

Clean paws

an essayistic opening text by Malene Hagen

for Jannis Besen's diploma show at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München

How do we home within the perpetual state of polycrisis without freaking out? How do we take this polycrisis in hand without freaking out? Should one house-train it and keep cleaning after it, like a domestic cat licking its own paw, in order to half-domesticise it, in order to temporarily *re-home* it *within* a would-be “safe” zone?

Jannis Besen's artistic practice takes in hand – more precisely, places in the cats' paws – the entanglement between global finance and pop culture, repeatedly working through and artistically processing what has been grasped. Cats, like *Cat cover* (2025), lick their paws in order to clean themselves. Behind the gleam of a clean paw or polished surface lies the effect of labour, the repetitive polishing that renders the paws or surface seamless to shine with a phantasmagorical gloss. Cleaning belongs to that strange category of labour that, when fully effective, cancels the evidence of the work that went into it, as if the work had never been done. Here, the cleaning has not quite finished and remains visible in the misbehaving prototypes not yet performing the clean phantasmagorical effect they strive to produce. *Platform* (2026) presents scattered fragments of a miniature architectural model of the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, illuminated by an intense, cold white light emitted from two low-hanging laboratory lamps suspended on metal chains. Instead of a seamless facade, the clinical “clean” spotlight arrests the architecture mid-disassembly, exposing the financial infrastructure before it can polish itself away. The wood layers of *Pawlicker* (2026) visibilise the layers of the preceding 3D rendering process, a still of behind-the-scenes processes fixed in an in-between state that paradoxically constitutes the final artwork. Their asymmetrical stepped strata echo Deleuze-Guattarian folds and the contour lines that map the plateaus across and within which performing and non-performing desire lines traverse capitalist circulation.¹ The general tendency in art to erase the behind-the-scenes processes and techno-material support breaks in the almost clean paws and almost polished surfaces that betray the labour striving to erase itself.

The status quo of today is experienced as a condition of crises, a cluster of emergencies without discernible beginnings and ends, without stable chains of cause and effect. Yet, as Marek Poliks and Roberto Alonso Trillo argue in the most recent analysis of soft capitalism, the algorithms running “exocapitalism”² are structurally incapable of “having” a crisis. What appears from a human scale as an interminable polycrisis is from the perspective of lifted capital a permanently exploitable time lag, in which the already abstracted operational processes are progressively abstracted from material conditions by additional layers of lifting. In this sense, the point is that crises must persist as noise in the system displaced onto the level

¹ Cf. Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari Félix. *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980.

² Poliks, Marek and Trillo, Roberto Alonso. *Exocapitalism: Economies Within Absolutely No Limits*. Berlin: Becoming Press, 2025, p. 1.

of social reproduction – neither allowed to be resolved nor to culminate – so that the flow of extractable capital can be indefinitely guaranteed to exocapitalist structures indifferent to living beings.³ There is a crisis *for us*, but not *for them*.

If exocapitalism seems to have moved *out*, Besen's work suggests that it has already moved *in*. The various cats can be framed as different speculative derivatives, "bets on bets"⁴ of this half-domesticised polycrisis, testing how much alienation a "safe" zone can absorb before its supposedly clean surface loses its gloss and the seams start to show. Derivatives in financial markets, according to Fredric Jameson, are an intensified form of Karl Marx's fictitious capital, which refers not to capital itself but to chains of claims on capital. They function as speculative bets on the future price of an underlying asset that become progressively detached from the asset "itself," so that value is assigned on the basis of stochastic prediction. This logic was exposed in the 2008 financial crisis, which resulted from the failed performance of the derivative's promised claims on capital. Non-investment grade credits re-packaged as safe assets were extended to borrowers with weak credit profiles, which triggered market instabilities due to such false speculations. Besen's cats likewise operate as second-order figures of the polycrisis displacing its volatility into a would-be "safe" zone of the living room.

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³ Poliks and Trillo 2025, p. 97-98. In this respect, Poliks and Trillo's conception of exocapitalism rejects Frankfurt School crisis theories and accelerationism, since they construe crises as seeds for emancipation, as argued in Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, Jürgen Habermas's theory of crisis legitimation, and Karl Marx's belief in necessary historical progress. The hope of a redemptive crisis melts into air.

⁴ Jameson, Fredric. "The Aesthetics of Singularity." In: *New Left Review*, No. 92, March/April 2015, p.113, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii92/articles/fredric-jameson-the-aesthetics-of-singularity>, accessed February 2, 2026, p. 120.