

# Encompassing Hostility: "Golden Eggs" at Team Gallery - artcritical

## *Golden Eggs at Team Gallery*

June 23 to August 5, 2016

83 Grand Street (between Wooster and Greene streets)

New York, 212 279 9219



Installation view, "Golden Eggs," 2016, at Team Gallery. Courtesy of Team.

The same day "Golden Eggs" opened at Team Gallery, the UK voted for the economic insanity of leaving the European Union, following on another economic insanity of austerity, privatization, and cheerful steroidal encouragement of the financial sector. The vote to leave was, in part, a severely misguided reaction against wealth concentration and the technocratic institutions of Brussels, Frankfurt and London, which have for decades segregated citizens and underserved them, or even put a boot to their neck.<sup>[1]</sup> "Golden Eggs," with work by 10 artists organized by Alissa Bennett, performs a similar kind of disaffection as those referendum voters, though framed by the analytic reflectivity of Marxism (probably at least a little sardonically) instead of the reactionary know-nothing populism that just made a basket case of Britain, that has threatened other European nations for almost a decade, and which is threatening the US election.



Gardar Eide Einarsson, *The Next Recession and Where to Hide*, 2016. Acrylic, graphite and gesso on canvas, 87 x 71 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Team.

Bennett described the show to me as a kind of answer to Art Basel, which had concluded five days earlier. That fair was, this year, seen as something of a test of the market's continuing hypertrophy, coming on the heels of an apparently lackluster run of auctions. And the outlook was judged to be good. Wasn't everyone very glad that the party is likely to continue?<sup>[2]</sup>

A large red-and-white painting by Gardar Eide Einarsson, *The Next Recession and Where to Hide* (2016), summed up the mood of the show succinctly: a giant arrow hurtling toward the lower right corner, imitating a graph of a crashing global market. It's a brusque, cool image that invites both terror and dispassionate admiration. It's appropriated from a January 2016 cover of *Time Magazine*, headlined with the painting's title in fearful, capitalized letters. Einarsson's painting excludes the original text, which had also ominously crowed about China and boasted a clever report from Davos, meaning the World Economic Forum, another Swiss confab for market makers, then congregating leaders and representatives of the most powerful businesses and nations on Earth to discuss economic policy, as they've done for 45 years. Although the meeting intends to help guide capitalism toward the benefit of all, it has prevented neither the greatest worldwide consolidation of wealth in almost 100 years, nor the costly, global, economic supercatastrophe that's been playing out since 2007.<sup>[3]</sup> In fact, it's probably done a great deal to enable those twin phenomena. Einarsson's bolting arrow isn't predicted by or aimed at Davos, but is cast by Davos; it's everyone else trying to find where to hide.

The people at Basel and Davos can be seen as the market's invisible hands, though perhaps "occluded hands" would be a better name, since although many of the participants at each conference are certainly recognizable, there's almost zero transparency in what they do. Hans Haacke's kinetic sculpture, *The Invisible Hand of The Market* (2009), anoints the whole show, hanging high on one wall. It's a large box, with the title written out like a billboard. In the center, a large, open hand tilts from side to side, its innards ticking metronomically. The disembodied hand greets, waves, grabs, swats, remains out of reach, and dominates. It quotes Adam Smith, capitalism's godfather, and his proposition that the private vices of individuals can, in their self-interest, invisibly, almost magically, develop into public benefits. However, Smith was speculating about the disembodied power of

crowds, not the secret pillaging of oligarchs. And what is the social benefit of a global art-as-investment frenzy remains unclear, even more so when vast quantities of artworks bought in Switzerland remain there, sealed in indefinite storage at the Geneva Freeport, constructed to sequester collections and avoid taxes, and maybe trade and deal and hide.<sup>[4]</sup> Given bad incentives — such as those that reward opacity in the art market, or that repay, with taxpayer money, dumb, massively over-leveraged financial bets — private vices may instead yield results which are simply vicious, yield a market whose aims and procedures are warped to favor wealth accumulation rather than innovative cultural production or social good.<sup>[5]</sup> Karl Marx asserts that this is capitalism's inevitable trajectory, not merely an accidental flaw.



Bjarne Melgaard, *Untitled*, 2016. Steel, wood, unfired clay, oil paint and mixed media, 91 x 39 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

Alex Bag, in *Coven Services* (2004), shows what such market forces look like as products for ordinary consumers (not *citizens*). Her video strings together several ad parodies, with interludes consisting of segments from a published sex tape starring the heiress Paris Hilton, shot in infrared, so that she and her paramour are rendered in green and black. This is riffed on by Bag, in clips where she plays PFC Jessica Lynch in green Army fatigues, selling Halliburton; a green witch named Eli Lilly dosing nubile children with Prozac and Satanism; and by a guy in a night-vision segment pimping the “warm, sticky infojaculate” pumped to consumers by AOL-Time Warner. She weaves a narrative of the interconnectedness (read: “collusion”) of the military, politics, capital, and entertainment in the construction of a totalizing ideology of consumption and obeisance.

Three text-based works — by Barbara Kruger, Jessica Diamond and Bjarne Melgaard — sneer at the developed world's socioeconomic turmoil, bringing to the surface a primary contradiction. Diamond's wall drawing declares “I HATE BUSINESS,” which is the product of her own business. Two prints by Kruger, wonder, respectively, about the relationship between being successful and feeling “FAKE,” and “IS BLIND IDEALISM REACTIONARY?” Melgaard snipes, “THE WORLD IS FULL OF RiCH CORRUPT CUNTS.” But his *oeuvre* is known for its ostentatious kind of cuntiness and opulence, and here is also included one of his sculptures, mounted with beauty

products and a Brioni jacket. Embroidery over the interior breast pocket, conspicuously visible, indicates that it was made specially for Melgaard; I have no clue what a bespoke coat costs, but suffice to say its retail price is at least several thousand dollars. None of these artists would be considered rich from the vantage of patrons in the transnational capitalist class who fund so much of the art market. But, looking upward, they seem rich, and it can feel really impossible for emerging artists to gain purchase among such established figures. The art market, like other markets for other labors, is built in such a way as to suppress or exclude the emergent and retain the privileges of the already established, even the blasphemous establishment.

It's tempting (and probably necessary) to extend this kind of critique, but it also smacks of the same myopia that always infects dogmatic demands for ideological rigor, or at least for the appearance of absolutism. In 2011, during the Occupy protests, TV personalities jeered at the protesters for leaving rallies to withdraw cash from Bank of America ATMs for lunch or whatever, as if the protesters' coerced interaction with corporate behemoths was in some way hypocritical to that movement's purpose. Einarsson, Haacke, Bag, Melgaard, Kruger, Diamond, and other artists here, as well as Bennett, have a license to criticize money and power. The meaning of their work, as pointed as it may be, is often secondary to its value for collectors. If the insults lobbed at capitalism provide good return on investment, then the market will reward its hecklers. These artists didn't choose this, but they are illustrative. They're collected at Basel by the kinds of people meeting at Davos, and they make a living. But Davos and Basel have true power, not them.<sup>[6]</sup>

Marx, elaborated by ideologists such as Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, wrote of sharpening contradictions as a propulsion towards the collapse of capitalism (a longtime fantasy not likely to be realized anytime soon).<sup>[7]</sup> As can be expected, those forces and contradictions play themselves out in every aspect of culture, from factories to studios. The depredation of middle and working class nest eggs, combined with the distribution of golden parachutes to speculators who were supposed to lose under the economic laws they had championed, has driven the contradictions to extremes. Will they crack? What happens then?



Alex Bag, Coven Services, 2004. Videotape transferred to digital storage, sound, TRT: 14:40. Courtesy of the artist and Team.

<sup>[1]</sup> By "severely misguided" I mean voters were literally given very bad counsel.

<sup>[2]</sup> Here's a guess that will never be confirmed: it would not surprise me at all to learn that the distribution of sales at Basel and its satellite fairs closely tracks the income distribution of the top, say, decile of wealthiest people on Earth. Nor would it surprise me if the predictive power of art-market speculators is worse than flipping a coin.

<sup>[3]</sup> Davos's consortium didn't even seem to see the crash coming, in their 2006-07 report, worrying more about interest rates and commodity prices than the possibilities for global market failure. As Joseph Stiglitz reported from

the meeting in 2009, writing for *The Guardian*, "The spirit was captured by one speaker who suggested that we had gone from 'boom and bust' to 'boom and Armageddon.' [...] The only upbeat note was struck by someone who remarked that *Davos consensus forecasts are almost always wrong*," (emphasis added).

<sup>[4]</sup> cf. "Swiss Freeports Are Home for a Growing Treasury of Art," by David Segal, in the *New York Times*, July 21, 2012, and "The Bouvier Affair," by Sam Knight, in *The New Yorker*, February 8 & 15, 2016.

<sup>[5]</sup> Is it any better or worse that at New York's galleries, the public are invited in to freely browse what most cannot hope to ever afford, crafted within a conversation that excludes them, and are expected to pay at museums to enjoy what they are told is their cultural heritage, which is delivered to them in a patronizing tone? An even more useful question might be how claims about the necessity of art can be held up as a way of deflecting or ignoring critical thought about the manipulative way that museums, galleries, collectors, and trustees collaborate to inflate prices and artificially control the market. A great example of this bait-and-switch can be seen in Intelligence Squared's 2009 debate "The Art Market is Less Ethical than the Stock Market," in which critics of the art market's opaque self-dealing are repeatedly accused that questioning the operation of the market is equivalent to denigrating art itself.

<sup>[6]</sup> And Team isn't even among the five galleries that accounted for 30% of museum solo exhibitions between 2007 and 2013.

<sup>[7]</sup> That's a fantasy that's been spun out for 170+ years. Whatever the current conditions, this political economy has plenty of juice left in it.