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A commentary on the series of paintings Inequality by Agata Bogacka situating her work in the context of contemporary discussions about the relationship between economy and visuality.

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## The Economy of (In)Equality

*Economy is the sole pathway of any creative movement*

Kazimir Malevich

According to Guy Debord's now-iconic words in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the "spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image."<sup>1</sup> It follows from this that the society of the spectacle is one in which the entirety of visual culture has been colonized by commodity circulation, within which capital expresses itself primarily through images. To Debord's thesis, Emmanuel Alloa puts this crucial question: when does the critical moment occur – the actual condensation by which capital makes itself visible? How might we pinpoint this threshold moment when capital turns into image? And should this moment be defined anew with each image, or does it obey some generalized structure of circulation, in which each image retraces the same predetermined route?

Alloa suggests that the decisive moment is the stoppage or stillness that inevitably asserts itself despite the fact that all visual forms in which we are immersed "are forever circulating and illustrating the economization of relations."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the society of the spectacle is the world of self-propagating images, which, despite their remarkable mobility, fail to alter the system's basic coordinates, and indeed all conspire toward the same goal: the accumulation of capital and maintenance of current economic relations, together with their corresponding forms of interpersonal co-existence. Social relationships "can be summed up in their entirety as images, as distant and formal abstractions."<sup>3</sup> Images, once capable of opening us to the outside world, today represent only the "ultimate outcome of the process of abstraction," in which the essence of each is no longer based on its content, emotional charge, or aesthetic value, but on its annexation to a generalized, abstract system of exchange. All these dimensions function insofar as they find their proper place

in the system of universal commodification. As Alloa writes, “[t]he society of the spectacle is the image-to-come of abstraction.”<sup>4</sup>

There is perhaps no clearer illustration of the condensation of images into abstractions than charts and graphs that purport to describe economic relations. These convenient images commenting on social life and proliferating in scientific and popular forums alike translate abstract concepts into data visualizations. In this way, such images explain, make evident, and assimilate complex, invisible relations in contemporary societies, just as they simultaneously neutralize them and naturalize the system as a whole. At the same time, however, they are abstract images: they refer to the abstraction of economic exchange, which, in turn, justifies their existence and secures their legibility. A similar pressure is exerted in all images, including those that do not “present” economic phenomena.

The society of the spectacle is therefore, as Peter Szendy has observed, a great “supermarket of the visible,” in which the economy has incontrovertibly become an “iconomy” (i.e. capital has become an image within it), while all iconography has been subjected to economic rules.<sup>5</sup> Yves Citton offers an important expansion on this thesis with his claim that presiding over this supermarket of the visible (but also alongside it) is the supermarket of ideology: the great exchange of ideologemes, which circulate in contemporary life according to the same premises of commodity exchange governing everything else. Ideologies have not disappeared, as the current system’s most fervent or naïve apologists might claim; instead, they constantly and “deeply structur[e] our shared imaginative constructs,”<sup>6</sup> often in a manner markedly more banal and subliminal than worldviews of the past. It is through this union of iconographic and ideological exchange that the society of the spectacle so forcefully and fully commands our attention. Each image is seen from the outset within the generalized ideology of capital, where it is subject to a system of “perceptions that have been socialized and historicized by being filtered

through a shared language and culture, affecting us like packets of impressions that are simultaneously standardized, yet always somewhat variable.”<sup>7</sup> When we observe images, we always already know how to receive them, though the implied moment of instruction is never experienced directly or consciously. Certain things are simply “understood,” just as this or that “is apparent” or “plain to see.”

This understanding of our current iconomy strikes me as a necessary context for interpreting, or at least mentally embracing, Agata Bogacka’s painting series *Inequality* [ *Nierówność*]. These abstract works refer directly to the economy, though their relation to it remains highly obscure. One can no longer point to a clear exterior of the society of universal economization; its components mutually intertwine, and the system’s centripetal and centrifugal forces express not stable political tendencies, but rather the inhalation and exhalation of one organism. In place of handy statistical images used to explicate the world on a daily basis, Bogacka offers large-format enigmas in which intricately arranged color blocks simultaneously evoke and obscure economic charts. Given this strategy, it is not my goal here to offer the typical or even inevitable fiction of commentary that would ascribe a more conclusive position to the artist than her work itself suggests. Bogacka’s paintings should instead be treated as visual questions rather than rhetorical or implicit answers conducive to hardline positions. As I have already mentioned, such positions are often projected onto artists by critics, and consequently fall prey to the generalizing filter of economic circulation, which dilutes their intrinsic importance.

Following Emmanuel Alloa, we might say that all images (even when figurative or immersive) contain within themselves a moment of abstraction. For making an image requires one to turn away from reality, to retreat from it in order to compile its representation or recreate the world within the image.<sup>8</sup> In the society of the spectacle, overlaying this moment of abstraction is

a second moment: the most elusive but also most ruthlessly potent fact of the image's subordination to the logic of capital. We might here recall a moment from the essay "Dualism and Unism" ["Dualizm i unizm"], where Władysław Strzemiński wrote that the baroque "replaces the real bond seen directly by the eye with one whose tendency can be mentally discerned but is never disclosed to the eye."<sup>9</sup> Bogacka's paintings belong to a different era, in which the bond of ultimate precedence bypasses both mind and gaze for their shared, unconscious, and indiscernible annexation to the system of commodity exchange. And within the range of visibility, each work must take stock of the economic conditions operative today.

Can the paintings that together form *Inequality* be construed as allegories of social trends or forces? Is it possible for allegory to come in abstract form? Or is Bogacka instead perhaps generating broken allegories, coaxing the gaze beyond the sphere of understanding, away from the reductive identification of icons or symbols? In that case, the results would be allegories breached by color. It would then seem that economic charts – images of an inevitably allegorical nature – here precipitate direct sensory impressions that resist allegorization at the precise moment when a schematic template or standardized image of social reality is evoked.

Above, I described these paintings as abstract, but perhaps this claim should be qualified. In the end, they do refer to something visible. To call them figurative may be unwarranted, but within them something resembling the work of figuration is carried out. Perhaps they are figurative abstractions in search of an object, engaged in a pursuit that unites two abstract moments: first, they possess some point of reference, but they obscure it more than they disclose it. What remains of the columns and lines delineating graphs and tables describing diverse social trends and relations is nothing more than their tinted echoes: visual citations of imperfect fidelity to their source.

The titles of individual paintings (*Inequality, Disagreement, Dependency, Divisions, Opposition, and Configuration*) also share a general tendency to evoke social relations rather than name some concrete or tangible variant thereof. Of the second abstract moment, the point of reference itself, assuming that it is indeed a visual representation of data, is bound up with abstraction: either the abstraction of the processes or trends purportedly represented in the chart, or the abstraction that is the chart itself, which translates real relations into a schematically rendered figure. Either way, the status of these images seems to be suspended between two extreme poles of abstraction and figuration, as if they are diagrams projecting their own relation to these counterposed values of painterly economy.

Between abstraction and figuration there is also a third (but not necessarily intermediary) term: the concrete. Bogacka's paintings leave the distinct impression that they restore painting to the concrete basis of its sensory reception. They command attention, drawing the viewer into a drama of interacting hues, but they disclose nothing directly and instead leave the viewer alone, face to face with empty or suspended concrete. Of the clear depiction of economic relations there remains only an altercation or conflict of forces captured in color or brushstrokes – moments still less defined than the original referents that the graph purports to compile into its "objective" representation.

The concrete, understood in these terms, is most concentrated in the color found in these works. The paintings prompt us to ponder: what is the relationship between color and capitalism? Have colors, too, become yet another component of economic exchange, just like feelings, worldviews, or behaviors? And in what way do we speculate in color? What kind of surplus value do we extract from it? Bogacka does not illustrate concepts in these paintings, but rather conveys them using color as a device. Does she thereby claim color as a revolutionary tool or perhaps



also a new kind of nonconceptual ideology? Are these two states of color concentration really so distinct? As Wittgenstein once noted, colors have a special capacity to resist conceptuality. He wrote: "I cannot explain what 'colour' is, what the word 'colour' means, except with the help of a colour sample."<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, we might concede that color, in its essence, also resists economization because, despite the illusion projected by its nomenclature, colors depend upon the senses; they can only be seen, not named. Or perhaps, to the contrary, colors are subject to the economy with special intensity and thoroughness, for in the sweep of one gaze, white, red, and purple have interdependent meanings, even before language asserts itself into this exchange.

The case of color grows even more complex when we recall that it was color that Kazimir Malevich, progenitor of abstract painting, envisioned as surrogate for the object in nonfigurative art. As Nicholas Cullinan has noted, "colour is both the subject and object of suprematism, in a pictorial language that is otherwise resolutely non-objective."<sup>11</sup> Color thus serves painting as its most abstract and most concrete property. On the one hand, color must be seen before some concept of it can be deduced; it is thus inevitably ascribed to sensory perception. On the other hand, color is also what remains when all painterly objects have disappeared; it will be the art of painting's final object. If contemporary paintings are, without exception, subject to economization, then surely that process is also operative through color.

Bogacka's paintings seem to subscribe to this ambiguity of color, and even manipulate this property within their internal economy. In the series of three *Inequalities*, we see only white spread across the canvas by decisive brushstrokes to form uniform columns. The result resembles a chart that brings the painting to light more than it is presented upon it. At the same time, the paintings together conspire toward a paradoxical visual event. On closer examination, we find that the white does not

illuminate the canvas so much as its lack, disappearance, or deficiency. The paint ends before the columned chart is fully outlined. This has a dynamizing effect on the canvas, causing it to emit a hint of luminosity. But what produces this effect is in fact a glimpse of the base: the gray material of the canvas, which then alters the painting into a kind of fuzzy frequency chart in which white corresponds to the backdrop and not to the depicted figure. *Inequality* might then refer to the relationship between the activity of painting and its material basis, and this, again, would focalize the economic dilemma of the painting within its ongoing economic circulation. Might the relationship thus forged between that which is painted and that which is to be painted correspond to the unequal, asymmetrical relationship between the economy and reality in late capitalism? At the same time, through the act of withholding color, inscribing deficit into the painterly gesture, do the paintings not demand the real in spite of themselves, against their own inevitably commodified fate?

In these many ways, has Bogacka created objects that do not want to be commodities and, to this end, annul their own market value? This too is not the case. Instead, she seems to construct, with subtle precision, an auratic effect: a flare inscribed in the painting which might render it an irreducible object of direct sensory perception. In paintings such as *Opposition* or *Configuration*, it is the white that first introduces this moment of illumination by colliding with another color (purple or gray). In the end, the artwork's aura works against its reproducibility, as Walter Benjamin would have it, and thus opposes the principal basis of commodification – seriality.<sup>12</sup> And yet, as Alloa has shown, Malevich termed a similar effect the "surplus element"<sup>13</sup> after Marx's notion of surplus value.

From this perspective, Bogacka's paintings seem to correspond rather neatly to the logic of capital according to which each object, as a commodity, must possess within itself some mystical surplus tag linking it to its system.

If so, is it perhaps this glimmer – this ineffaceable and necessarily sensory property – which persists as a kind of surplus that can be neither bought nor sold? Through this glimmer, would the painting also (alongside its participation in the literal commodity circulation of the art market) become the medium of another transaction, another exchange, whose relationship to commodity circulation is not yet fully defined?

Is it perhaps then a freely roaming glimmer which, appearing here and there, neither creates the system nor stands as a series subject to the abstract principles of pricing? In this fleeting, fragile moment of illumination, might the fate of art (and with it all cultural practices) hang in the balance, since without it art becomes merely one more dimension of the spectacle, capital in disguise? In his theoretical writings, Malevich argued that the surplus element (the painting's "fifth dimension," after width, length, depth, and space-time) should be termed its "economy." He wrote elsewhere that "[t]he economy, as a dimension, is always revolutionary, never reactionary. The economy is the key to unity."<sup>14</sup> Revolution, then, through the abstract unity of the painting? Through its intransitive nature, its irreducibility, its nonfungibility?

To position Bogacka's series within this framework, we must first consult one more advocate for unity in painting: Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński. According to him, the enduring persistence of baroque art (a term he applied to the historical baroque period but also, for example, to cubism and the art of Cézanne), should now be counteracted with the concept of Unism. The baroque rested on the premise of dramatic tensions: visual equivalents of "conflict resolution."<sup>15</sup> Art, in this view, becomes a field in which the economy's contradictions can play out and eventually be reconciled. This reconciliation occurs for the mind but not for the eye, Strzemiński adds.

That is why the art of “dramatic outbursts” should now be countered by paintings “as organic as nature,”<sup>16</sup> i.e. paintings that abolish all visual hesitations in favor of total unity.

Bogacka seems to challenge this understanding of the essential nature of painterly surplus. At the same time, her paintings show that even the opposition between Unism and dualism disappears in the face of another economy or figure of dialectical tension. Could it be that inequality in her paintings does not strictly refer to social or economic conditions, but also to the painting’s visual irregularities? Could it simply describe her free arrangements of non-uniform color blocks, broken lines, and incomplete figures with edges blurred by drops of paint? And to what does all this give voice? To the inalienable corporeality standing behind the painting? To the moments of painterly completeness inscribed within each work?

Focusing on the paint itself hardly directs us toward the pure aesthetics closed within analysis of the painterly gesture. For even here lurks the curse of omnipresent economization. In works like *Inequality 3* or *Relation*, the painter’s individual gestures (brushstrokes, even unfinished ones) mark the threshold of a chart: a column juxtaposed with others into a figure denoting growth, loss, or balance. The inevitably exemplary status of our gestures refers to yet another figure of economy: substitutions of the individual for the multitude, or metamorphoses of the discrete object (if only by a twitch of the hand) first into an image, and subsequently into a variable for exchange. Was it not this very logic that Marx identified in the context of labor’s relation to capital? Was it not this work of economization that he discerned in the case of money as a universal equivalent, so that Debord could later recognize the same process in all visual representations? Does the exemplarity of gestures not direct us (revolve us back) to the heart of our current iconomy?

From this perspective, it would seem there is no such thing as abstraction. What exists in its place, however, is universal figuration: the figurative as a premise of the society of the

spectacle, even if it was first based on the mechanism of abstracting from the body, from desires, and from the individual gesture's limits. The gesture's exemplarity also introduces a dualism into each gesture of Unistic inclinations, confounding all notions of pure art. Outside the economy, there is no "organic" to speak of, and perhaps the latter is even the ultimate culmination of the former. To generate an alien surplus for commodity economy, one must do so from its interior: one must compel the charts to do it. That which seems to be external is so easily made the economy's spoils. Perhaps it is this insight which informs the choice of charts as a reference point for Bogacka's paintings. If so, then the artist nevertheless sought to maintain differentiation as a basis for generating the surplus element proper to each painting – the glimmer suggesting its uniqueness. Should we seek in this gesture some announcement or memory of a potential or no longer possible revolution, one that would put an end to the capitalist commodification of life once and for all?

This begs further questions: observing the paintings that together form *Inequality*, do we see them after the charts or before them? In what temporal relation do we take in these graphs of the ideology of contemporary capitalism? Are we only just learning this ideology, or are we already trying to unlearn it? Could what we are seeing, then, be the afterimages of socio-economic charts, and thus the fading memory of a system that, in these paintings, already no longer exists? Are the afterimages of ideology already free of their referent, or are they the most distilled proof of its encroaching persistence in our impressions and minds? To these questions, the paintings alone grant no answer. They inquire (and perhaps this is all they are tasked with, for now) about the position from which we look outward, and of the model of the world that would be, for them, the most fitting context. And this does not depend on them alone.

