

## Juan Bosco Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz

### Rereading Marx

1. Behind them they left no legendary adventurers or cities without name. The gold of Sierra Pelada in Brazil only generated an enormous crater at the bottom of which there swarmed men working in conditions of all but slavery. There were eventually tens of thousands of them. Every day, tools in hand, they climbed down the steep walls of the pit, which the frequent rains converted into a quagmire, and then clambered back up bearing heavy bundles of material.

Alfredo Jaar arrived in Sierra Pelada in 1985 and stayed for months photographing and filming figures who seemed to relive, at the end of the twentieth century, the excesses of the *mita* enforced labor system. A year later he exhibited his work in the Venice Biennale. *Gold in the Morning* was an installation in which the photographs, in light boxes, placed on the wall at different heights and on the floor, even, created a space that more than the gaze, addressed the body of the spectator. That same year he arranged other photos of the mines on panels that covered the walls of Spring Street Subway station in New York. On each panel, *Rushes*, the title of that project, incorporated a sign that recounted the price of gold on the world's stock markets.

In this way Jaar established one of the nodal points of his work: "To give visibility to those our world denies it to". What's more he did this without producing a feeling of compassion in the spectator. In his photos the exertion of the bodies and the exhaustion in the faces emit a certain logic, inhuman but rational, "that of necessity" which all labor must agree to. A logic which corresponds to another one, that of the market, no matter how different the plane on which the latter moves might appear. This is what the Subway panels indicated, while *Rushes*, the title of the show, alluded to the rhythm of that brutal labor as well as to the options of the market.

From that point of view, Jaar's work makes one think of another attempt to make the hidden visible. In the first few pages of *Capital*, Marx sets out to unravel the mysteries of the commodity by showing where the value comes from that we attribute to things, beyond their physical properties and their actual usefulness<sup>1</sup>. Step by step, his analysis shifts economic value from the things themselves (where naïve consciousness places it) to the relations of exchange, also pointing out that the latter is measured by the amount of labor each product requires. This "labor-measure" does not take into account the skill it is done with nor the harshness of the circumstances it has

to be done in: it is an abstract kind of labor, that is to say one distinct from such matters since it only pays attention to the time that is socially necessary for it to comply with profitable exchange<sup>2</sup>. Labor and market are on a mutual collision course, showing that neither the necessity which puts pressure on the first nor the value that the second claims respond to the nature of the things themselves, but occurs, instead, in a specific structure of social relations. It would still be worth speaking of gold: its value is also shown in those pages. As a general equivalent for the exchange of commodities it enjoys special prestige, but as a commodity it obeys the same requirement as all the others: its value is equivalent to the labor time considered to be profitable<sup>3</sup>. This explains the exertion and the exhaustion of the individuals who turned up at the short-lived excavation of Sierra Pelada<sup>4</sup>.

2. For Jaar Brazil marked the beginning of a succession of pilgrimages. His willingness to travel comes from way back: he spent his childhood in Martinique and his university years (studying architecture and film) in Chile, his country, but in the peculiar inner exile into which the dictatorships forced people. There, he made his first forays into art, before leaving for New York in 1982 on a grant from the Fundación Pacífico. Following his stay in Brazil, he assembled images in Nigeria of one of those industries that nobody wants to have on their doorstep on account of their high toxicity. The resulting work would form part of a controversial exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, which some people take to be the beginning, albeit unsatisfactory, of the debate in contemporary art about postcolonialism and multiculturalism<sup>5</sup>. Jaar's contribution put its finger on another peculiar logic of capitalism. He describes it as a dialectic between the "here" and the "there" (respectively, the First and Third World)<sup>6</sup>, which means the siting of factories like the one in Nigeria or workings like those in Sierra Pelada: we take what we don't want "there" (toxic industries, inhuman jobs) and we bring the profits of both "here."

In principle, Marx also dealt with this logic by unmasking it: seeking ever-greater profitability, early capitalism offered work to primitive communities. In these, work was divided according to the capacity, skill and age of the different agents. It was "concrete" labor, inscribed within a single social organization. But this changes when the community accepts new tasks. The offer of monetary reward seduces the family or the village that is involved in the new work, equal for all, thus displacing to a marginal time period their former tasks or entrusting them to others, in exchange for payment. Little by little the ancient organization of work is transformed: labor becomes "abstract," distinct from old social roles, and subject only to the time socially necessary to it and to

the wage relation<sup>7</sup>. But the new “local division of labor” (the artisan becomes a worker and the peasant a day-laborer) occurs in a more general context: what work will be entrusted to the primitive community if not the kind that would only be performed in the metropolis with difficulty? In the “territorial division of labor” capital, initial, mature or late, will displace the more thankless tasks to the peripheries, as Jaar points out in the case of Brazil or Nigeria.

**3.** The reduction of the different classes of labor to mere abstract labor, the amount of the latter that serves as a measure for each commodity, and the division of labor itself are social processes that are further to consciousness. Marx uses a colloquial expression when saying that “they work behind the back of the producers” and that they assert themselves over the latter with the force of a “law of nature,” just, he sarcastically adds, as does “the law of gravity when a house falls about our ears”<sup>8</sup>.

The most disconcerting aspect of the fetishism of commodities is precisely the logical rigor, analogous to that of the laws of nature, which appears to justify it. Such “logic” legitimates inhuman jobs of work, permits the moving up and down of prices regardless of needs, and justifies territorial imbalances—this is why it has been a recurrent source of reflection for many thinkers. Deleuze alludes to capitalism’s ability to extend its axiomatic, with which it unceasingly accommodates its logic to new situations by concealing its illogicality<sup>9</sup>, and Badiou says that everybody knows the “truth” that is “organized socially by capitalism” in terms of its effects but nobody controls its source<sup>10</sup>. For his part, Adorno used the word “spell”<sup>11</sup>, which cleverly synthesizes the paradoxes of commodity fetishism: the quasi-mythic union between strict logic and a lack of reason, by means of which it asserts its authority over consciousness, bewitching it and neutralizing its critical capacity. This fusion of conceptual rigor and superstition can easily end in fatalism.

Can the critical capacity of the image challenge that fatalism, break its “spell”? In the First World War, and above all in the Great Depression, the documentary photo played an important role *qua* denunciation. When industrial technology is employed systematically to destroy the human body and the earth<sup>12</sup>, or the economy calls for an individual’s pain<sup>13</sup>—and those images showed this—there is something amiss. The logic of the system suffers. But the photographic document is produced in a social environment traversed by the division of labor and by certain circuits of distribution, and both can influence the outreach of the image. The camera gives visibility to whosoever does not have it, but it does this by cutting out and selecting so as to place something before our eyes. This power of the camera<sup>14</sup> places photography on dangerous terrain:

it can deprive what is photographed of its singularity, reducing it to a mere moment in the succession of events or to an instance of a strict law. It is easy, then, for the image to suffer, in its reception, a displacement that converts its critical force into a sign of impotence and ends up fomenting fatalism. On the other hand, the documentary nature of photography does not rid it of its status as an “image” which has to fulfill certain requirements. Another instance of ambivalence emerges, this time between the rigor of the testimony and the formal and expressive exigencies of the image<sup>15</sup>. Such tension leaves no room for simplistic solutions, but the risks remain: conceived as denunciation, the image may only lead to compassion.

Images lose their bite, then. Not because of the action of the photographer but because this action is inscribed within the division of labor and the work within circuits of communication that are not oblivious to the “spell” Adorno talked about, and which act as an authentic prophylaxis of the social stability and tranquility of (false) consciousness.

4. Some commentators have pointed out how in *Proyecto Rwanda* [The Ruanda Project], to which he devoted six years (1994-2000), Jaar rigorously addresses these problems<sup>16</sup>, although his ways of doing things already appear in his early works. For the Sierra Pelada photos in Venice he constructed an area in semi-darkness in which the spectator came across the images in light boxes and in an order different to that of the museum. More than revealing themselves to the gaze they grabbed the attention. In the New York Subway, the photos broke with the habitual use of such a space and were contextualized with precision. Marked by work, the figures in the photos did not for all that lack determination, and far from inviting commiseration they challenged the spectator through their very effort.

Jaar breaks through the “spell” of the image without toning it down, for fear of formal correctness, and without avoiding the selection, the “cutting out,” that photography demands<sup>17</sup>. He does not try, then, to avoid the exigencies of the division of labor, but interrupts the routine of the circuits of communication through what Rancière calls a “regime of visibility,” that is to say by regulating the status of the bodies depicted and the kind of attention they deserve<sup>18</sup>. Faced with the profusion of contemporary images and with the indifference with which each is presented alongside the others, Jaar, as an architect, constructs an exhibition space for each image, focusing on and drawing particular attention to it, or intervenes in a public space, altering its use. Or again, he endows images with a context that calibrates their outreach, taking his leave of the usual media methods (concise photo captions, shrill

headlines lacking in content, etc.). Such a reflexive framework is completed by the choice he makes of the figure. A mangled body may become, whether we like it or not, an object; bodies under strain, those of Pelada—which more than enduring, “suffer”; that is, they bear their pain, affirming their passion with integrity<sup>19</sup>—are positioned as equals before the spectator, as one individual to another. Maybe it is hardly worth repeatedly, glossing Marx, that more than interpreting the world, these figures stimulate us to transform it<sup>20</sup>, but they certainly do not move us to fatalism.

5. They have yet another virtue: they drive knowledge on, are a catalyst to the disquiet of learning. If the fascination the commodity exercises over individual consciousness is disquieting, the hypnosis it inculcates in public life is even more so. In the privacy of his own home the individual may still get angry about needs he cannot satisfy, but publicly he gives in, because the public sphere is unable to escape the logic of the commodity. A recent symptom is the docility of the State to the demands of the market. A phantasmagoric commodity, subprime mortgages, has unleashed a disaster as global as was the very circulation of those credits. Demanding no more responsibilities than the all too flagrant ones, various states have confined themselves to paying the “tribute of crisis” to the markets, thus shifting the consequences of the disaster onto their own citizens. Such an attitude is perhaps related to a politics which, for three decades now, has increasingly resembled a mere administration, turning into a “police force” (in the Old Spanish sense: a force aimed at putting order into and cleansing public life<sup>21</sup>), while the decision-making remains in the hands of the experts. The logic of the global market has extended so far that activism comes to nothing if not preceded by debate and reflection<sup>22</sup>.

*Marx Lounge* is Jaar’s most recent work. A room painted in red, neon lettering that identifies it, and on top of the huge table, specially designed, several hundred books from the Marxist tradition. They appear to describe a skyline, but they’re there to be read, as the black chairs and the light in the room indicate.

As in earlier works, Jaar constructs a space in which a number of objects, the books, take on visibility, with the result appealing first to reflection and then to the gaze. Its “time,” though, is different: it is not that of attention to what is on display but that of reading, unhurried reading, without calls on the cellphone or surfing on the net. The work responds to the recent appearance of numerous Marxist texts in the same years in which there occurs the advance of globalization and the “retreat” of the politics spoken of above, marking the universal dominion of the commodity. These new books abandon the utopian dreams and ineffable catechisms typical of the old Marxism and

go more deeply into the theoretical aspects: concepts like “the vacant world” (Badiou) or “discord” and the “division of the sentient” (Rancière)<sup>23</sup> go back over the central issue of the logic *sans* logic of capitalism, prolonging the critique of Marx and such now-classic derivatives as the “performance principle” (Marcuse), the concept of “problematics” (Althusser), and the difference between “the real” and “reality” (Lacan). In its automatism the logic of the commodity models an idea of the world in which a supposed necessity calls for sacrifice, pain and inequality. These books invite us to think of the world in another way, says Jaar, adding that this is what he “as an artist” is seeking after<sup>24</sup> *Marx Lounge* is, then, an invitation to be critical in times of scarcity: a request to follow the “old mole” in looking for new ways of seeing the world.

**Text about exhibition *Alfredo Jaar: Marx Lounge* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 3 February – 15 May 2011). Translation from Spanish: Paul Hammond.**

<sup>1</sup> Marx, K. *El Capital*. Translated by W. Roces. Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974, vol. I, p. 47, notes 87-9.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, K. *Op. cit.* p. 7, note 10.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, K. *Op. cit.* p. 54, notes 11 and 12.

<sup>4</sup> The lode ran out in 1992, some twelve years after its discovery.

<sup>5</sup> See the note by Hal Foster in Foster, H., Krauss, R., Bois, Y.-A., and Buchloh, B. H. D. *Arte desde 1900. Modernidad, antimodernidad y postmodernidad*. Translated by F. Chueca, F. López Martín and A. Brotons. Madrid, Akal, 2006, pp. 617-621.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Lilly Wei. *Art in America*. July, 1989, p. 155, cited by Sever, N. “Alfredo Jaar: From there to here” [www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/WtoS/Sever2.pdf](http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/WtoS/Sever2.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Marx, K. *Contribución a la crítica de la economía política*. Translated by J. Merino. Madrid, Comunicación, 1970, pp. 247-283.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, K. *El Capital. Op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 12 and 40.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *El antiedipo. Capitalismo y esquizofrenia*. Translated by F. Monge, Barcelona, Paidós, 1995, pp. 245 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, A. *Pequeño manual de inestética*. Translated by L. Vogelfang, J. L. Caputo, M. G. Burello and G. Molina. Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2009, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, Th. W. *Dialéctica negativa*. Translated by J. M. Ripalda, revised by J. Aguirre. Madrid, Taurus, 1984, pp. 342 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the war photos chosen by Jünger: Sanchez Durá, N., ed., *Ernst Jünger: Guerra, técnica y fotografía*. Valencia, Universitat de València, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Doud, R. K. “Encontré el coraje en lugares inesperados”. Interview with Dorothea Lange in *Dorothea Lange. Los años decisivos*. Translated by J. Porter and C. Granés. Madrid, La Fábrica, 2009, pp. 129-136.

<sup>14</sup> Rosler, M. “Ética y estética de la fotografía documental”, in *Imágenes públicas. La función política de las imágenes*, ed. J. Carrillo. Translated by E. García Agustín. Barcelona, G. Gili, 2007, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> Sekula, A. “Desmontar la modernidad, reinventar el documental. Notas sobre la política de la representación”. Ribalta, J. ed. *Efecto real. Debates postmodernos sobre fotografía*. Translated by E. Llorens Pujol. Barcelona, G. Gili, 2004, pp. 35-63. Crimp, D. “Photographs at the End of Modernism” in *On the Museum’s Ruins*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 2-31.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière, J. “L’Image intolérable” in *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, La Fabrique, 2008, pp. 105-110 and “Le Théâtre des images” in *Alfredo Jaar. La politique des images* (exhibition catalogue). Lausanne, Musée Cantonal, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Photography is not only a “trace” of light but also a “cutting out” that selects a part of the world and rejects the rest. Barthes, R. *La cámara lúcida*. Translated by J. Sala Sanahuja. Barcelona, Paidós, 2004; Krauss R. *Lo fotográfico. Por una teoría de los desplazamientos*. Translated by C. Zelich, Barcelona, G. Gili, 2002.

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<sup>18</sup> Rancière, J. *Loc. cit.*, also see *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*. Paris, La Fabrique, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> The difference between *endure* and *suffer* comes from Carlos Gurméndez, *Teoría de los sentimientos*. Mexico City/Madrid/Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, K. "Tesis sobre Feuerbach" in *La ideología alemana*. Translated by W. Roces. Barcelona, Grijalbo, 1970, pp. 665-8.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière, J. *El desacuerdo. Política y filosofía*. Translated by H. Pons. Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 2007. Foucault, M. *Seguridad, territorio, población*, ed. M. Senellart. Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Žizek, S. *Sobre la violencia. Seis reflexiones marginales*. Translated by A. J. Antón. Barcelona, Paidós, 2009, pp. 16

ff.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, A. *Logiques des mondes*. Paris, Seuil, 2006. Also see notes 18 and 21.

<sup>24</sup> [www.culture24.org.uk/art/](http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/)