Living Currency

by Henry Babbage

Published on 25.03.2021



Henry Babbage reviews (working title)*, an exhibition by Frankfurt-based New Zealand artist Alex Chalmers and French artist Gisèle Gonon, at gr_und project space in Berlin. The artists explore how the circulation of commodities shape our thresholds of political implication, drawing our attention to the global economy's reliance on an interdependent network of shipping and delivery services, and our own alienation as consumers from labour.*

> Your life goes back to vicious chance, to arbitrary violence, to a new credit card, new car loan, torn from those who hid you, ripped from those who shared bad debt with you. They don't hear from you again.
> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons* (2013)[01]

What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling good becomes evidence of justice's triumph?

Lauren Berlant, *The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics* (1999)[02]

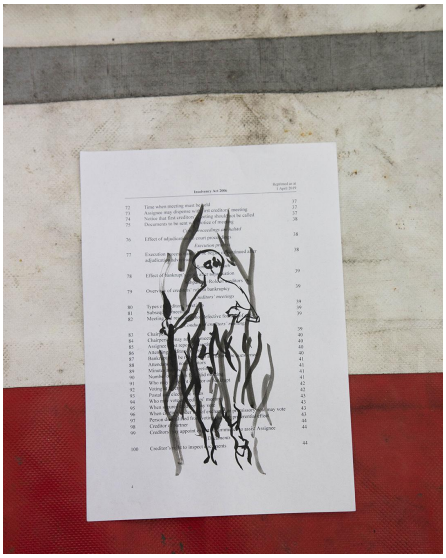
At gr_und project space, in Berlin's northern district of Wedding, the cobblestones of the sidewalk continue into the building from the street outside. This peculiar detail gives the visitor the feeling of being both inside and outside at once, as if the walls of the space have been built to enclose an area of the main road. From 12 December 2020 to 7 February 2021, New Zealand artist Alex Chalmers and French artist Gisèle Gonon presented *(working title)*, an exhibition that considers productive work and debt, modern logistics, the warehousing and movement of commodities and the affect of neoliberal bureaucracy that defines the new global economy. Chalmers is currently studying in Hague Yang's class at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and living in an industrial area of the city—he told me about how on the street where he lives drivers of freight trucks on long-distance haulage jobs frequently park for the night and sleep in their cabs, so that the constant conveyance of shipped goods passing through the city routinely marks his days. In 2021, the globalised nature of contemporary supply-chains has led to the creation of distributed production networks for consumer goods and a rerouting of industry towards cheaper labour markets, to geographies peripheral to the main centres. Europe's motorway network has grown exponentially since the end of the 20th century and represents the demands of a global economy oriented from the countryside towards the city. Just-in-time production supplies are deployed to the urban metropolitan centres from factories and 'fulfilment centres' in the hinterlands by sub-contracted delivery drivers in unbranded vehicles. In the height of the first lockdown, as commerce moved overwhelmingly online, courier drivers in Germany were delivering eight million packages and small parcels every day. In *(working title)*, Chalmers and Gonon pose the question: how does the circulation of commodities shape our thresholds of political implication?



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease*, 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



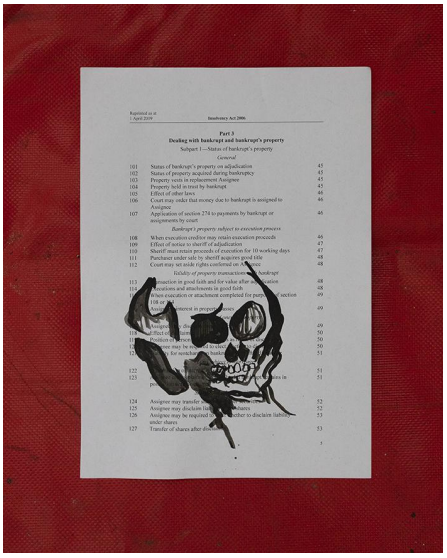
Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Photo: Henry Babbage.



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



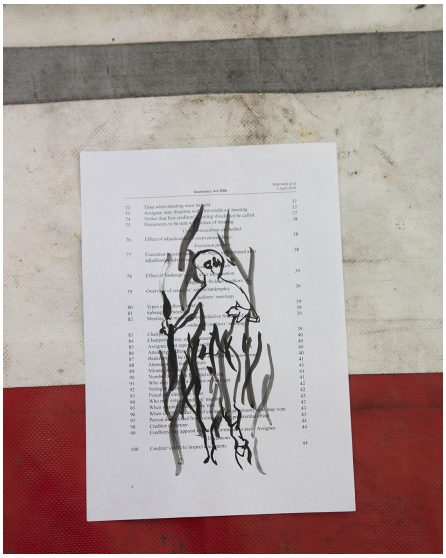
Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease* (detail), 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *PacLease*, 2020, LKW Plane, oil and ink on printouts, overall dimensions: 720 x 240 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.

The central work in the exhibition is *PacLease* (2020), Chalmers' installation of a massive tarpaulin, usually fitted on a truck trailer, displayed instead inside-out on the gallery floor so that the branding of the transport company is folded underneath and hidden, while drawings on paper are placed on top, like a merchant's wares at a market. The canvas surface of the tarpaulin is divided by a seat belt-like grid of polyester webbing, acting as a framing device for the drawings. The drawings themselves are made in ink over A4 pages of legislative text printed from New Zealand's Insolvency Act in expressive yet elegant strokes. They evoke a sense of movement—something fugitive in their ambiguity—while variously depicting; an ear, a skull, a skeletal tree without its leaves, a silhouette, a cloaked figure, a naked figure, and a pair of figures, gesturing, perhaps in conversation. Chalmers' drawings act curiously like Rorschach blots—thus it cannot be said with certainty that the cloaked figure is not rather a figure engulfed in flames, self-immolating. On one of Chalmers' pages, placed near the centre of the tarpaulin grid, a black silhouette painted over the length of a page of printed text appears as the distinctive and aerodynamic chassis of a Lamborghini. Lamborghini's website describes the Aventador Model S as possessing a "front end shaped to resemble a shark"[03]—here it stalks the printed obligations of the dense legislative text with the social and cultural associations held within this icon of extreme wealth.

Integral to the functioning of the global financial system is the unobstructed circulation of goods and money. The covid-19 pandemic has made plain the global economy's reliance upon an interdependent network of shipping and delivery services. Powerful logistics has led to complex supply chains composed of dislocated industry locations and peripheral production points. Europe's motorways and the liberalisation of truck transport in the European Domestic Market act as the precondition for the mobilisation of the consumer goods industry and its consumers' expectations for next-day and same-day delivery. What better example of this globalised 'track-and-trace' relation between consumers and suppliers could there be than for Chalmers to cast the space as a loading bay, its spare tarpaulin skin left folded up on the floor and the truck not parked but rather out for delivery?



Alex Chalmers, *Untitled* (detail), 2020, oil on metal sphere 3 parts, Ø each: 20 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Alex Chalmers, *Untitled* (detail), 2020, oil on metal sphere 3 parts, Ø each: 20 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Alex Chalmers, *Untitled*, 2020, oil on metal sphere 3 parts, Ø each: 20 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *Untitled*, 2020, oil on metal sphere 3 parts, Ø each: 20 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *Untitled* (detail), 2020, oil on metal sphere 3 parts, Ø each: 20 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

The walls of the gallery are meanwhile punctuated by metal spheres, 20cm in diameter, approximately the size of human heads, in sets of two or three, affixed to the wall and painted with emoji pictographic emotions (*Untitled*, 2020). The spheres are highly reflective and seductive, and the viewer's fisheye appearance in the mirrored surfaces is like noticing oneself in the domed super wide-angle view of a security camera. The emojis are painted in brushstrokes of cadmium red, ivory black and cobalt violet, and to view them is also to see each emoji superimposed on the reflection of your face, filter-like. The emoji icon that is repeated throughout the series in this case is the icon coded U+1F60A—described by the

most up-to-date Unicode set (v13.1) as one “smiling face with smiling eyes”.

As critic Lauren Oyler has explained: “The efficiency offered by internet language is less a shortcut to meaning than to social cohesion.”[04] The emoji, as pure expression, act much like the now commonplace customer experience feedback interfaces—the toy-like green, orange and red button terminals that populate airports and shops. A Finnish company called HappyOrNot that specialises in ‘sentiment analysis’ trades on the promise of being able to report users’ impressions of a business’ service at the exact time and location of the experience. HappyOrNot installs devices that survey respondents with the prompt, “How did we do today?” Throughout the masked greetings of the covid-19 pandemic moment, we have all been restricted to smiling with our eyes, too. Chalmers’ emojis perform a similar mute conveyance, the solicitous decor of contemporary branding and a forced positivity that quickly becomes unnerving. These smiles are the affective accompaniment to our precarity, the cultural logic that presents (and demands in response) a cheerful countenance that condescends individual subjects who fall into financial insecurity.

No wonder then that Chalmers’s emoji sculptures, painted in purple paint on the lustrous mirrored steel, also resound to the bright, colourful, and plastic appearances of Lotto balls—the coloured and numbered balls that are randomly drawn in televised lottery shows popular around the world. Indeed, in a previous exhibition Chalmers did present the metallic spheres not as emoji icons but as lotto balls with coloured numbers. Where the national lottery raffles a chance of rescue from precarity, insolvency is another way for subjects to restart, to be rescued but also brought productively back into the workforce, back into the flows of capital. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten identify in their book *The Undercommons* from 2013, “To forgive debt is to restore credit.”[05]



(in foreground) Gisèle Gonon, *Heirloom v2*, 2020, soil, seeds, Farmer seeds of wheat and buckwheat from Klaipėda, Lithuania, 105 x 40 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Gisèle Gonon, *Heirloom v2* (detail), 2020, soil, seeds, Farmer seeds of wheat and buckwheat from Klaipėda, Lithuania, 105 x 40 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Gisèle Gonon, *Heirloom v2* (detail), 2020, soil, seeds, Farmer seeds of wheat and buckwheat from Klaipėda, Lithuania, 105 x 40 cm. Image courtesy gr_und, Berlin.



Alex Chalmers, *Museum garden*, 2020, field recording, 1:23:40. Image courtesy the artist.

If Chalmers' absent delivery truck suggested the distance between markets and the labour upon which they depend, Gonon's sculpture towards the far end of the gallery—a cast tractor tyre in rammed earth—invoked the agricultural producers invisible in the conveniences enjoyed by city-dwelling populations. Gonon's earthen tyre, titled *Heirloom v2* (2020), was created as a 1-1 scale replica of the tractor tyres used on her family's farm near Saint-Étienne in France, where she grew up and worked. From the top of *Heirloom v2*, new shoots had sprouted from the soil, grown from oat

and wheat seeds the artist brought back from Lithuania, where she completed a recent residency. The roots from the seeds grew over the course of the exhibition's duration and gradually ruptured the integrity of the tyre shape, suggesting a skewed relationship between growth and productivity. Degrowth theories posit that to exit from economies predicated on endless growth requires a global system that must operate within Earth's biophysical limits—to conceive of planned production and energy descent as an opportunity for civilisational renewal. As cities continue to expand, relentless sprawl displaces the landscape from the experience of the city, and consumers remain alienated from the suppliers who provide their subsistence. Gonon seems to imply we might do well to excavate the foundations for our ways of life. After all, it is the sight of the tractor tyre that serves as a reminder that the countryside surrounds the city.

Berlin has seen large-scale protests throughout the last year as farmers have descended on the city in massive convoys of several hundred tractors at a time. Farmers joined in protest to drive from farming regions across Germany, gridlocking traffic and forcing closure of autobahns—and in another protest blocking access to central warehouses of large food traders in a stand against supermarkets' pricing policies. These farmers know that the locus of power is not the courthouses and the state offices, but rather the logistical infrastructures that service the productive capacities of the state. The Invisible Committee, the group of activists whose sensational arrests and (eventually unsuccessful) prosecution on terrorism charges for sabotage of railway lines in France brought them to international attention in 2008, once asked in their book *To Our Friends*; "what is it that appears on euro banknotes? Not human figures, not emblems of personal sovereignty, but bridges, aqueducts, arches…"[06] The appearance of tractors arriving from the countryside ask us how our ways of life depend on the subjugation of others—put simply, in what way do the consequences of thought *here* affect the lives of people *there*? This negligence of policymakers was brutally articulated in signs from the recent protests:

"Fachkräftemangel gibt es nur in der politik."
(A shortage of skilled workers only exists in politics.)

"Do you know who feeds you?”

"We need a future—now.”

Footnotes

01. Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Compositions, 2013.

02. Berlant, Lauren. “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics.” *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, edited by Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns. The University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 58.

03. www.lamborghini.com/en-en/models/aventador/aventador-s

04. Oyler, Lauren. *Internet Speak*, London Review of Books, 7 May 2020, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n09/lauren-oyler/short-cuts [Accessed May 2020].

05. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.

06. The Invisible Committee. *To Our Friends*, Semiotexte, 2015.

Biographies

Alex Chalmers (b. 1991, Whangārei, Aotearoa New Zealand) currently lives and works in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. He completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts. At the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Städelschule, he is currently pursuing a Meisterschule in professor Haegue Yang’s class. Recent exhibitions include Städelschule Absolventum Exhibition, Frankfurt (upcoming), 1822-Forum Frankfurt (upcoming) Berlin Art week, Kunst Haus KuLe Berlin, Post Paris Ass, Palais de Tokyo, Paris Ass book fair, Paris, Villa Empain Studio Boghossian Foundation, Brussels, Individuating, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin.



Henry Babbage (Te Rarawa) (b.1989, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand) lives and works in Berlin.

creative nz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa