



April 13, 2015

Is Social Media a Heaven 2.0? Sure, and Both are Dystopias

By DJ Pangburn

Imagine an airless, ethereal and infinite realm. A place where the idealized self lives beyond its biological limitations. No, this isn't heaven but social media — or the utopian ideal of it anyway. Viewed through this lens, perhaps it's not so provocative to suggest social media like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and others collectively form a Heaven 2.0—a virtual equivalent of the afterlife. This is basically the conceit of the Russian art collective Recycle Group's new exhibition *Heaven Carrier*, their first in the U.S., on now at Richard Taittinger Gallery in New York.



Recycle Group, *Virtual Noise* (detail), 2015 Acrylic, plastic cast 14.5 x 9.5 x 8.5 in. (36.83 x 24.13 x 21.59 cm)

Comprised of the duo Andrey Blokhin and Georgy Kuznetsov, Recycle Group is known for using recycled industrial materials for their techno-art. They continue along this track with the works in *Heaven Carrier*, their attempt to place social media in religious terms through art and spiritual iconography.

“If ‘heaven’ is a transcendent utopia promised by many faiths, and ‘carrier’ is a corporation that provides essential data services, it asks what differences remain between them.”

Before Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species*, humanity largely depended on religion to sustain itself in an unforgiving world. Now, many depend on connectivity, social media and the reassuring glow of the electronic device screen. In a world where God is dead, and the new deities and messiahs are capitalists and Silicon Valley technologists, it makes perfect sense.

This is the foundation upon which Recycle Group build their exhibition. And it is fundamentally a dystopian one, because both the virtual and spiritual realms promise liberation but instead deliver constant surveillance, amongst various other negative aspects.



Recycle Group, Slave, 2015, Polyurethane rubber 30 x 19 x 22 in. (76.2 x 45.72 x 55.88 cm)

Christopher Hitchens once characterized heaven as “a celestial North Korea” where souls praise the “dear leader from dawn ’til dusk”. After Edward Snowden’s NSA leaks, which revealed the astonishing scope of electronic surveillance, should we not think of the Internet itself as resembling that hermetic dwarf kingdom a bit more than we’d like to admit? Sure, the leader is no one in particular but the system itself, and its various effects to which we’ve grown accustomed.

By constructing these works Western civilization’s disposable culture artifacts, Recycle Group is also able to address consumerism’s mushrooming material waste.

“Heaven Carrier, invites multi-faceted comparison between religion and the wireless networks of today,” the duo explain. “If ‘heaven’ is a transcendent utopia promised by many faiths, and ‘carrier’ is a corporation that provides essential data services, it asks what differences remain between them. If both powers hold an omnipotent presence and dictate from above, which holds greater control over the daily life of the individual in the current age?”



Recycle Group, Dome, 2015, Metal, plastic mesh
34.5 x 11.8.11 x 118.11 in. (80 x 300 x 300 cm)

With “Tower” (2015), Recycle Group fuse the ancient with the future in an obelisk made out of a metal truss around which they’ve wound electrical wire looms. On top of the obelisk sit antenna spires, symbolizing constant connectivity and ever-present surveillance instead of the omniscient,

all-seeing eyes of the gods. For “Dome”, Recycle Group create a futuristic version of Renaissance-era trompe l’oeil oculus, the domed paintings that create the optical illusion of three-dimensionality.

In “Virtual Noise”, the Facebook icon, and perhaps other symbols, explodes through the head of a portrait bust; one of several made of polyurethane rubber instead of the traditional marble material. In “Slave”, the Vimeo, Skype and Facebook icons burst David Cronenberg-style out of a man’s body like some sort of pervasive digital virus.

By constructing these works out of Western civilization’s disposable culture artifacts, Recycle Group is also able to address consumerism’s mushrooming material waste problem. They also explore the high degree of cultural pastiche that exists because of materialism’s emphasis on the creation of *things*, whether to sell, inspire or both. None of this would much matter if the works weren’t dynamic and mesmerizing. Which, to Recycled Group’s credit, they most certainly are.

Heaven Carrier is on at Richard Taittinger Gallery until May 3.



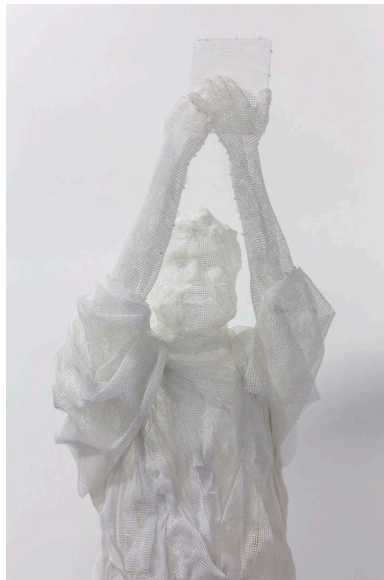
Recycle Group, Clear Stream (detail), 2015 Acrylic cast 14.5 x 11 x 9.5 in (102.87 93.98 x 25.4 cm)



Recycle Group, Adam, 2015 Acrylic, plastic, LED light 41.3 x 29.9 x 2.3 in. (105 x 76 x 6 cm)



Recycle Group, Virtual Noise (detail), 2015 Acrylic, plastic cast 14.5 x 9.5 x 8.5 in. (36.83 x 24.13 x 21.59 cm)



Recycle Group, Wayfarer (detail), 2015 Plastic mesh, iRobot 85 x 25 x 16 in. (215.9 x 63.5 x 40.64 cm)



Recycle Group Tower, 2015 Metal, corrugated cables 138 x 22 x 22 in. (350.52 x 55.88 x 55.88 cm)