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# ARTFORUM

## HAMBURG

### Nina Beier

KUNSTVEREIN HAMBURG

I am writing this on Monday, July 14, the day the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, announced that Greece's withdrawal from the EU—the dreaded "Grexit"—had been averted. The euro zone's heads of state have agreed on a comprehensive package of spending cuts and reforms that lays down humiliating conditions that Greece must comply with in order to get new money going forward. The writers Maurizio Lazzarato and David Graeber have analyzed the moral and political dimensions of debt and demonstrated that people tend to respond coolly to the suffering of others who are in debt. This implicit moral code now serves to justify policies that perpetuate and even actively promote the subjugation of the entire citizenry of a debtor nation.

In the early stages of the crisis, many Greeks put their money in gold—widely regarded as a safe investment, especially in times of economic upheaval—which they might now convert back into cash. "Cash for Gold" is the Danish-born, Berlin-based artist Nina Beier's first solo show at an art institution in Germany, a nation whose politicians have played a leading role in the Greek crisis. To sell one's gold is to tap into one's reserves, but it is also to juggle the relative representational values of metal and paper money, hoping that the daily fluctuations of the exchange rate between the two will trend in the right direction. The quick cash-for-gold deal offered by seedy storefronts is the little guy's last resort; his better-heeled compatriot has part of his wealth in liquid assets, usually stocks and securities, that can be discreetly converted into cash with a call to the broker. Beier's *Liquid Assets*, 2013, consists of five glass cases full of fragments of a full-size bronze statue of a knight on horseback. Beier bought the sculpture at an antique store, paying only the scrap price of the material, which has risen considerably over the past decade. Scrap metal is usually melted down, becoming, quite literally, a "liquid asset." Another work, *Greens*, 2013, consists of palm fronds layered on cheap bath towels that are printed to mimic banknotes of various currencies. The entire ensemble is pressed beneath a glass pane as though it were a framed picture, an illustration of the dreams that money can still buy. The towels are not real money, of course, only oversized effigies manufactured by exploited Asian workers. They will never buy anything, and the palm fronds have dried and turned brittle, their symbolism reduced to mere physical properties.

Both the dizzying oscillation between the intrinsic worth of a physical object and the value it stands for and the arbitrariness of the relation between object and image are frequent themes in Beier's art. In *Plunge*, 2014–15, for example, she encased everyday objects in resin, then placed them in knee-high models of wine- and cocktail glasses. The sleekly versatile motifs—colorful fish, cigarette butts, bottles of nail polish—are effective eye-catchers only in this bizarre fishbowl setting, without which they would probably blend, chameleonlike, into

the most diverse contexts. Produced without a view to a specific purpose and having no identifiable author, stock photographs are pure metaphors for certain emotions or aspirations. That makes them an accurate reflection of the functional principle of contemporary capitalism, whose basic operation is the accumulation and construal of just such empty signifiers open to infinite reinterpretation. Her works deftly highlight forms of this so-called semio-capitalism, which is fueled by conjectures, rumors, and conspiracies. For a dramatic illustration of the political consequences of these mechanisms, look to the power games that divide Europe today.

—Nina Möntmann

*Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.*

View of "Nina Beier,"  
2015. Foreground:  
*Plunge* (detail),  
2014–15.  
Background: *Liquid  
Assets*, 2013.  
Photo: Fred Dott.

