings of hierarchy in ideologies of public space.



Boxer shorts from Hugo Boss are tighter around the legs than Calvin Klein's

Julika Rudelius works with video, and focuses on discursive rationalizations of power relations, often in contexts of cultural Otherization, be it with respect to fashion brands or macho male bonding. Her work traces ways in which matter-of-fact discourses of Truth are tailored to fit ones immediate needs. In the piece *Economic Primate*, for example, Rudelius looks into correspondences between seductively eloquent proponents of free market Darwinism and the clinical definition of the violent psychopath.



Natascha Sadr Haghghian is an artist who works with video, performance and online modes of presentation. In *Bioswop*, she investigated the persistent question of the creator’s biography in the arts, where the Author has never been analyzed with the same deconstructive rigor as in the field of literature. While in *Present but not Yet Active*, Sadr Haghghian reconsidered Biennial traditions in the light of issues of representation and visibility in 1960s zoology.



Marion von Osten is a researcher, curator and artist who works with various media. She is widely known and appreciated for her long-standing engagement with Marxism, and with postcolonial and feminist theory. Von Osten's analyses of working conditions in the creative industries were key contributions to the debate on postfordist mechanisms of glamorized self-exploitation in the contemporary artworld.



Nick Waplington & Miguel Calderon's ongoing collaborative project has recently culminated in *Terry Painter L'Artiste* a graphic novel providing a satirical view of today's artworld, following the rise and fall of an emerging artist. It looks at the limited methods and conditions for 'working' particular elitist social circles, which artists feel they need to penetrate in order to gain recognition.

Researchers will include

- **Frédérique Jacquemin** is an art historian who is head of programs at the Fondation Hicter in Brussels. He also works as a curator and filmmaker, initiating training and research projects in Europe and Africa. His work engages critically with questions of long-term cultural policy and with art as a mainstream fashion.
- **Beverley Skeggs** author of *Class, Self, Culture*, and *Class and Gender*, is a professor at Goldsmiths University who has published widely on issues of class, reassessing its shifting significance both as a tool in cultural analysis and an increasingly loose term in the mainstream media.