
ARCHITECTURES OF SOCIAL CRISIS IN MELANIE GILLIGAN'S FILM'S AGAINST CAPITALISM

Those who cannot people their solitude can never be alone
in a busy crowd.

Baudelaire, *The Crowd*

Her obsolescence is indispensable to her work with resistance. She will have become the philosopher of her own ruin, which is also the ruinousness of capital. By entering the theatre of the street each day and displaying the dignity of her irrelevance, she alters the interpretation of necessity.

Lisa Robertson, *Proverbs of a She-Dandy*

— This article takes as its principle subject the work of artist Melanie Gilligan, in particular two serial-films that comprise part of her recent project, *Films Against Capitalism*. These films address capitalism's polycrisis – its economic, social, and health crises – through its manifestations in the present. *Crowds* (2019) is an allegorical docu-fiction series that takes Orlando, Florida as its object of investigation, specifically as a town undergoing a process of gradual impoverishment.¹⁾ It follows a young woman named Irene as she drifts through the low-waged service economy that serves the tourist industry. Irene's semi-fictional encounters are interwoven with interviews with workers and members of the labor union Unite Here about their experiences, their 'social consciousness,' and their economic anxieties, introducing documentary elements into the film.²⁾ In contrast to the individuated perspective in *Crowds*, *Home Together* (2022), to which I will make passing reference in this article, is a docu-fiction series that looks at the idea of community, and specifically, communities of older people who have made the decision to live collectively in order to fight the alienating effects of isolation, both in the context of Covid-19 and more broadly in relation to aging.

— Gilligan's films investigate how housing, infrastructure, care, and community – areas of reproduction, and their representations – are inscribed socially, economically, and politically in a system mediated by capitalist social relations that evades its real function. In what follows, I want to suggest that *Crowds* and *Home Together* allegorize architectural representation and its

1)

Parts-wholes 2, the precursor to *Crowds*, is also set in Orlando. Rather than a traditional film, *Parts-wholes 2* is a video-sculpture: a cube made of screens which show various images simultaneously. The screens show moments of the hospitality industry – non-places in which people are pictured working: hotels (draped in the US flag); hotel rooms; motels inhabited by workers who cannot afford to rent their own apartments; highly securitized spaces of tourism and business, e.g. an airport. The description of the work states: "The video cubes, held together by metal bars, are sculptural forms that figuratively actualize the real abstractions of exchange, but they inevitably can only ever do this inadequately." Gilligan 2022a.

2)

Unite Here is a labor union that represents 300,000 working people, mostly women and people of color, in Canada and the USA with backgrounds from 200 countries across the planet. It represents workers in hotel, gaming, food service, manufacturing, textile, distribution, laundry, transportation, and airport industries. Unite here 2023.

concomitant social ordering. This article investigates allegory as a tool to illuminate capitalist social relations and its relevance for (militant) artistic research, which is the context in which this body of Gilligan's work was produced. Specifically, these works, along with an accompanying book, formed the qualifying materials for Gilligan's art-practice PhD. In her PhD book, Gilligan lays out "provisional directions for filmmakers interested in reflecting on capital as a social form, using film as part of the struggle to fight against it" (Gilligan 2022b: 11). Though not the main aspect of my argument, I will address the context of artistic research as a framework governing much artistic production today, within which *Films Against Capitalism* makes a critical intervention.

— In *Crisis as Form*, philosopher Peter Osborne extends architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri's idea of "history as a project" to form the theoretical basis for an idea of "history as a project of crisis," which is how Osborne conceives of *contemporaneity* as a historical project. For Osborne, the translation of the architectural use of project to mean design and plan, allows for the idea of plan or form of crisis to emerge. Building on Tafuri's work, Osborne argues that architecture's fate is entangled in its crisis: it is "addressed to the source of the crisis of architecture in history itself, that is, in the history of capitalism: in the subjection of architecture (with its primacy of the project, design or plan) to a capitalistic form of urban planning, in which the capital functions of building have primacy over all other architectural and social forms" (Osborne 2022).³⁾ This idea – of an architectural form/plan of crisis – comes close to offering a description of Gilligan's films, which expose the contemporary as a crisis of planning. In this essay, I explore how her most recent film works investigate the form and manifestation of capitalist crises in the current conjuncture, with the built and ruined environment and its architectures at its center.

— In order to describe the "house" in its fullest extent, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Paula Chakravartty investigate the racial and colonial inheritances within the "subprime crisis," within which those who failed to pay their mortgage (subprime loan) were also burdened with interest rates far higher than those given to 'prime' borrowers. They write: "Houses are unsettling hybrid structures. A house is, in all its figurings, always thing, domain, and meaning—home, dwelling, and property; shelter lodging, and equity; roof, protection, and aspiration—oikos, that is, house, household and home. A house is a juridical-economic-moral-entity that, as property, has material (as asset), political (as dominium), and symbolic (as shelter) value" (Chakravartty / da Silva 2012: 362). In

3)

For a contextually specific account of Tafuri's arguments and political positions, see Day 2012: 31–77. I am not engaging in the nuance of debate around the reception of Tafuri by e.g., Jamison that is countered by Day in her very insightful article; rather I want to engage with this idea of planned or formed crisis.

Crowds, architectural representation is cast with housing crisis, and is explored in the political and legal notions of representation in the protagonist's investigation of the labor union Unite Here. Unite Here also actively engages in struggle both in legal institutions such as courts, and in protests in the public sphere. In its economic analysis, *Crowds* explores the architectures of tourism and the service economy that feeds it. In these instances, the film addresses the racial dynamics – in terms of housing access, and in terms of access to the wage – that structure participation and exclusion in both markets. It is worth mentioning that Gilligan's fictional protagonist is a white woman, who, starting with her own disenfranchised material conditions, critically investigates these dynamics in her research and interactions.

— In the second film *Home Together*, which I will only briefly touch on in this essay, Gilligan follows Janette Ledwith who discusses the community-home she is building and the obstacles she faces in realizing this home, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Gilligan combines found news footage from Democracy Now and Real News, as well as interviews with researchers such as Seong-gee Um (who discusses immigrant and racialized elderly people) and Catherine Doherty (who discusses the devaluation of care-work and the relationships that care workers build with those under their care). In the final part of the series, the actor (Theresa) attempts to join a co-housing community but is turned away due to discrimination on the basis of her chronic illness. The docu-fiction series criticizes rampant liberal individualism and shows the ways that the pandemic exposed it, as well as the obstacles in the way of acting differently. In what follows, *Crowds*, and secondarily *Home Together*, are analyzed with respect to their representation of the form of the crisis of contemporaneity and the political potential or foreclosure that they figure.

PRECURSORS — For more than a decade, Gilligan's work has addressed the double notion of collective action and collective subject of Capital, in crisis. In an interview with art historian Tom Holert conducted between April and May 2011, she discussed the temporality of her (first wave) of narrative serial-films, *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008), *Self-Capital* (2009), and *Popular Unrest* (2010), in relation to capitalist regimes of time and domination (Gilligan / Holert 2012: 84–98).⁴⁾ With these early works, she focused on how capital's foreclosure of the future leads it to mine 'human capital' – the aspects of subjectivity that are optimized for capital's logic, and by default the logic of the market. For example,

4)

Holert describes the works as "fictional episodic dramas, displayed in traditional art world venues and distributed via Internet websites, function as allegories of the complex relations between the worlds of art and finance, but they might as well be watched as elegant, neo-Brechtian *Lehrstücke* about the interdependence of systemic collapse and individual trauma". See Gilligan / Holert 2012: 84.

according to Gilligan's *Popular Unrest* “looks at how capital manages and captures the future behavior and physical health of populations” (Ibid.: 87). In the film, capital is represented by Spirit, a figure that can instrumentalize technologies to predict human behavior. Using the logic of pre-emption – modelling probabilities – Spirit uses capitalist biopolitics to “increasingly incorporate the affective and biophysical dimensions of people’s lives” into its logic (Ibid.). In exploring the capacity to diagnose economic reality, Gilligan’s early video art articulated how capital’s orientation towards the future expands, precisely when value produced at one point is valorized through exchange at a later point. The version of crisis elaborated here is a secular crisis in a Marxist sense, meaning that it is a permanent crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labor relation – which weakens the position of workers in the wage relation.

— In these works, Gilligan locates aspects of the financial crisis and represents them but insists that “Capital as a whole is inexpressible” (Ibid.: 87). It cannot be represented. Yet she attempts to understand and depict the *meaning* of “total social capital” through its self-valorization process.⁵⁾ *Films Against Capitalism* exists on a continuum with these early works, producing a partial vision of the relations and conditions within which people produce their lives. However, I argue that the films I investigate here are more politically open because they offer materializations of the ongoing crisis, figuring capitalism’s abstract relations through the concrete scenarios that are staged and improvised.⁶⁾

WHERE IS THE CROWD? — *Crowds* takes place over five episodes that spiral around Orlando.⁷⁾ It starts with picturesque, somewhat banal scenes resembling stock images that do not suggest poverty but its opposite: the camera follows roads manicured with flowers and palms; cars speeding along highways that serve as both connectors and borders; children playing inside fake, plastic modelled waves that reach over their heads. Tourists walk through an airport. The camera glances across streets at motels, before it settles on Irene working in Denny’s, a fast-food restaurant. Using her laptop, the protagonist signs onto a job search website for service industry work [fig. 1].

— Orlando is sprawling in a way that cannot be navigated by foot. It is a city that *belongs* to cars and traffic. In episode 2, as

5) Gilligan writes, “Toward the end of *Popular Unrest* the group confronts and does final battle with the Spirit. As this segment ends, they encounter a vision of capital in its totality and see it for what it is—the totality of human relations touched by capital. They realize that the Spirit is not the totality but that we are and that capital’s mediation of our actions both unites us and puts all our activity into abstract relation. This point in the film is meant to suggest that perhaps this totality itself—or its contact through abstraction, if this characteristic could somehow exist without the value form—could be the ground for a new movement out of capital.” Ibid.: 88.

6) “I sincerely want to engage an audience in the way that a fictional drama does, using the moving and immersive forms of contemporary TV and film but making dramas that question the operative assumptions of our economic and political world.” Ibid.: 94.

7) *Crowds* was presented in an exhibition as a video installation on top of the floorplan of a home. The screens scattered within the space are punctuated by household utilities such as a sink and a mobile bearing the cliché “LIVE LOVE LAUGH.”



// Figure 1
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019

Irene is forced to cross the city by public transport, she considers buying a car but has no means. Upon entering a car dealership, she begins an interview with a woman describing buying a car after one year of taking busses, but it becomes audible. The conversations that she has with members of the labor union, Unite Here – mostly women and people of color – are integrated as meta-narrative within Irene’s reflections, or as memories bleeding fictional situations with documentary. As viewers we are required to hold these layers together, either simultaneously as in the conversation about car ownership, or at a delay, as when Irene takes a bus to the supermarket to buy food and a worker describes their experience of food poverty. In another instance, when Irene drifts between cleaning jobs, we encounter hotel workers who describe the brutal effects of housekeeping on their bodies. These moments, layered together, amount to a weaving of the texture of working-class life.

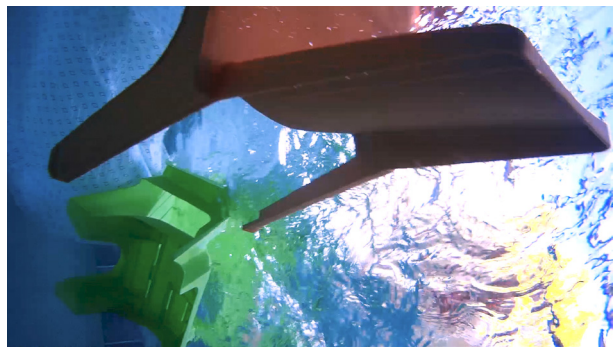
— In another scene, Irene walks to visit her cat (which she cannot keep because she has no stable home). In a voiceover she narrates a story about a person who saved their money to buy a house. The house is described as big but affordable; the people were happy there but did not feel at home. These people live in rooms that stretch out in front of them infinitely, but the walls and floor alone fail to provide a felt sense of stability. Irene sits on the steps belonging to the homeowners who are looking after her cat. In her story, the house was porous; its structure could be undermined; it lacked boundaries; its architecture was insecure. Gilligan’s rendering brings together the economic architecture of capitalism in terminal decline with the physical architecture in Orlando, itself built on swampland, and the character of Irene, who herself seems to be identified with the house as a figure whose internal structure is insecure.

ALLEGORICAL STRATEGIES — In Gilligan’s account, the difficulties in representing capitalism emerge from both the impossibility of comprehending capitalism as a whole and the ways in which representing its fragments remains insufficient to understanding capitalist totality as the artist writes in *Treating the Abstract of Capital Concretely*. With regards to the specificities of film itself, a medium that produces “non-instrumental deliveries of affect,” which “at times defy logic and communication” (Gilligan 2022b: 107) – she determines that even this medium is unable to depict capitalism’s density of information. Nevertheless, her chosen environments for filming are cities and their thickly interwoven convulsions of capitalist social relations. In her attempt to represent

capitalism in these films, Gilligan resorts to allegory as a method that can also critique liberal individualism.

— Following art critic Craig Owens, Gilligan’s model of allegory is defined as the doubling of one text by another: telling a general truth by means of narrating a particular story. In her terms, this allows readers and viewers to “make narrative sense from the fragments, from the wreckage of colliding narratives” (Ibid.: 107) In this sense, allegory provides Gilligan with a means to explore the fragments of capitalist life. She reaches for Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* as a tool to think about the ways the commodity form impacts the city and the relentlessness of the commodification of everyday life. Benjamin’s focus was on Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century, where he saw the commodity inaugurating an allegorical mode. He writes, “the commodity fetish is itself allegorical, modern culture is intrinsically allegorical, with the exchange value of the commodity devaluing all other traditional or use values. Allegory is no longer a stylistic choice but a predicament” (Ibid.: 108; Benjamin 1999) For Benjamin this predicament arises after his engagement with Baudelaire, for whom “*Everything* becomes an allegory” (Benjamin 1999: 10). Benjamin describes Baudelaire, the flaneur, looking upon the city from its threshold, pierced by alienation. Baudelaire does not belong to the city; he looks for refuge in the crowd. As Gilligan’s protagonist Irene drifts through Orlando, she evokes something of this figure’s rootlessness. While Benjamin’s view of Paris as a city cannot simply be transposed directly onto Orlando as urban sprawl, Irene is figured as a nomadic outsider whose sole stable objects are her cell phone and laptop, thus revealing the contradictory and alienated social world through her interactions.

— In this state, Irene drifts from her role as child minder, to that of a care worker, a nanny, a pool cleaner. In the last instance, she falls into the pool and hits her head. In a surreal moment, she hallucinates household items floating around her, as if she is overwhelmed by them [fig. 2a & b]. Her behavior starts to shift. When Irene finds herself in the carpark of Home Depot, a home improvement chain store, she walks the lines of an empty parking space. She jumps up and down. She repeatedly opens and



// Figure 2a & 2b
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019

closes a car door. She then lies on the ground in a parking space, as if she were a car [fig. 3]. We are made aware of the difference in scale between a person and a city wholly designed for cars, a space that is, in the sense given by Guy Debord, unified and homogenized so that it is merely free space for commodities (Debord 1970: 165). Here, the person rotates through life by working enough to survive, unable to get out of such conditions.



// Figure 3
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019

— In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin builds on Baudelaire in writing about the modern as spleen (Ibid.: 10). Spleen is here a kind of malaise that grows on melancholy, pain, pathos, creating a kind of pathology of a culture with the power and capacity to fracture. But spleen also has a utopian aspect. Benjamin writes that “[a]mbiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute—seller and sold in one” (Benjamin 1999: 10). This appearance of the dialectic, this dream image, is held in the arcades: which represents both house (interior, covered, domestic, inward) and street (outward, bustling, trade, exchange) in one, just as the ‘prostitute’ is both seller and sold in one. I have already discussed the house in *Crowds* as “shelter, lodging, and equity,” and architecture in general per Tafuri as subjected to capitalistic forms of urban planning, and thus at the forefront of capitalism’s ongoing crises. In the twenty-first century, the house has come to signify property, commodity, asset, and above all credit tethered to future (foreclosed) labor, or unpayable debt and ruin.

— In Benjamin’s schema, the predicament of allegory relates to how meaning is made, which is contrasted to a reductive movement within the valuation of commodities: “The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as a commodity, no other meaning” (Gilligan 2022b: 109; Benjamin 1999). In Gilligan’s film, there is an identification with this reduction, in that the film produces a landscape of price differentials, but in a way that takes a stance. *Crowds* thus renders visible “the unaffordability of everyday life, where the housing crisis is caused by the commoditised environment” (Gilligan 2022b: 109).

—— Philosopher Howard Caygill describes Benjamin’s dialectical analysis of allegorical contexts as antinomic, in its “nihilistic devaluation of the meanings of the world of things and actions accompanied by their re-evaluation” (Caygill 2010: 248). The devaluation and revaluation takes place by means of allegory. Here, there is a processual logic whereby “meaning is first destroyed and then restored at a higher, allegorical level” (Ibid.). Caygill describes this moment of destruction as one of fragmentation where the contexts of meaning are subject to ruination — “with the ruin as an emblem of the destructive character of allegory.” Time becomes spatial: “temporal meanings are frozen, objects and actions either piled up or stratified according to their structures that are indifferent to their natural meaning” (Ibid.). This logic is infinitely perpetuated. Caygill continues, “The annihilation of natural meaning by the allegorical is then succeeded by an allegorical restitution, one in which the destructive impulse of allegory is applied to itself” (Ibid.: 249). The meta-shift – the allegorization, the fragmentation of the fragment – allows for the questioning of the destroyed or ruined meaning.

—— Gilligan’s films should be understood to partake in this process. The filmmaker’s method, in which she develops scripted improvisations that are then played out in the context of the city as commodified environment by the protagonist, generates interactions with, and thereby brings into question, the material conditions that produce the city. In this sense, her interviews are also part of her own consciousness-raising process, presented as a moment of self-directed learning. The spontaneity of the shooting allows for a degree of chance and contingency and necessitates flexibility in terms of narration.⁸⁾ These scenes, layered with absurd or surreal moments that break the illusion of the video work in a Brechtian register, are then cut with interviews that incorporate documentary realism into the frame. It is by means of these formal strategies deployed throughout the episodes – which produce ambiguity between the real, the factual and experiential, and the sur-real – that *Crowds* creates allegorical meaning.

A TOWN THAT IS BECOMING POOR —— In the two final episodes of Gilligan’s partial vision of capitalist ruin, Irene works for a caterer in Winter Park, part of Orlando marked by former and foundational racial segregation. The camera pans across scenes

8)
Gilligan compares this style of producing to candid camera comedy films such as Eric Andre’s *Bad Trip* (2021).



// Figure 4
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019

of affluent villas, leafy streets, swamp lakes dotted with boats [fig. 4]. The area traverses Orange Blossom Trail, from Osceola to Orange County, the heart of tourism and the theme park industry.

— White Europeans settled in Orlando in the late nineteenth century, forcing native populations off their lands. Because of the region's climate and natural resources suitable for citrus production, the area grew steadily until the 1950s, when limited-access highways were built, putting the city at Florida's crossroads (Hollander 2011: 97). Soon after, the US Missile Test Centre was built 50 miles east of Orlando, bringing high tech industries. With the arrival of the world's most popular tourist attraction in 1971, the city almost doubled from 99,006 and carries on growing, as Gilligan's narrator says. But it remains poor.

— Just under a decade before Gilligan made *Crowds*, scholar of urban planning Justin B. Hollander described the typical characteristics of a couple who could leave the city, citing the widespread devaluation of homes that took place after 2006 as their reason for doing so. The neighborhood in question was built to provide for the growing population that came with the 1970s tourism boom and tech industries, modelled for suburban development with large lots and space for cars. Contra Gilligan, or maybe just prior to her, Hollander addresses the depopulation and abandoned property through the sub-prime crisis, observing that in their levels of turbulence, the theme park's rollercoasters and the housing market's booms and busts resemble one another. Indeed, in the moment of Hollander's investigation just after the 2008 crash, the city's population started to shrink: during 2009 an estimated 1,000 people left, and many more left Florida as a whole.

— Orlando is an object lesson in cities that rely on tourism. In turn, this reliance produces a service industry. Hollander explains that "tourism and theme parks brought 'an economy that is structurally deficient—the vast majority of workers are part time, low wage, and have few if any benefits,'" continuing that "the Orlando area is home to a permanent underclass of gainfully employed workers who cannot break through to higher-wage positions" (Ibid.: 97).

— Florida's history as a site of tourism reaches back to the era of Reconstruction. In *Emancipation Betrayed* – a history of Black organizing against White capitalists who tried to re-establish themselves during the initial period of reconstruction until the 1920s – historian Paul Ortiz writes about how Florida was already seen as a place of leisure for rich Whites and Europeans, built on the labor of the racialized and formerly enslaved (Ortiz 2006: 15). During the nineteenth century, newspapers compared Florida to

Italy, describing its climate as better than Naples and its landscapes as better than Florence, in bids to lure in rich Whites from the North or European settlers to spend their wealth (Ibid.: 16). Ortiz writes, “At the bottom of this entrepreneurial plan rested a disenfranchised and powerless black population whose low wages and hard work would underwrite the booming agricultural, service and shipping sectors” (Ibid.) This compulsion and this work discipline are among the afterlives of slavery, in which the paths to economic growth were paved by democracy’s concessions – how much freedom was given away? Ortiz’s title, *Emancipation Betrayed*, suggests an answer to this question. Florida’s draconian nineteenth-century Black Codes extended slavery by other means. In a private correspondence to me, Gilligan cited Ortiz’s observations as continuing in Orlando in many forms today.⁹⁾ As well as Ortiz’s account, Tana Mosier Porter’s article “Segregation and Desegregation in Parramore: Orlando’s African American Community” was an important reference in Gilligan’s research on Orlando. The scenes in Winter Park, which explore the continuation of systemic racial segregation after the Jim Crow laws in the post-civil war South, build on Mosier Porter’s account of this. Mosier Porter describes urban developers in 1881 building separate communities for white resort goers, and Black employees (Porter 2004: 292). This spatial division would later become legally enshrined segregation, intensifying until the 1950s. In her book, Gilligan points out the “tangible evidence of this history with its design for oppressive spatial control with its winding cul de sacs that seem constructed to limit access to people attempting to navigate these securitized private environments” (Gilligan 2022b: 114–15). Gilligan describes this planning as reminiscent of a form of Haussmannization, which controls the movement of people, here maintaining a racist hierarchy within the built environment. The scene around Winter Park progresses. A member of Unite Here narrates an account of hotels being run down, having become temporary homes for undocumented immigrants entering the USA to live and work as cleaners, housekeepers, and dishwashers, the underbelly of this magic landscape. We learn that these hotels also practice wage debt, an illegal process whereby workers are asked to clock out but continue working. Mosier Porter describes a zoning code adopted in Orlando in 1927, wherein White citizens demanded that Black residents be ousted from their homes and forced into newly segregated areas (Porter 2020). Gilligan traces the afterlife of this segregation, as it manifests in the service economy and in Orlando’s economically unstable built environment, as capitalism is inflected with the ongoing history of racialization.

9)

Melanie Gilligan, email to author, 13 April 2023.

— In *Crowds*, Irene joins a protest organized by Unite Here, opposing a Florida State Bill that would allow ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a federal agency) power over the local police [fig. 5a & b]. This crowd scene is intercut with her conversation with an organizer from Unite Here, who talks about how in Orlando undocumented workers vulnerable to deportation are mistreated because they have so few legal rights. The crowd leaves the court after the senate fails to decide on the Bill [fig. 6]. An interviewee describes the risk immigrants are subject to simply in walking to a grocery store, for fear of being stopped by the police, as well as that of working when they are sick, since they do not have access to the health system.

— In Orlando, major new housing construction took place until 2006, when it *began* its phase of managed decline. Single family units increased from 642 to 1,104 and multi-family units from 3,590 to 4,273 in the space of 3 years (Hollander 2011: 98). Between 2006 and 2009, the texture of the city changed dramatically. The real estate market crashed, and the foreclosure crisis began, effectively leading to vast sums of housing being abandoned; in these circumstances it was cheaper to abandon than to sell.¹⁰ This abandonment also led to the unkemptness of neighborhoods, the effective rewilding of formerly landscaped lawns, and graffiti and vandalism. In Gilligan's rendering of the crisis, though we are not given the specific history, we begin to see an account of the human suffering that the crisis and foreclosures produced, countering the ideological image of stability. Synthesizing Gilligan's *Crowds* and Hollander's text, we sense the presence of an employed but permanent underclass, that, due to this history, and current migration patterns, is also highly racialized. This is mediated through Irene's interviews with members of Unite Here, and the character of their protests.

— At the end of the film, as Irene is evicted from her apartment, from the singular house, she narrates a story about a *town* becoming poor. Irene tells how the town tries to stop this process, but the process is too strong. In

10) Single family rental permits dropped by 78% and multi-family permits dropped by 98% to just 66 in 2009. See Hollander 2011: 99.



// Figure 5a & 5b
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019



// Figure 6
Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019

Gilligan's script, the failing economy cannot be saved through hard work and perseverance. From inside the crisis, the liberal dream of the land of opportunity is an impossibility. In Irene's speculative fairytale about capitalist urban planning, the mayor and 'honorable townspeople' do all they can to open factories. Eventually, there is a lack of food and no ability to grow food. The town is hungry, and the people do not know why. The town's activities cease.

— In her analysis of capitalism's secular crisis through its concrete manifestations in Orlando, Gilligan diagnoses a poverty of low-income housing and an abundance of minimum wage service-work: in this equation, people cannot afford to pay for their basic needs. Orlando grows fast and poor. Those who service the tourist economy pay the highest price. They must work multiple jobs to live in conventional housing; otherwise, they live in cars.¹¹⁾ *Crowds* narrates that the 17,000 USD minimum wage, with 12% going to taxes and more than 50% to housing, leaves 77 USD per week for what is left – spelling out a crisis that produces decisions between leaving kids at home alone and not going to work.

— At the end of the film, Irene moves into a car with a rescue cat. In this fairytale, *Crowds* allegorizes capitalist polycrisis through its plans and designs that in turn produce insecurity on structural, economic, and emotional levels. In this sense, the internal, psychic fragmentation and the fragmentation of the external world are coterminous.

— Though I do not have space here to analyze *Home Together* in as much depth, I want to suggest that, with its focus on the collective, it is a response to the problem of the individual in *Crowds*. As the pandemic showed us, there are real crises across all sectors of the reproduction of life and care. In the final scene of that film, Michelle articulates the ways in which we will all become sick. Our crises will also be secular. We will not be able to revive ourselves. Michelle allegorizes the crisis of capitalism as a human health crisis, in the sense that, as the etymological roots of the word crisis suggest, a decisive point is reached that just precedes interminable decline.

CODA – ON MILITANT OR LIBERAL ARTISTIC RESEARCH —

Crowds is one of a series of film works and writing that comprise *Films Against Capitalism*. The films include *The Common Sense* (2014–15), *Parts-wholes* (2018), *The Bay Area Protests* (2016–2022), *Health as Individual vs. Health as Social* (2021), and *Home Together* (2020–2022). The written portion is a handbook titled *Treating the Abstract of Capital Concretely* (2022),

11)

The car plays a significant symbolic role, as the car is both travel infrastructure, and increasingly it provides a place in which to sleep for low wage workers who cannot afford housing, ending in tragedy. See Román 2018.

to which I have referred throughout this article. All elements of *Films Against Capitalism* are presented on a website, designed by LOKI and licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. The website also signals that this material is the virtual component of Melanie Gilligan’s Doctoral Dissertation, completed at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in 2022 (Gilligan 2022a). All the films/video works are available to access on the website [fig. 7 a & b]. They include a general description, stills, credits, and, when necessary, episodes, which include descriptions, effectively mimicking Netflix or other streaming services. The descriptions use simple, non-theoretical language, even if they ask probing questions. They are pedagogical, attempting to raise awareness and politicize their viewers.

— Gilligan’s practice is discernibly political but does not easily fit into existing models. Using scripted improvisation, the films experiment with innovative allegorical structures in an attempt to represent capitalism at the point of its multiple (infrastructural/reproductive) crises. The project has a pedagogical and activist function that is legible in its name: *Films Against Capitalism*. It is inspired and frank in its linguistic clarity. In this final section, I would like to ask: what kind of artistic research is this, what does it offer politically and aesthetically in relation to contemporary artistic tendencies that attempt to critique capitalism?

— Art historian Larne Abse Gogarty posits the political spectrum as polarized between the irrational in the realm of emotion and belief, in contrast to truth and science which stand as sovereign. Abse Gogarty sees these two positions – cleaved between the “ultra-left valorisation of spontaneity” that accompanies mass movements guided by the political compass of lived experience, and the moderate and liberal visions of “political education” guided by party structures – as the two poles that animate leftist political debates today (Gogarty 2022: 53). Her concern with this polarization between the rational and irrational is spurred by the epistemological foundations of Fredric Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping,” which has become a dominant tendency for artists and writers concerned with the critique of capitalism during the last three decades, including Gilligan.¹²⁾ In Jameson’s

12) Gilligan argues for relevance of narrative scenarios to analyze capitalist dynamics, rather than ‘God’s eye view’ overviews of, e.g., supply chains. See Gilligan 2022: 125.



// Figure 7a & 7b
Melanie Gilligan, *Films Against Capitalism*, 2022

account, these polarized epistemological foundations lead us to conspiracy. Specifically, conspiracy is the degraded version of the “cognitive map’s superior attempt to ‘think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’” (Ibid.: 55). Abse Gogarty formulates conspiracy as a “model of knowledge in legibly political art via the aesthetic category of the sublime (along with the racialised, proprietary dynamics that underpin it), emphasising this as the glue holding together the dyadic relationship between the respectable quest for knowledge that propels the cognitive map and the low associations of the conspiracy theorist” (Ibid.: 54). When manifested as art-making, this info-loaded mode uses lens-based media to attempt to map the relations of capitalism, a project linked with the liberal (and) conspiratorial tendency to imagine that data mining and foreign interference are the main culprits of the contemporary turn to the far-right in recent years.¹³⁾ Gilligan offers a model that counters this liberal tendency to blame data mining, but does not simply concede to the irrational; instead, she brings into view the social relations that index violent abstraction. It should also be understood that art’s irrationality is dialectically linked to its rationality, and the role that rationalization plays in the social process.

— In a similar vein as Abse Gogarty, Claire Bishop addresses this informational tendency within contemporary art as producing mild panic. For Bishop, contemporary art has become dominated by research – through the development of arts-based PhDs in Europe and the United States – where the systems of value are derived from neoliberal notions of “return on investment” and “measurable impact” (Bishop 2023). Bishop’s aim in her article, like Abse Gogarty’s, is instead to attend to the *forms* and *knowledge* that artists produce within information-based aesthetics.

— Bishop’s genealogy of data returns to artist Renée Green’s installation titled *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992–93), which she understands as introducing research-based art as a hybrid form.¹⁴⁾ In her schema, she invokes three models of art. The first, pre-internet, is a distributed form of knowledge as per Green, wherein knowledge production itself becomes a collaborative process (Ibid.).¹⁵⁾ The second model is contemporaneous with Green’s, but opts for soon-to-be-obsolete analogue media: slides, celluloid, record players, typewriters.¹⁶⁾ For Bishop, within this “archival impulse” (Hal Foster), the artist seeks to connect what cannot be connected: the self takes up a prime position as “a glue that enables the debris of the past to stick together, at least temporarily” (Ibid.).¹⁷⁾ Finally, the third model, the digital, is labelled

13)

In this view, Trevor Pagan stands out as an artist whose practice embodies this liberal imagination, par excellence. Moreover, Paglen’s work is described as determined by a kind of “info-optimism” which derives largely from conceptualism and is additive and information centric. Abse Gogarty links this to notions of data sublime (building on James Bridle and Will Davies) and then reads this history of the concept of the sublime through the racialism in the language of Burke and Kant. I am convinced by the argument that this idea of unveiling some kind of state secret leads to liberal quietism.

14)

“Green’s video recordings total more than twenty-six hours and can be consulted by viewers, as can her audio recordings and reading materials. *Import/Export* marks a rupture with preceding modes of artistic research by inviting the viewer to be a *user*, someone who can explore the fragments, synthesize them, and potentially even mobilize the material for his or her own research (or at least perform that role—notice the white gloves placed on top of a box marked DATA).” See Bishop 2023.

15)

At that moment, this strategy was deployed to avoid the simple takeaway – to avoid didacticism – opting for complexity. This tendency to avoid authorial mastery, as Bishop underlines, responded to post-structuralism and feminist and postcolonial theory, which aimed to critique linear history as, “evolutionary, univocal, masculinist, and imperial.”

16)

This is exemplified in the work of Tacita Dean and Danh Vo, in which information is narrated by storytelling, in purposeful sequences derived from serial methods producing individual micro-narratives – research based and fictional – which intersect with “history.”

as post-internet (Ibid.). It is based on, in David Joselit's words, "aggregation"—the tendency to select and sample autonomous elements. This process results in an "epistemology of search" (Ibid. 2023; Joselit 2013) Here, artistic work involves downloading and assembling existing material—suggesting modes such as appropriation and the readymade. This is solved through a process of "conflation:" Bishop writes, "search becomes research." Artist Wolfgang Tillmans' *Truth Study Center* epitomizes this tendency, wherein the content can be continuously "refreshed," inhabiting a post-internet imagination. Bishop describes the artist herself, unable to draw conclusions, as being lost in data. Artists present information without an authorial voice, or they present information that can't be contested, but merely agreed with—producing a dead-end.¹⁸⁾

— In Gilligan's research into and representations of capitalist crises we have seen a model for film against capitalism, that, in allegorical fashion, attempts to capture the fragmented moments of everyday life and its concomitant political struggles, as they index abstract reality. Gilligan's engagement with the labor union *Unite Here* lends itself to a kind of radical openness against political quietism, and in turn contributes to one of the concrete moments of resistance to capital's determinations, which is premised on the efforts of people working together to build structures of solidarity. In particular, *Crowds* has shown a way to engage with the surrounding environment, to question and test one's encounters with reality.

— The architectures of social crisis, manifest in housing and its legal structures whose socio-historical, political formations have produced the racialized inheritance of the sub-prime crisis, bring into view the extent to which the project of history is, by design, a project of capitalist crisis.

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17)

Here, this research-based art pries open a gap between *research* and *truth*: Instead of starting from social themes (migration, translation, female labor, environmental damage), "the artwork pulls disparate strands together through fiction and subjective speculation." As such, this tendency opens up overlooked narratives, but shores up a canon of white male protagonists, thus consolidating received history. Bishop compares this to Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation," which is much more radical, and struggles with the question of invention, itself an artistic category, in the face of 1) the ethics of the researcher, and 2) the constitutive exclusions and violences of the archive, here, the archive of slavery told through the violence of the slaveholders and their legal institutions. In Bishop's view, and I would agree, Hartman thus achieves a methodological breakthrough in writing the difficulties of this kind of research.

18)

Ways of pushing against academic research, for Bishop, are offered by 1) allowing personal narrative into research, thus challenging the relationship between truth and fiction, and 2) "by presenting research in aesthetic forms that exceed the merely informative (the pleasure of a well-crafted story; connections and juxtapositions that surprise and delight)." Thus, Bishop's problem is solved in the work of Anna Boghiguian: "Boghiguian's internalization and processing of history is not simply the outcome of digital meandering (although that inevitably plays a role). It is a lived, sensuous encounter that has been digested. The format of the grid enables a line of inquiry that is nonlinear but not unstructured, while the honeycomb frames anchor the research in a nondigital apparatus of communication. Nor is it an unmediated truth claim: *The Salt Traders* is a poetic and critical journey of visualized connections between the past and today—one in which history is presented as messy, unfinished business." Thus, for Bishop, the answer is given in this notion of the metabolization process within research. The encounter has been digested. The artist feels their way through the world. Bishop's model for artistic research is all the more artistic, poetic, before it is political, or rather, its politics are held in this mode of production, digesting and feeling encounters with the world, fully idiosyncratic. See Bishop 2023.

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// Image Credits

- Fig. 1–6: Melanie Gilligan, *Crowds*, 2019, 5-channel HD video, 12–15 min each, 5 episodes, stills, Courtesy of Melanie Gilligan and Galerie Max Mayer
- Fig. 7a & 7b: Melanie Gilligan, *Films Against Capitalism*, 2022, virtual component of Melanie Gilligan's Doctoral Dissertation at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, Sweden: *Treating the Abstract of Capital Concretely: Films Against Capitalism*, Courtesy of Melanie Gilligan (screenshot)

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