

ARTSEEN

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# SOCIÉTÉ RÉALISTE

## *A rough guide to Hell*

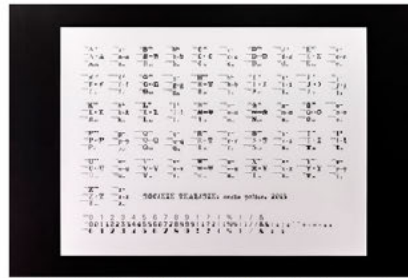
by Paula Burleigh

P! GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 5 – OCTOBER 27, 2013

CURATED BY PREM KRISHNAMURTHY AND NIELS VAN TOMME

Black lettering on P!'s deep red awning reads: "Lasciate ogne stranezza voi ch'intrate" (Abandon all strangeness, you who enter here), a loose adaptation of the infamous inscription over the Gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Hell is the ultimate dystopia, which makes the *Inferno* an apt reference to begin "*A rough guide to Hell*," a show that is largely about how early 20th century fantasies of utopia gave way to a dystopic present. The artists—Ferenc Gróf and Jean-Baptiste Naudy of the Paris-based cooperative Société Réaliste—manipulate familiar spaces, both real and virtual, in order to highlight connections between architecture, communication, power, and politics.

The main room of "*A rough guide to hell*" is devoted to "media police" (2013), the most recent in a series of fonts developed by the artists. A large print with the alphabet, numbers, and common symbols rendered in the font also lists its origins, which are existing typefaces used by newspapers around the world. The range, drawn from publications based in the United States, France, Burkina Faso, Turkey, and Nigeria, among many others, make "media police" a global media Esperanto. The letters' intense fragmentation frustrates any attempt to identify the original fonts, resulting in a global language system that subsumes its regional sources to render them part of a unified whole. However, the whole isn't necessarily more than the sum of its parts: it's clunky and difficult to read, as though generated by a computer malfunction. Appropriately, the nearby floor-to-ceiling installation "Circles of Errors" (2013) is a series of phrases, printed in media police font, that evoke technology and its capacity to break down in intentionally elliptical language: "prohibited coordinates....words untagged...concise mutation." While the installation is not as unsettling as the gallery press release states (the font reminds me too much of Microsoft wing-dings), "Circle of Errors" points toward cracks in a system that's not supposed to fail, while "media police" enacts a pointed critique of globalization. The immersive arrangement (the text not only covers the walls but it's used on the awning and all signage) links the font it to the architecture, reminding us that virtual spaces are just as intentionally constructed as brick-and-mortar architecture.



Société Réaliste, "Media Police," 2013. Archival inkjet typographical chart mounted on dibond. Photo by Nahou Kubota.

The highpoint of “A rough guide to Hell” is “The Fountainhead” (2010), an appropriation of the 1949 film directed by King Vidor that adapted Ayn Rand’s novel (Rand also co-wrote the movie screenplay). Set in a modern metropolis, the original film told the story of a ruggedly individualistic architect who refused to compromise his artistic ideals in the face of public demand. In Société Réaliste’s version, the artists digitally removed all human figures from the film, which is then played without sound. The manipulated black-and-white version is reminiscent of early photography, when extended exposures resulted in images of empty-looking cities, as architecture was the only thing that would stay still for the camera. While the film’s spaces are predictably eerie in their forced emptiness, watching Société Réaliste’s “Fountainhead” gives the viewer the sense that the missing characters would have only distracted from the story’s real protagonist, which is the built environment: the seamless integration of interior design, architectural sketches, and the expansive panned shots of the cityscape are surprisingly seductive. This literal de-humanization transforms the film into a silent paean to an architecture of capitalism, obliquely suggesting that this architecture was never meant for people anyway. Perfectly autonomous, it facilitates the circulation of capital and information. As Société Réaliste’s intervention suggests, the human element is extraneous. And yet we’re here: the architecture lauded in “The Fountainhead” still dominates our cityscapes. If we’re to take Société Réaliste’s invocation of Dante at its word, we’re living in Rand’s dream world, now a modern-day nightmare.