



Window
Space

2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

CASH4KARMA

Reid Jenkins

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C.R.E.A.M. (CASH RULES EVERYTHING AROUND ME)

“Tired of suffering consequences of an improperly balanced spiritual energy? Wish there was an easy and convenient way to rid your life of useless cash squandered on frivolous consumer goods? Isn’t there a way to take all that money and turn it into good vibrations? Well now there is! Redeem yourself today—Cash4Karma is here for your salvation!”

In his window installation *CASH4KARMA*, Reid Jenkins, in the dark humor typical of his works, employs a mimetic strategy, referencing the Money Mart across the street in the storefront of a fictitious business entity CASH4KARMA. Satirizing the formal visual language of these predatory institutions, such as the use of stock images of happy individuals holding or posing near piles of money, Jenkins supplants the ultimate reward of cash and subsequent happiness to a direct balancing of a celestial ledger. In this sense, *CASH4KARMA* undermines the vast mechanisms by which individuals progress to points of happiness through participation in systems of labour and reward lubricated by monetary systems. *CASH4KARMA* cheekily makes literal the dismal refrain that ‘money buys happiness’. By drawing a direct visual and conceptual linkage with the Money Mart across the street Jenkins draws passersby into a reexamination of the promises the institution professes while also highlighting its shortcomings. While providing short-term financial remedies these institutions perpetuate a paradigm of debt-based economies of living, maintaining elevated levels of financial and psychological insecurity in a class of individuals and families perpetually underserved by educational and social infrastructures. Money can’t buy happiness in a system that perpetually undermines and maintains communities of oppression.

Emerging in a large part to service mostly low-income minority neighborhoods which have historically been subject to red-lining¹ and as a result a scarcity of access to primary financial institutions such as banks and credit unions², payday loan services have provided access to small, short-term unsecured loans and cash advances. The growth of these institutions has been staggering considering their relative scarcity in the 1990s, they now outnumber McDonald’s restaurants in America. The merits and pernicious effects of payday loan services have been widely debated with some scholars, such as,

¹ A practice of denying, or charging more for, services such as banking, insurance, access to health care, or even supermarkets, or denying jobs to residents in particular, often racially determined, areas

² Immergluck, Dan. 2004. Credit to the Community: Community Reinvestment and Fair Lending Policy in the United States. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Uriah King and Leslie Parrish, asserting that the high fees of accessing loans are exorbitant and lock individuals into cycles of debt in the repayment of said fees.³ Others, such as Yilan Xu, have asserted “payday lending mitigates foreclosure risk after shocks of natural disasters, improves borrowers’ financial situations as well as [their] subjective well-being and avoids more costly alternatives such as overdrafts and check bounces”⁴. Regardless of which side of the argument is taken, these institutions mark an absence within institutional frameworks, the cracks through which broad swaths of the population fall through, a systemic and ongoing negotiation of access and its denial by the machinations of neoliberal capitalism, which disproportionately maintain communities of the underserved and the underclass.

Jenkins’ installation also functions to bring forth a broader commentary on the gentrifying potential of art institutions in general, and the shifting economic and social landscape of the Lansdowne and Dundas area. Since payday loan businesses tend to be located in low-income and minority neighborhoods they likewise serve as a visual marker of these demographics, in essence visually demarcating spaces of ‘decline’ from the perspective of property markets. Several researchers have even gone so far as to problematically attempt to draw direct linkages between the prevalence of payday loan services and crime.⁵ Alternatively, art institutions serve the converse function of demarcating spaces of economic prosperity acting as either secondary or pioneer gentrifiers of an area. Much to the chagrin of artists who typically fall into lower-income brackets⁶, the symbolism of cultural capital so lauded by Richard Florida et al. serves to displace working class communities, which in many cases includes artists themselves. This precarious relationship is a morally uneasy one that any institution and artist should strongly consider and weigh in their desire to live and work cheaply. Through the mimetic strategy employed by Jenkins the institution of Xpace as an art space is temporarily masked, inverting the performance of value presented by this institutional façade.

- Felix Kalmenson

³ King, Uriah and Leslie Parrish. 2007. “Springing the Debt Trap: Rate caps are only proven payday lending reform,” Durham, N.C.: Center for Responsible Lending.

⁴ Xu, Yilan, *Payday Lending and Crimes in the Neighborhood*, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

⁵ Charis E. Kubrin, et al., “Does Fringe Banking Exacerbate Neighborhood Crime Rates? Social Disorganization and the Ecology of Payday Lending”, 2009.

⁶ The mean art-related income for 2012 is \$2,300 a year (after expenses.), *2012 Waging Culture survey*