In June 2007 we, a group of visitors to Documenta 12, eager and motivated, mingled with the customers and passers-by who were gathered, energetic, bored, idle, excited or lost, in a commercial space in the city centre. All at the same time. The City Point shopping arcades in Kassel’s busy Wilhelmstrasse were humming with activity. Some, the locals, were taking advantage of the supposed sales bargains all the shops were advertising in their windows, or simply passing through that “worldwide country” shopping malls establish everywhere. Business and entertainment – or simply a stage set to wile away the tedious hours of early summer in – formed the packaging of such an improbable meeting. The building’s centre of gravity was occupied by a huge well that ascended towards the upper floors, where the shops were no longer visible, and descended in turn in the shape of a subterranean lake giving rise to a small oval plaza. Others, we visitors, were convoked for the execution of an “opera”, a work created by Alice Creischer in collaboration with the composer Christian von Borries and Andreas Siekmann, along with the musicians of the Hesse Youth Orchestra, who were positioned on a platform in the central oval of the escalator well. The work was called All of a Sudden and Simultaneously. A Feasibility Study, and its subtitle is meant to correct the description of the musical genre it is inserted in: Musical Scenes About the Negation of Labour. The short wait would serve to check out a landscape of goods in which the similarity of products and shop windows with the ones we have in the places where our everyday life unfolds is surprising. The same products, the same brand names… the same prices. It’s a landscape with nothing quaint about it. There are no souvenirs to take home, nor samples of local gastronomy.

From this sunken orchestra there will go on arising, around the musicians, the movements of the actors, following the thread narrated by Creischer herself. The story spells out the fantasy of a world without commerce, without temples of consumerism and without needs. The drama conveys us to a spaceship, in another time and another place poles apart from the sensations the sense of sight brings us. We are in the presence of the staging of a farce about a parallel world presented as something of a utopia disguised as a satire.
Compère: Greetings, ladies and gentlemen! What you will see in the next few hours belongs to the realm of science fiction. We will take you to a world in which, by being ignored, all the relations between work, merchandise and money go by the board. Although this world already exists and is always present. If you, for example, take a little step to one side, you might immediately – oops! – fall into the intergalactic tunnel. This tunnel is a short cut between reality and reality. It’s full of negative energy. At the end of it there’s no ready-made world. But you might suddenly not want to buy a single thing more.¹

The actors are to keep moving through the different levels of the shopping mall’s atrium, where we, the audience and the customers, are milling around, some amazed and incredulous, all open-mouthed: suddenly and simultaneously. The action envelops the place the way a space army invades one galaxy after another. The notes executed by the orchestra “sample” motifs from historical sources (quotes, for instance, from Hans Eisler or Beethoven’s Leonora Overture) in a compilation of themes dedicated to the workers’ movement of various eras.

Alice Creischer has addressed the mechanism of fascination that merchandise has over us before, especially through the cathedrals of consumerism that big shopping malls are. In the videos …To Earn It Again (1996) and The Generalisation of Not Working (2000) Creischer was already using the setting of a huge hypermarket to do a silent performance: the voices of the characters were replaced by speech balloons in which quotes could be read from Marx and Nietzsche about the human condition and the status of the commercial object: fetish, object of seduction. Creischer’s actions, done with the collaboration of other artists, among whom we frequently find her companion, the artist Andreas Siekmann, are symbolic insertions in a world dominated by an advertising whose intention is to seduce the individual enclosed in a supposedly marvellous world. The desire to marvel typical of such spaces is the strategic goal the irony constructed by the artist is aimed at: we are, effectively, what we buy. Or rather, we buy what we are. The constitution of the individual seems to depend upon the acquiring of goods within a necessarily gregarious ritual, at certain hours and with precise movements, which in the ceremonies of existence continually emit the meaning of authentic modern life.

If only Walter Benjamin were to come back to life…! The representation Creischer offers us of these spaces of seduction is not in itself ironical; the camera doesn’t falsify the location nor does it ridicule it in some way. This is an exercise in cinéma vérité in which the actions of the artists take place without any high-flown pretension. A character seeks work the way Nietzsche sought God… With a lamp lit in broad daylight.

The theatre and certain literary genres invented in Antiquity and perfected during the 18th and 19th century – the epistolary genre as a form of essay, for instance – provide the artist with models of formalisation for the telling criticism of those behaviour traits the excess of modernity has managed to almost imperceptibly instaure in our daily lives. They are behaviour traits that we frequently adopt as if they
provided us with a *raison d’être*. The early formulations of utopia spoke of an absence of need for the individual, a state that would not make them wish for possessions. In such a state consumption would not be a destructive action but an innocuous act, like breathing, like conversing. Creischer has done away with the idealised component of early utopia and converted it into an object of irony in order to mitigate, with laughter, the destiny of critical artistic practices. What is the real object of criticism? What is that which angers us and against which we direct the darts of our rage? Is it ideology? Is it its discourse?

Satire and irony give Creischer a tool with which to address one of the conundrums of art at the end of the 20th century: art’s need and ability to change the world. After almost a century of art that not only represents the world but seeks to change it, with what tools may we seek to bring about a change of awareness in the society which welcomes it? Creischer opts for three typologies in her works: firstly, satire will enable her to tackle, with humour, those questions that at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century were approached with literalness or with poetry. Secondly, the artist has resorted to dramatised ways of communicating fables whose structure is put forward as moral. Lastly, a strategy of representation that utilises forms of scientific method will introduce the wedge of overwhelming, deafening objectivity. The appearance of objectivity provided by scientific methods (observation, the accumulation of data, analysis and the drawing of conclusions) is likewise an object of scrutiny on the part of the artist:

It would be wrong to define our fieldwork in this project (*Ex Argentina*, 2002-2006) as a transition between two theoretical models: genealogy and militant investigation. […] We will refer to the concept of genealogy that Foucault developed in one of his lectures at the Collège de France in 1976. This lecture begins with a complaint about the deficiencies of his research, which he considers to be fragmentary and discontinuous, useless erudition […]. However, he doesn’t try to defend this uselessness in order to affirm its opposite, efficiency, but in order to establish its critical potential, the local and particular criticism of an autonomous, non-centralised form of theoretical production, which would act as a brake on global, centralised theoretical productions. In that sense he speaks of a “return of knowledge” that has been covered by representational systems, a local, different, non-universal knowledge. This would mean, then, connecting the useless erudition (as is also stated about art) that goes nowhere to a decried kind of knowledge: “popular knowledge.”

I’m thinking now of Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), which revealed the coincidences between the action of political leaders in New York and the workings of real-estate speculation which would provide fat profits for the members of a dominant class due to controlling not only political decision-making but also the judicial system, capital and information. And I’m thinking of *Windows Blow Up* (1976) by Gordon Matta-Clark, whose destructive act of firing at the windows of the building where the exhibition took place, the Institute for Architecture and Urban Planning, revealed the ineffectiveness of the action of architects (Richard
Meier, Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman, among others) with regard to the urban and social decadence of local neighbourhoods, or, put more simply, the connivance of these with the interests of property developers.

Direct denunciation and symbolic action may have appeared at the end of the 1990s, with bullets being spent in the continuation of a tradition that, above all in German art, had reached extremely high degrees of iconographic, conceptual and technical refinement. While during the 19th century French painters succeeded in producing images whose aesthetic qualities were only able to be read in exercising an awareness of political and social criticism at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the Berlin artists intellectually affiliated to the Dadaist milieu, on the other hand, would give very precise expression to the practice of art as an instrument of political awareness and denunciation in order to bring about action in an agitated world. John Heartfield, George Grosz and Raoul Hausmann, among others, flayed the bourgeois spirit of the place and of the moment. The perfecting of photomontage and different publishing projects were to produce a framework for diffusing messages denouncing the absurdity of things and calls for action. In the 1920s action meant revolution, and the fascination this necessity caused in some people could only be put on a par with the panic of others. The advent of the fascist government of the Third Reich wiped out such activity, but the remains of the attempt are still there for us to see. Thus, for example, in 1920 Raoul Hausmann would call one of the most enigmatic photomontages of the time *Ein bürgerliches Präzisionsgehirn ruft eine Weltbegegnung hervor (Dada siegt!)* (A Bourgeois Precision Brain Incites a World Movement (Dada Triumphs!)).

In 2001 Alice Creischer mounted the exhibition *The Greatest Happiness Principle Party* in the Wiener Secession building. The exhibition included collages which contained works on fabric, along the lines of great decorative friezes, with texts, photographs and drawings that traced a map in which the coincidences appeared between the shares of the Österreichische Creditanstalt and those responsible for the transfers of foreign capital of the Nazis, as well as the similarity of the financial techniques put into practice by the latter and the forms of management of the International Monetary Fund. *The Greatest Happiness…* is an example of the typology of work by Alice Creischer that is based on an almost scientific principle and in which representation tends to be demonstrative; that is to say, it is assembled with the organisation of data and allows conclusions to be drawn from an argument. Its formalisation is a nod in the direction of forms that unite sculpture with architecture and of what we now call the applied arts: from the friezes of the Parthenon to the reliefs of Mesopotamian temples, or to the decorations of the domestic settings created by Jugendstil or Art Nouveau. Forms in which figures and vegetation intermingle and blur in order to create an idyllic space in opposition to the brutality and grime of the world of industrial work. Here are images and words that join together to reconstruct an uncomfortable tale.
The literary quotations of authors who have helped create a certain line of argument, an ideology or a technique of analysis are accompanied by data and figures. There are many quotations from Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Carlyle in a comparison of contrasting models. Creischer concludes:

Showing how capitalism acculturates itself is something that’s been done quite often. A new task would now be to observe which type of culture produces what’s become known as “globalisation”, and which new powers of affirmation and values now become evident in art.

The Apparatus for the Osmotic Compensation of the Pressure of Wealth During the Contemplation of Poverty (2005-2007) is the most recent case in which Creischer’s scientific focus gives rise to an installation of great size, with a seemingly mechanical composition. The very title of the work refers to the characteristics of a prototype, of an instrument for measuring the sensations experienced upon being the witnesses and observers of the poverty of societies remote from our own. The origin of the work goes back to a trip the artist made to India. The landscape of extreme, generalised poverty and memories of the experience lived in Argentina in 2002 impelled her to materialise this feeling in the shape of a mechanical instrument technically organised for production. The basic hypothesis of Apparatus… is the observation that the massive poverty experienced by the vast majority of the population of a country (in this instance, India) is the result of European colonising projects that ever since the 16th century have extended their programmes – previously of pillage, now of investment – in regions of the world where the equation “raw materials/workforce” permits the greatest profit to be obtained. The work seems to take the form of a camera blown up to a colossal size to show, alongside its different components, the links between different European colonising projects: of the Spanish and Portuguese in South America and of the English in India. The sculpture augments and separates the parts of a mechanism which extends in depth and which we first see in linear perspective. Emanating from the different parts are data, images, figures and quotations about the distribution of property, the systems of price-control – those traditionally used by the Mogul kings and those implanted by English governors – and the different agreements with the laws that converge in the formation of India as an independent, modern State.

The utilisation of the simile of the photographic apparatus is not gratuitous: the evolution of these devices led, at the beginning of the 20th century, to a qualitative leap in the constitution of an iconography of the effects of colonialism that is fundamentally explained through the use of the portable camera for taking snapshots. Until then photographs (of exotic landscapes and their inhabitants, as well as the effects of colonial exploitation) were taken with heavy cameras on a tripod, in front of which everything – both nature and individuals – seemed “to pose” for the photographer. Preparing the camera to take an image had a correlation in the preparation of the elements that were going to be photographed. The snapshot

Apparatus for the Osmotic Compensation of the Pressure of Wealth During the Contemplation of Poverty at Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst (GAK), Bremen, 2005.
camera allowed instant images to be taken, without a staging of the machinery or a preparation of the photographed object. In fact, the photographs taken by British missionaries at the beginning of the 20th century are the first that communicate the devastating effects of the impoverishment of Indian society, which the laws, administrative partitions and systems of taxation had gradually created in India. A voyage in time and in space takes us in *Apparatus...* to the silver mines of Potosí, in Bolivia. Potosí was the biggest silver-mining operation in the world, and also one of the main sources of capital for the Spanish crown and its European wars. Indeed, flows of capital at a global scale are not a recent event in history: colonialism and globalisation are correlative, interchangeable and resilient factors. If colonialism initiated the international flow of finance, globalisation is nothing but a contemporary expression of the phenomenon of colonialism. At bottom, their strategies and their results are the same. Did someone say we live in the postcolonial era?

Finally, let’s mention one last typology of work with which Creischer has addressed the relationships between politics, economy and culture: the fable. *Proudhon, the 10 December Society and the Idle Debtors’ Club. A Concetto in Three Acts* transforms the fable into a satire about the relations between social actors and the tensions between their conflicting interests. A pig, a dog, a lion, an elephant, an owl, a bear and a badger are gathered together to discuss their positions and priorities. The texts include data about the development of capitalism from the beginning of the 19th century. Gradually the casuistry becomes diversified and fragments are included of Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in dialogue form between the different animal-actors. In the third act, Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s *The Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism. Notes and Analysis,* is also cited, in particular “The social reconsolidation of capital (German Letters by the Führer, September 1932, within the framework of Central Germany’s Day of the Economy, translatable today as ‘First Drafts of the German Industrial Union’”). Historically, the fable has “humanised” animals so as to soften the instructive effect of the moral conclusion. Creischer utilises toy animals that exponentially increase the satire with regard to the types of characters represented on stage, while the recorded voices recite bits of historical, ideological or scientific text.

In the most recent exchange of letters between the artist and the Colectivo Situaciones, Alice Creischer asks:

> In your text on militant investigation it’s clear that it’s not a matter of commenting on social movements but – please correct me if I’m wrong – of a libidinal hermeneutics. Don’t you feel exhausted at times by, for instance, the way things have gone in Argentina since 2001? How is it possible to keep this libido entire? How do you see this concept today? Has it been relativised in the current context of post-crisis in Argentina? Doesn’t the loss of value of words in common discourse make you fed up at times with this concept?

Creischer has, in different ways, suggested answers to these questions over the course of different works.
One of the most effective, and perhaps bloodiest, forms of criticism is the one that includes laughter, which has been feared since the Greeks for its liberating power, for its ability to make him who laughs forget his fear. But the laughter the ironical works of Alice Creischer seek to provoke is a nervous, anxious laughter. We laugh with knitted brow.

Notes

1. Presentation of the work. Unpublished text.
3. “In 1931 the Österreischische Creditanstalt [Austrian Credit Institution] went bankrupt and thus triggered the second worldwide economic crisis. This banking group was the hub of international investments made in southeast Europe. In the entire following story I refer to an essay by Detlef Hartmann published in the magazine Autonomie in 1982. It shows the conclusions that the subsequent National-Socialist finance technology drew from this crisis and why this became the model for organising the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Hartmann claims that the reason for the economic crisis was not the gold standard but the resistance of subsistence against capital – a thesis I don’t believe, but which I subscribe to because of its beauty.” Alice Creischer: “The Greatest Amount of Happiness for the Greatest Amount of People. On Rationality and Outrage. A Conversation”, in Alice Creischer; Helmut Draxler; Andreas Siekmann: Alice Cresicher. The Greatest Happiness Principle Party. Vienna: Wiener Secession, 2001, p. 29 [exhib. cat].
4. Ibid., p. 31.
5. “We read your letter on returning from our trip to India. But we needed a lot of time before we could describe the black hole we’d fallen into there. Towards the end of our stay in New Delhi they organised a trip to Agra for us. We visited Matura, with its temples to Krishna, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra: we saw the Taj Mahal, the Red Fortress, we paid our guide in the restaurant, the driver left us in the station and went. We waited for our train without the usual bubble of services and immediately the beggars surrounded us: mutilated women, men and children, the sick, the hungry. It was like we were anaesthetised. We couldn’t give money, nor drive away the beggars. We might have supposed that all the actors of this scene depend on a ‘yes/no’, ‘money/no money’ as a reply. The fact is that one relies on what one has learnt to overlook, as if these beggars were air, or – at least – little flies in the air. But who can distinguish between anaesthetised and ignorant people?” Alice Creischer; Andreas Siekmann: “El agujero negro y los bandoleros mancos”, in La normalidad, op. cit., p. 217. Published in English in this catalogue, p. 123.
6. A form of textual assemblage that was often practised during the era of Mannerism.
7. At the beginning of the work the pig declaims from the pulpit: “Between 1803 and 1831 the population of Lyons increased from 93,000 to 146,000 without the consumption of meat and wine going up. An industrial bourgeoisie and a manufacturing proletariat are involved here. The entrepreneur is modern. He buys raw materials, has it elaborated in small workshops for a wage and sells the finished products. The market dominates, it has people in the advertising agencies and the work tribunals and determines the municipal authorities through donations to the parties.” From the unpublished script of the work.
8. See p. 128 in this catalogue.