

**Feeling Numbers: KP Brehmer and
the Supermarket, on the Occasion of
*To refuse / To wait / To sleep***

Jamie Hilder

The cashiers at the supermarket by my apartment have recently started calling me Jeremy. It is uncomfortable. They do this because I signed up for a membership card under a false name and phone number. I signed up for the card because I was tired of paying extortionate prices for groceries. I refuse to carry a supermarket member's rewards card on me, though, so when the cashiers ask me if I have my rewards card on me, I offer them a phone number instead. I then recite a defunct phone number of a close friend, and they ask, "Jeremy?" as they look me in the face and slightly raise their eyebrows, and I lower my eyes away and mumble, "Yes." When they finish bagging my groceries they often say something like, "There you go, Jeremy, have a nice day," and I say, "Thanks, you too." Then I pick up the bag and leave the store feeling an angry kind of sad.

It's easy to forget where economy lives. Giving a false name and phone number to a supermarket was a spontaneous gesture of resistance that backfired. Fed up with being treated like a walking sack of numbers, I tried to cheat big data by detaching my supermarket shopping habits from my name and phone number. I realized they would be able to track my purchases, but they wouldn't be able to track *me*. But I didn't count on their policy requiring the use of that data in the personal contact between consumer and cashier. I can glean from the scripted regularity of my interactions with the cashiers and my experience working in similar service jobs that they are required to use the customer's name at least once, and perhaps are encouraged to use it twice.

The feeling of being a set of numbers is difficult to quantify, because it is a feeling. This difficulty is at the foreground of several works by the German artist KP Brehmer (1938–1997), who in the 1960s and 1970s addressed the emergent subjectivities of the statistical citizen. Loosely affiliated with the capitalist realists in Germany (Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg and Wolf Vostell), Brehmer took as his material not so much the images that circulated within contemporary consumer capitalism as the images that produced the images: the bar graphs and diagrams that argued for the rational organization of human behaviours on various levels, from opinion polls to production metrics, from market data to state data. In Brehmer's 1978 work *Seele und Gefühl eines Arbeiters, Whitechapel Version (Soul and Feelings of a Worker, Whitechapel Version)*, for example, he provides a large-scale display of two workers' emotions based on the economic psychologist Rexford B. Hersey's 1932 study *Workers' Emotions in Shop and Home*. For his analysis, Hersey tracked the emotions of a group of workers within the Pennsylvania Railroad company, applying a methodology similar to that of Frederick Winslow Taylor during his development of scientific management ("Taylorism"), but preserving the lustre of socio-historicity. Instead of measuring the speed of tasks in pursuit of a definition of a fair day's work, though, Hersey aimed to "check in" with workers, to address conditions of alienation on the job that might contribute to larger structures of feeling while off the clock.¹

1. Harry Braverman, "Scientific Management," in *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998 [1974]), 66.



Brehmer's fascination with the study emerges out of the range of emotional states Hersey offered his subjects, which Brehmer lists on the side of his image: Very Happy, Happy, Hopeful, Interested, Neutral Plus, Neutral, Neutral Minus, Nervous, Angry, Sad, Uneasy and Fearful. Brehmer repeats the days of the week along the top, and then blocks out portions of the graph

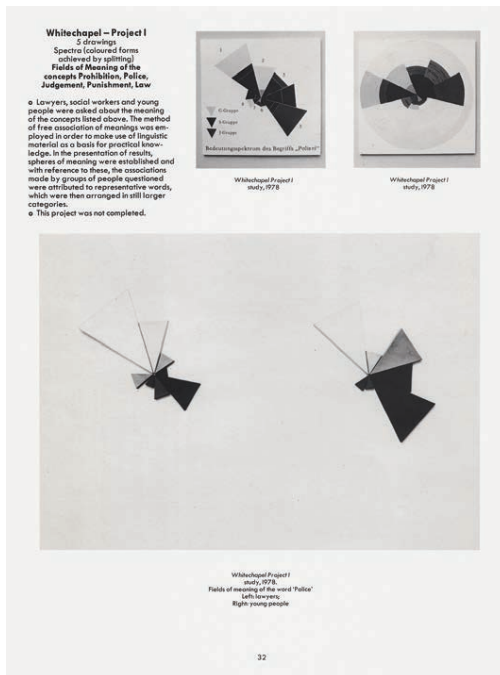
to represent a particular feeling. The overall impression given the viewer is one of rational data collection, the kind one might encounter on a worker's punch card. Though painted by hand, the information is meticulously presented. It reads as if it were industrially printed, an aesthetic Brehmer would have a particularly intimate relationship with, considering that he worked as an

KP Brehmer
Seele und Gefühl eines Arbeiters,
Whitechapel Version (Soul and
Feelings of a Worker, Whitechapel
Version), 1978
Estate of KP Brehmer, Berlin
Photo: Marcus J. Leith

2. Georg Jappe, "Interview:
KP Brehmer," *Studio
International* 191 (March
1976): 141.

image reproduction technician before joining the faculty at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg in 1971.² But disrupting the objective appearance of truth in the display of scientifically gathered material—one assumes that Hersey adhered to the strictures of sociological research, whatever they might have been in the 1930s—is the absurdity of both the experiment (tracking the emotions of workers only *while* at work) and the necessarily inadequate descriptions of feelings, as if workers could identify a single feeling that lasted throughout the day, or that anyone could truly *feel* a category such as “Neutral Plus,” or that “Hopeful” and “Happy,” or “Happy” and “Very Happy” have distinct boundaries.

The humour in Brehmer’s work often rises from identifying the failures of the brackets we use when thinking about the social, whether those are emotional categories or statistics in general. In *Fields of Meaning of the Concepts Prohibition, Police, Judgement, Punishment, Law* (1978), groups of lawyers, social workers and young people were invited to respond to the listed concepts. Brehmer coded and translated their responses into visual representation using drawings and wall-mounted sculptural forms that appear as a kind of warbled logarithmic spiral. The charts are unlabelled, though, a formal gesture that implies the overall uselessness of particular modes of data collection and analysis. The shapes represent a relationship between the different groups’ perspectives that we do not actually need evidence of. Presumably, police will have more positive connotations for lawyers than they will for young people. Social workers will likely fall somewhere in between. The absence of a legend that would reveal the meaning of the chart prevents the viewer from seeing the graphic elements either as representative of particular correspondences or as simple shapes. The same absence forces them to imagine the shapes in relationship to one another as well as in dialogue with the visual data techniques of scientific, economic and social discourse. In this way Brehmer’s work departs from that of his more internationally known contemporary Hans Haacke. While Haacke’s *MoMA Poll* (1970) was meant to humiliate the Museum of Modern Art by tying New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to



KP Brehmer
Whitechapel Project I, 1978
From the catalogue for the exhibition
Thirteen Degrees East: Eleven artists working in Berlin, held at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, November 10–December 22, 1978
Courtesy of the Whitechapel Gallery, Whitechapel Gallery Archives
Estate of KP Brehmer, Berlin

Nixon's disastrous military policies in Vietnam (Rockefeller was a board member of MoMA at the time, as well as a candidate for president of the United States), his method was to expose the democratic process by displaying a clear ballot box. In this way, Haacke not only mocked the fantasy of transparent democracy in the United States, and in its cultural institutions especially, but also propped up the concept of the rational political participation of contemporary subjects through their responses to narrowly defined poll questions. The fact that he withheld the question used in his piece until the night before the exhibition only strengthens the idea that the limited and narrow questions people are able to vote on are at the root of political apathy and alienation. Brehmer's work, alternatively, points to a more expansive critique of economic subjectivity as it is produced by image reproduction, where the images *are* data: statistics in graph form that convince viewers they are living rationally or irrationally, efficiently or inefficiently. This is the difference between Haacke's poll boxes, where we imagine that visitors to MoMA are interested in ending the US aggression in Southeast Asia, and Brehmer's unlabelled information works. Brehmer is interested not in showing whether or not we are effective or ineffective managers of our lives, but rather in asking questions of what capacities we have for imagining our relationship to an increasingly quantified world in the first place. A ballot box full of folded votes under a wall text about war is still only an *image* of democracy. It is a different kind of capitalist realism.



Hans Haacke
MoMA Poll, 1970
 two transparent ballot boxes with automatic counters and colour-coded ballots
 © Hans Haacke / Artist Rights Society, New York
 Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

In 1971, Brehmer wrote that he believed “the only progress of art consists in shifting all the intensity from *I* to *we*.”³ This position seems all the more challenging considering the social environment of postwar Germany, where the state-supported ordoliberalism—a West German political philosophy that emphasized personal responsibility and competition between rational actors⁴—served as a bulwark against conceptions of the collective, a concept that was rooted in the viable communist states and parties of Europe as well as in Germany's own Nazi past.

3. Quoted in Kerstin Stakemeier, “KP Brehmer's Kleptomania: A Productivism of Expropriation,” in *KP Brehmer: Real Capital-Production*. [Exhibition Pamphlet] (London: Raven Row, 2014), n.p.
4. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval provide a definition of ordoliberalism: “Ordo-liberalism aims to ground a social and political order in a determinate type of social relation: free, fair competition between individuals who are completely sovereign over their own existence. Any distortion of competition betrays the illegitimate domination either of the state or of a group of private interests over the individual. It is comparable to tyranny and exploitation.” Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), 224–27.

The contemporary technologies of representation—not simply the material technologies Brehmer was familiar with professionally as technician and artist, but the organization, expression and distribution of particular data as a *technology*—were constituting subjects who believed in accuracy and who found comfort in measurement. What becomes uncomfortable, then, becomes a threat, and the lessons of the past forty years of ordo- and neoliberalism have shown how ideas of publicness or co-operation or shared property have been consistently discouraged and eliminated in favour of the individual owner, small-scale businessperson and current hero: the entrepreneur.

The critique of data at the core of Brehmer's work is not meant to condemn the field of statistics or to suggest that we return to some pre-lapsarian economy where everybody knows and trusts their creditors, or to demand some anarchic future utopia where communities rule and private property and hierarchy have been eradicated (even if some of us are still obliquely aiming for that). But it does require us to become aware of how our subjectivity on various levels—personal, national, global, financial—is affected through processes of information organization and display. In her book *Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism*, Miranda Joseph cites the rallying cry from Strike Debt, an offshoot from the Occupy movement: “You are not a loan.”⁵ She points to this phrase in order to frame a discussion of the ways in which we are, in fact, our loans, and our accounts, and our constantly shifting calculation

of our human capital. She makes this argument not to sound the alarm of the end of hope, but rather to advocate for thinking through our financialized, mathematicized subjectivities as generative, and to approach our condition dialectically. I think a similar impulse can be read in KP Brehmer's work, and is perhaps why I find it so resonant with current strategies in artmaking.

In an interview he gave in relation to the 1974 exhibition *Art into Society—Society into Art* at the ICA in London, Brehmer spoke about his work and that of the other artists in the show as an “agitation of the ways of seeing” (*Sichtagitation*).⁶ In her essay for the catalogue of the exhibition of Brehmer's work at Raven Row in 2014, curator Doreen Mende expands on that position and describes his project as one that aims to “abuse capitalism's means of articulation.”⁷ It is that same mode of articulation that I was reacting against when I provided a fake name and a defunct number to my neighbourhood supermarket. I am still uncomfortable with all of the ways I am enumerated. But my error comes in believing that there is still a me outside of data, in holding on to a liberal dream of self instead of simply ceding terrain that has already been lost. Locating economies of pleasure, play and laughter and insisting on living in those numbers seems to be a more promising strategy.

5. Miranda Joseph, “Accounting for Debt: Toward a Methodology of Critical Abstraction,” in *Debt to Society: Accounting for Life under Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1.

6. Quoted in Doreen Mende, “KP Brehmer: A Foreign Agent from a Place Called ‘Art,’” in *KP Brehmer Visual Agitation* (London: Raven Row and Koenig Books, 2017 [forthcoming]), n.p.

7. Doreen Mende, “KP Brehmer: A Foreign Agent from a Place Called ‘Art,’” in *KP Brehmer Visual Agitation* (London: Raven Row and Koenig Books, 2017 [forthcoming]), n.p.