

MARX on EARTH

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Marx@200, exhibition at SPACE Gallery, Pittsburgh, curated by Kathy M. Newman and Susanne Slavick, April 6–June 10, 2018

The SPACE Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, unveiled its two-hundredth anniversary celebration of Karl Marx's birth this past spring at a timely moment. Indeed, from all reports the word *socialism* no longer raises the sort of McCarthyite hackles it once did, most especially among politically energized millennials too young to know or care what the Red Scare was all about anyway. Curated by Professors Kathy M. Newman and Susanne Slavick of Carnegie Mellon University, *Marx@200* was part of a larger and ambitious framework of discussions, performances, lectures, and events sponsored by Carnegie Mellon University's Humanities Center. The overall aim was to explore Marx and the legacy of socialism. At SPACE attention focused on how artists the world over have made use of that legacy in responding to the predations of global capital and, most vividly, to continuing fallout from the Great Recession of 2008.

Included in this wide-ranging show were many well-known names like Coco Fusco, Mel Chin, Pedro Reyes, and Dread Scott, along with a refreshingly diverse array (in terms of gender, ethnicity, and national origin) of some thirty-three other artists and artist groups. Through paintings, videos, billboards, photos, and other media, *Marx@200* skewered a rogues' gallery of seismic epicenters for the world financial crisis, including Lehman Brothers and Goldman Sachs, while also taking up pressing themes including labor exploitation, gentrification, and the prison-industrial complex. At a time when populist rage against neoliberalism and the 1 percent careens frighteningly to the right, *Marx@200* tilted left with varying degrees of admonition, satire, hopefulness, and humor. Taken as a whole, the show makes plain the need for Marxist cultural critique, perhaps now more than ever.

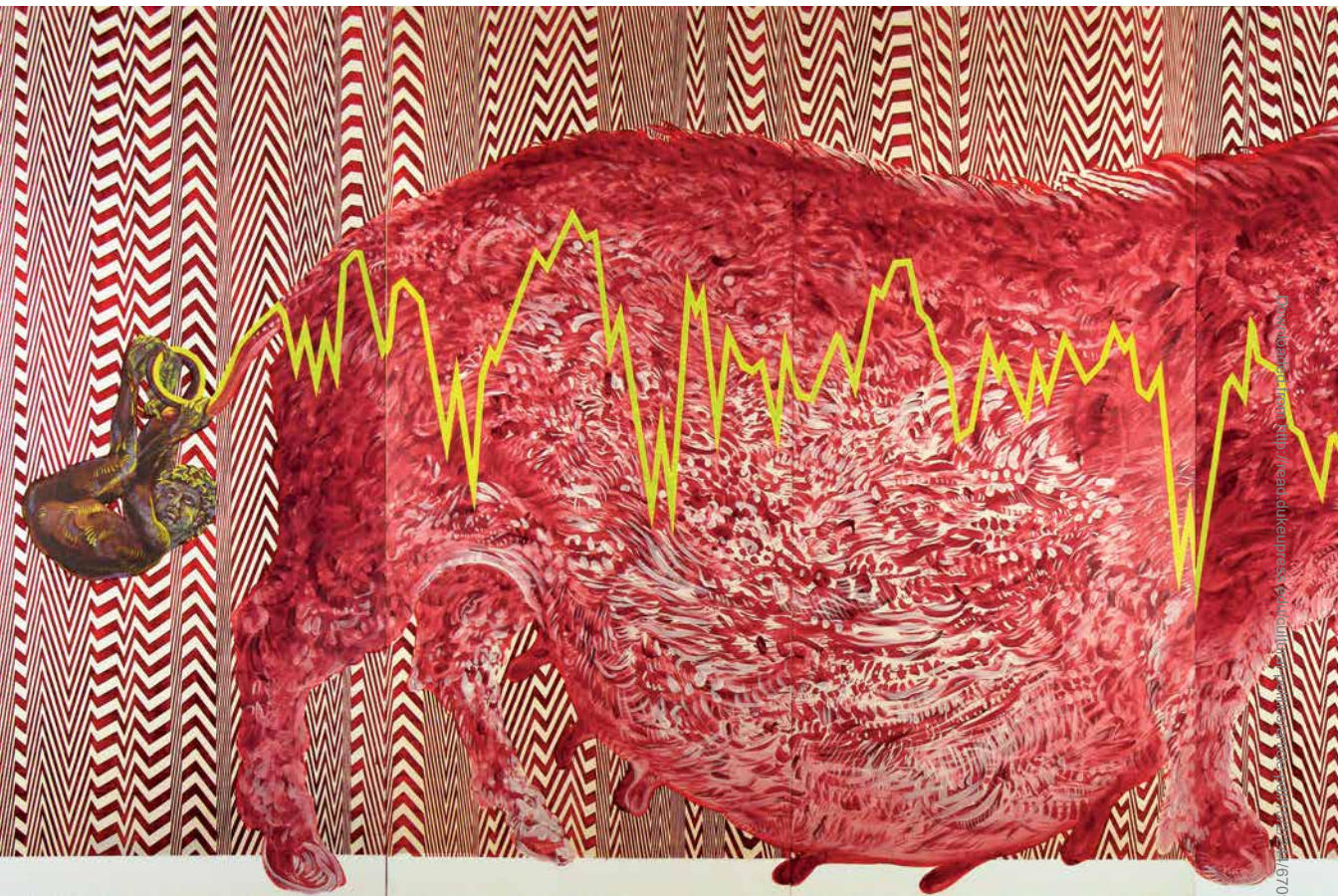


Figure 1 Cao Fei, *My Future Is Not a Dream 05*, 2006. Inkjet print, 120 × 150 cm. Video still from *Whose Utopia*, 2006. Projected color video with stereo sound, 20 min. Courtesy of the artist.

Two mural-sized canvasses served as bold visual anchors for the SPACE installation of *Marx@200*. Matt Bollinger's spray-painted and collaged *The Lot* (2013) covered one wall of the gallery, immersing viewers in the ravages of neoliberal dystopia. Used cars and broken fencing share a depopulated construction site with battered cameras, ladders, and plywood props that simultaneously mark the area as an abandoned stage set. Perversely bounded off by a "Private Property, No Trespassing" sign in the foreground (who would want this junk anyway?), the work

literally and metaphorically brings down the curtain on a drama all too familiar from Bollinger's Missouri roots and the blight of so many rust-belt towns where jobs dried up long ago.

The second large-scale frame for *Marx@200*, Andrew Ellis Johnson's *Futures* (2005–9), responds to this neoliberal dystopia with the sort of caustic humor that made a bygone generation of Marxist Left artists (George Grosz, John Heartfield, etc.) pariahs of capitalism's early twentieth-century industrial phase. In place of their jowly, porcine depictions



of fat, cigar-smoking capitalists, Johnson gives us the pig itself—a lumbering, sanguine (as in red-hued) colossus of overstuffed flesh. Slicing across its bloated form is a wildly jagged stock market graph. Its vertiginous zigzag tracks the corporate mendacities that prepared the ground for the infamous crash of 2008, while the image overall reminds us of a swinishness that has yet to be held to account.

This sort of deadly earnest humor resonated elsewhere in the show, as could be seen in Mel Chin’s woodblock print, *Revised Post Soviet Tools to Be Used against the Unslakeable Thirst of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism* (2010). With crisply incised white lines on a red ground,

Chin’s work gives us a graphically powerful and Gothically backdated version of the Soviet Union’s symbol of revolutionary solidarity between workers and peasants. Instead of the emblematic hammer and sickle, Chin depicts a hammer crossed with a wooden stake. They serve as an altogether more suitable duo of implements for slaying what Marx (1906: 257) himself decried as the “vampire-like” specter of capital that “lives only by sucking labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”

Kirsty Whitlock picks up on the theme of the 2008 crash in *Losses* (2009), an image that mixes the homespun innocence of a Norman Rockwell painting with the



Figure 2 Andrew Ellis Johnson, *Futures*, 2005–9. Acrylic on five panels, 80 × 180 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Whatever way you slice it, he's in deep shit.

Among the most arresting pieces in the show is Kathryn Clark's small-scale, delicate, and conceptually brilliant *Riverside Foreclosure Quilt* (2012). Inspired by African American quilt making as a mode of storytelling and social protest, Clark uses that tradition to address current atrocities. These include redlining, foreclosures, and dispossessions that disproportionately afflict racially segregated and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout urban America. Taking foreclosure maps that she came to know as an urban planner in Washington, DC, Clark's quilt transforms such maps into an abstract grid of white, black, and gray textile rectangles, many of which are ripped and torn. Holes, ragged edges, and dangling threads use quiet means to speak loudly about the fraying and destruction of communities perpetuated by practices that condemn them to blight, uproot them through gentrification, or otherwise leave them tattered shadows of what they were or could have been.

Marx@200 also presents us with two pleasingly annoying works that have done their bit to piss off those who deserve it, namely, corporate capitalism and its minions who brought us the 2008 calamity. Alex Schaefer's *Bank of America, Palm Springs* (2012), is one of a series of plein air paintings of Southern California banks that he produced in response to the crash. Rendered in oils with all the bravura and meticulous draftsmanship of traditional realist painting, his images also happen to depict his chosen banks on fire.

trepidation of a well-padded life suddenly gone awry. The work shows a businessman dressed in a corporate uniform of black suit and white shirt seated before us with his face obscured from view by the copy of the *Financial Times* he holds before him. His hands cling to the upper edge of the newspaper as his world—and the paper he holds—unravels. Dollar signs, stock market graphs, and tanking financial indicators tumble away, progressively turning newsprint into a fragile latticework soon to disintegrate altogether. With his feet dangling off the edge of his chair, Whitlock's white-collar everyman appears both naive and duplicitous, both a victim of the crash and guilty of bringing it on.

Schaefer reports that many who passed by him on the street as he was at work before the motif gave him the thumbs up in approval. Others clearly drew a different conclusion: on more than one occasion he found himself confronted by local police in response to complaints that his work was “threatening.”

Meanwhile, Christin Lahr’s performance piece *Macht Geschenke: Das Kapital, A Critique of Political Economy* (2009–ca. 2052) must have German bankers groaning every time they see her come through the door. And they’ll have to get used to it, as her project is slated to transpire each and every day for the next three decades or so. The SPACE iteration that documented Lahr’s daily performance was visible through the plate-glass street window in a space appropriate for an ATM.

Prints of deposit slips and book pages flanked a video screen, detailing her long-term project of “giving back” to the people of Germany following the financial crisis of 2008. Since May 2009, she has deposited a single euro cent every day as a “gift” to the German National Bank, which deliciously costs the bank a hell of a lot more than one cent in processing charges, to be sure. She follows bureaucratic regulations and details the reasons for her transaction each time. Accordingly, she enters 108 characters from Marx’s *Das Kapital* on the bank form. Given the 1,696,500 characters in that book, she estimates it will take her until 2052 to finish the project. In the meantime, her “gift” will be the one that keeps on giving—wanted or, more likely, not.

Other contributions to the show come



Figure 3 Slinko, *Crowd Pleaser*, 2018. Steel wool, plywood, and wire mesh, 96 × 72 × 48 in. Courtesy of the artist.

to us from the post-Soviet world and focus on Marxism as a fragile, if not betrayed, dream. Ukrainian-born artist Slinko does so to hilarious, yet sadly touching effect with her gargantuan steel-wool rendering of Marx's trademark beard and mustache, *Crowd Pleaser* (2018). Her accompanying video, *Ghost Looking for Its Spirit* (2012), also on view in *Marx@200*, shows the artist wheeling her earlier oversized version of Marx's quivering steel-wool facial hair through a McDonald's drive-through, a Walmart, and other iconic sites of post-Soviet global capital as she searches for a communist past that both never existed and from which she feels "alienated." As she sets fire to her steel-wool homage to Marx at the conclusion of her video, she asks, "Is this revolution still possible? Or should I talk about this to my shrink?"

Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda's photographic triptych (2005) captures the dream of a communist Angola quite literally as a shipwreck. The work takes its title, *Karl Marx, Luanda*, from the name emblazoned on the rusting hulk of a boat he frequently saw on childhood visits to Luanda Beach. The *Karl Marx* was once part of an Angolan-Soviet fishing cooperative. It now serves the artist as a poignantly disintegrating memorial to ideals that were shattered in the long Angolan civil war. To the extent those ideals yet remain, their trace is captured and preserved in the artistic amber of Henda's lush and haunting photographs.

On the subject of dreaming, other works in *Marx@200* present us with the dream's subversive power. Among them is Cao Fei's lyrical three-part video *Whose Utopia* (2006). The setting is a Chinese Osram light bulb production center and the mind-numbing, soul-crushing repetitiveness of Taylorized factory labor that is

China's hyperdriven globalized economy. In the second part, "Factory Fairy Tale," workers' hands that perform minute precision tasks over and over again are transformed into the graceful gestures of dancers. Their exploited hands become expressive as they dance on the factory floor and dream of release from their menial task into a utopia of free creativity. The video concludes with the ambiguously titled sequence "My Future Is Not a Dream." Here, the camera focuses on individual faces of the Osram workers who stand or sit stock-still facing the camera lens. Their impassive expressions confront us with an unblinking humanity and inalienable capacity to dream even amidst alienating circumstances. Does "My Future Is Not a Dream" suggest that their future will look just like their dreamless present? Or will they one day make their dreams reality?

Elin Slavick's *Workers Dreaming* (1999 to the present) continues this theme in a series of full-color, large-scale photographic prints. Her work explores dreaming as a refuge from and counter to the commodification of everyday life under capitalism. Asking workers she encounters to take a moment from their labors (cooking, leaf blowing, driving fire trucks and taxis), Slavick sets her camera to capture them with all the dignity of a formal studio portrait. They appear before us, singly and in groups, with their eyes closed and faces at rest and expressionless. What *are* they dreaming? We're prompted to ask that question and never to know the answer, at least not yet. Cao Fei's and Slavick's works bring to mind the words of Rosa Luxemburg on the subject of freedom. To paraphrase: freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks (and dreams) differently.

In the end, *Marx@200* brings home our desperate need to do this different dreaming, and quickly. Only a handful of the works directly took up the imbrication of labor exploitation, racism, capital accumulation, and greed in our current climate catastrophe. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's contribution was among them, consisting of two photographs from their *Multiple Exposures* (2011) series. The series as a whole addresses the transformation of the landscape around Niagara Falls over a span of six centuries, from its forested precolonial days, through human settlement and resource extraction, and up to the current effects of global warming on the area. The two photos included in *Marx@200* feature a chemical plant that opened in the 1960s and closed two decades later, tracing an all-too-familiar pattern of industrialization, globalization,

and deindustrialization. Across the globe, this pattern has left many towns and regions similarly toxic and uninhabitable. Each of the photos includes two workers: one represents the illness and impoverishment of those exploited in the neoliberal world order, while the other signals opposition to that order through angry gestures and holding signs of protest. In each, this drama of despair and resistance unfolds against the backdrop of a dilapidated and shuttered chemical plant that has all but eclipsed the natural landscape it has come to dominate and despoil.

Marx himself was equivocal on the relationship between capital, labor, and the environment, so it is perhaps not altogether surprising that our looming climate catastrophe did not play a larger role in *Marx@200*. He well recognized the toxicity of industrial production and the price



of “progress” in this regard, especially for workers. But he also believed in and advocated domination of nature through industry in the interest of human emancipation. His techno-fetishist optimism found visual expression in earlier generations of Marxist Left artists (twentieth-century Russian constructivists foremost among them). They saw revolutionary possibility in the gleaming surfaces and streamlined silhouettes of the machine. That aesthetic positivism is nowhere evident in *Marx@200*, nor could it be. The earth is not what it was in Marx’s day. And neither is industry. But the despoiling of the former by the latter began its ruinous heyday in his lifetime. We are now reaping that whirlwind at the same time as we continue to draw inspiration from Marx’s implacable demand for social justice, egalitarianism, and human freedom. While often presenting us with a discomfiting mirror, the

works in *Marx@200* also remind us of this important list of demands and their fundamental correctness for any vision we may have of a future worth living and sustaining. They also show the vital role of artists in helping us to do what no politician, corporation, or industry appears currently willing or able to do, namely, enabling us to envision the causes and consequences of the world we have created for ourselves, while also prompting us to dream and act anew before it is too late.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

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Figure 4 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Karl Marx, Luanda*, 2005. Triptych of three photographs, 41.3 × 27.5 in. each.