

Laissez Faire

'Cristiano Volk: Laissez Faire' [book review], *Art Monthly*, no. 457, June 2022, pp. 39-40.

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Cristiano Volk's photobook, *Laissez-Faire*, opens with a pairing of images on opposite pages: a figure seen from the back, wearing a coat with a garish and exaggerated night sky of bright stars and glowing nebula; and what looks like a stock image of a hand tossing dice. The second image points to the great existential gamble of the book's title,

that Adam Smith's invisible hand will work to the long-term of humanity without destroying the ecosphere; the first image to a meagre compensation for the blotting out of sight of the wider universe.

This is a book of the urban night — of consumption, clubbing and office work, of the light of Capital, seen pure and without the competition of the Sun, and the photographic rendering of its colours in acidic clashes across many pages. Under such selective lighting, the night obscures much of the degraded urban scene that the system continues to produce. These are the colours, the book seems to say, of seduction and illusion alike, pointing (as David Batchelor argues in his account of chromophobia) to the various polychrome perils of superficiality, decadence and deception.



Throughout the book, Volk stages an elegant choreography of leitmotifs and discrete episodes that build into a lurid vision of a phantasmic prison containing (as Eugenie Shinkle puts it in her essay) 'billions of conjoined subjects whose sole purpose is to act as vehicles for the exchange of commodities'. So we see not just light but lighting in myriad forms; office facades and (through long lenses) the weary night workers within;

bits of the physical infrastructure of computer networking; people absorbed in phones and lit by their screens; cars, art works, trainers and other commodities lit to enhance their seductive power; and—referring to the invisible walls of capitalist entrapment—creatures in aquaria. Lest the point be missed, one of these is juxtaposed with an image of a boy encased in a large plastic globe that acts like a hamster wheel.

Compared to much of the fantasy that is adorns this environment, its inhabitants do not come off well, appearing as the unprepossessing herd of the vampiric machine, dazzled by its light, caught by phones, confined in office cubicles, or dazed by drugs and alcohol. The neon sign of a burger restaurant announces ‘it’s all about the meat baby’, a phrase that in this context takes on a grim significance.



One exception is the beautiful young woman who appears on the cover, her face seen from the side, her eyes obscured by reflected points of light: she looks like Audrey Hepburn (indeed the image is titled *Audrey*), and draws the reader in—the book itself is unavoidably a commodity, after all. A translucent orange slip cover can be removed to

reveal an entirely different colour cast beneath, as if to say that the removal of one deceptive coating yields only another.



A few points of disturbance break into this dream-like realm: sometimes the smooth facades splinter or crack; the guts of a dead mouse spill over expensive paving; in one tawdry image, a garage reveals a white van partly wrapped in fabric, and it is no accident that above the door is written the word 'arte'; a kitschy statue of Christ wields a brace of neon pistols, in a nod to the religious Right. Volk also carefully photographs certain commodities against backlit backgrounds that emphasise their surfaces and the way that they refract light: brightly coloured condoms, broken plastic forks and hypodermic needles with syringes. The latter read 'Discard After Use', a phrase which may be applied to all the objects and people that appear here. Each of these images points to human urges and their satisfaction, and each play with a pull and push of desire and disgust, gratification and pollution.



This opposition points to a wider effect across the book's image sequence. It may seem at first that the weak denizens of this environment are at one with Mark Fisher's capitalist realism, incapable of seeing beyond the reflections in the glass. And, as in Fisher, its inhabitants are far from content—they cannot be, of course, if the machine is to run. Dissatisfaction, fear, inadequacy, neediness, misery and mental illness must be continually propagated.

The book itself is disturbing in its high-production, high-colour glossiness, in which coloured light seems to adhere like a greasy film to the skin of objects and people. Allure may easily flip to abjection, as if the pages had become suddenly clammy. This

feeling may be akin to the subject of a collection of writings, edited by Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer over twenty years ago, *Hatred of Capitalism*: the visceral rejection of its many forms of pollution, regulation and oppression, and its violent suppression of alternative ways of life. In that book, with its then chimerical title, such a hatred seemed to be a form of madness, as the globally triumphant system had become so naturalised as to disappear from sight.



Now, in manifest dysfunction, capitalism has crashed back into visibility and thought. The achievement of *Laissez-Faire* is to visualise a fragment of that system, self-consciously using the fragmentary form of photography to still, quiet and examine various of its shards. In a recent book of essays, *Capitalism and the Camera*, TJ Clark cautiously asks if the affective power of the capitalist image world is weakening, as other such worlds have in the past. One sign of that weakening may be the disgust that runs through this book, a feeling which unavoidably rebounds on every consumer in their complicity. That feeling, depending on how it issues into thought, may just as easily carry those who experience it into radical or reactionary territory.

Cristiano Volk, *Laissez-Faire*, Fw:Books, n.p. 2022.