

Anna Elise Johnson: Simple Hand Gestures and the Social Life of Frozen Abstract Capitalism

By Zachary Cahill

“The hand delineates a world by drawing what it grasps from the element, delineating definite beings having forms, that is, solids; the informing of the formless is solidification, emergence of the graspable, the existent, support of qualities. Substantiality thus does not reside in the sensible nature of things, since sensibility coincides with enjoyment enjoying an “adjective” without substantive, a pure quality, a quality without support. Abstraction, which would promote the sensible to a concept, would not confer upon it the substantiality the sensible content lacks— unless we stress, not the content of the concept but the latent birth of the concept in the primordial effected by labor. The intelligibility of the concept would then designate its reference to the seizure by labor by which possession is produced. The substantiality of a thing lies in its solidity, offering itself to the hand that takes and takes away.” ~ Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity¹

Hands are funny things. Little creatures, they give form to the reach of our desires. Whither we want, our hands take us there. Taken individually they can be thought of as the tools that have the power to build a world or tear one down. As such, they can (and do) function as symbols of power. One thinks of a clenched fist such as the symbol that adorns the latest addition of Penguins edition of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* or the Ancient Roman gestures of thumbs up or down; indicating if it is to be life or death. Hands form forms.

Taken together or commingled, hands have the power to bind; to form a contract. Handshakes “seal the deal.” World leaders shake on agreements and thus solidify countless abstractions that impact the lives of millions of people at a time. It is a performative gesture that enacts policy. It might be more accurate to say that the handshake conceals the deal with the ritual spectacle of present-ness and embodiment that literally puts a “human touch” on the machinations of power. It is

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 161.

precisely these attributes of the hand and its relationship to power that philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was criticizing and by extension also taking a hammer to Nazi Philosopher Martin Heidegger's theorizations of tools and things that are "ready-to-hand."

For several years now Anna Elise Johnson has given over a large part of her artistic out-put to deconstruction of what one might term the social life of power. Or put better still, the social life of power as it is theatricalized and choreographed for television and news cameras. Through paintings and photo-sculptures she adroitly returns the true depth of abstraction to social choreography of power that on the face of it seem normal, representational, human even. Yet, the peculiar thing about such photo-opic moments of world leaders making pacts is they nevertheless often constitute the inhuman and terrifying abstraction of the total financialization of life as we know it under the thrall of Global Hyper-Capitalism.

The title of Johnson's exhibition Structural Adjustment makes plain the target of her critique: International Governmental Organizations (IGOs); specifically the IMF and the World Bank. These IGOs often use terms like "structural adjustments" as euphemisms for the way in which they imperiously subjugate less developed aka cash-poor aka exploited nations to monetary policies which solidify US hegemony around the globe.

Works such as Stela and Table I & II evoke the abstract paintings of the Surrealist Chilean painter Matta, with his palimpsestial compositions. These works by Johnson however build on Matta's approach to abstraction and concretizes it. The accoutrements of power are here caught in the aspic of the artist's design. The social choreography is frozen in time and power returned to its abstract essence; while all the while manifesting itself in the obdurate form of a resin sculpture.

What lessons can be drawn from such an art that so troubles the waters of aesthetics and politics? Ultimately I will leave it to each viewer to decide for themselves but I would suggest that at the very least these works perform a

pedagogical function of sorts by showing us the opacity of statecraft and how mind boggling-ly abstract global capitalism is, while at the same time showing it nevertheless possesses an un-budge-able material reality that touches each and every one of us with its invisible hand.

Essay included in the exhibition brochure for *Anna Elise Johnson's Structural Adjustment* at The Mission, 1431 W Chicago Ave.